

Quining Quined Qualia

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To most of us, the concept of ‘qualia’ refers to a feature essential to our mental lives – the subjective character of our experiences. When we see the colour blue, for example, there seems to be a certain *felt quality* to the experience. There is *something it is like* to experience the *blueness* of blue, that is different from the *something it is like* to experience the *redness* of red, the *hotness* of hot, or the *sourness* of sour. Daniel Dennett however, is not like most of us. To Dennett, the concept of qualia is incoherent, and refers to nothing at all. It is thus my goal in this paper to show that Dennett is mistaken, and that qualia are still worth believing in. I will begin by examining some of his arguments – namely, the ones that aim to discredit qualia as an ‘immediately apprehensible’ phenomenon. In the second half of the paper I critique these arguments, and offer an alternative interpretation of this ‘special property’ of qualia.

Why all the fuss about qualia? It seems undeniable that there are phenomenal aspects of experience – in fact, there may be nothing we know more intimately. (Chalmers, 1995; Dennett, 1988) Knowing however, is not understanding. Qualia are problematic because of this very fact – we claim to have qualitative experiences, yet fail to properly explain them. We can try to describe a quale in scientific terms as best we can – that is, in terms of cognitive processes and neural mechanisms – but in the end, it seems that no amount of physical information can suffice to capture what it is like to *experience* that quale. We seem to hit an ‘explanatory gap’. (Levine, 1983, p. 354)

Dennett attributes this difficulty in explanation to four commonly supposed properties of qualia: ineffability, intrinsicality, privacy, and immediacy of apprehension. (Dennett, 1988, p. 385) Traditionally, these ‘special properties’ are what have made the concept of qualia so intractable, and they are what Dennett targets in his paper *Quining Qualia* (1988). Using a series of thought experiments he cheekily terms ‘intuition pumps,’ Dennett attempts to expose these

properties in order to show that ultimately, *nothing* possesses them. I will give my attention to two of these intuition pumps: ‘the case of Chase and Sanborn,’ and ‘the gradual post-operative recovery’.

Chase and Sanborn are two seasoned coffee-tasters working for Maxwell House, who, after several years of employment, both decide that they no longer enjoy the flavour of their product. Chase claims that the coffee itself has not changed, but his *preferences* have – that is, he no longer likes *that taste*, the Maxwell House quale. (pp. 389-390) Sanborn on the other hand, thinks that his preferences have remained constant, but his *tasters* have changed. In other words, he believes that something has gone horribly wrong with his ‘perceptual machinery,’ such that he now experiences a completely different quale when drinking Maxwell House. (p. 390) Chase believes his *attitudes* have changed, while Sanborn believes his *qualia* have changed. The dilemma here, Dennett claims, is that there is no way of knowing if either of them are correct in their assumptions. There seem to be at least three possibilities:

- a) Chase is right – the Maxwell House quale has remained the same, but he now judges his coffee by a higher standard.
- b) Chase is wrong – the Maxwell House quale has shifted so gradually over the years that he has not noticed, and his standards are as low as they have always been. In other words, Sanborn is right.
- c) A little from column A, a little from column B. Both Chase’s attitudes *and* qualia have changed. (pp. 390-391)

Try as they might to settle the matter, neither Chase’s nor Sanborn’s subjective experiences will tell them anything about what has *really* happened. Despite the ‘immediate apprehensibility’ of the Maxwell House quale, neither can say with confidence whether it is that

quale that has changed, or their judgements of it. But if qualia really are as directly and immediately apprehensible as they are thought to be, then surely Chase and Sanborn would *just know* through introspection what changes have occurred. This is the thrust of Dennett's argument. The fact that neither Chase nor Sanborn are able to detect *what* changed or *how* they did, must mean that qualia are far from being immediately apprehensible. (p. 396) Nevertheless, one might argue that there are other ways of apprehending – perhaps some aspect of Chase or Sanborn's physiologies would be more revealing? This possibility is explored in the next intuition pump – the gradual post-operative recovery.

Imagine that Chase, for whatever reason, undergoes a surgical procedure that 'inverts' his taste bud connections, such that sugar now tastes salty, salt tastes sour, and so on. (p. 394) After some time however, we find that Chase's tasters have fully compensated – he now says that sour foods taste just as sour as they used to. On all accounts, he seems to be telling the truth – when we squeeze a lemon wedge over his tongue, he recoils and curses us out for it. Suppose further, that in the interest of investigating this curious phenomenon, we manage to devise a physiological theory that explains *how* this compensatory effect occurs. We consequently discover that 'adjustments in the memory-accessing process' have been covertly altering his taste perception this entire time. (p. 394) But there is still more to the story, Dennett argues. Even with all the physiological facts in hand, it is still unclear *where* in the processing stream his qualia are being reverted. (pp. 394-395) Like before, there are a few possibilities:

- a) The compensatory adjustment occurs pre-qualia – that is, the way Chase compares his memories is altered. The qualia themselves have changed, and things taste the same to Chase as they used to.

