

THE QUALITIES OF QUALIA

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Abstract: This essay is a defence of the traditional notion of qualia – as properties of consciousness that are ineffable, intrinsic, private and immediately apprehensible – against the eliminative attempts of Daniel Dennett in the influential article “Quining Qualia.” It is suggested that a thorough exploration of the concept is an appropriate starting point for future explanations of qualia, and the essay ends with some possible explanations of the four traditional properties.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is an attempt at characterising qualia by critically appraising a certain candidate notion and the eliminative arguments put against it by Daniel Dennett (1988). The notion is one that Dennett (1988) has referred to as the “traditional analysis,” and which he claims is at the root of all available construals of qualia. The tradition purportedly ascribes certain specific properties to qualia, as we shall soon see, and Dennett’s claim is that since nothing in fact has these, or could have these properties, the term “qualia” names nothing.

What I will do is to examine the arguments put forward by Dennett (1988) to see whether any of the properties under attack might not, after all, prove resilient enough to be accepted into a coherent notion. Since “tradition” sometimes represents the convergence of opinion as well as theoretical stability, it might be prudent to look here first. If Dennett is right in that the traditional analysis is all there is, or at least what everything boils down to, then we haven’t got much choice in the matter.

In contrast to Dennett, I hope that this exploration of the concept of qualia might provide a starting point for an eventual explanation of qualia. A well worked out notion might also, in itself, suggest ways for such an explanation to proceed: by qualifying the problem, we not only make it possible to work on the different properties individually, but

we also provide for the possibility of seeing patterns. Such an explanation might take the form of a reduction, although it is uncertain whether even a successful reduction would satisfy our explanatory demands.

Even granting the most favourable of outcomes for the traditional notion, our way of conceptualising experience would still need to be supplemented. For a start, there is surely more to our experiences than the simple succession of qualitative states: these individual states are also related to each other in all sorts of complex ways. But having said that, I think that this is as good a place to start as any. After all, we will need *something* that we can then supplement.

Finally, qualia are fascinating in their own right, being in my mind (if indeed they are in my mind) a wondrous feature of our existence as sentient beings.

2. THE QUALITIES OF QUALIA

2.1. *The tradition*

Although Dennett himself never makes it quite explicit, “the traditional” notion of qualia alluded to is one which may probably be said to originate with sixteenth- and seventeenth century philosophers like René Descartes and John Locke. The character-

isation of qualia imputed to this tradition is that they are: ineffable, intrinsic, private and directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness. These properties of qualia occasionally find contemporary justification, but can just as well be brought to the fore by contemplating Locke's notorious thought experiment involving spectrum inversion (Locke, 1690). The idea is the familiar speculation that different people might be experiencing different colours in response to the same stimuli (e.g. when I see red, you see what I would call green), and that we could never know whether this is so. I shall try to indicate how the fourfold characterisation of qualia might be seen to spring from Locke's hypothesis and also clarify what each property actually amounts to.

2.2. *Qualia are ineffable*

One of the things preventing us from comparing our qualia, and confirming or disconfirming the inverted spectrum hypothesis, is that our qualia are ineffable. Although we can speak about our experiences having certain qualities, we seem unable to verbally communicate exactly in what way we are tasting, seeing, feeling or smelling. This seems particularly obvious if the person we are talking to lacks the relevant sense modality, but even in describing a colour to someone sighted, we cannot convey the precise way in which we are experiencing that colour. We may to a limited extent communicate the quality of the experience by referring to other experiences: we might say of a particular colour that it is halfway between the colour of a ripe tomato and that of a banana, but language stops short of actually capturing what it is like to have those experiences we are then using as reference points.

2.3. *Qualia are private*

Not only are qualia ineffable, preventing verbal comparisons, but because language is learned in reference to public observables, all our verbal behaviour will match even if our qualia don't. This is particularly clear when we think about how we learn and use colour words. What fixes the meaning and use of these words is their relations to certain classes of objects and not their relations to the idiosyncracies of experience.

