‘This’

Trying to reconcile the data of conscious experience with a materialist understanding of the world is notoriously difficult and stands as one of the final bulwarks to an ever creeping, mechanistic view of reality. Resolving this tension has usually prompted one of two responses: the materialist will dig in their heels and attempt to deflate the data of conscious experience or the non-materialist will point to the necessity to move beyond a materialist world view and a so-called science worship. On their surface, neither of these options are particularly palatable and with this paper, I attempt to take a step back from the debate and examine the assumptions that undergird the discussion. To this end, I look closely at Frank Jackson’s Mary argument and try to isolate certain presuppositions about the mechanisms by which the data of conscious experience is acquired by examining the role of mental ostention in Jackson’s analysis. After isolating and looking closely at mental ostention, I then provide a late-Wittgensteinian analysis of mental ostention and the way it is deployed in Jackson’s argument. I cash this out by articulating what I call “grammatical affordances”. With the notion of a “grammatical affordance”, I argue that Jackson is taken in by a certain way of speaking which leads him to believe that more should be able to be said about qualitative experience than can in fact be said and thus leads to the philosophical problems he articulates. Once we notice this error, we can work towards dissolving the philosophical problem of qualia and attempt to make progress in this debate.

Keywords: Mind, Wittgenstein, Qualia, Consciousness, Frank Jackson

“...And it would not help either to say that it need not be a sensation; that when he writes “S” he has Something – and that is all that can be said. But “has” and “something” also belong to our common language. –- So in the end, when one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound. But such a sound is an expression only in a particular language-game, which now has to be described” (Wittgenstein 261)

Introduction

This paper might best be summed up as yet another attempt to clarify the philosophical significance of “this” where “this” is taken to denote the referent of a mental ostention¹. One way to understand the reference of “this” is to see

¹There is much that needs to be unpacked here; “philosophical”, “significance”, “denotation”, “reference” and “mental” to name a few are highly loaded terms that deserve papers of their own. While it is distinctly unpalatable and may serve as the main source of philosophical confusion, I will attempt to use these terms in a relatively intuitive sense. It may be that this approach is precisely where my errors creep in; I see no way around this for the length of this paper and I hope that readers will bear with me if they find my errors to be in the formulation of the question.
it as a quality² and with this understanding³, attempt to integrate it into different metaphysical pictures of reality. Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument is one such attempt and, for many philosophers of mind, presents a lucid articulation of why integrating qualia into our understanding of a physical world has proven to be so difficult. With over thirty years passed since its formulation in Jackson’s famous, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*, the landscape of responses appears to be relatively set with individuals roughly finding kinship in one response or another. In the face of this division, one might, instead of searching again for a solution, instead further investigate the possibility of a dissolution of the problem. I will attempt to explore that avenue by laying out the knowledge argument, noting how it relies on a particular way of understanding “qualities” and will attempt to look at this understanding in detail by employing certain insights found in Wittgenstein’s later work. I will proceed in the following way: first, I will provide an overview of the knowledge argument, second, I will attempt a Wittgensteinian critique of the argument by analyzing the assumptions made by it, third, I will highlight more clearly the assumptions and how they are problematic, and fourth, will end by providing a very brief response to my arguments. With that said, I will now proceed into the providing an overview of the knowledge argument.

Jackson’s Mary

The knowledge argument was constructed as a response to a popular metaphysical account of how minds and bodies relate to one another. The account in question is of a physicalist variety and very roughly holds that minds are part of the physical world. Frank Jackson explores one permutation of the physicalist picture which states that there will be nothing left to explain once the sciences have succeeded in providing a comprehensive account of the physical world; minds will, as it were, come along for the ride in the same way that an understanding of chairs come along for the ride. This account plays well with our growing scientific understanding of the world and leaves nothing mysterious; we think we know what it means for the world to be physical, and this approach allows us to rest our intellectual pursuits on familiar ground.

