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## Qualia Exist, So What?

What is it like to see the color red? Unless you are colorblind, you know the answer. But could you articulate it? These experiences populate our everyday life but are difficult, if not impossible, to clearly explain to others. Within technical philosophy, these experiences are called “qualia”. In the following discussion, I will outline the concept of qualia, and then consider whether qualia do in fact exist as defined, a seemingly absurd question posed by Daniel Dennett. I will conclude that qualia do exist as Dennett characterizes them, despite his arguments to the contrary. However, qualia are necessarily fleeting, and therefore our theorizing with them is inherently limited.

Qualia are how we experience the world. Put simply, they are “the way things seem to us” (Dennett 226). Examples include the experience of seeing red for me, the way a song sounds to me, and the way the carpet feels on my toes. Thomas Nagel would characterize consciousness as the collection of these qualia, or more generally as “what it is like” for me to be me. These qualia seem to be the building blocks of our interactions with the world every day. They are ever present and therefore seemingly undeniable.

Amassing the historical assumptions about qualia into a coherent concept, Daniel Dennett found four characteristics qualia seem to definitionally possess. Qualia are ineffable, intrinsic, private, and immediately apprehensible in consciousness. The ineffability can be seen in the question with which we began. What is it like to see the color red? There is no way to sufficiently answer this question, no way to capture the experience in words. Next, qualia are intrinsic. Essentially they are “atomic,” simple in and of themselves. What it is like to see red is not an experience made up of simpler fundamental components; it is its own.

In addition qualia are private. It is impossible for someone to know what I am experiencing when my eyes look at the color red. Even if I retract my hand and scream upon touching a glass, no one could actually say they know exactly what I am experiencing. My experience is my own, and outside observation can only help to approximate my qualia. Finally, qualia are immediately apprehensible in my consciousness. Put more simply, I know my own qualia without debate or consideration. When I see red, I do not need to think about what it is like for me to know what it is like. The likeness is automatically apprehensible to me.

In his *Quining Qualia*, Daniel Dennett argues that qualia do not exist, no matter how obvious they seem to us. Through a slew of thought experiments, Dennett questions the viability of the four definitional characteristics of qualia, and therefore the concept itself. In the following analysis, I will consider whether Dennett's arguments against the immediate apprehension of qualia work to disprove their existence, as he claims.

Imagine, as Dennett does, that you wake up one day and the sky is now yellow. The grass is now red. However, no one seems to notice the difference but you. There is likely a neurological explanation for this switch, which would seem to fully explain your new state. There are two possible events that could have caused this switch. Possibly the high level "qualia-producing channels" like your retina processes have inverted and thereby given inverted inputs to lower level processes, and consequently inverted your qualia (Dennett 231). Maybe, though, all of these channels have remained unchanged, but your "memory-access links" have somehow inverted, causing you to remember your qualia differently from how they actually were. In this case, your qualia have stayed fixed but your "memory-linked qualia reactions" have changed (Dennett 231). Therefore the experience of a switch in qualia could either be just that, or else be explained by a switch in memory.

Dennett argues that there is nothing in your experience that shows which one of these is in fact true. You cannot tell whether your memories have switched or whether your high level visual receptors, and therefore qualia, have changed. Possibly a neuroscientist could provide some insight, but until that point you are just as lost about the history of your own qualia as you are someone else's. According to Dennett, this contradicts the immediate apprehension of qualia. They were supposed to be completely accessible to us, but on the surface this case seems to reveal the logical possibility of our qualia being just as foreign to us as a stranger's. Dennett takes this case to say that qualia cannot be immediately apprehensible, as we had thought.

Dennett's unique inverted spectrum case does not do as much work as he claims, however. The case simply shows that the memory of our past qualia is not directly apprehensible to us. When you see the sky today and realize that it looks different from how it did yesterday, you are employing your memory of your past qualia to characterize your qualia today as being different. The fact that you are unable to determine whether your memory is faulty or whether your vision has switched is simply due to the inaccessibility of your past qualia to your present self. To you, the sky is yellow and the grass is red. This is immediately clear. So even though you cannot characterize your qualia history, specifically whether your qualia have switched or not, you can still directly and automatically apprehend your current qualia state. You may not know whether your qualia have changed. But this just reveals the fallibility of your qualia memory, instead of the non-apprehension of your present qualia.

