

Mary and Qualia

Please read the introduction to *There Is Something about Mary*. This is a difficult article. If you don't understand all of it – good, neither do I. Just tell me what you got out of it. There are some technical words that I can define for you.

Phenomenal consciousness: This refers to conscious experience. Mary *knows* about color, but she *experiences red!* The point of the knowledge argument is that there is an aspect of reality that is not purely physical, namely, phenomenal consciousness.

Supervenience: The verb form of this is *supervene*. We say that B supervenes on A if it is true you can't change anything in A without changing B. One way of putting it is that if God created the laws of physics, then everything else followed and there was nothing God could do about it.

Physicalism: This doctrine holds that, very loosely, everything is physical. We say that everything including consciousness *supervenes* on the laws of physics. The point of the knowledge argument is to prove that physicalism is wrong.

The supposed fact that everything supervenes on the laws of physics does not mean that we could, even in principle, derive everything from the laws of physics. Given the facts about hydrogen and oxygen, we could derive the fact that snowflakes have six-fold symmetry. We could not derive the fact that it snows a lot in Buffalo. Truths of the first sort are said to be *a priori*. Truths of the second sort are *a posteriori*. You might insist that there are cases where it is not clear which is which. Exactly! A lot of the technical stuff in this article turns on this issue.

Epiphenomenalism: According to this doctrine, consciousness exists but it is a sort of useless byproduct of the physical goings-on in our brains. It is like the rainbow over the waterfall. It is caused by the waterfall but it has no effect on the waterfall. Or it's like the steam coming out of the whistle of an old-fashion steam engine. If you want to appear very sophisticated, just say that there is no downward causation.

Qualia: (Incidentally, the word is plural. The singular is qual, but it is seldom used.) These are the objects of conscious experience: the smell of a rose, the itch of poison oak, the sound of a tenor singing slightly off key, the sight of your beloved. This concept is at the center of the philosophy of consciousness. How can we explain qualia in terms of physical processes? Can we?

OK – having said all that – what is the knowledge argument? Do you think it is valid? Why or why not?