Frank Jackson, aware of the appeal of the physicalist account, nevertheless thinks that it fails to fully account for what we wanted explaining. As he says in *Epiphenomenal Qualia*:

² Indeed, for many, this is the only way to understand “This”.
³ Otherwise known as a quale (plurally known as qualia).
⁴ On the assumption that there is actual understanding here.
“Tell me everything physical there is to tell about what is going on in a living brain, the kind of states, their functional role, their relation to what goes on at other times and in other brains, and so on and so forth, and be I as clever as can be in fitting it all together, you won’t have told me about the hurtfulness of pains, the itchiness of itches, pangs of jealousy, or about the characteristic experience of tasting a lemon, smelling a rose, hearing a loud noise or seeing the sky.” (Jackson 127)

As Jackson notes, it seems that, given all the physical information, we still have not touched upon what is most puzzling about the mind: its qualitative aspects. To illustrate this point further, Jackson brings up the example of Mary the color scientist. Imagine an individual Mary, an extremely gifted color scientist, who has been trapped in a black and white room her whole life and learns about the world through a black and white color television. She knows everything that there is to know about the neurophysiology of color discrimination and how all the processes interact with one another. Now, Jackson asks, what should we say about Mary when she is released from her room or sees the world through a colored monitor? He asks and answers, “Will she learn anything or not? It just seems obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it” (Jackson 130). How should we understand this learning? As the acquisition of a new fact about “...the special quality of...experience” (Jackson 132).

If we accept that Mary acquires a new fact, then Jackson thinks that the argument for physicalism fails. He believes this because he thinks that, if the physicalist metaphysical picture of the world were correct, then our having all the physical information should entail our being able to deduce complete knowledge of the world (Jackson 130).

I take Jackson’s response to be unsatisfactory but not because it is inadequate as a response to physicalism, but rather that it is predicated upon what I take to be a fundamentally misguided picture of how we relate to our experiential states. But before I get to that point, I am going to engage in a slight aside on the notion of a quality with my critique of Jackson building off this analysis.

Conscious States & Movie Theaters

A couple questions we might ask about the notion of a “quality” is what exactly notion is meant to do and how exactly is it it picked out. To see how this is done, consider how many philosophers of mind often pick out the referent of conscious experience. If one where ask such a philosopher what the referent of a conscious experience is, it will often lead to a response in which the individual mentally ostends for a few seconds, as if to fully immerse themselves in the referent, and confidently reporting that it is ‘this’ while
perhaps pointing to their head or where he takes the referent to be located in the external world. If we look confused in response or ask further questions, the individual might attempt to recreate the experience in us by moving the object such that we “see” it in the way that they “see” it. They might attempt to describe it in a way that connects it up with objects that they have seen in the past, “it is sort of like...”. If we turn to the individual and say, “I understand, when you refer to your conscious experience, you mean to refer to objects in the external world”, they will likely say that the conscious experience is not the object per se, it is perhaps a picture of the object; a kind of middleman that works to recreate objects in the external world but recreate it in a way that is analogous to a private show. After further prodding and pushing, the individual might finally say that what they mean to denote when ostending to their mental states is a “quality”. But what has been accomplished by saying this? For this answer to be an answer, the notion of a quality and what it is has to be understood. As Wittgenstein notes early on in the *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*), a word acquires its use by having the linguistic ground prepared in a manner that is analogous to how an explanation of a king in chess only serves as an explanation when the surrounding concepts of the other chess pieces are explained (Wittgenstein 31). Simply calling it a “quality” appears to leave it undefined and what I want to propose with this paper is that, in our language, the notion of a quality often plays a similar grammatical role to the notion of an object. The superficial similarity in the grammatical structure of the notion of an “object” and the notion of a “quality” leads us into our difficulties as we assume certain further grammatical affordances and when those affordances are not forthcoming, we feel as if we have discovered a grave philosophical problem. For the next part of the paper, I will talk about how it is that Jackson runs together the grammar of “object” and the grammar of a “quality” and then, with this on the table, will attempt to trace further problems that arise when

---

5I am assuming a sense of answer that would largely be at play in most philosophical conversations.
6If not, I could have accomplished the same explanatory success by making up a word and exclaiming, it is a “blan”.
7By a “grammatical role”, I mean to highlight the idea that certain words (and possibly expressions) have certain functions that they play in discourse. They allow for certain questions to be asked of them and play an active role in the attribution of meaning and significance.
8I am understanding grammatical structure being the totality of grammatical affordances that the idea allows. By grammatical affordances, I mean the integration that the notion has with other aspects of language and the further moves that can be made with the notion; for example, of an object, there is the grammatical affordance of asking, “where is the object?”
we do not appreciate the grammatical differences between an “object” and a “quality”.

When Jackson speaks about what Mary learns when she leaves the black and white room, he speaks of it in terms of acquisition. Specifically, he talks about the acquisition of a fact, but it is a fact about some quality. For example, talks about knowing, “…the hurtfulness of pains, the itchiness of itches, pangs of jealousy…” (Jackson 127). When Jackson speaks about knowing the “hurtfulness of pains”, he is presumably not referring to the true statement, “pains hurt”, rather he is referring to that which is supposed to make the statement true, namely, the hurtfulness. But how is it the basis for my statement?

