

AGAINST DENNETT'S ELIMINATIVISM: PRESERVING QUALIA AS A COHERENT CONCEPT

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QUALIA HAVE BEEN the source of much debate in philosophy of mind as well as cognitive science in general. The problem seems to be clear enough: When a pin pricks one's foot, a sequence of physical events are initiated that cause a pattern of neuronal firings that somehow represents the sensory information of pain. Where, however, does the qualitative feeling of pain fit into the neurological processes involved in the perception of a pin prick? In other words, how is a physical state of the brain responsible for the confused and subjective quale of pain? This mystery posed by qualia has been called *the hard problem* of consciousness. Some more descriptive names that have been applied to qualia are *the raw feels* of a sensory event, *the qualitative character* of experience, and *what it is like* to experience something.¹

In his article "Quining Qualia," Daniel Dennett attempts to remove the problem that these properties of conscious experience seem to pose. He proposes that qualia, as most philosophers conceive of them, do not, in fact, exist. Using a series of thought experiments, Dennett closely examines the concept of qualia and identifies what seem to be their four essential characteristics. Dennett proceeds to show how it is impossible for those properties of experience that we usually call qualia to simultaneously have two of these four second-order properties.² He then concludes that it is impossible for properties like qualia to exist and thus calls for the elimination of the concept of qualia. Although many of his points are insightful and supported with empirical data, Dennett, in the end, fails to show a real incoherency in the concept of qualia.

Dennett begins his eliminativist attack on qualia by establishing the four seemingly essential traits of qualia. The first is *ineffability*; after all, it is clearly difficult to articulate what it is like to see red, to taste licorice, to smell ginger, to feel pain, or to hear a musical note. Another characteristic is *intrinsicity*—that is, qualia seem to be inextricably bound to experience, and it seems that qualia cannot be broken down to any constituent parts that may then be analyzed. Qualia also seem to be *private* and *directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness*. The attribute of privacy seems to come from the fact that it is impossible to express the qualitative aspect of experience to others, and it is

therefore impossible to compare qualia between people or to identify qualia scientifically. Dennett lists direct apprehensibility, because it does seem that the experiencer has immediate access to her qualitative states and that qualia are “the very properties the appreciation of which permits us to identify our conscious states” (Dennett 1988, 523). Of these four second-order properties, Dennett only focuses on two: direct apprehensibility and intrinsicity.

In the next section of his argument, Dennett points out some problems with the commonly accepted concept of qualia. Dennett notes the well-established problem with interpersonal qualia comparison. That is, it would be impossible for a scientist to show conclusively that two patients were experiencing different subjective color spectra. The study could not be done by comparing verbal accounts of red things and green things, because both patients use the terms “red” and “green” to refer to whatever subjective color they experience when seeing something that other people conventionally call red and green. The experiment could not be done by channeling one person’s neural sensory input into another person’s brain either, because there would be no way of designing such a channeling apparatus without knowing whether it is working properly when it yields an inverted color spectrum or whether it is just miscalibrated. To avoid this practical problem, some philosophers choose to consider intrapersonal, rather than interpersonal, qualia comparison.³

However, Dennett remarks that the intrapersonal situation is no better, because it is impossible for a person who believes he has undergone spectrum inversion to know whether his “‘early’ qualia-producing channels” have been inverted or whether his “memory access links” to previous qualia have been inverted (Dennett 1988, 525). In the first case, because an inversion-causing change was made early on in the stream of neurological information, all sensory experiences that occur later on in the perception process are inverted. Thus, the subject would presumably have inverted qualia, and he believes this is so by comparing his current qualia with his memories of previous qualia. In the second case, the change is made later on in the sensory perception process such that the conscious experience and, therefore, the qualia remain the same, but when the subject compares his current conscious experience with previous ones, he will (erroneously) think that there has been a qualia switch. Now it is impossible for the subject to know at which point the inversion occurs. Therefore, anyone who claims to have undergone qualia inversion may have, in fact, experienced memory inversion.