One may argue, though, that actual qualia themselves, not just the memory of them, can be inaccessible to us at times. Consider when you go to the dentist, and she drills into your anesthetized tooth. At the first moment of drilling, you moan, thinking you are in pain

despite the drugs. But then you realize you are just feeling the vibration of the drill, instead of pain. Using most physicalist notions of pain, under anesthetic you simply could not have felt pain and therefore, at the start of the procedure, you were wrong about your feeling. You realized your mistake after some time, though. In more extreme cases, you are never able to realize the specific sensation you are feeling. For example extremely hot and cold substances do not feel different to the touch. Therefore, it is impossible for us to tell which sensation we are experiencing when we touch a very hot or very cold object. Either we are feeling extreme heat or extreme cold, but the fact of the matter is not accessible to us. These two examples seem to show that sometimes our qualia are not accessible to us while we are having them. This would contradict the immediate apprehension of qualia required by definition. Therefore, these examples could signal that qualia cannot exist as defined.

These cases do prove that our sensory inputs are not always comprehensible to us. Sensory inputs, though, are not qualia. Qualia are the subjective likenesses of experiencing such inputs, not the comprehension of the inputs themselves. In the case of the drill, let us assume that pain is physically defined and impossible to experience when under the influence of anesthetic. The fact that you misnamed your quale as pain does not signal that your quale was inaccessible to you, but instead that you could not easily characterize it. Put more clearly, you felt exactly what the start of that procedure was like for you. You just simply could not successfully express it. This case, then, is a fault of qual-naming not qual-direct-apprehension. Similarly, in the hot and cold case, you could not articulate which sensory inputs were occurring.<sup>1</sup> There was exactly something it was like to touch the hot or cold object, though. The what-it-is-likeness is the quale you experienced. Even though you

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<sup>1</sup> Technically when you touch something extremely hot, both your hot and cold receptors fire, creating “paradoxical cold” (Hoffman). Neurologically the experience is a combination of hot and cold perception.

were unable to tell whether the object was hot or cold, you still had a particular experience upon touching it. Therefore, while you may not have understood or been able to characterize the qual, you still felt one.

To make this explanation even more palatable, consider optical illusions. When you watch the Mask Illusion, you experience seeing a face rotate in one direction and then another face rotate in the opposite direction. In fact, though, there is no second face. You are simply watching the inside of the first face rotating in the original direction. There is something it is like for you to see the rotating mask, despite that likeness not matching the reality of your visual inputs. This likeness is the qual, and while it is not an accurate characterization of the real world, you are still subjectively experiencing it. Qualia are necessarily subjective, as Nagel thoroughly argued. Therefore, while you may be wrong about the objective facts of your visual field, you will not be wrong about your own experience of those facts. While these examples on the surface seem to show qualia not to be directly apprehensible, they simply signal the frequent disconnect between our experience of reality, called the qual, and the reality itself. So it seems that the immediate apprehension of qualia may not be as problematic as Dennett believed.

As a further attack on direct apprehension, Dennett imagines two coffee tasters, Chase and Sanborn. Both Chase and Sanborn loved coffee, but for some reason they no longer do. They both agree that the coffee itself has not changed, just aspects of their experience of it have. Chase believes that coffee has not changed its taste at all, but rather he does not like the taste in the way he did. Sanborn, on the other hand, believes the taste of coffee for him to actually have changed. Chase believes his qualia have remained fixed, while Sanborn believes his to have shifted. According to Dennett, their present qualia upon tasting the coffee does not, on its own, give reason for either Chase or Sanborn to believe what they do

about their qualia having changed or not. They each know how coffee presently tastes to them, but that does not tell them why they like it less than they once did.