An easy answer is to consider what I do when I speak of cars, trees, cats, dogs, etc., and how they serve as the basis for my statements about them. When I say, “that cat is moody”, I have an object of which I am predicating; the cat. I can point to the object in the external world, (the cat), speak about how it behaves (in such a manner indicative of moodiness) and in this way, the cat and a description of its actions serves as the basis of my statement. If we consider the “hurtfulness of pains”, it appears that we can give a similar analysis. We have an object, the pain, and we can describe the object, it’s “hurtfulness”, and this all seems quite innocuous. Indeed, Jackson seems to reinforce this understanding of qualities as he speaks of qualities as being captured by facts about the qualities in a similar sense to which objects are captured by facts about objects. Specifically, he notes that Mary “…discovers, for example, just which wave-length combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal chords…” and it is only when she leaves the room that “…she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it.” (Jackson 130). In the previous sentence, Jackson seems to appeal to the idea of learning about an “object” (or set of “objects”) and learning about a “quality” in such a way that makes them seem analogous. The problem that Jackson then wants to highlight is similar to the following case: suppose you and I were to go to the cinema with all the movie theaters playing specific movies in each theater. While at the cinema, I ask you to tell me all the facts about the cinema and after looking at me oddly, start noting its different aspects. You note the popcorn machine, drink stands, layout of the furniture, the amount of movie theaters, how the projection works in each theater, how many each theater seats, the size of the screen, the railings inside each theater, etc. You walk me around and continue to rattle off facts about the cinema and I say, “This is all well and good but what about the movies playing inside each theater? Are there not facts about those as well?”

Well, you tell me that in each theater, there is one individual inside and there is a movie playing but unfortunately, each of them is locked and no one can get inside to see the movie that is playing but still there are facts about
those movies that the individual inside the theater has. Upon seeing my look
of disappointment, you may continue and tell me that over the course of a
million years, a complex tubing system (that is just large enough to send hand
written notes) has been developed which connects the inside of each theater to
every other and based off that, individuals attempt to tell others about what is
happening in their movie theater but unfortunately it is impossible to verify
the claims on the paper (perhaps they are all lying!) and even if they were not,
simply knowing all the facts about the theater (even the facts about the
projector inside each theater and all the components of each theater) would
still leave out facts about the movie. To make this more vivid, we may further
assume that you and I have discovered a new theater in the cinema into which
only I am allowed.

Now we can ask, if I enter my theater or manage to enter someone else’s
do I learn a new fact about what is playing the screen? It seems just patently
obvious that I would; I would learn facts about the movie playing whatever
theater that I did not have access to before I went into it and watched the
screen.

If we understand qualities as the movies inside each theater, everything
external to the movie as being all the physical facts about the different objects
of the world and Mary’s learning a new fact when she steps out into the color
filled world as my learning a new fact when I step into a theater, then it
certainly does seem like I am missing some fact when not knowing about the
movie. But crucially, the above example makes a mistake in that it
understands qualities on the model of objects that are open to inspection.
There is a superficial similarity in the grammar of an object and the grammar
of a quality seems to allow the above scenario to map relatively cleanly onto
Jackson’s Mary argument but to do this would be to overlook an important
difference between the grammar of the notion of an object and the grammar of
the notion of a quality. The moment we do overlook this difference, we get an
understanding of a quality as being a kind quasi-object that is hidden away.
Indeed, it very easy to do this and in remark 400 of the PI, Wittgenstein makes
a similar comment when he notes how our grammar leads us to assume that
our visual experience is analogous to a “visual room” that we can explore.
And it is when we forget the difference in grammatical affordance between
and object and a quality that our problems start to occur as we have formed
certain expectations about what grammatical affordances the notion of a
quality should allow. When these expectations are broken, things start to
appear slightly odd, and we feel as if we have stumbled upon some
philosophical problem. As Wittgenstein notes in remark 401, “The visual room
seemed like a discovery, as it were; but what its discoverer really found was a
new way of speaking, a new comparison, and one could even say, a new
experience”. But when we think of it as a discovery without realizing the
crossing of the language-game of qualities with the language-game of objects
that we start falling into philosophical puzzlement and start asking questions like: “Where are my conscious states? These qualities sure seem like different kinds of stuff than other stuff: are they a new kind of stuff? Is it not possible that the qualities I have before me are completely different than the qualities you have before you and that we are!? If I only know about my qualities from my ability to see them (as we see other objects), then is it not possible that he has no qualities and is only saying he does?” Before we have said go, the philosophical race has already started, and bewilderments creep up in all different forms. But perhaps, instead of puzzling over these seemingly intractable issues, we might start at the start and ask where they come from. In the next section, I will attempt to more explicitly point out the difference between the grammatical affordances of objects and the grammatical affordances of qualities and use this to more vividly highlight the differences between them. Once I have done this, I will come back to Jackson’s knowledge argument and note where I think he errs.