Apparently the situation is even worse than that, ruling out any interpersonal comparisons of qualia, be they physiological, behavioural or otherwise. Principally excluded from each other's experiences in this manner, our qualia turn out to be properties which are essentially private.

2.4. *Qualia are directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness*

Qualia are however properties of *my* experiences, properties which seem to be directly given to me in my consciousness. Qualia can be said to be knowledge of *the way* in which information is presented. Unlike our knowledge of the world, say, which is inferred from our qualia, the qualia themselves are directly and immediately given in consciousness.

A further claim that is sometimes made about this direct knowledge of qualia is that it can't be wrong, that we can't be mistaken about the way things *seem* to us. This, the so-called "infallibility claim," is often taken to be especially controversial, but whether the idea is untenable or not all depends on *what* it is we supposedly can't be wrong about; a point which I will return to in the discussion to come.

2.5. *Qualia are intrinsic*

Within philosophy there is a distinction, albeit a contentious one, between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. Roughly speaking "extrinsic" seems to be synonymous with "relational." The property of *being an uncle*, for example, is a property which depends on (and consists of) a relation to something else, namely a niece or a nephew. Intrinsic properties, then, are those which do not depend on this kind of relation. That qualia are intrinsic means that their qualitative character can be isolated from everything else going on in the brain (or elsewhere) and is not dependent on relations to other mental states, behaviour or what have you. The idea of the independence of qualia on any such relation may well stem from the conceivability of inverted qualia: we can imagine two physically identical brains having different qualia, or even that qualia are absent from one but not the other.

Summing up, we might say that qualia are properties of experience you can have for yourself, but can't talk about in public.

3. DOUBTING DENNETT'S STRATEGY

3.1. *Striking at the source*

These properties, then, are the target of Dennett's (1988) essay "Quining Qualia."¹ But before we begin to examine the specific details of the attack, I

¹The meaning of the word "Quining" is not important here, it suffices to say that its main function is to ensure the alliteration in Dennett's essay title; much like the word "qualities" in my own title. The word "properties" would have been more accurate and less archaic.

would like to take a closer look at his general strategy.

The goal that Dennett proclaims to have set for himself “...is to destroy our faith in the pre-theoretical or ‘intuitive’ concept...,” the “intuitive concept” that he has in mind being identified with the traditional fourfold characterisation. Since he holds that all available technical or theoretical notions of qualia are just extensions and refinements of this intuitive idea, a successful attack on our intuitions will also serve to discredit all related notions. In fact, our only evidence for qualia has always been our intuitions. The way that he goes about doing this is to first question the coherence of the four properties, via a series of thought experiments,² and then somewhat superfluously (assuming the success of the first stage) to display their inadequacy in dealing with some real cases of anomalous experience.

3.2. *Shattered patterns*

I will first try and dispense with the second stage of Dennett’s attack. Dennett’s claim is that there must be something terribly wrong with our intuitive concept of qualia, as it is unable to offer any interpretation of a number of real cases of pathological experience. What, for example, is our intuition concerning patients who claim to experience no defects in their colour vision, but who show severe impairments during testing? Are their qualia unaffected or not? Our intuitions simply don’t tell us. But I would claim that these sorts of cases are surely of little consequence when we consider how our intuitions might be formed. Presumably, our intuitions are something like unreflected insights, shaped in the course of our day to day lives in relation to normal experience (cf. Fricker, 1995). If that is what they are: *intuitions regarding our own normal subjective states*, there is no reason why we should expect them to handle unusual or pathological cases. It is certainly not unprecedented that “...real patterns which hold for non-mysterious reasons in a class of normal cases may, for equally non-mysterious reasons, break down in non-normal cases.”³ To take another example: no one would expect the patterns of behaviour and conduct observed in a department store on a normal Monday afternoon to apply to some other Monday, on which the store happens to be on fire.

²Which Dennett calls “intuition pumps.”

³The quote is from a passage by Don Ross (1993) in which he is reasoning along similar lines as here. My argument differs from Ross in that I take the nature and formation of our intuitions of qualia as my starting point, whilst he takes a detour via qualia as posits of folk psychology and the prima facie evidence that folk psychology picks out real behavioural patterns.

