

A note on the knowledge argument

Michael Pelczar

The knowledge argument needs no introduction, but here it is anyway:¹

K1 Someone who knew all the physical facts could fail to know all the phenomenal facts (such as the fact that **THIS** is what it's like to see red).

K2 If someone could know all the physical facts without knowing all the phenomenal facts, then the physical facts don't metaphysically entail the phenomenal facts.

K3 So, the physical facts don't metaphysically entail the phenomenal facts.

This argument might be sound; at least, for reasons discussed elsewhere, I believe that it survives the most common objections raised against it. However, there's one objection that I think does cast doubt on the argument.²

The following appears to be a metaphysically necessary truth: if someone knows what it's like to see red (or, knows that **THIS** is what it's like to see red), then he or she has had phenomenally red experience, or is currently

¹The canonical source is (Jackson, 1982); see also (Robinson, 1982, 4-5) and (Broad, 1925, 69-72).

²The two most common objections to the knowledge argument are (1) that Mary gains a new ability (to form phenomenally colorful visual imagery), but acquires no knowledge of a new fact; and, (2) that Mary acquires knowledge of a new representation of a fact, but no knowledge of a new fact. The main problem with (1) is that Mary knows what it's like to see red while actually having phenomenally red experience, even if, for some reason, she doesn't acquire the ability to imagine or remember things in color. The main problem with (2) is that since Mary is supposed to know all the physical facts, and since those are supposed (by the physicalist) to be the only facts there are, the physicalist must say that Mary knows *all* the facts, including all the facts about all the representations, and all the facts about how various representations represent various facts; this makes it hard to see what's left for Mary not to know. I develop these criticisms fully in (Pelczar, 2009).

having phenomenally red experience, or resembles someone who has had phenomenally red experience in a respect in which a perfect physical copy of me created ex nihilo would resemble me.

(The last disjunct is to leave room for the view that someone who has never had phenomenally red experience could be made to know what it's like to see red, by being implanted with false unconscious memories of phenomenally red experience. For example, you might think that if scientists were to create a perfect living duplicate of me at a time when I'm in a deep dreamless sleep, my sleeping duplicate would know what it's like to see red, since I do, even before he actually has any phenomenally red experience.)

In other words, “John has never had phenomenally red experience, is not currently having phenomenally red experience, and doesn't resemble those who have had phenomenally red experience (in the relevant respect)” metaphysically entails “John doesn't know what it's like to see red.” Presumably exponents of the knowledge argument agree, since otherwise they'd have no reason to think that depriving someone of chromatic experience (like the fabled Mary) is enough to ensure that she doesn't know what it's like to see red.

There are two possible explanations for why the stated truth is metaphysically necessary. One is that there's a fact—that **THIS** is what it's like to see red—that's accessible only to people who have had, are having, or relevantly resemble those who have had phenomenally red experience. The other is that we implicitly *define* the phrase “knows what it's like to see red” so that only people who are having, have had, or relevantly resemble those who have had phenomenally red experience fall within its extension.

The first explanation is obviously not friendly to physicalism, but the second is.

According to the second explanation, our use of “has knowledge of what it's like to see red” is like our use of “has carnal knowledge.” Just as we use the latter phrase to keep track of who has or has not had sexual intercourse, we use the former to keep track of who has or has not had phenomenally red experience. This is compatible with our also using it to attribute factual knowledge to those we describe as knowing what it's like to see red: when we say that John knows what it's like to see red, we mean (1) that John knows a certain fact, and, (2) that John satisfies the three-part disjunction stated above.

The key point here is that if we accept this second explanation, we shouldn't feel compelled to accept the first premise of the knowledge argument. The

only reason we're given to accept that premise is that someone could know all the physical facts without knowing what it's like to see red. But if what we mean by saying that Mary doesn't know what it's like to see red is just that she fails to know a certain fact *or* fails to satisfy the three-part disjunction stated above, then we can accept that Mary doesn't know what it's like to see red without accepting that there's any fact she fails to know. Maybe the only reason she doesn't fall within the extension of "knows what it's like to see red" (or "knows that **THIS** is what it's like to see red") is that she has never had phenomenally red experience, isn't currently having phenomenally red experience, and doesn't relevantly resemble people who have had phenomenally red experience. For all that proponents of the knowledge argument have told us, that's consistent with her knowing all the facts.

This wouldn't pose a threat to the knowledge argument, if we had good reasons to think that we don't implicitly define the phrase "knows what it's like to see red" so as to keep track of who has or hasn't had phenomenally red experience (as explained above). The problem is that it's hard to think of any non-question-begging reason to favor using the phrase to ascribe knowledge of a fact accessible only to those who satisfy the three-part disjunction, rather than simply to ascribe satisfaction of the disjunction plus knowledge of some (possibly physical) fact. Until this issue is settled in favor of the former usage in a way that doesn't prejudge debate about how consciousness relates to the physical world, I think we have to regard the knowledge argument as inconclusive.

References

- Broad, C.D. 1925. *Mind and Its Place in Nature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Jackson, Frank. 1982. Epiphenomenal qualia. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, **32**(127), 23–36.
- Pelczar, Michael. 2009. The knowledge argument, the open question argument, and the moral problem. *Synthese*, **171**(1), 25–45.
- Robinson, Howard. 1982. *Matter and Sense: A Critique of Contemporary Materialism*. London: Cambridge University Press.