Grammatical Fictions

In the PI, Wittgenstein indicates how we are forced into particularly odd linguistic contortions when we run together the grammar of objects and qualities. More specifically, there are certain grammatical moves that we can make with objects; we can talk about how we see them, have them, and manipulate it and when we graft these grammatical affordances onto qualities, we run into issues. Wittgenstein gives voice to these grammatical moves in remark 398 when he speaks for his interlocutor and says, “But when I imagine something, or actually see objects, surely I have got something which my neighbor has not” and Wittgenstein responds by saying,

"...I understand you. You want to look about you and say: "At any rate only I have got THIS." — What are these words for? They serve no purpose. — Indeed, can’t one add: "There is here no question of a 'seeing' — and therefore none of a 'having' — nor of a subject, nor therefore of the I either"? Couldn’t I ask: In what sense have you got what you are talking about and saying that only you have got it? Do you possess it? You do not even see it. (Wittgenstein 398)

To see the full force of this passage, we have to notice how easily we are led from a superficial similarity to absurdity. Consider how easy it is to say, “I have my book” and “I have my sensations”. Both appear like legitimate uses of language and all seems in order until we start to use the grammatical model of our understanding of objects, like the book, to understand the grammar of the sensation that we run into issues and ask questions like, “I can locate my book in the world but where are my sensations!?”. But to ask this question is to
not appreciate the full, rich grammatical difference between objects and sensations. Consider the circumstances in which I talk about having my book. You may ask me, “do you have your book?” To this, I can reply with yes or no. I might search my bag, look around me and say “I’m not sure. I think I have it but I cannot find it” or “I had my book but I do not now” or “I’m looking…I have it — I found it at the bottom of my bag”. We can now apply this to the notion of a quality: I may ask, “do you have your pain?” Immediately, this type of question strikes us as odd. This almost seems like an ill-formed question and in response, I might understandably say, “Of course I have my pain. It is mine after all”. But what does that statement mean to convey? One possibility that is that I am telling you something analogous to the having of a book but in this instance, am highlighting the absurdity of thinking that my experience of pain is ever away from my person as my book may be. My pain is, as it were, attached to my psyche but in what sense then can I have my pain if it is impossible for me to not have my pain? If one cannot so much as even understand the idea of not having pain, the notion of having a pain seems to be an empty claim. Another instance in which a superficial grammatical similarity leads us astray is to consider the idea of “inspecting” in “he inspected his feelings” and “he inspected his book”. Both sentences seem well formed and in order but again, they play different grammatical roles, and it is when we use the model of an object to understand the model of the sensation that our problems arise. To see this, consider what it means to inspect an object like my book.

When I inspect my book, I turn it over and look it from all different angles, count the pages, note the cover, mull over its contents; this all seems to be in good order. Suppose that I apply the same type of understanding to how I inspect my pains. How would this go? Well, the response here might be to focus ones, attention on their feelings in order to amplify them but how does this work? One way to think about it is to consider how I might turn up the volume on my music in order to hear it more clearly. But consider what I am doing when I turn up the music in order to hear it more clearly; I am attempting to hear more of the details and thereby gather more information about the music (I might be attempting to pick out the cello or hear more clearly how it is that the violin harmonizes with the other instruments). Now, can something similar be said of an inspection of my pains? Well, what is being assumed here if I am able to do this? One thing that seems to be assumed is that it would seemingly be possible to learn more about my pains if they were amplified in the same way that I would be able to learn more about the music when the volume is turned up. If this is true, then it is also true to say that, in my everyday experience of having a pain, I have an, at best,

*The structure of this remark is largely in line with Wittgenstein’s remark in 411 but instead, I am appealing more to the notion of having as opposed to idea of “my”.*
partial understanding of my pain. While this sounds a little odd, we may accept this as a conclusion but consider what else we have to let in to get this conclusion. In order to be able to learn more about my pain, I have to understand what it would mean to learn more about my pains, otherwise I might think that I am learning about them without actually learning about them.