3.3. *No broth forthcoming*

In my opinion, the success of Dennett’s elimination of qualia thus hinges on the direct arguments questioning the coherence of the four properties. If the properties are individually insupportable and/or mutually incompatible, then the concept of qualia must be incoherent, and since an incoherent concept can have no extension, there can be no qualia. But for the elimination to be achieved, we must agree with Dennett that the traditional notion is at the core of our intuitions regarding qualia and that all other alternatives necessarily boil down to these particular ideas. I think that there are good reasons for doubting both claims.

As to the second claim, Dennett offers no *principled* arguments for why all construals of qualia must amount to the same thing, and it is hard to see how singling out Shoemaker’s treatment of qualia as he does, is supposed to enlighten us about the fate of all the remaining notions (possible or actual).

As to the first claim, there is, as it happens, at least one other construal of qualia which does not seem to imply the quartet of properties outlined above (Flanagan, 1992). Ironically, it is a formulation of qualia which Dennett himself uses in order to introduce the concept, namely the idea that there are “ways things seem to us.” Furthermore, it can also be argued that this version of the idea has a greater claim to the title of “intuitive notion,” being an idea that seems to come pre-reflectively and which almost certainly precedes any idea of the four properties. Indeed, the way in which the four properties are introduced by Dennett, as the outcome of our intuitions when faced with a number of thought experiments, gives them more the flavour of a philosophically extended notion than of core intuitions.

This all suits me perfectly. Although my special interest is still the extended notion given by tradition (as a tentative starting point for working out a coherent conceptualisation of qualia), I will not have to fear elimination in case this notion has to be revised or supplemented. The core will remain unaffected.

4. THE THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS RETHOUGHT

4.1. *Road works*

Most of Dennett’s essay is taken up with several thought experiments aimed at just one of the four properties of qualia: their immediateness in consciousness, the remaining properties acting as a

kind of background, against which the incoherence of the traditional concept is supposed to be revealed. If qualia are essentially private (being both ineffable and closed to any objective third-person testing), then our only route to them has to be through our direct experience of them. The tactic that Dennett employs is to try and close off this last route, leaving us with no reliable epistemic access and without any justification for positing their existence. I will try to show that the road isn't blocked, that at worst, there might be a few temporary road works.

4.2. *Are qualia immediately apprehensible in consciousness?*

Locke's hypothesis regarding the possibility of spectrum inversion was long thought to be unconfirmable in principle, but then philosophers dreamt up a way in which this might be achieved, albeit in a single individual.

Imagine waking up and discovering that all colours have changed: the sky is yellow, your face in the mirror is blue etc, and everyone else is behaving quite normally, indicating no incongruity in the world. In this situation it would seem reasonable to conclude that the change must be in you, and that what you're experiencing is a change in your qualia.

Dennett, however, cleverly exploits this basic scenario, *against* qualia, by amending it in an important way. Suppose that we imagine the reason for the change above to be the result of some covert brain surgery done on you as you were asleep (by a gang of evil neurosurgeons perhaps). Dennett's crucial point is that the change which you experience on waking (aside from the massive bandages around your head) could have been achieved in at least two different ways:

- a) The surgical team tampered with some parts of your brain involving the early processing of your qualia (e.g. your optic nerve) so as to change the input to those areas later on in the processing responsible for your experiences.
- b) The evil neurosurgeons (and this is perhaps even more evil) leave the early pathways intact and instead tamper with those parts of your brain which accomplish the comparison between the colours you are currently experiencing and your colour memories.

Even though you notice a change on waking, there is nothing in your experience which tells you whether this is due to your qualia having been altered, or to interference with your memory-anchored dis-

positions to react to those qualia. You notice a difference, but not *as* a shift in qualia or *as* a shift in your memory-anchored dispositions, despite the fact that your own qualia are right there, directly given in your consciousness. Dennett takes this as showing that we are *not* directly or immediately acquainted with our qualia.

