

Handout: Frank Jackson – “Epiphenomenal Qualia” (1982)

I. The Problem: Physicalism and the Explanatory Gap

The central challenge Jackson raises is this:

Can physicalism account for everything there is to know about conscious experience—especially qualia?

- **Physicalism**, broadly construed, is the view that *all* information is ultimately *physical information*—i.e., information that can be captured by physics, chemistry, biology, and functional descriptions of brain states (p. 127).
- Jackson acknowledges that physical information captures a great deal about how the world and our bodies function.
- However, **there is a class of facts—qualitative facts about experience—that seem left out**: what it is like to feel pain, smell a rose, see red, or taste lemon.

Jackson declares himself a “**qualia freak**” and aims to argue that qualia are *real*, *non-physical*, and *epiphenomenal*—they do not affect the physical world (p. 127).

II. The Solution: Epiphenomenalism

Jackson’s Proposal:

- Qualia exist, but they are **epiphenomenal**: they are caused by physical brain states but have *no causal power* themselves (p. 133).
 - **Qualia are not captured by physicalist theories**, and Jackson believes this can be shown through argument—**not merely intuition**.
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III. Structure of the Argument

Jackson presents and defends **four main arguments** in the paper:

1. The Knowledge Argument (§I)

Knowing all the physical facts is not knowing all the facts.

- **Example 1: Fred and red₁/red₂** – Fred sees an extra shade of red that we cannot discriminate. Despite knowing all about Fred's physiology, we *still don't know* what red₂ is like *for Fred* (p. 129).
- **Example 2: Mary the color scientist** – Mary knows all the physical facts about color vision while living in a black-and-white room. When she leaves the room and sees red for the first time, she *learns something new* (p. 130).

→ **Conclusion:**

- Mary's case shows that **complete physical knowledge is not complete knowledge**.
 - Therefore, **qualia are non-physical**, and **Physicalism is false**.
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2. The Modal Argument (§II)

It is *logically possible* that physical duplicates of us lack consciousness.

- There could exist "zombie" organisms that are physically and functionally identical to us but **lack qualia**.
- Thus, *what we have and they lack must be non-physical* (p. 130-131).

Objection and Response:

- Critics say Physicalism is only meant to be a contingent truth, not a necessary one.

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- Jackson replies: If **our world contains qualia**, and other worlds could lack them, then our world contains *non-physical properties* (p. 131).
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3. The “What Is It Like to Be” Argument (§III)

Inspired by **Thomas Nagel**, Jackson argues:

- Physicalism cannot capture “**what it’s like**” to have another being’s experience—e.g., what it’s like to be a bat (p. 131-132).
- Importantly, Jackson distinguishes his view from Nagel’s:
 - He is not just claiming that we can’t *imagine* experiences like Fred’s.
 - He’s saying that we *lack knowledge of a fact*—specifically, a qualitative fact *about Fred*.

Key Supplement:

- Jackson draws on David Lewis’s idea of “**knowledge de se**”: the idea that some knowledge is essentially *first-personal* (p. 132).
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4. The Defense of Epiphenomenalism (§IV)

Jackson defends the **causal inertness of qualia** against three common objections (p. 133–135):

(i) *The Obviousness Objection:*

- It seems “obvious” that the painfulness of pain causes avoidance behavior.
 - Jackson counters: **correlation is not causation**—both pain and behavior can be caused by brain states without qualia being causally active (p. 133).
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(ii) The Evolutionary Objection:

- If qualia were causally inert, why would they evolve?
 - Jackson's reply: **they're by-products** of adaptive processes—like *the heaviness* of a warm coat (which is non-adaptive, but goes along with adaptive warmth) (p. 134).
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(iii) The Other Minds Objection:

- If qualia don't cause behavior, how can we infer others have them?
 - Jackson replies with a newspaper analogy:
 - Reading about a sports win in *The Times* can be good evidence that *The Telegraph* also reported it, even though one doesn't cause the other.
 - Likewise, **qualia and behavior can both be effects** of brain states (p. 134–135).
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IV. Pessimism and Humility about Science (§IV-end)

Jackson concludes with a reflection on our **cognitive limitations**:

- Physicalism assumes we can comprehend the full nature of reality.
 - But **we evolved to survive**, not to *understand everything*.
 - He offers a thought experiment: imagine intelligent sea slugs who develop successful science but fail to recognize the limits of their cognition. Perhaps **we are in the same position** (p. 135–136).
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V. Takeaway

The central thrust of Jackson's paper:

Physicalist accounts of the mind leave something crucial out—the qualitative character of conscious experience.

Key Terms for Review

- **Qualia** – Subjective, phenomenal aspects of experience.
- **Physicalism** – The view that all facts are physical facts.
- **Epiphenomenalism** – The doctrine that mental phenomena are caused by physical processes but do not themselves cause anything.
- **Knowledge Argument** – Argument that knowing all physical facts doesn't entail knowing all facts.
- **Modal Argument** – Argument based on the logical possibility of zombies.
- **Knowledge de se** – First-personal, perspectival knowledge.