David Lewis, “Knowing What It’s Like”

David Lewis was, without exaggeration, one of the most important and influential philosophers of the 20th Century. He wrote extensively on a wide range of topics, including metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and aesthetics. He was a great admirer of the philosophy scene in Australia and travelled there often, which we can assume is the reason why he had such an interest in the taste of Vegemite. Lewis was also a prolific teacher who was a mentor to many of the best philosophers working today. Lewis's goal in this paper is to respond on behalf of physicalists to Jackson's argument, and to argue that Mary need not have learned a new fact—she simply gained a new ability.

Notes:

- p. 324: Functionalism is the view according to which mental states are identical with whatever fills the characteristic functional role of a mental state. Most functionalists are also physicalists because they think that phys-chem states of the brain play the role. Like Armstrong, Lewis is one of these functionalists who are also physicalists. Unfortunately, Lewis fails to keep the functionalist component of his view distinct from the physicalist component.

- p. 324: In this context, the term “phenomenal” is another way of describing the what-it's-like-ness of qualia.

- p. 324: To turn eliminative is to deny that something exists at all, even though some people might take it for granted.

- p. 325: Lewis doesn’t make the clock radio example as clear as he could. What he means is something like this. Suppose you have an alarm clock that tells time on the ordinary 12-hour system. It's not able to tell time on the 24-hour system, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have all the facts there are to know about what time it is. Take a moment to ask yourself if you think Mary's experience of red is analogous to the clock example.

Questions to think about:

1. Do you think that Mary's learning some new abilities makes a difference to whether she learned some new facts? Or did she learn a new ability in addition to learning new facts?

2. Do you feel more certain that physical facts are all the facts that there are, or that there are facts about what it’s like?