

Subjective Physicalism as a Response to the Knowledge Argument

[Bilgi Argümanına Bir Yanıt Olarak Öznel Fizikselcilik]

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Abstract: According to Frank Jackson (1982, 1986), phenomenal knowledge, our first-personal knowledge of subjective experiences, cannot be reduced to objective knowledge that can be expressed in physical/functional terms, and this shows that there are non-physical facts that can only be known from the first-person perspective. This is Jackson's knowledge argument against physicalism. In this paper, I first give a brief survey of the standard responses to the knowledge argument in the literature and, next, I critically evaluate a relatively less commonly defended response, namely subjective physicalism. I consider two versions of subjective physicalism, namely inclusive subjective physicalism and exclusive subjective physicalism. The former, as I argue, is not a clear and coherent enough theory to be acceptable, and the latter, as I argue, is not plausible since an intuitively acceptable definition of the physical, which would also allow fundamentally subjective/phenomenal properties to be physical, is yet to be proposed.

Keywords: subjective physicalism, the knowledge argument, physicality, phenomenal knowledge, consciousness, subjectivity.

Öz: Frank Jackson (1982, 1986), görüngüsel bilginin, yani öznel deneyimlerimizin birinci kişi perspektifinden edinilen bilgisinin, fiziksel ve işlevsel terimlerle ifade edilebilecek nesnel bilgiye indirgenemeyeceğini ve bunun sadece birinci kişi perspektifinden bilinebilecek fiziksel olmayan olguların varlığını gösterdiğini iddia eder. Bu argüman, Jackson'ın fizikselcilik karşıtı bilgi argümanıdır. Bu çalışmada, analitik felsefe literatüründe bilgi argümanına verilen en yaygın fizikselci yanıtları kısaca taradıktan sonra, "öznel fizikselcilik" yanıtını ayrıntılı bir şekilde irdeliyorum. Öznel fizikselciliğin iki çeşidini, yani içerici ve dışlayıcı öznel fizikselcilik görüşlerini ayrı ayrı ele alıp, öznel fizikselciliğin her iki çeşidinin de kabul edilemez olduğu

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görüşünü savunuyorum. İçerici öznel fizikselcilik, ayrıntılı bir şekilde incelendiğinde, yeterince açık ve tutarlı bir görüş niteliği sergilemiyor. Dışlayıcı öznel fizikselcilik ise, temelde öznel olanın fizikselliğine kavramsal olarak izin verecek, kabul edilebilir bir fiziksellik tanımının ortaya konmaması nedeniyle bilgi argümanına güçlü bir yanıt olarak karşımıza çıkmıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: öznel fizikselcilik, bilgi argümanı, fiziksellik, görüngüsel bilgi, bilinç, öznellik.

1. Introduction

Mary is a brilliant scientist who has never left her black-and-white room, in which she has never seen colors. She has seen only black, white and shades of grey. She acquires complete physical knowledge, knowledge expressible in physical/functional terms, about human color vision from books and a black-and-white television.

She knows all the physical facts about us and our environment, in a wide sense of 'physical' which includes everything in *completed* physics, chemistry, and neurophysiology, and all there is to know about the causal and relational facts consequent upon all this, including of course functional roles. If physicalism is true, she knows all there is to know. For to suppose otherwise is to suppose that there is more to know than every physical fact, and that is what physicalism denies. (Jackson, 1986: 291; emphasis in the original)

But one day she leaves the room, sees a red tomato, and learns what it is like to see red. Since she learns something new, her pre-release knowledge, complete physical knowledge, was not complete knowledge, and hence, there are non-physical truths and physicalism is false. This is Frank Jackson's (1982, 1986) knowledge argument against physicalism.¹

In the next section, I give a brief survey of the standard responses to the knowledge argument in the literature and, in the third section, I critically evaluate a relatively less commonly defended response, namely subjective physicalism. I consider two versions of subjective physicalism and I argue that neither version constitutes a plausible physicalist response to the knowledge argument.

2. Objections to the Knowledge Argument

¹ By "physicalism" I mean the view that all fundamental properties are physical, and they metaphysically determine all properties instantiated in the actual world. A functional property can be regarded as physical when it is realized by a physical property. Only properties that I exclude at the outset from my discussion are properties that can only be exemplified by abstract objects, such as being-even (number).

