

# **What is the best objection to Jackson's Knowledge Argument? Is it decisive?**

Draft 0.2

Andreas Tzortzis

Frank Jackson's Mary argument, also referred to as the Knowledge Argument, has been described as the "most famous and provocative thought experiments" in the philosophy of mind (Nagasawa 2008, 99). This thought experiment has been frequently used by academics as an argument against physicalism (Rumelin 2015). In this essay I will present Jackson's Mary argument and highlight its challenge to physicalism. I will explain why the phenomenal concept strategy is favoured by physicalists and present Brian Loar's conception of the phenomenal concept strategy. Three contentions to Loar's strategy will be discussed to warrant the conclusion that it is not decisive.

## **Background**

Physicalism (or materialism) maintains that all things are physical or are "necessitated by or supervenes on the physical" (Stoljar 2014, 529). In the context of consciousness, someone who adopts physicalism would argue that conscious or phenomenal states are physical states. Physicalism is the metaphysical thesis that there are no substances other than basic physical ones. This means that a conscious experience is fundamentally a physical experience. Physicalism has three main areas of discussion when it comes to phenomenal experience:

1. Consciousness does not exist, the language we have used to describe the illusion of consciousness will be replaced by a physical scientific language (known as eliminative materialism).
2. Consciousness exists but it is a physical thing, like physical happenings in the brain (known as reductive materialism).
3. Consciousness exists and is a physical thing, however, it is based on complex physical processes, causal relations and activity (known as emergent materialism). (Revonsuo 2010, 17)

Fundamentally, phenomenal consciousness is in some way something physical. Michael Tye's description of physicalism aptly summarises the above points,

"Physicalism, in its most general form, is the thesis that no non-physical ingredients, are needed to account for anything in the actual world: the physical ingredients alone suffice." (Tye 2009, 25)

## **Frank Jackson's Mary Argument**

Frank Jackson's Mary argument has been used to undercut physicalism. The Mary argument can be summarised in the following way: Mary has lived in a black and white room all her life and acquires information about the world via black and white television. In her room, Mary has access to all of the scientific objective information about what happens when humans see physical phenomena. She knows everything about the science related to perceiving objects with the human eye. Yet, she is unaware of what it is like to see colours. One day she is allowed to leave the room. The moment she opens the door she looks at a red rose, and experiences the colour red for the first time. She only appreciates what it is like to see the colour red the moment she sees it (Jackson 1986, 291-295).

Mary's knowledge about all the physical facts concerning visual perception and colours did nothing to prepare her for the new experience of seeing red. She did not know what it is like to see a red rose by learning the physical facts, she only knew what that experience was like the moment it occurred.[A] David Chalmers provides the following premises to show that the Mary argument renders physicalism as unable to explain phenomenal consciousness:

1. Mary knows all the physical facts;
2. Mary does not know all the facts;
3. The physical facts do not exhaust all the facts.(Chalmers 2010, 108)

Chalmers' argument here shows that knowledge of the physical world will not lead to knowledge of subjective conscious reality—for example, what it is like to see red. This seems to undermine physicalism. Chalmers generalises the argument in the following way:

- A. There are truths about consciousness that are not deducible from physical truths.
- B. If there are truths about consciousness that are not deducible from physical truths, then physicalism is false.
- C. Physicalism is false.(Chalmers 2010, 109)[B]

The Mary argument has been used by anti-physicalists to show that physicalism does not explain subjective consciousness. Anti-physicalists argue that knowledge of physical truths does not lead to an understanding of a subjective experience, because there are facts about consciousness that cannot be deduced from physical facts. According to Robert Van Gulick the Mary argument has "been regarded as a serious threat to physicalism." (Van Gulick 1997, 560)

## **Phenomenal Concept Strategy**

The Mary argument has generated interesting objections. The most popular of these objections concerns the idea of phenomenal concepts. Chalmers argues that phenomenal concept strategy is the “most attractive option for a physicalist to take in responding to the problem of consciousness” (Chalmers 2007, 168). The reason many physicalists like to adopt the phenomenal concept strategy is that it seems to answer the questions: “why do these physical states feel like that? Why do they feel any way at all?” (Tye 2009, 42). In other words, why do physical states have a phenomenal quality to them? The apparent inability to answer these questions has given rise to the explanatory-gap. This gap is our inability to coherently explain how physical reality can give rise to the fundamentally different reality of phenomenal experiences. Since we are faced with this explanatory-gap, there needs to be a strategy to explain it.

