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Jackson’s Epiphenomenal Qualia: It’s too early to Quine Qualia

According to philosopher Thomas Nagel, “the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism” (“What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” 436). This “something it is like to *be*” an organism or person entails qualia or what it is like for an organism to experience environmental phenomena. In this paper, I provide a brief introduction to qualia and how it fits into the framework of the philosophical study of consciousness. Then, I present philosopher Frank Jackson’s Mary the Color Vision Scientist argument in favor of qualia, and show how it leads him to deny physicalism, the view that everything is composed of physical matter, and classify qualia as epiphenomenal, something that can by physically caused yet cannot cause physical events. I claim that Jackson takes a hasty step too far by eliminating physicalism as the current methods and technology available to the scientific study of consciousness could potentially become more advanced in the future and provide a physical account of qualia. Furthermore, I argue that Jackson has more reason to deny qualia’s existence and epiphenomenalism than physicalism. Finally, I conclude that an examination of the relationship between the subjective and objective to an extent and further empirical studies of consciousness can help us determine whether we should continue to include qualia in our ontologies.  
 In the realm of philosophy of mind, the mind-body problem is a highly contested issue. The mind-body problem concerns defining the relationship between the body and the mind and how they interact with one another. Substance dualists propose the view that the mind is non-physical while the body is physical. The supposed interaction between a non-physical mind and a physical body raises a number of issues, including a violation of the conservation of energy. Due to the problems that arise from substance dualism, some philosophers argue that the mind and the body are both physical entities. This view is called physicalism; the two major types of physicalism are identity theory and functionalism. Identity theorists believe that mental states are equivalent to brain states while functionalists believe that mental states are equivalent to functional states, or states in which some function in the brain is performed. Those who do not subscribe to functionalism argue that qualia states are not functional states and functional states cannot supervene or cause changes in qualia states. If one accepts the previous argument, he or she refutes functionalism as well as physicalism. Then, if physicalism is not true, qualia are non-physical. Due to this result, some philosophers, including Jackson, accept that qualia are non-physical entities.

In Jackson’s Mary the Color Vision Scientist argument, Mary is a scientist who studies the neurophysiology of vision in a black and white room using black and white television. Mary’s black and white environment is often likened to having black and white colorblindness. Despite her environment and impediments, Mary is able to uncover all the physical information about color, such as the wavelengths of each color and how the brain processes those wavelengths to perceive color. Now, if Mary is released from her black and white room, receives an eye operation that enables her to see color, or is provided special glasses that enable her to see the world in color, will Mary learn anything new about color? In other words, can Mary learn anything about color beyond its physical properties? Jackson suggests that indeed, Mary will learn not only what colors look like but also what it is like to experience the colors or color qualia. Since, Mary learns something new about color, namely color qualia, her studies concerning the physical properties of color did not provide her with a complete knowledge of color. As her knowledge of color is incomplete, physicalism does not paint a full picture of her conscious experience; therefore, physicalism is false (Jackson 275). In other words, if physicalism were true, Mary would have learned everything there is to know about color from her studies. Furthermore, as science is a means by which to explain the physical world around us and could not account for qualia, qualia are non-physical.

If physicalism is false and qualia are non-physical, it seems that qualia cannot impact anything in the physical world. Jackson makes this point saying, “mental states are inefficacious with respect to the physical world” and the “mental is *totally* causally inefficacious” (276). However, qualia are caused by the physical world; what it is like to experience something results from the experience of some physical phenomenon. Thus, qualia are considered epiphenomenal as they can be caused by the physical world, yet they do not cause anything in relation to the physical world.

Jackson is a self-described “qualia freak,” going as far to deny physicalism to defend qualia (273). Accounting for qualia or subjective experience is exactly the Hard Problem of consciousness proposed by philosopher David Chalmers (5). Chalmers claims the Hard Problem differs from and is more difficult than the easy problems in that it cannot be accounted for by empirical evidence which is given in the form of a functional explanation of the workings of the brain. The inability to answer the Hard Problem by means of science results in an explanatory gap between the functional explanations for the easy problems and the explanation required for the Hard Problem (Chalmers 8). In the “Philosophy of Phenomenal Consciousness,” philosopher Zoe Drayson says that for Jackson, “the existence of a genuine explanatory gap would be proof that consciousness is not physical” (Drayson 289). So, Jackson’s view solely holds if the explanatory gap cannot be bridged. However, this explanatory gap may not be permanent as future scientific advancements in empirical methods and data collection and analysis may be able to bridge the gap and provide for qualia. Therefore, Jackson makes a premature conclusion that physicalism is false based on the little empirical work that has been done thus far on the study of consciousness.

