

The knowledge argument against physicalism

Physicalism:

The thesis that all the facts with regard to the objects that participate in events and their properties are physical facts.

Physical facts are facts about matter, its arrangements, and the forces that operate on it.

The knowledge argument (from Frank Jackson)

Imagine Mary, a brilliant physiologist who knows everything there is to know about colour vision from the point of view of physical science. Mary knows all the physical facts. Mary, though, either lacks colour vision or has always lived in a black-and-white environment. Mary has seen blue things, but she's never seen them as blue.

One day, Mary gains colour vision or is let out of her black-and-white environment.

Looking toward the sky, Mary sees a blue thing and, moreover, sees it as blue.

In seeing the sky as blue, Mary has learned a few things she didn't know before, such as what the sky looks like to a person with colour vision and what the blue of the sky looks like.

Mary, then, is now acquainted with facts with which formerly she was unacquainted. Mary knows facts she didn't know before.

But Mary already knew all the physical facts about colour vision. Since she now has knowledge of facts she didn't have before, it must be true that not all the facts about colour vision are physical facts.

Thus, there are facts about colour vision in addition to the physical facts about colour vision.

Therefore, the physical facts are not all the facts that there are.

There are also (at least) experiential facts, facts about the qualitative character of our experiences.

The argument:

1. We can know all the physical facts about brains and eyes and light and colour and so on without also knowing how a thing's colour appears in experience.
2. There are facts about how a thing's colour appears in experience.

Therefore: 3. There are facts about colour in addition to the physical facts.

4. Colour was chosen in the above argument as simply an instance; the argument goes through for the objects of each of our sense modalities.

Therefore: 5. There are facts about how things appear to us in addition to all the physical facts about those things.

Therefore: 6. Physicalism does not imply a complete inventory of objects that participate in events or their properties.

Objections:

1) The descriptions under which these new things are known can be reduced to physicalistic descriptions. Mary hasn't actually learned anything new about colour. Rather, she's just acquired a new way of describing what she already knew.

2) Mary has acquired no new propositional knowledge. She's had experiences she hasn't had before and she's acquired ways to discriminate among things that she didn't have before. For the argument to succeed, though, Mary would have had to have acquired propositional knowledge, for it's not a fact if it cannot be expressed in a proposition. Since how blue appears to Mary is not expressible in a proposition, there is no fact here, and, thus, no fact to be added to the physical facts.