

Physicalism Prevails

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Let us tweak Jackson's Mary's Room analogy a little. Suppose there is a guy called Darryl. Darryl is now deaf. Now, he is not able to hear any sounds. When he was younger, he was able to hear sounds quite well. In fact, he was a violinist and a composer. He had many auditory experiences, and he acquired competence with a full range of auditory concepts. He was able to recognize that one sound was higher in pitch than another, and that one sound was an octave higher than another. He also knew that A4 was a fifth higher than middle C, and he was able to play A4 on his violin. Besides being deaf now, Darryl has suffered a couple of specific cognitive deficits: he is no longer able to remember any auditory experiences he ever had, and he is no longer able to imagine any sounds. Darryl does still possess a full range of auditory concepts. So he is still able, among other things, to entertain thoughts about sounds. He might wonder, for instance, whether the tuning fork is currently producing the sound A4. Suppose last that Darryl has come to know a complete physical theory of sound. From this complete physical theory and a specification of the physical properties and relations of particular things in a given circumstance follow all the physical facts about sound in that circumstance. So Darryl might know that the tuning fork, which has certain physical properties and which he has just struck with a certain force, is vibrating at 440Hz in its fundamental mode. His instruments tell him that, and he feels the fork vibrating in his hand. But does Darryl know that the fork is producing the sound A4? I argue that he does not.

Phenomenal properties of existence are known as qualia. Qualia are the way things seem, look, or appear to a conscious creature.¹ A sound has a qualitative phenomenal state, or qualia. A sound is the way that sound appears to a conscious creature, i.e. it is a heard noise. There is a unique "what it is like" character to hear a sound. I argue that Darryl does not know

¹ Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 290.

that the fork is producing the sound A4 even if physicalism is true. There is a way for physicalism to be true and Darryl not knowing that the fork is producing the sound A4. All Darryl knows, apart from all the physical facts there are, is that the fork produces acoustic waves of 440 Hz. But an acoustic wave of 440 Hz is not the sound A4 because it lacks a qualitative phenomenal property. In order to recognize that sound, one must know what that phenomenal property is like. First, I will present a variation of Jackson's argument that claims if Darryl doesn't know that the fork is producing the sound A4, physicalism is false. Second, I offer Lewis's objection to this argument—his Ability Hypothesis. I conclude that Darryl does not know that the fork is producing the sound A4, and that physicalism remains true. Finally, I present a possible objection to Lewis's argument and contend that it fails to hold.

An anti-physicalist would argue that Darryl does not know the fork is producing the sound A4. Let us follow Jackson and say that physicalism claims that all correct information is physical information.² We can also replace information with facts and say that physicalism claims that all facts are physical facts since Jackson regards correct information as factual truths.³ A proponent of Jackson's Knowledge Argument would argue that Darryl does not know the fork is producing the sound A4. Darryl already knows all the physical information there is, but if his hearing capabilities are suddenly restored while the fork is vibrating at 440 Hz, it is obvious that Darryl learns something new about the world and our hearing experiences of it. He gains new knowledge that entails what it is like to hear the sound A4 since he has already forgotten the previous experiences of hearing it. Hence, Darryl gains new knowledge and new information that he does not already know. This new information is not physical because it is concerned with the subjective qualities of hearing the sound A4. It follows that physicalism is false if Darryl doesn't know that the fork is producing the sound A4 just from the physical facts alone.

² Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," in *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. David J. Chalmers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 283.

³ *Ibid.*, 289.

The issue with Jackson's argument is that he claims knowing what it is like is knowing-that. We can follow Lewis's objection to Jackson and say that what an experience is like is not knowing that certain possibilities aren't actualized, but *knowing how* to represent that experience again.⁴ Knowing-how is gaining an ability to remember, imagine, and recognize the experience.⁵ If Darryl regains his hearing capabilities while the fork is vibrating at 440Hz, he would gain the ability to remember the sound through this experience. By remembering this experience, he can thus recreate the experience of hearing the sound A4 in his mind, i.e. imagine hearing it again. He will also be able to recognize the sound as A4 if he hears it again in the future. Thus, what Darryl gains after hearing the sound A4 is not new information, facts, or knowledge-that, but new abilities to remember, imagine, and recognize. It follows that Darryl does not know that the fork is producing the sound A4 because he lacks the ability to recognize it in the first place. In order for him to regain that ability, he has to experience, and hear, the sound first. He can't imagine the sound A4 just from the fact that the fork is generating waves of 440Hz. He does not know what it is like to hear the sound. But this does not refute physicalism, because what is gained upon hearing new sounds is not new information (and facts), but new abilities. It might also be the case that Darryl can access an old ability that he never lost. Since he once knew what A4 sounded like, he also once had the ability to recognize A4 again upon hearing it. If Darryl were to regain his hearing capabilities and hear A4, he could access the ability to recognize A4. While it is true that Darryl no longer remembers his experience of hearing the sound A4, it does not follow that he can no longer recognize the sound A4 if he were to hear it again. Therefore, the abilities gained do not have to be new abilities, it could be an ability that Darryl already possesses.