His other major argument against this property, a scenario involving a couple of professional coffee-tasters, is rather similar to the one above when we ignore some minor nuances. The outcome is again that we're unable to tell through introspection, whether some change in our experience (in this case, the taste of Maxwell's coffee) is due to a change in the quality of the qualia themselves or in *the dispositions to judge or react to qualia*. Say you no longer like the coffee you once did, this might be due to a change in your qualia (your judgements of taste having remained constant), or to a change in your reactive attitudes (your qualia having remained constant). Or again, it might be due to some intermediate between these two cases (your qualia as well as your reactive attitudes each having shifted a little). Dennett's conclusion is the same as before.

4.3. *The Pope is infallible about one thing*

An essential assumption in Dennett's thought experiment involving the two kinds of brain surgery, is that both operations are possible and would have indistinguishable effects on the victim. These implicit premises are difficult to evaluate without knowing how *the judgement of difference* is actually carried out and how it relates to *the experience of a difference*. But even granting Dennett the possibility of the two scenarios, for the time being, we needn't feel compelled towards his conclusion.

The most obvious response to the thought experiment is, that although introspection can't decide between the alternatives, there is still a fact of the matter: either a change in qualia has occurred, or the change is in some other aspect of the individual. There is still the experience of a particular quale, but since we might be misremembering the past (or our tastes might have changed), we just can't be sure whether that quale is the same as, or different from, some other particular quale.

Dennett dismisses this kind of response as vacuous, on the grounds that he thinks nothing follows from it and that it is as "mysterious as papal infallibility." But these accusations don't warrant Dennett in misinterpreting the property under suspicion. Both of his thought experiments are geared towards showing that we can't be infallible in our comparisons of non-simultaneous qualia, but

is this what immediate apprehension in consciousness is supposed to mean? I think not. What the notion implies, is that we are aware of our qualia directly and non-inferentially; there is no room for an is/seems distinction. That is, one cannot "... be unaware of one's 'real' qualitative state of consciousness during the time one is aware of *some* qualitative state."⁴ This is simply not the sort of mistake we can make; which still leaves a whole range of other sorts of mistakes we can, and routinely do make. It is trivially true, for example, that we often misremember our experiences of qualia (even without nocturnal neurosurgery).

4.4. *Vacuous or verifiable?*

Unfortunately, Dennett doesn't make it altogether clear how this version of the idea of direct and incorrigible access (as opposed to his own mischievous misinterpretation) is lacking. Comparing it to papal infallibility does little to illuminate the issue. He does express a worry that nothing would follow from this kind of knowledge of qualia. Nothing anyway that could throw light on the kinds of claims that might be made by the individuals described in his two thought experiments, claims regarding what they themselves consider to be the reason for the change in their experiences. It is unclear why we should expect it to do so, unless we misconstrue incorrigible access in the way just described.

Presumably, it is Dennett's leanings towards verificationism which move him to reject this kind of incorrigibility. Without trying to figure out exactly which brand of verificationism, and thus staying clear of the label-then-refute tactic which he himself so rightly abhors (Dennett, 1993), I think it is safe to assume some minimal version of the criteria. Something like: significant propositions are those whose truth or falsehood can be settled empirically in some way. It might be hard to settle the truth of the proposition that "qualia are directly and incorrigibly apprehended in consciousness," but need we swallow verificationism just because it is dangled in front of us? Seager (1993) quite rightly points out that the criterion is chiefly epistemological and quite unsuitable for deciding metaphysical questions. Even if the victim of malicious neurosurgery can't tell through introspection the exact nature of the deed that has been perpetrated, it might yet be established by empirical testing, thus partly fulfilling the verificationist onus.

4.5. *I don't know but I'll ask my neurophysiologist*

Suppose that a concerned victim of the rouge neurosurgeons wants to know were the defect in him resides: is it his qualia which have changed or is the fault in the "memory comparator"? (Perhaps his insurance only covers one of these alternatives, or maybe the prospects of recovery are different for each case.) Couldn't he just call his local neurophysiologist for an appointment and let her decide?

