Very (Un)Illuminating: An Evaluation of Paul Churchland’s Responses to The Knowledge Argument

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Abstract: Professor Churchland has opposed Mary Story-style arguments against physicalism by constructing an argument he believes to be analogous to the Mary Story; because the conclusion of his analogous argument is absurd, he suggests that we dispense with similar from knowledge. I argue in this paper that first, Churchland’s parody argument fails to distinguish between knowledge of what it is like for an agent to experience a certain quale and knowledge of the object that causes the quale, second, I will suggest another, more charitable reading of Churchland’s argument against the Mary Story, and argue that this second reading does little to help his position; third, I will consider a distinct but related argument proposed by Churchland, that when Mary leaves her room she gains only knowledge by acquaintance and not propositional knowledge, and conclude that, in fact, Mary gains both acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge, and that hence Churchland’s second argument fail.

In The Rediscovery of Light¹, Paul Churchland uses a parody of Frank Jackson’s Mary Story in Epiphenomenal Qualia² and What Mary Didn’t Know, attempting to demonstrate that the so-called

‘Knowledge Argument’ is equally as ridiculous as the conclusion drawn from his parody and that therefore Jackson’s argument shouldn’t be taken very seriously. I will argue that the force of his alleged analogy is removed once one understands that Churchland’s parody does not adequately resemble Jackson’s original formulation of the knowledge argument. Churchland suggests that the invalidity of his parody argument counts not against his position but against the force of Frank Jackson’s Mary Story. I agree with Churchland that his parody argument is invalid, but for a different reason than he thinks. Moreover, attempts to understand Churchland’s criticism in terms of the knowledge by the description/ knowledge by acquaintance distinction also are unhelpful to Churchland’s position. That Paul Churchland has failed to rebut the claims made by Frank Jackson does not, of course, suggest that the knowledge argument against physicalism is valid, but it does suggest that one would be wise to avoid frivolous parodies of well-respected arguments.

Churchland’s Luminance Parody

Mary is a blind genius, says Paul Churchland, and she knows just everything physical there is to know about the nature of light. However, no matter how much Mary learns about light, she will never know what it is like to actually see light. Therefore, he argues, there is something about light that is nonphysical (Churchland calls it luminance). Churchland’s intention is to show that since his ‘luminance argument’, as I shall call it, very closely resembles Jackson’s ‘qualia argument’ and since the conclusion entailed by his luminance argument is plainly absurd (light is obviously a completely physical phenomenon), we ought not accept Jackson’s conclusion. His main argument in The Rediscovery of Light is a kind of a reductio ad absurdum via analogy. Consider the two arguments, formally mapped side by side:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Qualia Argument</th>
<th>The Luminance Argument</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Mary, before her release, knows everything physical about other people. (2) Mary, before her release, does not know everything there is to know about what it is like for other people to see color. (3) Therefore, there are truths about other people that escape the physicalist story.</td>
<td>(1’) Mary, when she is blind, knows everything physical about light. (2’) Mary, when she is blind, does not know everything there is to know about what it is like for other people to see light. (3’) Therefore, there are truths about light that escape the physicalist story (call these truths statements about luminance, per Churchland).</td>
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3 This is nearly the Jackson’s exact wording of his knowledge argument in What Mary Didn’t Know
4 This is a formal construction of Paul Churchland’s presentation of the second of his “Jackson/Chalmers-like arguments”. Concerning premise 1, Churchland says Mary is a physicist who “comes to know everything physical there is to know about EM waves”. Concerning premise 2, Churchland says that she “has not access at all to the visual point of view.” That is, she cannot know just what it is like for other people to see light, since she is blind. His conclusion is that “even complete knowledge of the physical facts must still leave her ignorant of the structure of luminance. Luminance must therefore be, in some way, non-physical.”
The Luminance Argument looks quite a bit like the Qualia Argument, indeed, but there is an important difference. The reason Churchland’s Luminance Argument is laughable is not that, as he thinks, it equivocates on “knows about” but that its conclusion doesn’t follow in the way he thinks it does. Paul Churchland’s confusion in *The Rediscovery of Light* lies in his conflation of Mary’s knowledge of other people’s *perception of light* with her knowledge of *light itself*. Churchland’s attempt to construct a *reductio* thus fails because it does not parallel Jackson’s Qualia Argument the way it should if his parody is to have any force. Frank Jackson’s conclusion in the Qualia Argument (that there is something about other people that is not told in the physicalist story) depends on the premise that Mary does not know something about what it is like for another person to experience color or light and not that Mary does not know something about color or light as such. To illuminate (pun intended) this distinction, consider the following two statements:

(A) Mary does not know that for S to experience X is a lot like Y
(B) Mary does not know that X is a lot like Y

The first proposition is a description of what Thomas Nagel famously called that ‘what-is-it-like-ness’ of certain qualitative mental states and the second is a description of the an extra-mental object itself. Notice that although (A) might *entail* (B), the two are certainly not the same statement and therefore ought not be conflated; (A) might be true and (B) false, or vise-versa.

What actually follows from Churchland’s (1)’ and (2)’ is Jackson’s conclusion in the original knowledge argument against physicalism, not that light can be described by two ontologically distinct categories. For on Churchland’s argument, Mary knows all true propositions about the physical world but does not know something about other people, namely, she does not know what it is like for another person (or herself) to see light since (per Churchland) she is blind. What follows from Churchland’s two premises is not that propositions about *light* are not completely exhausted by the physicalist account, but that propositions about *other people* are not completely exhausted by physicalism, which is precisely what Frank Jackson wants to demonstrate in his knowledge argument. Churchland’s parody argument, therefore, ends up proving too much.