The phenomenal concept strategy maintains that there are physical-functional concepts and phenomenal concepts that are distinct yet refer to the same physical property,

“... phenomenal concepts refer to physical properties, they are not physical concepts”. (Tye 2009, 43)

Below is a summary of the phenomenal concept strategy:

1. A phenomenal experience, like pain is the F.
2. F is a physical predicate.
3. Physical state X is present.
4. Physical state X is the F.
5. Therefore, a phenomenal experience is present.[C] (Tye 2009, 43)

Since this argument follows it provides an account for why physical states have a phenomenal quality to them. For example, if someone has the phenomenal concept of pain and the required physical data associated with it, then the presence of pain will be conceived even though the person knows that pain is based on a physical property (Tye 2009, 43).

### **Brian Loar’s Phenomenal Concept Strategy**

Professor Brian Loar’s conception of phenomenal concepts provides a strong challenge to the anti-physicalist conclusions of the Mary argument. Loar argues that Mary does not acquire new knowledge about red, only a new way of conceptualising what she already knew about the colour. This strategy declares that there is only one property that can give rise to different distinct concepts about that property. Loar maintains that there are physical-functional concepts and phenomenal concepts. These are distinct and refer to one physical property:

“Phenomenal concepts are conceptually independent of physical-functional descriptions, and yet pairs of such concepts may converge on, pick out, the same properties.” (Loar 1997, 602)

According to Loar, phenomenal and physical-functional concepts are epistemologically distinct. Their distinctness is only on a conceptual level and only refer to physical properties (Papineau, 111). The reason Loar cites for their conceptual distinctness is that phenomenal concepts are recognitional concepts. He argues that “recognitional concepts and theoretical concepts are in general conceptually independent.” (Loar 1997, 602)

Loar maintains that phenomenal concepts are recognitional concepts and their mode of presentation is the experience itself (to be explained further under Contention #2) (Balog, 303). This means that phenomenal concepts are demonstratives that pick out the objects that they refer to based on the person’s ability to recognise the relevant objects. Loar writes,

“Phenomenal concepts are recognitional concepts that pick out certain internal properties; these are physical functional properties of the brain. They are the concepts we deploy in our phenomenological reflections; and there is no good philosophical reason to deny that...” (Loar 1997, 601-602)

“...a phenomenal concept has its mode of presentation the very phenomenal quality it picks out.” (Loar 1997, 604)

Mary can only acquire phenomenal concepts when she sees red because these concepts come about only by seeing the colour red (Loar 1997, 601-603). Daniel Stoljar summarises the recognition thesis in the following way:

“S possesses the (phenomenal) concept C of experience E only if S has certain dispositions to recognize, discriminate and identify E if S has or undergoes E” (Stoljar 2005, 476)

In this way the recognition thesis maintains that experience is not required to possess phenomenal concepts. Experience is only required to acquire them. Katalin Balog summarises the recognitional thesis by stating that recognitional concepts is that “when a person is having a particular experience she can deploy a concept that refers directly to that experience.” (Balog, 303)

Loar’s phenomenal concept strategy seems to block the conclusions that Chalmers makes about the Mary argument. Mary knows all the facts, but she does not have the ability to recognise the phenomenal character of physical properties until she experiences an object that can be described

in phenomenal terms. The reason Mary cannot explain the colour red in phenomenal terms prior to her experiencing a red rose, is because phenomenal concepts come about only when she experiences an object that can be described in phenomenal terms. Therefore, the explanatory gap between Mary's knowledge of all the physical facts and her inability to conceptualise in phenomenal terms is explained by phenomenal concepts only coming about when Mary experiences an object that can have a phenomenal character.