Dennett argues that, whatever the case might be, empirical testing would fail to resolve the question. He admits that when the change is at one or the other extremes of the spectrum of possibilities, as in the scenarios described so far, we might have reasons for favouring one of the alternatives over the other. But for the whole range of possibilities falling between these extremes, where the change is a mixture of the two factors in varying proportions, behavioural or neurophysiological tests would be unable to establish the contribution of each factor.

Purely behavioural tests would fail, since qualia supposedly affect our actions only via the intermediary of our judgements about them. Thus, these tests would give us evidence only of the *resultant* of the two factors.

Neither would neurophysiological data settle the issue, since they won't tell us where in the stream of the physiological process qualia first appear. Dennett argues,⁵ that *even if* our neurophysiological theory told us that the change had been brought about by an adjustment in the memory-accessing process (as opposed to some other change), there would still be two different ways in which this adjustment might have been achieved:

- a') The qualia are normal but the revision of the victim's memory-accessing process has adjusted his memory of how things used to look, so that he now experiences a difference.
- b') The memory-comparison step occurs just prior to the qualia phase in colour perception, but due to the revision, it now yields different qualia for the same stimulation.

The first of these alternatives is already familiar. In the second, the qualia we experience are supposed to be part of the *output* of the memory comparator, but this seems very odd. The following example brings some of this oddness into relief.

⁴Seager, 1993, p. 352.

⁵The version of the argument which follows differs slightly from that given by Dennett. I have taken a few liberties with it for expositional reasons, but without altering the basic point (now that would be a low thing to do).

Imagine that a victim of version b') of the operation is a circus artist by the name of Jonas: a juggler of great fame whose famous speciality is "the rainbow," a spectacular set-piece in which 28 coloured balls are simultaneously kept aloft. In Jonas' memory therefore, are the representations of 28 differently coloured balls, otherwise identical in shape and texture. Even though Jonas feels nauseous and distressed after the operation, the show must go on. As he bends over to pick up the first of the 28 balls, what will he experience? According to the thought experiment, his qualia are now the end result of the early processing of his vision being compared with his memory of past qualia. But which memory is the ball in his hand compared to? After all, the only perceptible difference between the balls was their colour. Does this mean that now that he picks up a ball, the colour he experiences might vary at each occasion depending on which memory his pre-processed qualia is compared to? As poor Jonas tries to juggle, the airborne balls sometimes (or constantly?) change their colours so that he finally loses track and the balls come tumbling down around him. It would seem that the two kinds of operations, a') and b'), would in fact cause two very different kinds of symptoms.

In the absence of a properly worked out model for how qualia are produced and compared to memory, it is hard to say with certainty that the story which Dennett tells is incoherent, for there might always be some way of altering or adjusting the story to serve his ends. But for the same reason, it is also hard to tell whether it should count against the possibility of empirically deciding (within some theoretical framework) how things stand with our hypothetical victims. The crux of coming up with such a framework obviously still remains, but will not be hampered by the kind of difficulties envisaged by Dennett.

4.6. Three to go

So far, a fair amount has been said about just one of qualia's four properties. Less will be said about the remaining properties for the simple reason that Dennett himself has significantly less to say about them. I will start with his main argument directed at the intrinsicity of experience, after which I will examine his alternative explanation for why qualia only *seem* to be ineffable. When it comes to privacy, Dennett seems to want to keep his arguments to himself.⁶

⁶To be fair to Dennett, these two properties can be thought of (as I suggested earlier) as operating in the background and as necessary for his other thought experiments.

4.7. Are qualia intrinsic?

The taste of beer is one of those tastes which most individuals have to acquire, few enjoy their first sampling. However, most people become partial to the taste with time and repeated exposure (if you are one of the exceptions that liked beer from the start, think of some other taste you have come to enjoy only later in life). How are we to understand this in terms of qualia? Do we come to like the taste of *that first sip* (as it would seem judging by common parlance), or does the taste itself become different with experience? Dennett lets an imaginary beer drinker settle the issue. Our friend at the bar may say something like: "Beer tastes different to the experienced beer drinker. If beer went on tasting to me the way the first sip tasted, I would never have gone on drinking beer!..."⁷ Dennett thinks that "if we let this speech pass" we must admit that beer is not a taste we *learn* to enjoy, and further, that if we admit that our reactions or attitudes to experience are at all constitutive of their experiential character, then experiential character ceases to be intrinsic.

