

Qualia: A Defense

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Abstract *In Daniel Dennett's "Quining Qualia", 15 intuitional pumps are used to argue that qualia cannot be founded on four commonly assumed features. Dennett's aim is to eventually make anyone uncomfortable when trying to sensibly talk of qualia. We will go over Dennett's stance as well as several of the intuitional pumps he uses. We will reject that the considerations he raises does not give us reason to doubt that qualia is ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness. Moreover, by rejecting that Dennett's stance and intuition pumps gives us reason to doubt qualia in the pre-theoretical sense, we argue that we should not abandon sensible talk of qualia.*

Keywords: *Philosophy of Mind, Dennett, Intuition Pump, Introspective Knowledge, Infallibilism, Epistemology*

I. Introduction

In Daniel Dennett's "Quining Qualia", 15 intuitional pumps are used to argue that qualia cannot be founded on four commonly assumed features. 'Qualia' is simply "*the way things seem to us*", and as a folk psychological, pre-theoretical, concept has the following four properties: being ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness [1; pp. 228-229]. Dennett's aim is to eventually make anyone uncomfortable when trying to sensibly talk of qualia. He states, "I want to make it just as uncomfortable for anyone to talk of qualia-or "raw feels" or "phenomenal properties" or "subjective and intrinsic properties" or "the qualitative character" of experience" [1; p. 227]. We will go over Dennett's stance as well as several of the intuitional pumps he uses. We will reject that the considerations he raises does not give us reason to doubt that qualia is ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness. Moreover, by rejecting that Dennett's stance and intuition pumps gives us reason to doubt qualia in the pre-theoretical sense, we argue that we should not abandon sensible talk of qualia. Afterwards, we address possible objections. Before describing Dennett's position in detail, we will first formalize Dennett's stance and how it differs from our own.

Jonathan Simon accurately characterizes a formalized version of Dennett's argument in "Quining Qualia" the following way.

"Dennett is arguing as follows:

- 1) qualia (by definition) are: ineffable, intrinsic, private, and accessible to introspection
- 2) but no states have all of these features
- 3) therefore there are no qualia" [4; p. 1].

In this paper, we will reject premise #2 and assume that we can intelligibly understand qualia as having the four features listed in premise #1. In doing so, we are then left with being unable to accept Dennett's conclusion (proposition #3).

First, we will address Dennett's interpretation of intrinsic and how qualia can be understood as intrinsic in a differing sense.

II. Intrinsic

First, we will address Dennett's position that qualia are not intrinsic. He argues that "properties that "seem intrinsic" at first often tum out on more careful analysis to be relational" [1; p. 237]. One example he

gives is *the experienced beer drinker* – intuitional pump #9.

When someone first tastes beer, the experience of “first tasting” is unique and acquiring a taste for beer, Dennett argues, demonstrates that the way things seem to us is not intrinsic but is rather relational since it relies on how we interact with other, external, things. As Dennett puts, “no one comes to enjoy *the way the first sip tasted*” [1;p. 237]. Rather, when we notice that our reactions to other, external, things change over time, this gives us reason to assume qualia holds more of a relational, rather than intrinsic, property.

Dennett’s point is concisely stated as the following: “For if it is admitted that one’s attitudes towards, or reactions to, experiences are in any way and in any degree constitutive of their experiential qualities, so that a change in reactivity *amounts to or guarantees* a change in the property, then those properties, those “qualitative or phenomenal features,” cease to be “intrinsic” properties, and in fact become paradigmatically extrinsic, relational properties” [1; p. 237].

However, there are several reasons to reject the claim that changes in reactivity demonstrate that qualia are not intrinsic.

First, one could simply divorce the notion of ‘the way things seem to us’ from the external objects that may give rise to our phenomenological states. The fact that our different experiences change and vary over time, even when consuming the same chemical compounds that form a substance (in this case beer), indicate that how we view the world is intimately tied to internal processes.

A second reason to reject the claim that changes in reactivity demonstrate that qualia are not intrinsic would be to adopt an alternative-interpretation of a Humean approach to personal identity.

Concerning personal identity, David Hume would ask us to consider the following: “For from what impression could this idea [of the self] be derived? This question it is impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity” [3;*Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sec. 6, p. 320]. For Hume, one interpretation of personal identity is that there is no personal identity, since we are always changing – what we will call an error theory interpretation. Another alternate interpretation of Hume could be simply that we never have one single perception, since the eye always changes perceptions. Similarly, our identity is constantly changing, and it is simply wrong to ascribe an identity similar to numerical identity. These two interpretations of Humean personal identity drastically affect how meaningful we view the claim that qualia have intrinsic properties.

The first interpretation of Hume as an error theorist would leave us with a pessimistic outlook on qualia having an intrinsic property. Hume may be pointing out that we make two mistakes in our talk of personal identity. Our first perceptual mistake is that our being is unchangeable through time. Then, we make a second mistake in creating a soul or something that is unchangeable or unknown, and that cannot possibly be known in order to justify our first mistake in perception. Basically, we invent something to cover up our philosophical mistake. The reason this is a mistake is that “... we are not able fully to satisfy ourselves in that particular [a self that is reducible to an impression] nor find anything invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity” [3;*Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sec. 6, p. 321].

Adopting an alternative, non-error theorist, approach concerning Hume’s stance on personal identity will leave qualia in a position where it can still be described as intrinsic.

