

The Knowledge Argument

(i) Nagel and Bats

“We appear to be faced with a general difficulty about psychophysical reduction. In other areas the process of reduction is a move in the direction of greater objectivity, toward a more accurate view of the real nature of things. This is accomplished by reducing our dependence on individual or species-specific points of view toward the object of investigation.” [444]

“If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to a specific view point – does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.”

- The problem is that the human view point is *constitutive* of the phenomenon in question, not just one way of accessing it.
- Nagel uses **bats** to make this problem vivid: no amount of understanding bats’ perceptual systems (via sonar) lets me understand what it is *like* to be a bat.
- Why choose bats?
 - o Because they are sufficiently different to us that we have a sense that we can’t simply extrapolate from our own experience.
 - o But Nagel also claims we don’t need ‘exotic cases’ – that similar boundaries exist to him imagining what it would be like to lack a sensory modality
 - o p.442 footnote 8 “My point, however, is not that we cannot *know* what it is like to be a bat. I am not raising that epistemological problem. My point is rather that even to form a *conception* of what it is like to be a bat...one must take up the bat’s point of view.”
- See Kathleen Akins ‘What is it like to be boring and myopic?’ for pushback against the claim that objective investigation of a bat’s perceptual system doesn’t take us closer to understanding their subjective experience.

(ii) Mary and her black and white room

“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 monitor. 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. She discovers, for example, just which wave-length combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces *via* the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal chords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence ‘The sky is blue’....

What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a colour 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 then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had *all* the physical information. *Ergo* there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false.” (Jackson 1982: 130)

The knowledge argument:

(1) Mary knows all the physical information concerning human colour vision before her release.

(2) But when Mary leaves her black and white room, she learns something new

Therefore

(3) There is *non-physical information*.

This conclusion is an *ontological claim* derived from epistemic facts about what Mary *knows*.

- What is it for information to be *physical* or *non-physical*?
- David Lewis's notion of information as narrowing down the set of possible worlds in contention may be helpful

(iii) **Responses to the Knowledge Argument**

Dennett: Thick versus thin materialism

- Thin materialism denies that we should give any weight to the claim that Mary learns something new
- Thick materialism seeks to accommodate that intuition in some way or other.
- Most responses to the argument have been thick...

General thick strategy of objection: new knowledge, old information

These strategies deny (3), by accepting that Mary gains new knowledge, but denying that it need be of new *information*.

Version #1: abilities

Mary doesn't acquire new (non-physical) *information*, but merely new abilities (imaginative, recognitional...)

This is *knowing-how* not *knowing-that*

"Some modes of understanding consist, not in the grasping of facts, but in the acquisition of abilities... As for understanding an experience, we may construe that as an ability to place oneself, at will, in a state representative of the experience. I understand the experience of seeing red if I can at will visualize red."

Laurence Nemirow 1980 p.475

Lewis: "If you have a new experience, you gain abilities to remember and to imagine....Further, you gain an ability to recognize the same experience if it comes again."

"The Ability Hypothesis says that knowing what an experience is like just *is* the possession of these abilities to remember, imagine and recognize. It isn't the possession of any kind of information, ordinary or peculiar. It isn't knowing that certain possibilities aren't actualized. It isn't knowing-that. It's knowing-how. Therefore it should be no surprise that lessons won't teach you what an experience is like. Lessons impart information; ability is something else. Knowledge-that does not automatically provide know-how."

- But don't we gain those abilities *because* we gain information? What *is* know-how knowledge *of*?
- Note: some philosophers think know-how is a species of propositional knowledge.
- Do abilities amount to knowing what it is like? Can they adequately account for the change in Mary?

Lewis supports this with the claim that phenomenal information is an odd sort of fish....

- Oddity that you can't know which worlds you'd find out between if you had that phenomenal information. "I can't even pose the question that phenomenal information is supposed to answer: is it this way or that?"
- Oddity that the information has to be epiphenomenal or else it's at odds with physics. "To believe in the phenomenal aspect of the world, but deny that it is epiphenomenal, is to bet against the truth of physics."

