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### **The Qualiafications (or Lack Thereof) of Epiphenomenal Qualia**

In his essay *Epiphenomenal Qualia*, Frank Jackson makes the case for qualia as epiphenomenal in nature. The argument stems from his knowledge argument for the existence of qualia and the Mary's Room thought experiment. Jackson's basic argument (which I will explore in the next segment) aims to show that despite a lack of physical evidence for qualia, they exist, and further, that this lack of physical evidence merely shows their inability to causally affect the physical rather than their inexistence. I will discuss this claim, an objection to it that Jackson partially addresses, and finally show that the reasoning behind Jackson's refutation of said objection is flawed insofar as it asks the reader to ignore several important differences in his explanatory analogy. From this I will conclude that while it may be impossible to disprove qualia with physicalism, the impossibility of proving the existence of epiphenomenal qualia (and the inability to assess them objectively) is enough to leave the discussion at a standstill. From there I will continue the conversation to the subject of why epiphenomenal qualia would matter in the first place, and the potential philosophical and scientific benefits of making a stronger claim, such as classifying qualia as phenomenal instead. The points made in this paper are not meant merely as objections to the specific classification of qualia as epiphenomenal that Jackson makes, but are also meant to point out the epistemic dangers of reducing the strength of claims in order to make them more acceptable in terms of what is currently known, insofar as such reductions can lead to complacency in research, as well as destruction of any motivation to continue the discussion further.

In what is commonly referred to as the knowledge argument, Frank Jackson purports to show that physicalism lacks explanatory power when it comes to the way in which we

experience the world. Jackson uses the examples of Fred (who can see an additional shade of red) and Mary (who has been exposed only to black and white images but nonetheless has access to all physical information) in order to show the explanatory shortcomings of physicalism. Briefly, the argument is as follows: Mary is locked in a black and white room with no access to color. Mary is extremely intelligent, and has managed to learn and understand all physical knowledge, including how the experience of color would physically manifest in relation to her optical system should she encounter it. Upon leaving the room, she sees the color red for the first time. Here Jackson argues that it is obvious that Mary learns something about what *it is* to see red, and that this is evidence that physicalism leaves something out in its explanation of consciousness. Here is where the qualia come in. Qualia are as Jackson puts it, "certain features of the bodily sensations especially, but also of certain perceptual experiences, which no amount of purely physical information includes" (1). The qualia are meant to explain the 'what it is' of sensation; e.g what it is to see red or feel pain. In a secondary example, Jackson tells the story of Fred. Fred can see a distinct, extra shade of red where the rest of humanity sees one. Scientists have studied his physical system and know everything that they can possibly know about how Fred perceives. However, again, there is a gap between what Fred experiences and what we know about the process physically, and, the story goes, we never get to know what *it's like* to see the secondary shade unless his eyes are transplanted into our system. The Fred example demonstrates an aspect of qualia that the Mary's Room thought experiment does not insofar as it emphasizes the private nature of qualia; and ultimately the inaccessibility of qualia through personal accounts and comparisons as a result. According to philosopher of mind Daniel Dennet's definition of qualia, the nature of qualia is such that "all interpersonal comparisons of qualia are systematically impossible" (*from Consciousness Explained*). This interpersonal inaccessibility further complicates the issue of identifying and understanding qualia from the scientific perspective. Simply put, qualia are the qualities of sensation that Jackson believes current scientific explanation cannot account for in terms of experience. The complication of course is that qualia are necessarily, not detectable by the physicalist scientist.

Now the question of whether or not qualia are epiphenomenal. The question arises from the belief of many that, should qualia exist, they would at least be causally efficacious. If it is the case that qualia are causally efficacious, then Jackson is asking people to believe that something insubstantial is causally affecting that which is substantial. Jackson sees this problem and avoids it by claiming that in fact, qualia are epiphenomenal. This would mean that qualia need not have any causal effect on the physical, which would preserve their possibility despite a lack of physical evidence. Jackson doesn't specifically argue that qualia are causally inefficacious in the physical world, he simply argues that it "is possible to hold that certain properties of certain mental states, namely those [he has] called qualia, are such that their possession or absence makes no difference to the physical world" (2).