Dennett accomplishes three things with this counter-argument. First, he shows that the intrapersonal spectral inversion thought experiment fails to intuitively establish the existence of qualia. Second, Dennett demonstrates that introspection does not provide the immediate knowl-

edge about qualia that it supposedly should; he will return to this point later on. His third and most important point is to introduce his division of sensory processing into low-level, "early" neural pathways (the point in the process that lies before actual transmission of sensory information to the rest of the brain) and high-level, "late" pathways (the point at which memory-comparison reactive judgments are made).

The utility of this distinction becomes clear in Dennett's next section in which he presents the thought experiment with Chase and Sanborn, the coffee tasters. Chase believes that his taste qualia have been constant, but that his reactive attitudes toward the qualia have changed; Sanborn, on the other hand, believes that his taste qualia are what changed while his set of reactive attitudes toward the original qualia has remained constant. Of course, it may be that Chase, in fact, underwent a change in taste standards while Sanborn, in fact, suffered a change in qualia. However, as seen already, intrapersonal qualia change is impossible to confirm through introspection. Furthermore, Dennett argues that scientists cannot figure out which of these two types of changes actually occurred, because any empirical strategy that they try to use must depend on the subject's unreliable judgments of his own experience (the problem with avoiding verbal accounts with a neural apparatus has already been mentioned). Just why are these introspective judgments unreliable? Because, according to Dennett, they are the product of two factors—the dispositions to produce qualia and the dispositions to react to qualia—which are bound indiscernibly together in the formation of these reactive judgments. Now if this account of qualia judgments as a seamless meld of productive and reactive dispositions is accurate, then it seems that the experiencer's judgment about her qualia is no more accurate than her perceptual judgments about external objects. Thus, it appears that the experiencer, in reality, stands in a third-person relation to her own qualia and appears to be no more knowledgeable about her qualia than the scientist can be. In this way, Dennett claims that an experiencer has fallible knowledge of her own qualia. This conclusion indicates that our concept of qualia cannot include the characteristic of immediate apprehensibility—a trait that was thought to be an essential second-order property of qualia. Or, to put it more dramatically, it seems that these properties of experience that the thought experiments have been targeting are not qualia at all, because "the idea that one should consult an outside expert, and perform elaborate behavioral tests on oneself in order to confirm what qualia one had, surely takes us too far away from our original idea of qualia" (Dennett 1988, 533).

Dennett anticipates a maneuver that one might take to avoid the above conclusion. Suppose that the (low-level) productions of and the (high-level) reactions to qualia are causally linked in a rigid way such

that a change in the resultant reactive judgments is really just an indication of a change in qualia. This backwards link clears up the haze that blocked direct introspective observation of qualia, because by knowing her judgments, the experiencer knows her qualia. However, this link threatens another one of the four essential properties of qualia—this time, the property of intrinsicity. Dennett argues that if a change in a judgment “amounts to or guarantees” a change in experiential qualities, then those qualities cannot be intrinsic (Dennett 1988, 533). The idea seems to be that qualia become more closely linked to the reactive judgments than to the experience itself. Therefore, qualia are no longer properties that are inextricably bound to experience; rather, they are determined by, or perhaps even reduced to, the reactive judgments. As before, Dennett argues that if the experiential properties do not have one of the four essential second-order properties, then we are dealing with qualities of experience that do not fit the standard concept of qualia.

It now seems that the believers in qualia must choose between two undesirable outcomes. Under one partial conception of qualia, the qualitative properties of experience are completely distinct, but unobservably so, from the reactive judgments, so that, even though she knows these judgments directly, the experiencer does not know these qualitative properties directly. Under another conception, the qualitative properties of experience are “more closely bound,” so to speak, to the reactive judgments, so that the properties follow the judgments rather than the experience. Both formulations of qualitative properties yield a conception of qualia that is far from the standard conception. To make matters worse, it appears that direct apprehensibility and intrinsicity, two “essential” traits of qualia, may be incompatible second-order properties, since the reactive judgments cannot be both distantly and closely connected to these experiential properties. Because of the incoherency in the concept of qualia, Dennett concludes that there are no properties of experience that fit the standard description of qualia, and so we should abandon the concept of qualia altogether.