In summary, Loar seems to be adopting a form of ontological monism and conceptual dualism. Loar maintains that there are physical-functional concepts and phenomenal concepts (concepts that refer to subjective experience). So when Mary saw red for the first time she was not experiencing a new property and learning new facts about it. She was experiencing a different way of conceptualising what she already knew. Prior to leaving the room she recognised the property of red in physical-functional terms. However, when she left the room she acquired a new way of recognising the physical property of red in phenomenal terms.

There are a range of contentions to Loar's argument that renders it as indecisive. I will focus on three key contentions.

**Contention #1: Physical and phenomenal concepts cannot be distinct and refer to the same property.**

Loar assumes that physical and phenomenal concepts are distinct but refer to the same (physical) identical property. However there is no way to understand how that can be the case. Karol Polcyn postulates that it is not reasonable to assume that the distinct concepts could refer to the same property, because "we do not understand how properties expressed by such concepts could be identical a posteriori." Polcyn argues that Loar assumes that the two distinct concepts refer to the same property. (Polcyn 2007, 34) To defeat Loar's account Polcyn maintains that all we have to do is deny "the idea that this sort of difference between concepts is a purely conceptual difference that does not imply the expression of distinct properties." (Polcyn 2007, 35). Polcyn presents an interesting argument:

Imagine that a property P has two ways of being conceptualised, F and G. The essence of P is in relation to the concept F and G. Therefore, in relation to F, P is essentially F, and in relation to G, P is essentially G. P can only be described and understood relative to the concepts F and G, even though "P has only one essential property." (Polcyn 2007, 36) The intrinsic nature of P changes relative to the concept being used.

Polcyn argues that essential properties should not be described relative to concepts (Polcyn 2007, 35-36). Take into consideration CO<sub>2</sub>. CO<sub>2</sub> is made up of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules and this essential

property of carbon dioxide is based on *a posteriori* knowledge. Carbon dioxide's essential properties is CO<sub>2</sub>. This essence of carbon dioxide is contingent on its basic building blocks and it is not understood by the way we conceptualise about carbon dioxide. We could not say that CO<sub>2</sub>'s essential property is a gassy substance or a substance essential for plant life. These are only ways of describing the same property. There is an *a priori* link between the concept "gassy substance" and "a substance essential for plant life". They both entail each other. As they are different, yet not distinct, ways of conceptualising the same essential property, CO<sub>2</sub>. Distinct concepts describing the same property can only make sense if there is an *a priori* link between the concepts. The concepts should also not change the intrinsic nature of the property. Polcyn maintains that given that there is no *a priori* link between phenomenal and physical concepts then phenomenality becomes "very obscure".

Therefore, the implication of Polcyn's argument is that Loar's attempt to solve the Mary argument becomes unclear. Having two distinct concepts without an *a priori* link, should mean that there are two distinct properties. If Loar wants to maintain that there is only one property then he would have to argue that the concepts that refer to that property are not distinct and entail each other.

**Contention #2: The "thick" account of phenomenal concepts - which is Loar's account - is false.**

Erhan Demircioglu maintains that Loar's conception of phenomenal concepts is a "thick" account. The thick account maintains that "a phenomenal concept has as its mode of presentation the very quality it picks out." (Loar 1997, 604) This means that a phenomenal concept is how the experience presents itself to the one experiencing it, without any "distance between the mode of presentations and reference" (Demircioglu 2013, 270). For example the experience of eating a strawberry is the same as how it feels to eat a strawberry. Demircioglu postulates that the thick account of phenomenal concepts is based on the following thesis (T):

"(T) The mode of presentation of a phenomenal concept is the property it refers." (Demircioglu 2013, 272).

He also maintains that the thick account is based on the following three claims:

1. Phenomenal concepts refer to physical properties.
2. Phenomenal concepts are isolated from physical concepts.
3. Phenomenal concepts are substantive concepts whose modes of presentations are constituted by their references, which is (T). (Demircioglu 2013, 272)

Demircioglu raises a number of problems with the thick account. One main problem the thick account faces is with the thesis (T). If (T) is true, then a particular brain state is a component of the mode of presentation of the phenomenal concept it refers to (Demircioglu 2013, 274). If this is the case then if someone has the phenomenal concept of falling in love it should give them the ability to know the corresponding brain state. But it does not. As Demircioglu puts it, “the possession of the concept of pain does not bestow such piece of knowledge upon the subject.” (Demircioglu 2013, 274-275). The point being raised by Demircioglu here is that a phenomenal concept, like falling in love, does not appear to be anything like its corresponding brain state (Demircioglu 2013, 275). If the thick account were true it would follow that when someone has a phenomenal concept they should know the corresponding brain state. Since having a phenomenal concept does not give rise to knowledge of the corresponding brain state, then the thick account of phenomenal concepts is false.

