

Review of: "Knowledge Arguments for Time"

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Paul Merriam's article "Knowledge Arguments for Time" begins with a clever insight. If there is a phenomenological awareness of the flow of time, but a philosophical disagreement over whether time actually flows, then it seems like we should be able to construct a temporal version, or indeed, set of versions, of Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument concerning temporal qualia instead of color qualia. Doing so should elucidate or expose questions in the foundation of the philosophy of time, the philosophy of mind, and semantics.

Jackson's famous thought experiment places Mary, a person with normal human rationality and normal fully functioning human sense organs in a completely black and white environment, but she is given a complete scientific education concerning color. She knows everything there is to know about color, but has never experienced it. Mary is then taken out of the room and experiences the world of color. Does Mary now know something she did not know before? The intuition is, of course. But if that is true, then there must be knowledge about color that is purely phenomenological and not capable of being expressed or known otherwise. Color is more than any scientific/philosophical theory can account for.

Merriam seeks to set up an analogous situation for Nathan, who is kept in a room in which time does not flow, learns every fact about the nature of time, and then is released into a world in which time is flowing. Since we have a phenomenological experience of flowing time, we ought to be able to say the same thing about Nathan as we do about Mary and we ought to have the same sort of questions concerning temporal qualia as we have concerning color qualia.

Merriam takes this a step farther and contends that because Giuliani Torrenco (2013) contends that we need to distinguish between the metaphysics of time, the ontology of time, and the semantics of time, we could, in fact, reframe this as a set of three distinct thought experiments.

For these moves to work, three things have to be the case: (1) time and color have to be similar in relevant ways, that is to say, the facts of color and the facts of time must be the same sort of facts, (2) the phenomenological experiences of color and time flow have to be similar in relevant ways, (3) the trichotomy in Torrenco (2013) has to produce sufficiently independent questions to give rise to distinct version of the question at hand. I am not convinced that any of these three are true.

Color and Time

What makes Jackson's initial example work is that we do live in a world with color, whether we experience it or not. Mary's

circumstance is simple and straightforward. To see specific colors, we have to be in proximity of things with that color and surely we each suffer from some accidental version of Hume's problem of the missing shade of blue. There must be shades that each of us have just happened to never have been in proximity of an object so shaded and therefore have never experienced. Mary's experience is just a limiting case of this. While Mary's room is completely black and white, it is a colorless region in a world of color. To the intuition this makes perfect sense. There are orange things, just not where Mary can see them. Orange itself is no different inside or outside the room, there just happens not to be an instantiation of orangeness within the confines of the room. Nothing weird.

But now, let's do the same thing with Nathan. For Merriam's analog to work, there must be a flowing time outside of the room and no flow of time inside. The intuitive idea is Billy Pilgrim becoming unstuck in time or the end of an old *Police Squad* episode. The way Merriam works this out rigorously, in order to create the Knowledge Problem of Time, is that outside of Nathan's room McTaggart's A-time is the case and inside of the room McTaggart's B-time is the case. Outside the room, time is flowing, but inside there is block time that does not flow.

What does this mean? Unlike the Mary case where orangeness inside and outside the room were simply the same, just not instantiated within the room, this is strangely different. If we take a 4-dimensional picture of this world, it is not – like in Jackson's case – a limiting case of the normal situation. Instead, we have an A-world with an open future, fixed past, and experienced present, except in the four-dimensional rectangular time tube that is the pencil of timelines inside the room as it goes through time. Inside of that time tube, we have a limited universe of B-time with a completely different metaphysics. Within the room, time does not flow, but rather there is a moving now proceeding through a block time with future just as fixed as the past.

Mary's exit is from one part of her world with a fixed physics and metaphysics into another part of the world with the same physics and metaphysics, only a radical change in experience. Nathan is moving from one part of his world with a different metaphysics (although I assume a consistent physics), to another part of his world with a different metaphysics. Mary clearly notices the difference, but would Nathan? That is a fascinating question and well worth playing with, but is not the same question as we have with Mary and that analogy seems to be what Merriam takes to be the case.

