

A Note on the Knowledge Argument

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The knowledge argument is as follows: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 logically entail the phenomenal facts.

K3 So, the physical facts don't logically 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 significant doubt on the argument.²

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 materialist) to be the only facts there are, the materialist 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—which makes it hard to see what's left for Mary not to know. For a fuller development of these criticisms of the ability and “old fact/new guise” objections to the knowledge argument, see (Pelczar, 2009).

The following appears to be a necessary truth:

- (T) If someone knows what it's like to see red, then (1) he or she has had phenomenally red experience, or, (2) he or she is currently having phenomenally red experience, or, (3) he or she 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 third disjunct is to leave room for the possibility that someone who has never had phenomenally red experience could be made to know what it's like to have red experience, 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 breathing physical duplicate of me at a time when I'm in a deep dreamless sleep, my sleeping duplicate would know what it's like to have red experience (since I do) even before he actually has any phenomenally red experience.

To put this another way,

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).

logically entails

John doesn't know what it's like to see red.

Presumably proponents of the knowledge argument agree with this, since otherwise they'd have no reason to think that depriving the fabled Mary of chromatic experience (without implanting in her any false memories) is enough to ensure that she doesn't know what it's like to see red.³

There are two possible explanations for why this entailment holds (i.e., for why (T) is logically necessary). One is that there's a fact 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

³Mary is a hypothetical person who knows all physical facts, without ever having had colorful experience: see (Jackson, 1982, 130).

having, have had, or relevantly resemble those who have had phenomenally red experience fall within its extension.

The first explanation is unfriendly to materialism, but the second is not.

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 (“knowledge-that”) 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 is that if we accept this second explanation, we shouldn’t feel compelled to accept the first premise of the knowledge argument (K1). The only reason we’re given to accept K1 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 doesn’t know. Maybe the only reason she doesn’t fall within the extension of “knows 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 serious threat to the knowledge argument, if we had good reasons to think that we do not 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 (for proponents of the knowledge argument) 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 in (T), rather than simply to ascribe satisfaction of the disjunction plus knowledge of some (possibly physical) fact. Until and unless this issue is settled in favor of the first usage in a non-question-begging way, we should regard the knowledge argument as inconclusive at best.

References

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