

## **The Implications of Jackson's Knowledge Argument**

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### *Introduction*

In the dispute between mind-body dualism (the doctrine that the mind is metaphysically distinct from the body) and materialism (the doctrine that the mind is fully explicable through physical properties), Frank Jackson argues for dualism with his *knowledge argument* (Jackson 274). Block provides a widely accepted refutation of the knowledge argument involving a distinction between fact and concept (Block 5). I aim to qualify Block's objection on the grounds that it needs to explain how a person can experience qualia from mere understanding and then use the qualified objection to show that the knowledge argument does not disprove functionalism but that it does pose substantial difficulties for physicalism.

Jackson's thought experiment involves Mary, a neuroscientist raised in a black and white room, who understands all the physical information there is to know about the brain and its states during color perception. Jackson claims that when Mary leaves the room and actually encounters colored things, she will experience the qualia associated with color and thereby learn something about color experience she didn't know before. If Mary learns something about color experience after having learned everything physical about color perception, then there is something (qualia) about color perception which transcends the physical, and dualism is therefore true. (Jackson 275)

#### *1. Qualification of Block's objection to the knowledge argument*

Block offers an objection to Jackson's argument. He claims that when Mary leaves the room and sees color, rather than learning a new fact, she gains a new concept (qualia) for a fact (color perception) which she already knew

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(Block 5). Block's fact/concept distinction is clearer when we examine his example of knowledge about water. According to Block, there are facts about the substance which we call both 'water' and 'H<sub>2</sub>O' (Block 5). There are also concepts for that substance, namely, 'water' (that wet thing in ponds and beverages), and 'H<sub>2</sub>O' (that molecule of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom). The concept 'H<sub>2</sub>O' explains all the facts about the substance (e.g. viscosity, surface tension, specific heat), so full knowledge of 'H<sub>2</sub>O' is full knowledge of the facts about the substance. If one knew all the facts about the substance before personally experiencing water, then experiencing it wouldn't teach anything new. Instead it would rather provide a new conceptualization of the facts about the substance. Block holds that Mary's experience of the quale of red is analogous to the personal experience of water, in either case there is no new knowledge gained from a new concept for old facts. If Mary gains no new knowledge as Block proposes, then the knowledge argument fails.

I argue that Block's objection is incomplete because it implies that Mary must have an experience of the quale of red before leaving the black and white room but it is unintuitive how Mary should be able to experience qualia from understanding brain states.

How does Block's objection imply Mary had to have an experience of quale in the black and white room? A coherent concept (e.g. water) for a given fact (that substance called 'water') can be explained as a list of the properties of the fact (certain viscosity, transparency, surface tension, and other properties explain our concept of water as that wet thing we experience). Mary knows all of the facts about color perception because we stipulated that she knows everything about the brain-state which corresponds to the experience of red. It was built into Block's objection (and most materialist doctrines) that Mary's full knowledge of the brain-states involved in color perception is equivalent to full knowledge of the facts about color perception. Mary therefore knows all the properties of red color perception. Since concepts are just lists of the properties

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of a fact, Mary must be able to get from the properties of color perception a coherent concept of color perception before leaving the room. If Block's objection holds, then the subjective experience of red is just a part of the concept of color perception, so Mary must be able to have a subjective experience of red before leaving the room. The logic is straightforward:

- [i] The subjective experience of red is a property of the associated brain state R.
- [ii] Mary knows all the properties of R, thus she knows the subjective experience of red.
- [iii] To know a subjective experience requires having the subjective experience.
- [c] Thus Mary has the subjective experience of red.

*2. Functionalist use of Block's objection*

Let us first examine how a functionalist can explain Mary's experience of color qualia before her exit of the room. This will allow us to see how a functionalist can use Block's objection to overcome the knowledge argument. Using Block's objection a functionalist can claim that Mary experiences qualia because her mental processes emulate the functional state of a person experiencing the quale of red. Here is what I mean by that.

The functionalist says that a brain, or other object, must instantiate a certain set of logical processes in order to experience mental states. There is no apparent reason why functionalism should deny that mental processes (which are themselves physical, to a materialist) can instantiate the logical processes which objects like computers or brains can instantiate. Mary's brain conceptualizes every neuron and neural process of a human brain in the brain state corresponding to a subjective experience of red; in so doing, it produces billions of mental states which each represent neurons in a person's brain. Her mental states then cause each other to become "activated" a way that is functionally equivalent to the way real neurons would become activated. Those activated mental states then cause their connected neuron-representing mental states to receive impulses as neurons do in the brain. Mary's conceptualization

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of the brain is functionally equivalent to an actual brain. Therefore, under the functionalist view which holds that the mind (including qualia) are essentially and exhaustively logical processes, Mary's conceptualization of the brain must produce the experience of red. Thus, the functionalist can respond to the knowledge argument that Mary learns nothing new when she leaves her room because Mary can experience color qualia in the room since she knows all there is to know about color perception.

#### *3. Physicalism and the knowledge argument*

Physicalism, here understood as the doctrine that mental processes are essentially neural processes, cannot offer the same explanation of Mary's experience of qualia which we saw functionalism offer. When the brain-emulating Mary emulates the brain which experiences qualia, she creates a functional emulation. She does not literally re-create the emulated brain in her own neurons. To experience qualia, a physicalist requires a re-created brain, where a functionalist only requires re-created logical processes in the brain. Mary does not re-create the emulated brain; she only re-creates the logical processes in the emulated brain.

Moreover, the physicalist cannot offer any explanation of how Mary could experience color qualia inside the room; the quale of red is a brain state and no amount of understanding of a brain state can put Mary into the brain state of the quale of red; no amount of understanding of a brain state can give Mary the quale of red. Consequently, the physicalist cannot make use of Block's objection to the knowledge argument since the physicalist cannot explain how Mary could derive the quale concept from complete knowledge of the facts of red color perception. This leaves the physicalist with the burden of formulating an objection to the knowledge argument independent of Block's.

#### *Conclusion*

I have shown that the knowledge argument is susceptible to Block's

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objection only if the objector can explain how Mary can experience qualia in the black and white room. This is a consequence of Mary's full knowledge of color perception. Functionalism can explain how Mary can experience qualia by virtue of mental emulation of functional states so it can use Block's objection to defeat the knowledge argument. Physicalism cannot use Block's objection, so the doctrine must either find another objection to the knowledge argument or be defeated by it.

Works Cited

- Block, Ned. "Philosophical Issues About Consciousness." *The Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*.
- Jackson, Frank. "Epiphenomenal Qualia." *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary and Classical Readings*. Ed. David J. Chalmers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 273-280.