

Handout #6: Jackson's Knowledge Argument

1. The Thought Experiment

“Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like ‘red’, ‘blue’ and so on . . . What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But she had all the physical [and functional] information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false,” p. 275.

2. The Argument

(1) Mary (before her release) knows everything physical there is to know about other people.

(2) Mary (before her release) does not know everything there is to know about other people (because she learns something about them on her release).

Therefore,

(3) There are truths about other people (and color vision) that escape the physicalist story.

3. An Instance of the Argument

(1) Mary knows every scientific fact (she knows all of physics, chemistry and biology) before her release.

(2) Before her release Mary does not know what it is like to see red.

Therefore,

(3) Facts about what it is like to see red are not scientific facts (they are not facts of physics, chemistry and biology).

Facts about “what it is like” to have a particular sensation or experience are said to be *qualitative facts*. The properties of experiences in virtue of which there is something that it is like to undergo them are said to be *qualia*. People like Jackson who argue that there are qualia that cannot be reduced to physical properties are said to be *qualia freaks*.

4. Three Objections

a. Mary would know what it is like to experience redness before she leaves her room. If she is sufficiently imaginative, she can imagine what it is like.

Jackson's response: perhaps, but then there is something she hasn't learned *in* mastering all of science. The thing she learns after successfully imagining what it is like to see red is still an irreducibly non-physical fact.

b. Even physicalists can allow that Mary has a new experience when she leaves the room. Her visual cortex is active in a way that it wasn't when she was trapped inside the black and white room. So physicalists can allow that Mary acquires new knowledge. She now knows what it is like for *her* to experience redness, and since there were no such facts before (because she hadn't experienced redness), there were no such facts to be known.

Jackson's response: This is beside the point. Of course, Mary didn't experience redness while in the black and white room. And, of course, her having that experience and being acquainted with it provides her with new knowledge of what it is like for her to experience redness. Nevertheless, there was something else that Mary didn't know when she was in the black and white room that, on the physicalist's account, she should have been able to learn: namely, what it is like for *other people* (i.e. people out there in the color-drenched world) to experience redness.

c. Mary's failure simply results from the intensional context created by 'knows'. One doesn't know everything that is entailed by what one knows. So even if Mary does not know what it is like to see red, it still may be that all the qualitative facts are in principle deducible from the physical facts.

Jackson's response: Even if Mary were a logical genius she still couldn't figure out what it is like to see red given only the facts of physics, chemistry and biology.

A Retort to this Response: Consider John's knowledge that Mark Twain is clever and the Fregean account according to which John's knowing this fact is compatible with his not knowing that Samuel Clemens is clever. Is John's failure one of logical reasoning? Arguably not. Does this show that the facts about Mark Twain are not reducible to the facts about Samuel Clemens? Arguably not. Perhaps facts about what it is like to experience redness are akin to facts about Mark Twain, and the physical, chemical and biological facts about what goes on in the brain and environment when someone experiences redness are akin to facts about Samuel Clemens in the following respect: *These are facts about the same things and properties even if knowing one set of facts is compatible with being unable to deduce the later set of facts from them.*

The *a posteriori* physicalist claims that qualitative facts are not deducible from the facts of physics (so we cannot deduce them from complete scientific knowledge) even though qualitative facts have the same *subject matter* as do the facts of physics. They are both facts about our brains and the way they enable the organisms that house those brains interact with the physical world in adaptive ways.

Note that David Lewis, in the article we discuss next, rejects this response to Jackson's knowledge argument, because Lewis thinks this response fails to take "the hypothesis of phenomenal information" seriously enough. Perhaps there is a sense in which an English speaker "learns new facts" when she learns Russian and therein learns how to say or understand the things she already knows but in a new language (Chalmers (ed.) 2002, 288). But Lewis assumes that the qualia freak doesn't think Mary's color experience provides her with a way of representing things she already knows in a new way. Instead, Mary's color experience is supposed to provide her with substantively new knowledge: knowledge of how those with color vision have been experiencing the world that can only be gained from the inside.