The first objection Jackson addresses in his paper is the one I will be focusing on. The objection is voiced as a concern that it seems obvious that it "a quale like the hurtfulness of a pain must be causally efficacious in the physical world, and so, for instance, that its instantiation must sometimes make a difference to what happens in the brain" (2). As such, one would assume that should qualia exist, they would cause a reaction in the physical brain, which would bring us back to the insubstantial affecting the substantial. Jackson compares this assumption to that of a viewer watching a John Wayne movie. The viewer notes that the fist heading towards his face is followed by Wayne's face moving back from the force and infers that there is a causal reaction. However to do this is to ignore the overarching context of the movie, and the director behind it. Jackson claims that the epiphenomenalist can say something similar about the perceived connection between a quale and the physical reaction that we presume is a result of the quale. We are missing something in the grand picture, and the two (the quale and the physical action) can occur concurrently yet be unrelated on a physical level.

My problem with this is that it seems like there's an obvious reaction to this analogy; namely that in real life, if someone punched John Wayne, his face would move backwards from the force and that *would* be the cause. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that the epiphenomenalist view is asking us to believe in consistent coincidences but not draw any conclusions from their consistency. In the movie scene, there is a third party directing, and a

concentrated effort on the side of both parties to make it appear as if there is a connection causally while not actually committing one. There is a director behind these actions however, whereas in Jackson's analogous explanation of qualia, there is no clear concept of a 'director' or any particular reason for this account of qualia and action to be the case. Why would our systems function in this way? In fact, the question should be how. The qualia are supposed to exist, firmly, in a concrete sense of the word existence, and the way we know that the qualia exist is via a consistent correlation of experiencing them and being compelled in a certain way. Yet, we are also supposed to accept that the qualia are simply coinciding with actions that we presumably take as a result of them, but not in any way causing them. This seems extremely counterintuitive to me. Jackson would say that we are not taking any action because of them, merely that the qualia coincide with the physical aspects of pain and that we act as a result of these physical aspects. However what is it to claim that the physical aspects of pain are separate from the quale of pain? Is the physical form of pain necessary for the qualia to exist? Or do the two manifest completely separately? My biggest question would have to center around the evolutionary *point* of qualia if it is so that the physical reaction to our environment can arise without them, and the subsequent actions on the part of the subject are also caused by the physical rather than the qualia? The arguments leads us to the conclusion that epiphenomenal qualia are unnecessary for thought or action, which naturally brings into question their purpose within the mind, or if there is any at all.

It seems to me that Jackson has created a bullet proof argument for the existence of qualia by creating a definition for them that denies any sort of provable dismissal of them. They are undetectable by scientific methods, and have no effect on the physical world around them. Furthermore, we cannot even look to evolution to explain the point of them because our physical systems take care of our reactions to our perceptions and our survival, so we can't dispute that claim either. My skepticism here is that if it seems like one's argument is completely bullet proof, and the normal routes of dispute are impossible, it may be that what one is arguing for is arbitrary. All Jackson has done in my opinion is prove that we cannot disprove the existence of qualia. This does not constitute adequate proof for

their existence however. The discussion of whether or not qualia are epiphenomenal is an argument for their existence that is contingent upon their insubstantial and ineffective nature, which to me begs the question of why they would matter at all in the grand scheme of research and understanding.