There are at least two possible replies we might give. First of all, do we really need to "let this speech pass"? Would *you* trust the boastings of a drunken stranger in a bar? Dennett has given us reasons not to take this kind of introspective report at face value, reasons, mind you, which pose no serious threat to the immediateness of qualia. So despite what our friend might say or insist, it could be that we *do* come to like the taste of *that first sip*.

Alternatively, if we were to go along with the statement made by the experienced beer drinker (and why shouldn't we, after all he's been buying us drinks all evening) this needn't pose any serious threat to intrinsicity. For, as Seager (1993) has pointed out, it could be that increased experience is sometimes a *causal condition* of qualia change. The mere possession of causal conditions for a property surely doesn't make that property relational.

Neither of these two interpretations of the so called "acquired taste of beer" is incoherent or theoretically problematic. However, the very fact that I am willing to consider both, and my hesitancy in choosing between them, is, Dennett would probably argue, indicative of the weakness of our intuitions regarding qualia. This threat to qualia quickly evaporates when we again remember that intrinsicity is not one of our core intuitions, but rather a part of the philosophically extended notion.

Dennett also has doubts regarding the very concept of intrinsicity, partly because intrinsic properties

⁷Dennett, 1988, p. 60.

often turn out to be relational on further analysis, and partly because it has been notoriously difficult to settle on a definition of the term (a problem common to most metaphysical discourse). These are both, in my opinion, valid observations, but lack force as arguments (and I'm not sure that Dennett intends them as such).

4.8. What did Major Tom say to ground control?

According to Dennett, conscious experience only *seems* to have ineffable properties, because it has properties which are “relatively” or “practically” ineffable. He suggests that when we receive information about the world, there are certain “property detectors” within us which respond to particular unique patterns in that information. If, for example, I hear a bird call, there is a particular “property detector” in me which responds to the properties of that call. The property detector gives me a way of thinking about and referring to the experience, but since the property detected is extremely rich in information, it defies linguistic encoding.

This is not a direct argument against qualia being ineffable, but might serve to strengthen Dennett's case if he could provide good evidence for the property detector model being true. As it is, Seager (1993) has offered two considerations which both count against it. One is the realisation that there are qualitative states that could not be adequately explained in terms of information being transferred via brain mechanisms (if indeed any such state could be thus explained). What, for example, of being moderately drunk? This would not seem to be the detection of some property (i.e. the presence of alcohol), more like a change in the mode of information processing.

The other is an example showing that we are unable to describe experiences, even when the property experienced is one that is low in information. Seager recounts how astronauts in orbit sometimes report seeing very brief flashes of light that are caused by energetic particles striking just a few of the receptors in the retina. He argues that the information transmitted by such an event must be very meagre, but that the quality of the experience would still be as impossible to convey. His conclusion is that the ineffability of qualia is not contingent on the richness of the world itself.

Another odd feature of the model is that it seems to require that we already possess property detectors for all the properties we will ever come to detect, ranging, I suppose, from the taste of ear wax to the timbre of a harpsichord.

Dennett also claims, that although qualia may often seem ineffable, our capacity to describe a particular experience usually improves with training. As we become more acquainted with a specific domain, such as the taste of wine or the sound of guitar chords, we become able to pick out more and more structure in these experiences. What was once the unitary taste of wine may become the appreciation of a complex structure of different tastes. Dennett thinks that, aside for the “horizon of distinguishability,” there is nothing to stop us from refining our ability to thus describe our experiences.