In this section, I will organize my discussion based on Nida-Rümelin's (2015) version of the knowledge argument:²

Premise P1 Mary has complete physical knowledge about human color vision before her release.

Therefore (from P1):

Consequence C1 Mary knows all the physical facts about human color vision before her release.

Premise P2 There is some (kind of) knowledge concerning facts about human color vision that Mary does not have before her release.

Therefore (from P2):

Consequence C2 There are some facts about human color vision that Mary does not know before her release.

Therefore (from C1 and C2):

Consequence C3 There are non-physical facts about human color vision.

We can identify five claims in Nida-Rümelin's version of the knowledge argument: (i) P1, (ii) if P1 then C1, (iii) P2, (iv) if P2 then C2, and (v) if C1 and C2 then C3.

(v) is true, since the main argument is valid.

A few objections to (i) in the literature rest on some simple misunderstandings.³ P1, which states that Mary has complete physical knowledge about human color vision before her release, is acceptable to both dualists and physicalists.

² The reason why I am using Nida-Rümelin's characterization of the knowledge argument rather than Jackson's original argument is that Jackson's original argument begs the question against subjective physicalism, since Jackson equates having complete physical knowledge with knowing all physical facts (as we will see, this is the main assumption that subjective physicalism rejects).

³ For example, Stemmer (1989: 90, note 6) argues that the premise that Mary has complete physical knowledge is problematic because of the element of self-reference, which arises from the fact that knowing is, at least partly, a physical process, and hence Mary's complete physical knowledge must include knowledge of itself. But this objection rests on a confusion of general and particular physical knowledge. Mary has complete general scientific knowledge; she is not omniscient about every particular fact that is expressible in physical terms. The knowledge of what particular neural state she is in at any moment is not, and is not supposed to be, *a priori* deducible from her complete general physical knowledge.

The most notable objections to (iii) are the ability hypothesis⁴ and the acquaintance hypothesis⁵, according to which, what Mary learns when she sees red for the first time is not propositional knowledge, but some kind of non-propositional knowledge which does not concern facts. For another objection to (iii), Churchland (1985: 25-28) and Dennett (2004: 60-61; 2007) argue that the intuition that phenomenal knowledge cannot be deduced from physical knowledge is *prima facie* powerful only because of our lack of understanding of what complete physical knowledge would be. They maintain that it is question begging to just assume that a person with complete physical knowledge will learn something new when she leaves the room.

Most of the recent debate on the knowledge argument revolves around (iv). The most influential objection to (iv) is what Stoljar (2005) calls “the phenomenal concept strategy.” According to the phenomenal concept strategy, Mary’s new phenomenal knowledge is about the physical facts that she already has physical knowledge about.⁶ Phenomenal knowledge is knowledge that involves phenomenal concepts, and (excluding miracles) phenomenal concepts can only be acquired by phenomenal experience. A phenomenal concept picks out its reference directly, and not via a contingent property of its reference. What a phenomenal concept picks out, according to this view, is a physical property. So, what Mary learns upon seeing a red tomato is not a new truth, but a new way of apprehending a truth that she already knows in physical terms.

In the remainder of this paper I will focus on the most prominent recent non-standard objection to (ii), namely subjective physicalism.

⁴ Lewis (1983a, 2004) and Nemirow (1980, 1990) argue that Mary does not learn new factual/propositional knowledge when she experiences a new phenomenal state, but she gains some cognitive abilities, which constitute not knowledge-that but know-how. If what Mary learns is just know-how, then the new knowledge/new fact thesis is false, since acquiring new know-how is not (*ipso facto*) acquiring new factual knowledge. According to Lewis (2004), knowing what it is like to have a certain experience consists in the possession of the abilities to recognize, imagine, and remember the relevant experience.

⁵ Earl Conee (1994) argues that Mary’s new phenomenal knowledge is not factual knowledge, but nonfactual acquaintance knowledge. According to Conee (1994: 144), acquaintance knowledge consists in the most direct way of apprehending a thing, and this is not a type of knowledge that is peculiar solely to first-personal knowledge of phenomenal states. He states that “to come to know a property is to become acquainted with the property, just as to come to know a city is to become acquainted with the city, and to come to know a problem is to become acquainted with the problem” (1994, p. 140). To become acquainted with a city is to visit the city, and to become acquainted with a property is to experience the property. So, Mary’s new knowledge does not pose a threat to physicalism, since it is nonfactual acquaintance knowledge and the phenomenal property that she becomes acquainted with can be a physical/functional property.