One might respond to the problem by conceiving of reactive judgments as rigidly connected to qualia, but only with forward causality. That is, imagine that a change in reactive attitudes does not then guarantee or “cause” the qualia to change; rather, the change in reactive attitudes indicates that the qualia have changed, because changes in qualia cause changes in reactive attitudes. In this way, the experiencer really can know her qualia directly, by merely knowing her reactive judgments, and her qualia remain intrinsic properties of experience. Therefore, there really is a coherent concept of qualia.

However, this conceptual change of reactive judgments does not help much. By rigidly linking these judgments to qualia, which are, in

turn, rigidly linked to the early sensory-perception stimulation, the defender of qualia has fixed the variability of high neurophysiological events with the variability of low neurophysiological events. Thus, once the low-level event is determined, the reactive judgment is determined. It would not be accurate to call the judgments reactive anymore, for they no longer react; they become mere outputs to the function of perception. The two segments of the perception process become unified into a continuous, holistic chain of events, and so, in effect, the qualia defender is rejecting the claim of high-low neurophysiological independence. However, the reality of this distinction, as well as the extrinsic nature of what we want to call qualia, is made more clear by Dennett's explanation of the effects that analgesics have on pain.⁴ In "Why You Can't Make a Computer that Feels Pain," Dennett points out that, once an analgesic like morphine has been administered after the onset of pain, subjects report that "the pain *is as intense as ever* though they no longer *mind* it" (Dennett 1981, 208). He explains that the only way this experiential schism could occur is if there are low-level neural sub-processes that transmit the pain information to the rest of the brain and high-level sub-processes that react to and evaluate this information. In fact, Dennett notes that it is actually true that an analgesic like morphine "takes effect first at the higher, cortical levels of the brain and then descends to the old brain, [but] the specific projections to the cortex [high-level part of the brain] are especially resistant to damping by drugs, so that the effects of these drugs is more pronounced on the old low aversive path than on the new high path of fine-grained perception," thus allowing the presence of a large "amount" of pain to be acknowledged via the high neural pathways even though the qualitative aspect of pain is significantly reduced due to the drug effects on the low neural pathways (Dennett 1981, 208). This real-life example threatens the commonly accepted view that what "pain" refers to and what "the qualitative character of pain" refers to are one in the same thing; in other words, the studies on analgesics suggest that an experience and the qualitative properties of the experience are separable and are not intrinsic. These findings make it hard for anyone to deny that the high-low neurophysiological dichotomy is a reasonable distinction to make, and they return us to the conclusion that qualia do not make sense conceptually.

Perhaps the problem, the qualia supporter might then say, lies further back in the argument with the discussion of direct apprehensibility. It may be true that Chase and Sanborn are unable to know whether or not their experiential changes are due to true qualia inversions or misleading memory inversions. However, whether or not a subject can detect a true change in qualia between times t_1 and t_2 , the subject could really have an experience of an object with some quale Q_1 at t_1 and with

some quale Q_2 at t_2 . Q_1 and Q_2 might be the same quale or they might be different, and there may be no way of accurately comparing the two. But the fact that the subject may inaccurately compare Q_1 and Q_2 at t_2 does not mean that Q_2 is not directly apprehensible to the subject at t_2 . For example, I may see an apple today and believe that I am having the color quale that is usually associated with the grass—i.e. I now claim that the apple looks green to me. Furthermore, I might claim that the very same apple had appeared to be red to me just yesterday, as I would have expected it to. It may be true that this apple is really producing a quale in me today that is different from the one I had yesterday, or it may just be that my memory is faulty somehow, that I actually am having the exact same quale that I had yesterday, and that the change in qualia is merely an illusion. Either way, I know that, right now, I am having a quale of some sort, and I can immediately grasp it through introspection. It does not matter how this quale compares with any previous quale I may have had; the fact remains that this present quale is directly apprehensible to me at this very moment.