A possible objection to Lewis's Ability Hypothesis claims that physicalism is still threatened by Jackson's knowledge argument even if knowing what it is like to hear A4 is the

⁴ David Lewis, "What Experience Teaches," in *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. David J. Chalmers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 302.

⁵ Ibid.

gaining of abilities. Darryl, suppose that he regained his hearing abilities and hears the sound produced by the vibration of the fork, utters “So this is what hearing A4 is like.” Here, Darryl is expressing a new propositional knowledge that he gained. He might have had the same propositional knowledge before he lost his hearing when he first heard the sound A4, but he lost that knowledge when he no longer remembers the experience of hearing A4. Hence, the declarative sentence that Darryl utters is a new propositional knowledge that he gains. Moreover, this is a form of knowledge-that—knowledge that *this* is the qualitative phenomenal property of hearing A4.

One possible counterargument is due to Kim. To argue against this objection, one can follow Kim and say that the new propositional knowledge gained by Darryl is not objective information⁶. When Darryl utters the sentence “so this is what hearing A4 is like,” Darryl uses ‘this’ as a demonstrative pointing to the sound produced by the fork. However, the content of the knowledge of a fact should be expressible without the use of demonstratives (‘this’, ‘that’, etc.). That is, the content should be understood without a relation to the particular context in which it was used and the person using it. Thus, any objective information must be expressed using sentences free of demonstratives. However, this argument faces issues of its own. A Jacksonian, or other qualia freaks, can simply argue that the use of demonstratives in expressing the content of Darryl’s knowledge reflects the subjective character of his knowledge. Experience is always experienced from the experiencer’s point of view. Darryl’s new knowledge *should* be expressed using demonstratives. This actually provides more support for the Knowledge Argument instead of opposing it since Darryl’s new propositional knowledge is not physical.⁷ If this is the case, physicalism does not escape from the threat of the Knowledge Argument.

⁶ Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 324.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 325.

I argue that we do not need to follow Kim's argument, because it is not the case that Darryl will gain propositional knowledge expressed using demonstratives in the first place. "This is what A4 sounds like," or "A4 sounds like that" are not propositions that he will come to know and there is no need for him to know them. Recall that when Darryl regains his hearing and hears the sound produced by the fork, he gains a new ability to imagine the sound A4 and *accesses* an old ability to recognize the sound. Darryl never lost the ability to recognize the sound A4, he just doesn't remember the experience of hearing it. Hence, Darryl does not gain new propositional knowledge. He would recognize that he is hearing the sound A4 and perhaps utter the sentence "the fork is indeed producing the sound A4," which is free of any demonstratives and indexicals. Furthermore, this sentence is not a new piece of propositional knowledge. It is merely a verbal assertion entailing that Darryl recognized the sound to be A4. Or Darryl doesn't utter any sentences at all since he immediately recognizes the sound to be one that he has forgotten. I conclude that the objection fails to hold in Darryl's case. However, if Darryl is like Mary, who has never heard any sounds before and had no experience of hearing any sounds, the result perhaps would be different as Darryl would not have the ability to recognize the sound A4. In this case, Kim's argument would be more attractive. Though there is a way that Kim's argument can be used as support for the Jacksonians.

I conclude that Darryl does not know that the fork is producing the sound A4 because he cannot access his ability to recognize the sound. Moreover, physicalism can be true even if Darryl doesn't know the fork is producing the sound A4. If anyone hears a new sound, they gain abilities, not information. Hence, physicalism prevails.