⁶ See, for example, Horgan (1984), Byrne (2002), Loar (2004), Levin (2007), Papineau (2002, 2007), Balog (2012). For an assessment of the phenomenal concept strategy as a physicalist response to the knowledge argument, see Kıymaz (2019).

3. Subjective Physicalism

As an objection to the inference from P1 to C1, some argue that it is possible that Mary has complete physical knowledge but does not know every (general) physical fact, because there are physical facts that cannot be expressed in physical terms.

Bealer (1994: 191; also see Alter 1998) argues that some physical facts cannot be learned just from discursive lessons. Van Gulick (2004) maintains that the proponents of the knowledge argument unjustifiably suppose that there are no subjective physical facts, and hence beg the question against non-reductive physicalism. According to Van Gulick, subjective physical facts are “facts that are physically realized but cognitively accessible only from the experiential perspective of a certain range of physically realized self-understanding systems” (2004: 390-1).

Flanagan (1992: 98-9), similarly, argues that the knowledge argument does not disprove *metaphysical physicalism*, but it disproves the view that it is possible to express all physical facts in the language of physical sciences, which he calls “linguistic physicalism.”⁷

According to what Robert Howell (2013, 2009, 2008) calls “subjective physicalism”, some physical properties (or some aspects of physical properties) can be grasped only subjectively. If this is correct, it is compatible with physicalism that pre-release Mary cannot know all physical properties (or all aspects of physical properties). In this section, I will mainly focus on Howell’s work, since he offers the most extensive defense of the existence of subjective physicality in the literature.

Howell (2013) proposes two types of subjective physicalism. Inclusive subjective physicalism:

A full physical description of the world leaves nothing out. All properties can receive objective, physical descriptions. Nonetheless, there are some properties that cannot be grasped fully unless they are grasped subjectively, via conscious experiences, as well as by objective physical descriptions. (Howell, 2013: 154)

Exclusive subjective physicalism:

Some physical properties can be grasped only subjectively. The properties that underwrite conscious experiences (e.g. qualia) are physical, but they are not identical with any property mentioned in a completed physics. (Howell, 2013: 154)

⁷ This is also what Galen Strawson (2006) calls “physicSalism” instead of “physicalism.”

3.1. Inclusive Subjective Physicalism

Howell writes:

One way to describe what Mary learns, according to [inclusive] subjective physicalism, is to say that she comes to grasp an aspect of the property that she already knew about under its physical description. What, though, are these aspects? They are not themselves properties, but are instead part of the nature of properties that are not expressible by physical description. (2013: 156)

He goes on to explain what an aspect of a property is by an analogy. Consider classical atomism, according to which there are indivisible, simple but extended atoms. These atoms do not have real parts, but they have conceptual parts, such as the front half and the back half. According to Howell, “aspects are to properties as conceptual parts are to atoms” and aspects, like conceptual parts, are separable “in mind only” (2013: 157). So, strictly speaking, there are no non-physical phenomenal properties, but only metaphysically innocent non-physical phenomenal aspects of physical properties:

To add these aspects to the list of physical properties would, in fact, be redundant—much as adding “the first half of atom A” and “the second half of atom A” to a list would be unnecessary, according to the atomist, if that list already included atom A. (Howell, 2013: 157)

However, I don’t think the analogy between conceptual parts and subjective aspects works. One important difference between conceptual parts of an atom and subjective aspect of a physical property is that the atom does not necessitate the conceptual parts, since conceptual parts exist “in mind only,” so, unless there are subjects thinking about the atom, the atom does not have conceptual parts. But, as Howell explicitly says, the physical property of what it is like to see red necessitates the subjective aspect; the subjective aspect is “part of the nature of” that physical property.

Furthermore, pre-release Mary, according to Howell, knows the physical property of what it is like to see red, but she doesn’t know its subjective aspect. But, is it possible to know an atom and not to be in a position to know its conceptual front half *a priori*? Can one have an a-ha moment and experience a sense of discovery when one learns about a conceptual part of an atom that one already knows? Can one learn about a metaphysically insignificant conceptual part of a known atom empirically, as Mary learns the subjective aspect? One does not empirically discover, as Mary does, that an atom has a front conceptual part, because, strictly speaking, the atom does not have conceptual parts, conceptual parts are what we theoretically/conceptually impose on the atom. But, the subjective aspect of the physical property of what it is like to see red is not a product of Mary’s conceptual manipulation, it is, according to Howell, necessitated by the physical property itself. Because of these significant differences

between the conceptual parts of atoms and the aspects of properties, I find Howell's analogy more confusing than illuminating.