Version #2: acquaintance

Mary doesn't gain new propositional knowledge she just stands in a new acquaintance relation to colour qualia. (Earl Conee 1994)

- What exactly is acquaintance? What happens when acquaintance occurs that isn't about the transfer of (non-physical) information?
- *Why* is experience the most direct route to colour qualia? The dualist has an answer, the physicalist does not (Brie Gertler 1999)

Version #3: Phenomenal concepts

- It's a familiar phenomenon that we can have multiple different concepts which refer to one and the same physical thing. E.g. 'water' and 'H₂O' both refer to the same substance.
- The phenomenal concept strategy suggests that what is peculiar about the mental is not any underlying weird substance or set of properties, but rather a peculiar set of *concepts* which we use to think and talk about it.
- This strategy defuses the knowledge argument by claiming that Mary acquires phenomenal concepts, only accessible via experiences of the relevant phenomenal kind.
- This can be cashed out in different ways, e.g.
 - o Carruthers: Phenomenal concepts are *purely* recognitional concepts: to have the phenomenal concept of blueness is to be able to recognize experiences of blueness. They are conceptually isolated and have no a priori connections to other functional concepts.
 - o Perry: Phenomenal concepts are a special kind of indexical concept. "Seeing red is like *this*!" where 'this' refers to a physical property (the phenomenal character) of her present colour experience.

Thin Materialist Strategy of Objection: no new knowledge

This strategy denies (2) via a 'thin materialist' denial of qualia.

"At this point, if you are like many of my students, you are beset with frank incredulity. *Of course* Mary learns something on release! She *has to*! Oh? Then please give me an argument, based on premises we all accept, that demonstrates this." (Dennett 2007:20).

- The thought experiment is flawed because we can't accurately imagine the relevant scenario (perhaps because it would be very hard or even impossible for us to do so)
- Phenomenal character is accurately identified with informational properties

And so, one day, Mary's captors decided it was time for her to see colors. As a trick, they prepared a bright blue banana to present as her first color experience ever. Mary took one look at it and said 'Hey! You tried to trick me! Bananas are yellow, but this one is blue!' Her captors

were dumfounded. How did she do it? “Simple,” she replied. “You have to remember that I know *everything*—absolutely everything—that could ever be known about the physical causes and effects of color vision. So of course before you brought the banana in, I had already written down, in exquisite detail, exactly what physical impression a yellow object or a blue object (or a green object, etc.) would make on my nervous system. So I already knew exactly what *thoughts* I would have (because, after all, the ‘mere disposition’ to think about this or that is not one of your famous qualia, is it?). I was not in the slightest surprised by my experience of blue (what surprised me was that you would try such a second-rate trick on me). I realize it is *hard for you to imagine* that I could know so much about my reactive dispositions that the way blue affected me came as no surprise. Of course it’s hard for you to imagine. It’s hard for anyone to imagine the consequences of someone knowing absolutely everything physical about anything!” (Dennett 1991 p399-400)

E.g. Michael Tye: phenomenal character can be equated with Poised Abstract Nonconceptual Intentional Content: nonconceptual nonconcrete content that can make a direct impact on the belief / desire system

Pushback from Graham and Horgan

“Although phenomenal states may indeed play a PANIC role in human psychological economy, their phenomenal character is not reducible to that role. It is something more, something surprising and delightful. Its greater richness is what is surprising and delightful about it, and Tye’s theory leaves this out.” (Graham and Horgan 2000:73)

Dennett: “This “greater richness” is just what needs to be demonstrated, not assumed”

➤ Who’s begging the question? How do we decide?

Recommended reading:

- Jackson, Frank, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, no. 127 (1982): 127-36.
- Lewis, David, 'What Experience Teaches', in W.G. Lycan, ed., *Mind and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 499-519.
- Dennett, Daniel C. (2006). What robomary knows. In Torin Alter & Sven Walter (eds.), *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' *The Philosophical Review*, 83, no. 4 (1974): 435-50.
- Akins, Kathleen (1993). What is it like to be boring and myopic? In B. Dahlbom (ed.), *Dennett and His Critics*. Blackwell.