To see this, consider for example if I were to turn up the music and then proceed to hear a slight fuzz or static. One thing I can say here is that “I have learned more about the music by amplifying it, namely I have learned that there has been a slight fuzz or static present the whole time, but I just never heard it!” But, of course, this is false. The slight fuzz or static is a byproduct of the device being unable to maintain a certain level of fidelity at high volumes. In normal circumstances, I understand this and, as it were, cut out the fuzz and attempt to focus on the music. This shows that “learning more about the music” is bounded by criteria and merely thinking that I am learning more is not sufficient to be learning more. How does this apply to my pains?

Are there certain criteria here as well that inspecting my pain is bounded by? What exactly are these criteria for learning more about my pain? Could I flaunt these criteria and, in inspecting my pains more closely by amplifying them be wrong about my pains? Could I think that I learning more about my pain without actually learning more about my pain?

In response, it appears likely that one would not so much as answer my questions as they would say that they are fundamentally the wrong questions to be asking. Wittgenstein notes as much in remark 288 of the PI,

“...I turn to stone, and my pain goes on. — What if I were mistaken, and it was no longer pain? — But surely I can’t be mistaken here; it means nothing to doubt whether I am in pain — that is, if someone said “I don’t know if what I have is a pain or something else”, we would think, perhaps, that he does not know what the English word “pain” means; and we’d explain it to him...If he now said, for example, “Oh, I know what ‘pain’ means: what I don’t know is whether this, that I have now is pain” — we’d merely shake our heads and have to regard his words as a strange reaction which we can’t make anything of...” (Wittgenstein 288).

The reason an individual would so much as entertain the remarks given to him by Wittgenstein is because he is taken in by a superficial similarity in the grammatical structure of qualities and objects (again, I do often talk about “my pain” without as much of a hiccup in the conversation) and “going on” with the grammatical model of objects when talking about sensations. Again,

10Unless of course one wants to say that I somehow inspect my pains, gain a full understanding and now I walk through life with this complete understanding. I take this to not be what an individual would say in this context but if they do, I think that there are responses but they would be largely tangential to this paper.
when we do this, we start to form expectations about what grammatical affordances I should have when speaking about my qualities and when these are flaunted, philosophical issues arise and absurdities creep in.

To bring our discussion back to Jackson, what I claim is that Jackson is making a similar error to the individual above when talking about “having” and “inspecting”. The error he makes is to run together the grammatical structure of “knowing about objects” and “knowing about qualities”. Consider the two statements, “I know about my book”, and “I know about my qualities”. Neither sound particularly odd until I notice that I can say the word “know” for both so there must be some similarity of my knowing thus when I say, “I know about the objects in the external world”, I am not fully knowing for I can be said to not know of my qualities. I know what it is to learn facts about the external world and if I say “know” when it comes to my qualities, it seems like there must be some facts about it that I need to be aware of in order to know. But this overlooks the differences between “knowing” qualities of my experience and “knowing” about objects. For example, to refer back to the music example, it makes perfect sense to talk about how I may think I know about the music but be wrong about it, “I thought I knew that the fuzz was part of the song, but I was wrong” but it seems nonsensical to say this of my pains: “I thought I knew about my pains, but I was wrong”. There is a difference in the grammatical affordances of knowing about qualities and knowing about objects and when we ignore this difference and focus only the grammatical structure of knowing about objects and apply that to knowing about qualities that we go astray.

Come Now, Be Reasonable

With all that I have said, Frank Jackson may respond by saying, “But surely, still Mary learns something new when she leaves the room. She did not just learn a new way of speaking. The grammatical structure of how we speak about experience and how we speak about objects may be different, but I mean to talk about that which stands behind the speech. I am not talking about disembodied words floating in the air, I am talking about qualities”. I take this to be the most common reaction to what I have said and something like it is the response I level at myself almost every time I think about this topic. There is much to be said in response to this response and it could likely take up a whole paper on its own. For this paper, I will simply gesture at what I think the best direction to move is and I think Wittgenstein says it best when he notes in remark 304, (though it is said in a slightly different context) that we should “…make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose; to convey thoughts — which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever”.
Conclusion

More than anything else, this paper has been exploratory. It has been an attempt to clear the ground for a much more detailed and in-depth analysis. I certainly could have been clearer on the notion of grammar, surface grammar, language, “ways of seeing”, grammatical affordances, and other notions used above, and hopefully further papers can work to clarify those notions. While my critique of Jackson does not serve as any kind of knockdown argument, I hope for it to have set a path down which similar kinds of analysis of our philosophical puzzlement about experience may be explored.

References