Here is another consideration against inclusive subjective physicalism. Provided that inclusive subjective physicalism is true, there is an important difference between the property of *being-an-electron* and the property of *being-c-fiber-activation* (or some physical property like that): one of them has a subjective aspect, the other doesn't. This strikes me as a real metaphysical difference between these properties. We do not have to attribute independent metaphysical significance to subjective aspects in order to acknowledge this. Now, what explains that some properties have a subjective aspect, but some don't? The explanation of the subjective aspect can be a second-order physical/functional property F (of the property which has the phenomenal aspect) about the degree or kind of complexity, or it can be a property merely about causal/functional role. Then the difference between properties with a subjective aspect and properties without a subjective aspect is that the former have F and the latter don't. The difference must be a real difference according to Howell's account, because it is a physical/functional difference. But, pre-release Mary cannot *a priori* deduce which physical properties have subjective aspects from her physical knowledge since subjective aspects are only detectable through subjective experience. So, she cannot identify F and deduce from her physical knowledge alone in virtue of which second-order property some physical properties have subjective aspects, that is, her ignorance about aspects leads to ignorance about properties. One option for the inclusive subjective physicalist is to deny that there is an F and claim that some physical properties have subjective aspects as a brute fact. But, this claim would be highly unsatisfactory, since, as far as we know, there is a clear and very strong correlation between certain physical/functional properties of the brain and phenomenal consciousness, which requires explanation.

Later, Howell mentions *equiangularity* and *equilaterality* as "potential examples of aspects" and concedes that "the aspect-theory part of subjective physicalism might be forced to deny that there are necessarily coextensive properties" (2013: 157, notes 8, 9). This suggests that, because they are necessarily coextensive, we should regard equiangularity and equilaterality as aspects rather than properties. On this view, properties are coarse-grained, while aspects are fine-grained. But, Howell also maintains that the subjective aspect of what it is like to see red and the physical property of what it is like to see red are necessarily exemplified together. If phenomenal redness were a property it would be coextensive with the physical property of what it is like to see red. Based on what Howell says about equiangularity and equilaterality, this would mean that the physical is just another aspect and not a property. In fact, he explicitly says this: "the subjective aspect cannot exist without the physical aspect and vice versa"

(2013: 157). This makes it sound as if, on Howell's view, there is an underlying neutral property and the physical and the phenomenal are both aspects of this property. But this sounds just like the dual-aspect theory. And, even if there is a property of which the physical and the subjective are two aspects, then pre-release Mary would be genuinely ignorant of something about that property, since she knows only one aspect of that property, namely the physical aspect. This would be like knowing only one conceptual half of an atom, which does not count as having complete knowledge of that atom.

To sum up, I don't think Howell's inclusive subjective physicalism is clear or substantial enough to be regarded as a plausible rejoinder to the knowledge argument. It is not clear what the relation between a subjective aspect and a property is and it is not clear whether the physical is also an aspect or not.

3.2. Exclusive Subjective Physicalism

Let's remember Howell's definition of exclusive subjective physicalism:

Some physical properties can be grasped only subjectively. The properties that underwrite conscious experiences (e.g. qualia) are physical, but they are not identical with any property mentioned in a completed physics. (Howell, 2013: 154)

Exclusive subjective physicalism states that some physical properties are not expressible in completed physics and can only be grasped experientially.

According to Howell, a necessary condition for theory objectivity is that the theory about state T does not "require that one enter any token state of determinate type T [or a state sufficiently similar to T] in order to fully understand states of type T" (Howell 2008, p. 128). Subjective physical properties cannot be expressed by an objective theory like those of physics, chemistry, neurology, and biology.

Howell defines "physicalism" as follows.