For example, in terms of the thought experiment, if Mary has advanced enough technology and scientific methods to study color, she would be able to understand color qualia in the lab and have no need to experience colors themselves to know what it is like to experience them. Then, Jackson would no longer be able to dismiss physicalism, and qualia would be considered a physical phenomenon. While it seems incorrect for Jackson to claim physicalism is false, it is possible that he is right. However, it is not possible for Jackson to make a determination about physicalism at this point because the science available is not sufficient to do so.

Jackson also mistakenly categorizes qualia as epiphenomenal. In “The Hornswoggle Problem,” philosopher Patricia Churchland claims that “qualia freaks” like Jackson make the error of using the argument from ignorance to show that qualia is non-physical, cannot be explained by science, and thus epiphenomenal. In summary, the argument from ignorance states that if we do not understand much about qualia, then we know that either qualia can never be explained, nothing science could ever discover would deepen our understanding of qualia, or qualia can never be explained in terms of some other physical properties (Churchland 406). When he concludes physicalism is false and qualia are epiphenomenal, Jackson falls into the trap of assuming nothing science could ever discover would deepen our understanding of qualia. Often, epiphenomenalism is considered a mysterious or hand-wavy explanation for a phenomenon. Churchland explains what this mysteriousness signifies: the “mysteriousness of a problem is not a fact about the problem, it is not a metaphysical feature of the universe – it is an epistemological fact about *us*. It is about where we are in current science, it is about what we can and cannot understand” (406). So, characterizing qualia as epiphenomenal or mysterious is not a logical move to make. Once again, nothing about qualia is certain until there is empirical evidence that proves or disproves it as a physical or non-physical epiphenomenal entity.

In “Quining Qualia,” philosopher Daniel Dennett argues that qualia do not exist as nothing has the ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly knowable properties that qualia supposedly have. To explain how qualia are not directly knowable, Dennett suggests that we cannot isolate an individual quale from our experiences (228). Yet, since Mary experiences something new when seeing color for the first time, she might be able to isolate the qualia she experiences from the color. For example, for Mary, seeing the sky has particular qualia, but seeing the blueness of the sky is a novel quale, so she might be able to separate the blue sky quale from her usual sky qualia. Even if Mary is able to separate the blueness quale from her usual sky qualia, Dennett would say she would not be able to articulate about the blueness quale as qualia are ineffable. Thus qualia would not exist because they lack the ineffability property.

Now, it could be that every time Mary experienced the sky before seeing its blueness that her experience of it was slightly different. Dennett would argue that because each quale is different and seems new, Mary would not know which quale is which. She might have an idea if a certain quale seem similar to one she experienced before, but she could not be certain about her qualia. As Mary’s experience of the blueness of the sky is not directly knowable, qualia cannot exist. Therefore, Jackson should reconsider his stance as a “qualia freak.”

While Jackson’s epiphenomenal proposal, dismissal of physicalism, and promotion of qualia are not well founded at this point in time, it is still possible that he could be right. Nagel suggests that more work understanding the relationship between the objective and the subjective is needed to make any headway into the qualia issue: “it seems unlikely that any physical theory of mind can be contemplated until more though has been given to the problem of subjective and objective” (“What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” 450). However, determining how to objectively study subjective experience is a problem in itself. In “Subjective and Objective,” Nagel suggests that the subjective and the objective lie on a scale, and that we can become more objective but never attain true objectivity. The danger of becoming more objective is losing our understanding of things subjectively, which is needed for understanding individuals’ qualia and experience (“Subjective and Objective” 206-209). While looking more into the subjective and objective may be beneficial to gaining a better understanding of consciousness, it may lead us away from subjective experience. So, expanding the capabilities of science seems like the most feasible way to determine if qualia is physical or even epiphenomenal.

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