The question of qualia seems to be at this point a simple matter of opinion. I see much more promise in the argument for qualia without the stipulation that they are epiphenomenal. Jackson worries that this kind of discussion will have him “sounding like someone who believes in fairies”(1) but I see no reason to grant that the epiphenomenal stipulation saves him from this, while it comes at the cost of qualia *mattering* to the scientific and philosophical community. By establishing qualia as strictly epiphenomenal, Jackson risks encouraging academic complacency on the subject. Since qualia in this form are neither detectable nor even accessible to research given their inability to affect the physical, epiphenomenal qualia are essentially off the table for future academics. What motivation is there to pursue something with these qualities? Especially given the apparent pointlessness of the qualia within the brain that has been implied by this view. My personal view is that Jackson would be better off arguing for qualia in the sense that physicalism *currently* leaves them out, but that that is no reason to dismiss their existence or forfeit investigation of their causal role in the physical system. Arguably Jackson has pointed out something in these thought experiments that our current physicalist explanations leave out in terms of consciousness. This is a laudable achievement, however by establishing that *something* as epiphenomenal, Jackson gives up on the chase, and gives science and philosophy no reason to investigate this explanatory gap any further. There is room for discussion where this gap has been presented! This inability to explain the *what it is* of experience should leave us questioning our current models of explanation rather than forcing us to explain the lack of information by defining qualia as simply unexplainable in physical terms. Epiphenomenal qualia are unsubstantial, ineffective, and evolutionarily meaningless. So what would Jackson lose by claiming that qualia are part of the physical realm, but that we haven't advanced science far enough along to fully understand them? If this were the argument, then qualia would have the potential of a causal and affirmable

existence, which would in turn make them interesting and worthy of research and discussion. While perhaps this assertion is risky, and has a rather large chance of being wrong, I've found that possessing these characteristics rarely eliminates a philosophical inquiry from discussion. Additionally, I think that by preserving the possibility of qualia as physical, we would allow them much more credibility and interest in the scientific, psychological, and philosophical communities of which they would be a part. Jackson would have to admit that physicalism is correct, but again, I'm not sure what the point is of insisting that physicalism cannot (and never will be able to) fully explain the mind. Perhaps that will turn out to be true, but what good would it do us to simply give up on studying the mind because we fear an eventual inevitable shortcoming of our methodologies? If Jackson is right about qualia, then nothing that we will ever be able to develop scientifically will be able to prove them and that's fine, but I don't see a reason for Jackson to resort to epiphenomenalism to protect them from disavowal, especially at the cost of their scientific validity.

Additionally, there is the possibility that Jackson's fear of physically efficacious qualia being dismissed off hand is based on a paradigmatic construction of causality that may not necessarily be the right way to think about these things. The current views on causality require that the cause of a substantial event must be substantial as well. However, it seems plausible to me that our standards of causality will change if we uncover evidence for a current misunderstanding of it. In order to begin the discussion on causality within the mind, and the potentiality of other models of causality, we would need to have some sort of hypothesis that posits a different form of causality, while still being considered evidentially plausible. By limiting qualia to the epiphenomenal state, Jackson forfeits the discussion of physically efficacious qualia, and ultimately earns them a scientifically stagnant future. With the stipulation that our models of causality may be lacking in explanatory power, it may very well be possible to defend the notion of phenomenal qualia, which, insofar as it would at least keep the conversation going, seems to be a worthwhile pursuit. The purpose of stipulating that qualia may be physically efficacious need not be to actually prove that this is so in order for the project to be of worthwhile pursuit; in fact the likelihood of that specific

hypothesis being true does seem rather low. Rather, in searching for answers to this explanatory gap between physicalism and experience within the context of searching for phenomenal qualia, we will leave ourselves open to opportunities for discovery and understanding that we would otherwise be closed off to. The state of epistemic humility that is needed for this kind of venture, i.e the ability to recognize that we may not yet fully understand the systems within which processes such as phenomenal qualia would operate, promotes scientific and philosophical progress and defends against the kind of intellectual complacency that can arise from arbitrary and stagnant claims such as that of epiphenomenal qualia.

To conclude, in this essay I have presented the notion of qualia as defined in Frank Jackson's essay, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*. I have discussed the knowledge argument for qualia, and Jackson's assertion that qualia are epiphenomenal in nature. I discussed and extended an objection to this assertion, leading to a general questioning of the importance of qualia for research if they are unable to be detected, studied, or proven. From this discussion I can conclude personally that qualia need not be classified as epiphenomenal in order to be worth philosophical or psychological discussion, rather, their classification as phenomenal might make them more interesting, and more worthy of scientific inquiry than their epiphenomenal counterparts.

Works Cited.

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