Any metaphysically possible world that is a physical duplicate of our world is either a duplicate of our world simpliciter or it contains a duplicate of our world as a proper part. (Howell, 2008: 129)

This supervenience definition is one of the most popular ways of defining physicalism.⁸ According to Howell, this is a purely metaphysical conception of physicalism and it is

⁸ Lewis, similarly, writes: "Among worlds where no natural properties alien to our world are instantiated, no two differ without differing physically; any two such worlds that are exactly alike physically are duplicates" (Lewis, 1983b: 364). Also see Jackson (1998), Chalmers (1996), Tye (2009) for similar definitions.

compatible with subjective physicalism. It is possible for every property to supervene on physical properties with metaphysical necessity, while some physical properties are purely subjective. But, what does “physical property” mean if it doesn’t mean a property that (ideal) physics refers to?

Howell defines “physical property” as follows: “A property P is physical, iff (a) in the actual world P confers only spatio-temporal powers upon its bearer, and (b) P is a thin property” (2008: 30). A thin property is a dispositional property with no categorical basis that is over and above the powers it confers. So, physical properties are properties that, in the actual world, confer spatio-temporal powers and involve no phenomenality that cannot be metaphysically reduced to its dispositional nature.

However, there are several problems with this proposal. First of all, this definition focuses on what powers the property confers in the actual world, and hence all properties that are not instantiated in the actual world are, according to this definition, trivially non-physical.⁹ So, being-phlogiston, being-caloric, etc. are all non-physical properties. But this is very counterintuitive. I think it is much more plausible that these are physical properties that are not instantiated in the actual world. After all, regarding phlogiston as non-physical just because it is not actual misses an important difference between other uninstantiated properties, such as, being-ghost, which are non-physical properties in a much more substantial way than just being unexemplified in the actual world. Suppose some entities that are mentioned in our current physics are not mentioned in ideal/completed physics. Then, since those entities are not actual, they are also non-physical. So, being-black-hole is a physical property only if black holes really exist. I find the claim that physicality of a property is contingent upon whether it is exemplified in the actual world or not highly counterintuitive.

Furthermore, if souls exist and some souls have a telekinetic power, which is a spatio-temporal power, then being-telekinetic is a physical property according to Howell’s definition of the physical, given that being-telekinetic is a thin property. But this conclusion is not acceptable for many philosophers, who maintain that if souls exist and if they have distinct powers, then those powers are non-physical too.

The most important problem, however, is this: how can a physical property, in Howell’s sense, be a subjective property? According to Howell’s accounts of physicality and

⁹ This objection is only relevant if one is not both an actualist and a nominalist about properties. And, Howell’s definition of physical property suggests that he is a realist, rather than nominalist, about properties (he says that properties confer powers upon their bearers).

exclusive subjective physicalism, a subjective physical property has the following characteristics:

- (i) It can be grasped only subjectively.
- (ii) It is not mentioned in completed physics.
- (iii) Confers spatio-temporal powers (so, it is not epiphenomenal).
- (iv) Its nature is dispositional (no categorical basis).
- (v) Its subjectivity is metaphysically reducible to its dispositional nature.

There is an obvious problem with this description: if subjectivity of a physical property is nothing over and above its dispositionality, then why would its dispositional character, which is in turn nothing but the spatio-temporal power it conveys to its bearer (since it is a thin property), not be included in completed physics? If a property is physical in Howell's sense, then I can see no reason for it not to be successfully integrated in completed physics. But, then, because subjectivity is reducible to dispositionality, any subjective physical property will have its subjectivity only as an aspect, since the property can also be fully grasped in terms of physics. So, Howell's conception of the physical is incompatible with his exclusive subjective physicalism.

The important question that is not yet answered is this: If a property can only be grasped subjectively, then, based on what conception of physicality should we regard it as physical? Until an intuitively acceptable conception of the physical that is compatible with exclusive subjectivism is proposed, exclusive subjective physicalism cannot be regarded as a substantial enough theory.

4. Conclusion

Frank Jackson's knowledge argument is still one of the most prominent objections to physicalism. A recent attempt to undermine the knowledge argument is subjective physicalism, according to which, Mary cannot know all physical facts before she sees red since some physical facts, including some facts about what it is like to see red, can only be grasped subjectively upon experiencing a certain phenomenal quality. I discussed two versions of this theory, namely inclusive subjective physicalism and exclusive subjective physicalism. The former, as I argue, is not a clear enough theory to be acceptable, and the latter, as I argue, is not plausible since an intuitively acceptable definition of the physical, which would also allow fundamentally subjective/phenomenal properties to be physical, is yet to be proposed.

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