I agree with Dennett up to a point. He is clearly right about our potential to improve our sensitivity to the structure of our experiences and, consequently, our ability to describe them (although strictly, I think that our experiences also change in the process). I also think that articulating this structure can be an important step towards explaining phenomenology. We need structure, as Robert van Gulick (1993) would say, to sink our explanatory hooks into: the more of it we find, the greater our chances will be of mapping it onto the underlying neurophysiology. But, as van Gulick realises, this might still leave us with a phenomenological residue. Even if we succeed in explaining the relations that hold between phenomenological elements, this would not seem to explain the elements themselves. Thus telling a blind person that the colour red is experienced as unary, warm, positive, advancing etc, would still not do the trick.

4.9. Four survivors

We have now reached the end of my examination of Dennett's attack, and it would seem that the traditional fourfold characterisation of qualia has survived unscathed. There are of course other arguments directed at qualia, but I won't be considering them here. Part of my purpose in defending these properties is the hope that they might provide a tentative starting point for an explanation. As such, we can never guarantee that there will not be other arguments or even other ways of conceptualising qualia. What partly justifies examining this particular notion is its long life history and survival into contemporary debate, and I have not yet encountered any alternative construal radically at odds with tradition.⁸ Other properties I have seen proposed, either overlap with the ones already considered (e.g. Humphrey, 1992), or complement and expand on them (e.g. Metzinger, 1995). Metzinger, for example, adds the further properties of transparency, perspectivalness and presence. Qualia are transparent in the sense that they are not

⁸This tradition being the Anglo-American one.

experienced *as* phenomenal states, but rather *as* the things they happen to represent. They are also experienced as belonging to ourselves; each quale being, in some sense, accompanied by a phenomenal point of view. Qualia are also experienced as occurring in the temporal present. Humphrey would add to this list, that qualia are tied to a particular site of the body and that they are modality-specific.

Having defended the traditional four properties, the question now confronting us is whether they will help us to explain qualia, or, to start with, whether we are able explain the properties themselves. I will limit myself to these four, for now. Tackling them individually is, I think, at least a step in the right direction. Knowing more about them is knowing more about qualia. I will therefore spend the remainder of this essay trying to say a few constructive words about each property.

5. EXPLAINING THE PROPERTIES

5.1. *An intrinsically troublesome property*

The intrinsicity of qualia is a property which has caused some of the most severe headaches in the philosophy of mind. According to Levine (1995) a large part of the contemporary debate comes down to the dilemma of having to choose between qualia as intrinsic or as relational. If we opt for the former, the problem is to identify the appropriate intrinsic *physical* property. On the other hand, opting for qualia as relational properties just seems too implausible given our intuitions regarding absent and inverted qualia. Strategies which try to circumvent these problems, by either finding a function that some quale is uniquely suited to perform (thus ruling out its absence), or by giving it a relational description sufficient to uniquely specify it (thus ruling out inversion), make the mistake of equating the role-player with the role played. The fact that some quale plays a particular role or may be given a relational description, does not ensure that the quale itself is a relational property. Levine himself, in his amusing but rather unhelpful way, opts for the third alternative given in the title of his essay “Qualia: Intrinsic, Relational or What?”

Taking intrinsicity seriously has both desirable and undesirable consequences. On the down side, identifying qualia with some physical property invites well known objections such as the multiple realizability argument and the conceivability argument. A positive result is that it greatly limits our search for an explanatory theory. Any theory, in which the qualitative nature of experience is identified with some relational property, as in most

functionalist theories or higher-order thought accounts, can be stricken from the agenda.

If qualia can be identified with a physical property, this would also help to secure a causal role for them without violating the causal closure of the physical world. This is generally thought to be desirable: we want qualia to be efficacious, or to put it more informally, we want qualia to make a difference. If they don't, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand why we should have them at all.

5.2. *The privacy of our parts*

If intrinsicity moves us towards an identification of qualia with some neurophysiological property (or set of properties), then maybe there is a rather simple solution to the privacy of our experiences. Part of the problem is of course that qualia are ineffable, but a more fundamental barrier against interpersonal comparisons of qualia is that *my* qualia are identical with some neurophysiological property of *my* brain. Since you can't share my physical brain with me (although this might be possible in some gruesome thought experiment), you can't share the particular token or instance of the property subserving whichever quale it is that I'm currently enjoying. This might still allow others to know, with the aid of some advanced neuroscience, what *kind* of experience I am having. Other people's brains might even realise the same type of physical property. What they won't be able to do, however, is to share my qualia and compare them to their own.

