

## ON MINDS IN A PHYSICAL WORLD: FRANK JACKSON'S MARY-ARGUMENT AND MENTAL CAUSATION

by Jani Koskela

We seem to have introspective access to propositional contents and qualia. If someone asks whether one believes something, there is only one way for a person to find an answer to the question, *by* introspectively surveying the contents of one's beliefs. Also, it seems intuitively unreasonable to question the immediacy of subjective experiences, which entail *qualia*: those experiences feel like and are of something and therefore distinguish themselves from other objective relations to the world. Therefore, even if those contents and experiences were causally inert, there would still be reason to think they existed. But also, I think there is a case to be made for mental states being causally efficacious. In this short treatment, I will take a look at Frank Jackson's famous Mary-argument, in which he claims that the qualitative experiences of mental states are not causally efficacious but are outside the closed system of physical causality. I will critically assess the basic assumption of epiphenomenalism in the argument, and offer some possible ways out of the ontological dualism between causally efficacious physical reality and causally inert mental states.

### Jackson's Mary-Argument and Causality

Frank Jackson thinks that the qualitative experiences, "what it feels like", are outside physical descriptions and therefore have to be epiphenomenal, i.e. they are not causally efficacious. He claims that physicalism is false by stating his famous Mary-argument, otherwise known as the Knowledge argument against physicalism:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, [...], all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. [...] What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? [1]

Jackson makes a case claiming that, in fact, Mary *does* learn something new:

It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false. [2]

Daniel Dennett has made a counter-argument to this, claiming that if Mary really knew *everything* there is to know about colour, there wouldn't be anything she would not have

expected when she finally got to see colours [3]. But this argument seems counterintuitive. Jackson claims that Mary does not know everything there is to know about other people, because she learns something new about them when she is released. What Mary gets to know, says Jackson, is something that is not physical.

However, Jackson's Mary-argument makes also an argument *against* epiphenomenalism: qualitative experiences *can* have effects. Jackson points out, that the knowledge argument is not about the *manner* or *type* of knowing, as Churchland [4] has argued, but about *what* Mary learns to know. This would mean that qualitative experiences *are* efficacious, namely, they lead to new knowledge. Jackson does not distinguish types of knowing, such as manner of knowing as reasoning, as mentioned. Knowing as such is therefore 'a state of affairs' rather than reason explanation, ruling out causally other possibilities of 'what Mary knows'. If Mary knows a new thing, it causes the previous states of knowing to be necessarily incomplete. That is not the property of reasoning, but the state of affairs of Mary getting to know something through her subjective qualitative experience of colours, which 'caused' new knowledge *parallel* and *comparable* to knowledge of the physical kind, making the knowledge of the physical world seem incomplete. This line of argument may be refutable, however. But there is even more important point to consider on mental causation.

Jackson's Mary-argument is essentially based on the self-evident presupposition that the physical world is causally closed, that every physical cause has a physical effect. I think this presupposition is reasonable and accepted throughout the different views in philosophy of mind. But this presupposition doesn't have to be necessarily accepted. In fact, regardless of Jackson's knowledge argument, there are reasons to doubt the presupposition of causal closedness of physical world.

### **Is the Physical World Necessarily Causally Closed?**

The claim that all physical effects have a sufficient physical cause is the definition for all things 'physical', but this would make the whole presupposition of the causal closedness trivial and empty. Also, if 'physical' means those qualities which are entailed in physical laws, the presupposition rules out many completely scientifically acceptable causes (such as some biological causes) because physics does not deal with those. Even physical laws may allow non-physical causal elements: the first law of thermodynamics allow new variables to be added to the formula, say, a mental component, and still remain fully functional.

Any known analysis of the concepts of 'cause' and 'causation' does not insist that causes should be similar to the effects they cause. Therefore, non-physical subjective experiences may have causal power, causing beliefs and behaviour. They may necessitate new knowledge and be the objects of knowledge which is not reducable to the objective description of the world.

One can also deduce from this, that mental states *do not necessarily have to cause* anything, but they could still exist. If causation does not restrict itself to only one type of things, but that it can happen between different types of things, then *what causes a certain outcome* is a contingent state of affairs. Therefore, mental states may act causally, but that this causation is not a necessary thing, even though mental states exist.

## Can We Have Minds In a Physical World?

But, it may be that the world is deterministic even though it may not feel like so. We may feel like being able to make free choices regardless of the physical world being causally determined. And I argue that even if the world is deterministic, we may have minds with free will without it being in contradiction to reductive materialism. Dennett asks what does it really mean when we talk of determinism. According to determinism, all things in the future will be inevitable if determinism is true. Everything will happen according to deterministic laws and principles. But I argue that this does not really mean anything. The future happens regardless of determinism or indeterminism being true. What this 'inevitability' means is, that things are unavoidable. But this unavoidability necessarily presupposes someone, an active agent according to whom things can be unavoidable. Inevitability gets its meaning from the perspective of particular agents who can avoid things.

When it comes to determinism, and the unavoidability or inevitability of things, it is a question of perspective: what kinds of things are avoidable by a particular agent considering its powers and capabilities? Even though a human being cannot avoid gravity or a thunderbolt hitting him, it doesn't mean that this human being cannot avoid a brick from hitting his head. This is not in contradiction to determinism, but that it in fact gives room for the possibility of free minds in a causal world. The phenomenal subjective experience of a mind may not therefore be in contradiction to causally deterministic world, but that the sense of causally inert mental states is a part of the nature of the deterministic world itself.

## Conclusion

In this short treatment I have dealt with the question of causality and mental states, starting from Frank Jackson's epiphenomenal Mary-argument. I have offered some possibilities for bridging the gap between causally efficacious physical reality and assumption of causally inert mental states. The reviewed views on causality, determinism and mental states are preliminary and refutable, but they offer fruitful starting points for further philosophical work on the issue.

## Footnotes

1. Jackson, Frank. 'Epiphenomenal qualia,' in Chalmers, David. (ed.) *Philosophy of Mind. Classical and Contemporary Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 275.

2. *ibid.* p. 275.

3. Dennett, Daniel. 'Quining Qualia,' in Chalmers, David. (ed.) *Philosophy of Mind. Classical and Contemporary Readings*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 226. See also: Dennett, Daniel. *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1984); Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1992).

4. Churchland, Paul. 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes,' in Chalmers, David. (ed.) *Philosophy of Mind. Classical and Contemporary Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). p. 576.

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