

The theory of physicalism



Abstract: Physicalism is the theory that the universe and its phenomenon can all be explained through physical laws because physicalists believe the universe is completely physical. A philosophical theory opposing physicalism is proposed by the knowledge argument. Proponents of the knowledge argument say that complete knowledge of the physical world does not explain the subjective experiences of perception and interpretation of outside stimuli. If this is the case; then physicalism cannot be true.

Physicalism is a philosophical theory that states everything is physical, and that everything can be explained purely by the laws of physics. These physicalists argue that even the processes occurring in the mind can be understood through physics. This belief raises a disagreement with the understanding conscious experiences, which philosophers label as qualia. Qualia refer to the varying levels of quality that our conscious mind experiences from the outside world. Our brains translate electrical stimuli that we receive from the outside world into qualia. An example of this is the human vision. The conscious experience of looking at a blue sky is a result of a set of translation processes that happen inside the human brain. The brain receives electrical stimuli and translates them into a quality. The electrical stimuli will be the light waves and the quality that our minds understand is the color blue. If one single property in the universe can be argued as a non-physical entity, then theory of physicalism would be false. Quale, which is sometimes referred to the knowledge argument, is a famous theory that goes against the idea of physicalism, and this paper will focus on how the knowledge argument disproves physicalism.

A famous example of the knowledge argument was proposed by Frank Jackson (1982). He argues that even if a person has all the physical knowledge about the world it is inevitable that this person will still learn something when s/he is exposed to real experience of the world. In this example, Mary, a brilliant scientist, learned all the physical information and facts, including the distinctive wavelength of each color, in a black and white room. Mary is then released from this room and there she learns the information of color vision that she did not learn in the black and white room (Jackson, 1982, p. 291). This new piece of information that Mary learns after her release proves that not everything in this universe is physical. Before Mary's release from the room, all the knowledge she had about colors was the physical properties of colors. Mary had no idea what red, blue, yellow, or green actually "looked" like because all she had experienced was black and white.

Another famous example, "what is it like to be a bat?" proposed by Thomas Nagel (1974), also argues against physicalism. Nagel proposes that even if a human being has all the knowledge about bats' perceptual system, including details of how bats' sonar system functions, there is still no way a human being can understand what it is like to be a bat. This is because the human sensory system is too distinctive from the bats' sensory system. A human being has the ability to explore and research on what it is like to be a bat based completely on scientific information. With the aid of our advanced technology, human beings can map out the details how a bat perceives its sonar information easily. However, a human being will not be able to comprehend the qualitative experience that a bat receives because;

ultimately a human being is, simply, not a bat. The only way to know what it is like to be a bat is to be a bat.

Both examples above try to convey something in common, the fact that a subject X can never understand the quality of experience of another subject. This is because every subject has their own subjective views and physical laws cannot explain this phenomenon. Other than the learning behaviors, physicalists also cannot explain phenomena like memory, mental illness, belief, desires and the feeling of fear. Much of the information human beings have about the world is not in the form of physical information and cannot be explained by physical laws. Every human being is emotional and has a distinctive way of interpreting outside information. The differences between human beings result in different subjective experiences. Human beings not only learn about the world through sensory inputs and stimuli within the environment, but also through subjective opinions or point of views. This corresponds to the knowledge arguments presented above.

A physicalist may argue that the way the human brain interprets information can be explained by physical laws. In the example of Mary learning new information after her release, a physicalist may argue that Mary had not acquired any new information about colors. Instead, Mary applied her knowledge of colors after her experience of colors. The knowledge that Mary acquired before her release enables Mary to interpret the new information that she receives from the outside world. The result of Mary being able to interpret a color is based on her previous knowledge about colors.

Indeed, science has always been a powerful tool that helps us to understand the world. However, the physicalist argument does not deny the fact that Mary has learned new knowledge after her release from the black and white room. New information was introduced to Mary such as the ability to picture the color in her mind and the ability to distinguish each color without the aid of wavelength frequency devices. Also, normal human beings do not learn their world inside a black and white room. They are exposed to all the colors without the knowledge of every light wave property within each color.

Physicalism fails to explain every phenomenon in this world with physical laws. The fact is that knowing all the physical information of how an experience is like does not explain what it is like to experience it. Physical laws cannot explain a subjective experience such as learning behaviors nor can it explain feelings. Since physicalism argues everything in the universe is physical, as long as any property in this universe is a non-physical entity, physicalism cannot be true.