If intuition carried over in this case from the earlier color and touch experiments, Chase and Sanborn each experience their own qualia in the moment. They know what-it-is-like for themselves to taste the coffee now. However, their characterizations of possible changes in their qualia depend on accurate memories of past qualia, just like in Dennett's inverted spectrum case. For Chase to say his qualia have remained fixed but his taste has changed depends on his ability to exactly recall coffee's past taste to him. While this may not seem far fetched on the face, maybe Chase went through an inversion of the coffee-taste spectrum. As before, this inversion could be explained two different ways, one involving a change in qualia and the other involving no such switch. Chase believes the second case to have occurred, but like in the original experiment it is impossible for him to be sure. Therefore, neither Chase nor Sanborn can verify their beliefs by internal reflection, since, as was already made clear, the memory of our past qualia is not necessarily accessible to us. As before, though, the inability of Chase or Sanborn to accurately characterize their qualia history does not say anything about the existence of their present qualia. They each have a present experience of drinking coffee, and therefore they have qualia.

Buried in the middle of his discussion, Dennett targets this exact intuition. He claims that many, upon hearing his various thought experiments, simply revert to the conclusion that "[I] know how it is with me right now" (Dennett 233). As we have seen, though, knowledge of their present qualia does not help Chase and Sanborn verify their beliefs about their qualia history. Dennett takes this absence of explanation to be a fundamental lack of efficacy for qualia claims. As Dennett puts it, "If absolutely nothing follows from this presumed knowledge [of one's present qualia]- nothing, for instance, that would shed any light on the

different psychological claims that might be true of Chase or Sanborn- what is the point of asserting that one has it?" Here Dennett highlights a fundamental limitation of the concept of qualia. Qualia are not definitionally constant or accessible beyond the present moment. Therefore, we cannot make conclusions about any continued psychological states that involve qualia beyond those being presently experienced. This greatly limits the scope of qualia claims. Qualia tell us nothing but our present experiences, and even then we are unable to express those definitionally ineffable experiences to others.

Qualia are simply pointwise experiences of the world, held by us for single moments. To highlight this, imagine going outside and looking up at the sky. You sit on a lawn chair and stare at the vastness for a little while. As you sit there, it seems continuously blue. Unknown to you at that moment, though, the sky looked yellow to you when first you looked up. Then you instantaneously experienced both a color inversion and a memory inversion. So not only does the sky seem blue now, but you remember it having been blue for the whole time you had been outside, even for your whole life. To you, the sky is and always has been blue. Clearly, as with each of the other examples, your qualia memory is faulty. However there has always been a what-it-is-likeness for you to see the sky. Inconveniently, though, this what-it-is-likeness is only accessible to you in the exact moment you are experiencing it.

Qualia do exist, but are only pinpoint perceivable to us. Despite Dennett's arguments to the contrary, they seem to be immediately apprehensible. However their apprehension stops after that present moment. Ultimately, Dennett was correct in discounting the power of qualia theorizing. We have no certainty of the continuity of our qualia, as the sky example underlines. Therefore, while there is something it is like to experience the world in a present moment, no conclusions about our past qualia could arise from this.<sup>2</sup> Qualia, consequently,

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<sup>2</sup> Dennett addresses the possibility of neurological tests to determine the fact of the matter for Chase and Sanborn. Clearly, if these tests could answer the question, the privacy of qualia

do no work in characterizing our perceived-to-be continuous experiences of the world.

Qualia have no explanatory power beyond the exact moment of perceiving them.

In the above analysis, I considered Daniel Dennett's arguments against the immediate apprehension of qualia, a definitional feature. Dennett presented a series of thought experiments intended to reveal the lack of certainty we can have about our own qualia. Two cases in particular, his inverted spectrum and Chase and Sanborn cases, initially seemed to deny that our qualia are accessible to us. This would be problematic for the existence of qualia as they are definitionally immediately accessible. Ultimately I argued that Dennett's cases simply highlight the inaccessibility of past qualia, which does not contradict their definition. This was further highlighted by the possibility that our qualia are actually discontinuous, with us unable to recognize their discontinuity. I finally concluded that qualia do in fact exist, but they have no explanatory power beyond the exact moment they are experienced. Any psychological analysis using qualia consequently loses a substantial amount of its power. Qualia cannot explain why I continue to drink tea or run in the sunshine. Qualia are fleeting. It is like something for you to see the color red right now, but there is no way to tell whether that likeness is the same as it was when we began this discussion. And if qualia cannot even help us answer that, why talk about them?

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would be at risk. As I wanted to focus on the immediate apprehension of qualia in this discussion, I decided these considerations of privacy to be beyond the scope of the present analysis.

## References

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