**Another Reading of the Luminance Parody**

Perhaps, though, the above depiction is unfair to Churchland’s argument. Maybe in *The Rediscovery of Light*, he intends his argument to be read this way:

(1)” For any true physical proposition\(^5\) q, Blind Mary knows that q.
(2)” But Blind Mary does not know that r, the true proposition that seeing light is like such-and-such.
(3)” Therefore, r is true but cannot be a physical proposition.
(4)” Therefore, light is made of both the physical and the nonphysical.

This second reading of the Luminance Parody first may seem attractive. However, although I want to be as charitable as possible, this understanding of Churchland has little more success than the first formulation of the Luminance Argument given above, and therefore it may not be charitable of me to attribute it to Churchland. This reading again ends up (validly) entailing Jackson’s conclusion without necessitating Churchland’s conclusion in (4)”, that light is made of both physical stuff and nonphysical “luminance”, even though the first conclusion, (3)”, follows validly and soundly. If Mary knows all physical propositions but she does not know a certain proposition, r,

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\(^5\) By “physical proposition”, I just mean any kind of declarative statement about (and only about) the physical world. The statement, ‘all continental philosophers have beards’ is an example of such a proposition.
then r cannot be a physical proposition. What is _not_ specified in this argument, is precisely what r is _about_, the key distinction articulated above in (A) and (B). Is r a statement about the _nature of light_ or about the nature of _what it is like for a person to see light_? Again, if Churchland is to follow Jackson’s lead (as he must, if his _reductio_ is to be successful), then r is about the former rather than the latter. As we saw earlier, though, if r is about what it is like to see light and not about light _qua_ light, then (4)” cannot be validly entailed, even given (1)”—(3)”.

**Knowledge By Acquaintance?**

Maybe Churchland’s criticisms of the Mary story later in _The Rediscovery of Light_ can stand on their own two feet, without the assistance of his parody argument. In his commentary on the Luminance Argument, Paul Churchland notes that there are at least two kinds of knowledge. In _What Mary Didn’t Know_, Jackson agrees, following Churchland in labeling these **descriptive** and **acquaintance** knowledge. Consider my knowledge that this desk is wooden. What I know in this case is a proposition that carries information content about a state of affairs. My knowledge how to build a desk is, however, an ability, a faculty of some sort; I know how to _do_ something rather than knowing _that_ something is the case. Maybe Churchland’s objection in _The Rediscovery of Light_ and as described by Jackson in _What Mary Didn’t Know_ is something like this:

(1)” If the Mary story shows physicalism to be false, then Mary must come to know a new proposition upon leaving the room (since physicalism as a metaphysical theory claims only to be responsible for propositions and not perceptual/acquaintance knowledge).

(2)” But Mary does not come to know a new proposition upon leaving the room (rather, she gains knowledge by acquaintance).

(3)” Therefore, the Mary story has not shown physicalism to be false.

The problem in both scenarios, says Churchland, lies with Mary herself and not with the ontology of luminance or qualia; even if we could know with certainty that physicalism is true, we still shouldn’t expect Mary to have acquaintance knowledge about light (that is, we shouldn’t expect her to know what it is like to perceive luminance) since that would be requiring physicalism to complete a task it never set out to complete in the first place. Unfortunately, while there is indeed a distinction between description knowledge and acquaintance knowledge, Churchland is wrong to suggest that this distinction applies in any relevant way to the Mary story. Before I explain, consider the following thought experiment:

Archilochus is one of the prisoners in Plato’s allegory of the cave. He has lived his whole life facing a wall watching the shadowy figures of puppets dance back and forth. He and his fellow prisoners have never left the cave and have never experienced the sight or the feel of sunlight. One day, Archilochus is released from his bonds and is allowed to wander freely outside in the sunlight. He experiences the soft, warm rays against his face and immediately understands just what it is like to be in the sun. Returning to the cave, his fellow prisoners ask him what it was like to be outside. What did the sunlight feel like? It felt, he reports, a lot like fire. It was hot and bright, but soft and comforting. Archilochus’ report belies his actual epistemic constitution: he has gained, upon leaving the cave and experiencing what it is like to feel sun, not just knowledge by acquaintance but also propositional knowledge and has expressed it in comparative terms: feeling sunlight was a lot like such-and-such. Critically, therefore, he has not only experienced light but he also now has gained new propositional knowledge; he knows ‘what it is like to feel sunlight’. When asked about his experience, Archilochus reports a proposition, the proposition that the what-is-it-like of feeling sunlight is like the what-is-it-like of feeling fire and this is precisely the same type of report one
would expect if Archilochus had gained propositional knowledge of his experience. His declarative description is evidence of the category of his new knowledge.

Return to (2)”’ of Professor Churchland’s objection, that Mary gains knowledge, but not knowledge that after leaving her black and white room. Churchland is right to say that Mary has knowledge by acquaintance about color that she previously lacked; however, he errs in thinking that that is all Mary gained. Consider what would happen if we asked Mary questions of the same kind as those posed to Archilochus. What is the color red like? What did it feel like? Can you describe it? She would likely report that seeing red was a lot like such-and-such, maybe a lot like hearing the sound of a trumpet, or like the feeling of pricking one’s finger on a pin. That her descriptions are propositional in nature is no accident; when an agent like Mary encounters a new quale, she both acquires new abilities and comes to know new propositions, propositions that are such that before her encounter with the quale she didn’t know them.

It is tempting to berate Paul Churchland for his belittling and condescending treatment of Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument, especially since no reading of his parody argument (insofar as I can understand it) yields the conclusion he wants for his reductio. His type of argument is motivated by the same genus of sentiment that prompts the ‘there must be a response’ reaction to Mary story-style arguments against physicalism. It is, however, too facile to brand this kind of reasoning presuppositional as nearly all philosophical discourse proceeds with a certain understood level of holy-cow-ism (if such a phrase can be used).