One might be tempted to think that this objection may be refuted by Dennett's claim that an experiencer's knowledge of her own qualia is fallible. It must be conceded that, if a reactive judgment does depend on the productions of and reactions to qualia and if the reactions rely on qualia comparisons made by memory, then the qualia are not directly apprehensible by the experiencer. However, the reactive judgment need not be discriminatory or memory-based as Dennett suggests; that is, the judgments do not have to be ones in which the experiencer judges that some type of food tastes better or worse than it used to or that it tastes like chicken or any other food she has had before. A reactive judgment could simply be that the food has a flavor of *some sort or another*; she need not liken or contrast the taste quale with any other previous quale from her memory. Thus, although qualia are not directly apprehensible when the experiencer is limited to having memory-dependent high-level judgments, her qualia may be directly apprehended via some other high-level, memory-independent judgments that are not rigidly connected to the qualia such that the properties of experience retain their essential quality of direct apprehensibility as well as intrinsicity. It therefore seems that the qualia defender has a way out of Dennett's property dilemma.

At this point, a supporter of Dennett could point out that the proposed solution to the dilemma does not address the empirical data from the analgesic studies that seem to demonstrate that the qualitative character of pain is an extrinsic property of the experience of pain. However, a patient's judgment that his current quale of pain is as intense as, yet more tolerable than, his previous quale of pain is just the sort of memory-based reactive judgments that Dennett has been criticizing. In order to have this

response to the objection stick, Dennett must abandon his claim that all memory-dependent reactive judgments of qualia are unreliable. If he does so, then he admits that qualia are directly apprehensible via any kind of reactive judgment. If he does not, then it seems that a qualia defender can merely disregard the findings on analgesics, and so the aforementioned solution remains viable. Either way, the dilemma disappears.

Thus, despite Dennett's detailed analysis, his eliminativist criticisms seem to have been diffused. Dennett's strategy includes a dilemma with two options—having intrinsicity without direct apprehensibility or having direct apprehensibility without intrinsicity—each of which has an argument supporting it. He first argues that the distinction prevents qualia from having the essential property of direct apprehensibility. He then argues that the only way that qualia could keep this property is by losing the essential property of intrinsicity. Thus, qualia have two essential properties that are incompatible; therefore, the concept of qualia is incoherent. In this paper, a first attempt at an objection to the latter argument was considered and immediately refuted, yet it seemingly established the strength of the argument against intrinsicity. Another objection successfully undermined the former argument, thus eliminating the dilemma, and, in addition, the analysis presented there illuminated a problem with the argument against intrinsicity. If this problem is taken seriously, then it seems that the argument against intrinsicity is undermined as well. Hence, proponents of qualia seem to have a clear avenue by which they can travel around Dennett's call for the elimination of the concept of qualia.

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NOTES

1. Although these terms commonly appear in the literature on qualia, it should be noted that they are borrowed from the writings of David Chalmers (1995), Ned Block (1978), and Thomas Nagel (1974).
2. If P is a property of the object O and P^2 is a property of P , P^2 is often called a first-order property of P , while it is a second-order property of O . Dennett, however, refers to the four properties of qualia as the second-order properties of qualia, rather than calling them the second-order properties of experience. For consistency and clarity, this paper will adopt Dennett's convention.
3. That is, if a person were to consistently have the color qualia Q_r , Q_g , and Q_b when seeing an apple, a blade of grass, and a portion of the sky, respectively, at any time $t_1 < t_2$, then suppose that the person suddenly underwent a qualia shift such that, at the present time t_2 , he had the qualia Q_g , Q_b , and Q_r when experiencing the apple, grass, and sky, respectively; thus, the person would report that the apple now appears to be green, the grass is blue, and the sky is red. The intuitive plausibility of this hypothetical situation is meant to show then that qualia are real properties—i.e. that qualia, in fact, exist.

4. Analgesics should not be confused with anesthetics. Local anesthetics act on (“deadened”) the nerves themselves so that no pain signals may be transmitted to the brain. General anesthetics merely deprive patients of consciousness, so that the pain signals may still be transmitted to the brain, but the patients are merely unaware of the pain information. With both forms of anesthesia, the qualitative feeling of pain (or of anything else, for that matter) is completely absent (*DIMD* 86). On the other hand, the feeling of pain is still present with analgesics, but it is *alleviated* to a tolerable level. Different analgesics operate in different ways; for instance, some may act on the source of pain such that the production of the hormone that irritates nerve endings is inhibited, e.g. aspirin, while others may act on the early channels of the brain, e.g. morphine (*DIMD* 77). Dennett focuses on the latter type of analgesics.

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