5.3. *What is there to be wrong about?*

What can we say regarding the immediacy of qualia in consciousness? Does this property suggest anything to us? I would like to avoid thorny issues, as for whom or what qualia are immediate, but can't resist at least one related metaphysical speculation. If my qualia are identical with some physical property of my brain (as was suggested above), so that having a certain quale is just realising that physical property, then how can there be room for mistakes? Qualia simply enter into my consciousness when my brain is in a certain state or actualising some specific property. It might be said then that qualia are the most shallow level of consciousness. At this level, consciousness is purely qualitative, mistakes become possible later on when we interpret our qualia or make judgements involving them. I will leave open the question of how the mechanism for this is to be understood. Perhaps the uninterpreted qualia are superseded by their interpretations, or perhaps both coexist as overlapping layers in consciousness. A model of these processes

might give some indication of where in the overall cognitive architecture to place qualia, which in turn might suggest what they are doing there.

5.4. *Some final words on ineffability*

The various things which have been said in this essay about ineffability all seem to indicate or suggest that the property has more to do with language itself than with the nature of qualia.

For a start, it is hard to envisage a way in which qualia could enter into language. How could we agree on how to speak about experience when we can't experience each others qualia? How could a language of qualia gain stability when there is no way to gauge the appropriateness or correctness of utterances? Qualia, being accessible only to their owners, seem to be the sorts of things which just have to fall outside the reach of language.

Of course, the fact of qualia's intrinsicity might also contribute to their ineffability: if the quality of a particular quale does not depend on relations to other things, then there is simply no structure for language to latch on to; there is nothing to describe.

There is probably a more mundane explanation of the limitations of language to fully communicate qualia, an aspect of language not unique to the domain of experience. Qualia are supposedly ineffable because no description by itself can yield knowledge of *what it is like* to have an experience. A description might tell you certain things about qualia, but it won't *give* you them. The question is how this is supposed to be radically different from any other sort of description? All descriptions are in some sense incomplete, in some way less than the things being described. This is not at all surprising. After all, descriptions are something different from the thing being described.

In the end, perhaps we shouldn't view ineffability as a property of qualia so much as one of the several factors constricting our inquiry. As it is, we are able to communicate *some* of the qualitative aspects of our experiences, if only to an extent (perhaps to the extent that we need to). We also seem to have little trouble talking about our inner lives, as evidenced by a whole range of human activity, ranging from poetry to writing essays about qualia.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The speculations above are just some of the possible ways of understanding these properties. Depending on which properties we start with, different explanations will suggest themselves. If we wish

to explain qualia, it would seem wise to examine the different properties which have been proposed, and to bring together a coherent set. In this essay, I have attempted a part of this work. Expanding the explananda sets the first point on our agenda, the next concerns what kind of explanation we should strive for. Which terms, concepts and processes may legitimately be included in an explanation, and what must their relationship be to the properties being explained? (For a clear and elegant survey of the options, see van Gulick, 1995). To take an example, would we be satisfied with the kinds of reduction which consists in showing qualia to be *nothing but* some other kind of thing? Reduction thus understood, may be an important step on the way to a satisfactory explanation, but lacks what van Gulick (1995) calls intuitive sufficiency. That is, we want to be able to see intuitively how the processes or mechanisms which are invoked, produce the property we are aiming to elucidate. We want to grasp this in the same way that we grasp the scientific explanation of the different phases of water. The theories of how water molecules behave and our understanding of intramolecular hydrogen-bonds almost allow us to *see* why ice should be solid. But perhaps this demand on explanation is unreasonably strong, there are many generally accepted explanations of phenomena which do not meet it. The question still remains whether the demand might be reasonable in this particular case. There is also the question of whether there is any hope of satisfying it. At this point there are different directions we might choose: one possible solution is simply to ask for less, another, which I much prefer, is to hope for more.

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