**Contention #3: On Loar’s account we cannot explain why a brain state should be identical to a phenomenal state.**

Michael Tye presents an argument against Brian Loar’s conception of phenomenal concepts. Loar’s recognitional conception of phenomenal concepts allows us to comprehend why a particular phenomenal state is equal to a particular brain state, because distinct concepts have their own unique mode of presentation (Tye 2009, 49). However, Tye argues that Loar’s account does not explain why we are perplexed that a physical brain state is identical to a subjective conscious experience (Tye 2009, 49). For example, the following postulation,

Atum [D] = Sun

Reveals a valid identity statement, in other words, Atum is the Sun. Just like Loar’s conception of phenomenal concepts, “Atum” is a concept that has is an alternate mode of presentation, and so is “Sun”. However, saying that Atum is the Sun is not something we cannot understand. With Loar’s view of phenomenal concepts it is not difficult to appreciate how physical stuff explains phenomenal states. Yet, we are still bedazzled how a physical state could be a phenomenal experience. (Tye 2009, 50) Then, where does the problem lie? Tye explains,

“...it is only when I conceive of the state I am representing by being in that state as something I represent via a token of *painfulness* that I start to get really puzzled, for now I must conceive of the represented state *as* painfulness, and I find it mysterious how the state I am so conceiving could just be the state I am conceiving in objective, physical terms.” (Tye 2009, 50-51)

In other words, although experience E can be understood by means of phenomenal concept A, what I cannot explain is that my experience E is understood as phenomenal concept A, and at the

same time experience E is understood as physical concept B. Loar's account fails to explain why I cannot resolve this mystery.

## Conclusion

Physicalism is the view that all phenomena are fundamentally physical phenomena. The Mary argument seems to undermine physicalism. Mary knows all the physical facts prior to leaving the room. If physicalism were true she would be able to know what it is like to experience colour. Intuitively, the Mary argument indicates that she does not know what it is like to experience red. Therefore, physicalism is false; the physical facts do not exhaust all the facts. Physicalists attempt to respond to the Mary argument by presenting the phenomenal concept strategy. Loar's conception of this strategy argues that phenomenal and physical-functional concepts are distinct. Phenomenal concepts' mode of presentation is the reference itself. Loar's account is not decisive because (i) physical and phenomenal concepts cannot be distinct and refer to the same property, (ii) having a phenomenal concept does not give rise to knowledge of the corresponding brain state, and, (iii) the mystery that arises in trying to understand an experience with the use of phenomenal concepts and at the same time physical concepts cannot be explained.

## Footnotes

[A] This refers to a concept known as the hard problem of consciousness. By their own admission, the issue of consciousness has caused many academics unsolvable problems (Koch 2012, 23-24). What are the problems that specialists in the field are trying to address, and why does it seem that the brain and consciousness not the same thing? The answer to these questions is in what is known as the *hard problem* of consciousness. The hard problem of consciousness concerns the fact that we have internal subjective experiences. In other words, the problem is that we cannot explain *what it is like* for a particular organism to have a subjective conscious experience in terms of the third-person language of science (Chalmers 2010, 5). Torin Alter adds another dimension to the definition of the hard problem of consciousness by focusing on the inability to answer why physical brain processes produce conscious experience (Alter 2014, 340).

[B] David Chalmers refers to materialism. However, I have changed it to physicalism for consistency. The terms physicalism and materialism are used interchangeably by many academics (Chalmers 2010, 105; Levine 2011, 280). Although they have separate histories and some conceptual differences (Stoljar, 2016), these do not pose a problem to the concepts dealt with in this essay.

[C] For the purposes of simplicity and clarity. I have adapted this argument from the original.

[D] The Ancient Egyptian Sun god.



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