Objections to the knowledge argument

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Recall that the knowledge argument can be laid out like this:

1. While in the black-and-white room, Mary knows all of the physical facts about color experience.
2. Mary learns something about color experience upon her release.
3. If Mary learns something about color experience upon her release, she does not know all of the facts about color experience while in the room.
4. Mary does not know all of the facts about color experience while in the room. (2,3)
5. There are facts about color experience that are not physical facts. (1,4)
6. If physicalism is true, then all facts are physical facts.

C. Physicalism is false. (5,6)

Let's look at three lines of objection to the argument.

1 The hard line reply

The simplest reply just denies that (1) and (2) can both be true, and insists that if Mary knew all of the physical facts, she would also know what it is like to experience red.

A problem: it really seems as though one could learn all of the physical facts wuthout ever experiencing red. (See Jackson's joke about the Open University.) But then this reply seems to amount to simply denying the intuition on which Jackson's argument rests.

Possible reply: that intuition is unreliable, since we have no real grip on what it would be like to know all of the physical facts.

2 The abilities hypothesis

Another reply denies premise (3). The most well-known version of this reply says that Mary learns something only in the sense that she acquires an ability — a piece of know-how — rather than knowledge that any fact is the case. A comparison: one can know all of the physical facts about bikes without knowing how to ride a bike.

This leads to the question: what ability does Mary acquire? Perhaps: an ability to remember or imagine certain sorts of experiences. Two problems: (i) she may lack imagination or memory, but still learn something; (ii) if she does acquire new abilities, this seems to be explained by her knowledge of what the experience is like. But then the abilities must be explained by some new factual knowledge which she acquires.

3 The phenomenal concept strategy

The most popular reply to the knowledge argument concedes that Mary does learn something, but denies that this shows that physicalism is false. Which premise does this response deny? There are two options, depending on how we understand 'fact.'

Consider that I can know all of the physical facts about the universe and its history without, intuitively, knowing either of the following facts:

> Location L is here.
>
> Time T is now.

where 'Location L' and 'Time T' are replaced with accurate objective descriptions of the speakers time and location. And yet this obviously does not show that either times or locations are non-physical.

Suppose that I come to learn that Time T is now. Do I learn a new fact? If we say yes, then we are using 'fact' in a very fine-grained way, according to which the fact that Hesperus is Hesperus is distinct from the fact that Phosphorus is Phosphorus. On this understanding of 'fact,' the phenomenal concept strategy denies (6).

One could also say no, and say that I have only learned a new way of thinking about a fact which I already knew (namely, the fact that Time T = Time T). On this usage of 'fact,' the phenomenal concept strategy denies (3), and says that one can learn something without learning a new fact.

The phenomenal concept strategy is so-called because it says that when we think about Mary's experience and about certain neural activity of hers, we are thinking about the same property using different concepts: a phenomenal concept in the first case, and a physical concept in the second case.

What are phenomenal concepts? There are different answers to this question. One answer is that they are indexical concepts, like 'here' and 'now.'