This can be seen in the analogy between Mary's and Nathan's fact sets. Jackson posits that Mary understands all of the objective color facts, e.g., light as an electro-magnetic wave, the various parts of the spectrum, the way in which rods and cones work, how the brain interprets signals from the eyes, the difference in the ways paints and colored light combines to create new colors,... Merriam similarly posits that Nathan knows all of the time facts. But what exactly are these? Are we referring only to the facts of the physics of time and the biology of human cognition and aging? In knowing all the time facts, does Nathan know about the content of time, that is, the events in time or just about time? Does Nathan know the future inside the room but not know the future outside the room? Just the future of the room or of all of time? Does Nathan see the four-dimensional time tube of the room? Outside the room does he no longer know the future of the inside of the room? Where the notion of "color facts" was straightforward in Jackson's original version, it is not clear what knowing all

the time facts means. Again, if this were specified, it would be a fascinating thought experiment, but I'm not sure it does the same sort of thing that Jackson's argument does.

Phenomenology of Color and Phenomenology of Time

What launches the project is the idea that color and time are both physical phenomena that have corresponding phenomenological experiences and that, in both cases, we often confuse one with the other, assuming they are identical. What Jackson's thought experiment does is force us to wrestle with what it means when we separate them and Merriam is asking the same question in the case of time.

That we have phenomenological experiences of color is intuitively accepted as a starting point for Jackson. The same may not be the case with time. While there is broad acceptance of a basic phenomenological experience of the passing of time, Cristoph Hoerl (2014) argues that there is no such experience. But we need this for Merriam's puzzle to proceed as an analog of Jackson. Let us set aside this concern then and along with the vast majority presume that there is a phenomenon of time passage.

Merriam's justification for this is Matt Farr's (2019), but it makes a move that seems problematic for the connection with Jackson. Farr writes,

"I take it that we do have qualia that are worth grouping and characterising as 'temporal', and these have a phenomenal character that is commonly associated with the idea of time as passing. However insofar as we do have temporal qualia, I argue that it is a mistake to regard such qualia as functioning as a representation of time as passing, since such a position is not forced through philosophical argument, nor is such a claim useful in categorising the ways in which we can successfully or unsuccessfully represent things like motion or change. Rather, my central claim is that very tendency to relate the problems of temporal passage and temporal qualia in the first place serves only to confuse two independent philosophical problems: nothing is gained in the explanation of temporal qualia by referring to the concept of temporal passage. (Farr 2019, 7)"

This is a dissociation that Jackson's analog argument can presume, but Merriam's perhaps can't. Again, this is not to say that the range of puzzles Merriam offers are not interesting and potentially informative, merely to point out a structural dissimilarity between them.

The aspect, however, that would have to be borne in mind in playing with these puzzles is that, at least for McTaggart, A-time and B-time ought to be understood as phenomenologically equivalent. There is, of course, a long tradition of trying to use the feeling of the passage of time as empirical evidence for A-time, but the way in which the distinction is set out, the same lived experience. Recall that McTaggart in (1908) is not arguing for either A-time or B-time as the unique correct metaphysic of time. Rather, he is arguing as a neo-Hegelian that both are necessarily correct and mutually inconsistent. The necessary truth of both would thereby imply that the idea behind the distinction is one without any possible phenomenological difference.

Torrenco's Trichotomy

In the opening footnote of Torrenco (2013), a distinction is drawn between the metaphysical, ontological, and semantics of time. The metaphysical questions of time include, for example, the A-time vs. B-time debate. The ontological concerns include, for example, presentism vs. eternalism. And the semantic questions are those about the truth conditions for tensed propositions. Merriam uses this distinction to multiply versions of his Temporal Knowledge Arguments. But for them to be distinct, the sets of questions in these three categories would have to be independent. Of course, they are not so. Positions in one area can have effects on one's positions in others. So, there may not be quite as many versions as Merriam leads us to believe.

That does not mean we cannot frame the arguments differently and, as with transforming a math problem using a different coordinate system, sometimes the change makes answers clearer. So, whether the different framings are, in fact, distinct philosophical questions, is itself a philosophical question and even if the answer is no, that does not make the re-framings useless. It is not, however, clear that the multiplication is, in fact, multiplication.

Conclusion

It is important to note that Merriam is asking questions and not suggesting solutions. The claim in doing so is weak – he is not making any claim about the nature of time, the nature of mind, or of semantics. He is simply positing some puzzles that may be interesting in leading to suggestions relevant to the interplay between all three. As such, with such a weak claim, it is easily justified. Yes, these puzzles might, in fact, be interesting. But then again, they might not. But to show not, you would have to engage them the way Merriam suggests.

Are they puzzles of the order of Jackson's? Probably not, but that does not make them less worthy of playing with.

References

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