- b) The compensatory adjustment occurs post-qualia – that is, the way Chase accesses his memories is altered. Chase’s memories have changed, and he no longer notices any abnormalities in his taste perception. (p. 395)

As with the previous intuition pump, Chase cannot offer us anything in the way of introspection, because scenarios (a) and (b) are indistinguishable to him. And as we have just seen, nothing of a physiological sort can tell us what is happening either. Both subject *and* observer are at a loss. It seems that the state of Chase’s qualia simply *cannot be known*. (p. 396)

If ever there was an inscrutable phenomenon, Dennett’s treatment of qualia would be it.

Like ‘the case of Chase and Sanborn,’ the challenge posed by ‘the gradual post-operative recovery’ is that it is *not* possible to *immediately apprehend* the constancy of a quale. Thus, Dennett insists that qualia must lose this ‘essential’ property altogether. (p. 396) But Dennett has played a cunning trick on us. In both intuition pumps, Chase is unable to judge whether his qualia have changed not because of some feature or flaw inherent to qualia, as Dennett would have us believe. Instead, Chase’s judgements are lacking because he cannot rely on *his memories* of these qualia. Dennett’s intuition pumps have been pumping at our intuitions about a property of *memory* rather than a property of *qualia*. Let us revisit his arguments to see how this is the case.

In ‘the case of Chase and Sanborn,’ Chase finds that he can no longer stomach Maxwell House coffee. Something has changed, but he cannot identify *what* – has the Maxwell House quale shifted, or his reactive attitudes towards it? The problem with this scenario is that it rests on a principle of memory that says nothing about the quale itself – its fallibility. Something in Chase has changed *so gradually* with the passage of time, that he no longer remembers how it once was. If Chase had gone from fawning over Maxwell House one day to finding it utterly

repulsive the very next, would it not be obvious to him what had changed? The linchpin of this intuition pump is that it is not possible to reliably detect a change, of any sort, if it has occurred over an *extended period of time*. The claim that present-moment qualia are inapprehensible because they cannot be compared to *past instances in memory* seems simply false.

Dennett makes a similar appeal to the unreliability of memory in ‘the gradual post-operative recovery’. We find, following a ‘surgical inversion’ of Chase’s taste buds, that some process in his perceptual machinery has been ‘compensating’ for the effects of the operation. But again, we are in the dark about what is being changed – is it his qualia, or his memories of them? We are to assume that if it is Chase’s *qualia* that are being adjusted, then it should be immediately obvious to us in some way. But we are being misled. Why should it not be obvious that Chase’s *memories* are being adjusted? Simply because we know that his memories *cannot be trusted*. The very fact that memories are susceptible to change allows us to accept the premise that *it very well could be* Chase’s memories that have changed, and not his qualia. Suppose we conducted this procedure on an analogue of Chase in another possible world – one where memories are infallible and evidentially robust. If we asked this version of Chase to explain himself, he might say something like this:

“Well, it is obvious to me that my qualia have changed. All I had to do was search my memories – *and they are never wrong, you know* – and I recalled a moment, before the surgery, when I was enjoying a cup of Maxwell House coffee. The coffee that I’m holding in my hand now tastes no different. And since my memories cannot deceive me, the culprit *must* be my qualia.”

And so I hold that it is not *qualia* that are inapprehensible, but rather *our memories of them*. I believe that Dennett has misunderstood what ‘qualia freaks’ *really* mean when they say

that phenomenal experiences are ‘immediately apprehensible’. The apprehensibility of qualia simply refers to the fact that there is *something* to apprehend, rather than *nothing*. When you take a look outside and see the blueness of the sky (or more likely, the greyness of the clouds), *it is like something* to have this experience, and this *what-it-is-like-ness* is known directly, and immediately. To put it another way, there is a direct and immediate apprehensibility of the qualia *itself*, in the moment of experience. Being able to apprehend the constancy of qualia is not what is at issue here. Dennett asserts that we have been hopelessly confused about the very concept of qualia. (p. 382) Dennett, it seems, is not exempt from this confusion.

References

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