Even though we have multiple perceptions, what necessarily binds them to our identity? What Hume suggests is that “Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation” [3;*Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sec. 6.]. One idea will give rise to another where memory alone acquaints us to our own continuity. We have mental events and connectedness, and we may talk about this mental connectedness without referencing ‘identity’. Hume eventually finds talk of identity unintelligible in the absence of this connectedness that has been described above. “All disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are

merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union as we have already observed” [3; *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sec. 6., p. 325]. Under this interpretation, a kind of identity claim could be made, but only relating the connectedness of mental events.

If intrinsic is understood as merely being essential and belonging to us naturally, then it seems reasonable to assume that qualia is intrinsic, since there would be nothing against holding an interactionist view of what gives rise to qualia, yet still holding that it both belongs and is essential to ourselves. Also, if our identity is merely an amalgam of time-sliced mental events, the claim that changes in our reactivity demonstrates the relational character of qualia becomes untenable. While Dennett might rightly show that objects internal to human bodies (the taste buds) and external objects (the beer) are both involved in creating qualia, he has not demonstrated that qualia (the way things seem to *us*) is not an intrinsic property.

Dennett argues against qualia understood as being privately knowable.

III. Privately Knowable

A commonplace assumption is that our experience is private, and an infallibilist position would state that we could not be wrong or misdiscover qualia. Dennett characterizes the popular claim as stating, “I know how it is with me right now” [1; p. 233].

Dennett holds the stance that qualia are public (insofar as ‘redness’ can be construed as a public property), and only private in a superficial sense. To the claim that qualia is private he states, “But if absolutely nothing follows from this presumed knowledge... what is the point of asserting that one has it?” [1; p. 233]. He then supposes they must be fictions, since they fail to have empirical testability.

There are many truths that humans cannot test due to limitations on our ability. For example, before the Hubble telescope, humans were unable to see extremely far distant planets. However, human limitations do not affect the truth of the matter of whether or not there were distant planets before Hubble telescoping¹. Just because nothing useful can come from knowing a particular fact does not mean that the particular fact cannot be understood in a way that constitute knowledge.

Also, there might exist other methods than empirical that are worthwhile and might be used as a process to develop reasonable claims that are knowable. Descartes’ method of systematic doubt is a classic example of how he derived “Cogito Ergo Sum” in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes’ four laws, that he adhered to in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, were elaborated on in the beginning of *Discourse on the Method*, which we now call the Method of Systematic Doubt:

1. Never accept anything as true
2. Divide each of the difficulties into as many parts as possible.
3. Direct my thoughts in an orderly manner
4. Make enumerations so complete, review so comprehensive, that I could be sure of leaving nothing out [2; AT, VI, 19].

By following these steps, Descartes found that he could exhaust the ability to doubt something so thoroughly, as to render it necessarily or undoubtedly true. Dennett should not assume that empirical models are the only models that allow us to meaningfully claim knowledge.

To address Dennett’s point on “what is the point of asserting that one has it?” we would respond that “the point” of asserting something might be tied to an individual’s motivational set. If someone cares about accurately representing reality, he or she will not be perturbed when particular facts seem irrelevant to everyday

¹Telescoping is the art of making telescopes.

survival (such as the privateness of “*the way things seem to us*” - qualia).

Dennett argues against the direct and immediately knowableness of qualia.

IV. Direct and Immediately Knowable

Third, we will address Dennett’s rejection of qualia as directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness. Intuition pump #7 (the case of Chase and Sanborn) is an example where Dennett illustrates that a subject’s “introspective” convictions about his or her own taste may generally be *worse* evidence than what outside observers can gather.

Intuition pump #7: Chase and Sanborn

Mr. Chase and Mr. Sanborn are coffee tasters, and after a long history of coffee tasting (for Maxwell House) they each grow to dislike the taste. However, their claims as to why they currently dislike the taste vary.

Mr. Chase Says to Mr. Sanborn:

“I hate to admit it, but I’m not enjoying this work anymore. When I came to Maxwell House six years ago, I thought Maxwell House coffee was the best-tasting coffee in the world. I was proud to have a share in the responsibility for preserving that flavor over the years. And we’ve done our job well; the coffee tastes just the same today as it tasted when I arrived. But, you know, I no longer like it! My tastes have changed. I’ve become a more sophisticated coffee drinker. I no longer like *that taste* at all” [1;p. 232].

However, Sanborn says to Chase:

“When I arrived here, shortly before you did, I, like you, thought Maxwell House coffee was tops in flavor. And now I, like you, really don’t care for the coffee we’re making. But *my* tastes haven’t changed; my . . . *tasters* have changed. That is, I think something has gone wrong with my taste buds or some other part of my taste-analyzing perceptual machinery. Maxwell House coffee doesn’t taste to me the way it used to taste; if only it did, I’d still love it, for I still think *that taste* is the best taste in coffee. Now I’m not saying we haven’t done our job well. You other tasters all agree that the taste is the same, and I must admit that on a day-to-day basis I can detect no change either. So it must be my problem alone. I guess I’m no longer cut out for this work” [1; p. 232].

All Dennett has shown is that a subject’s “introspective” convictions lend no insight into the causal history that answers the question *why* the subject currently has “the way it seems to him or her”. However, nothing Dennett has said attacks the notion that each coffee taster knows his own qualia – the way it seems to him. Indeed, Mr. Sanborn and Mr. Chase might be epistemically in the dark when it comes to questions about whether their taste buds have developed or the coffee blend has changed over time, or both.

Dennett, in order to attack our commonsense notion of qualia, needs to show that either Chase or Sanborn cannot know their own immediate experience, not merely that they lack the details of its realization. He says, “Chase’s intuitive judgments about his qualia constancy are no better off, epistemically, than his intuitive judgments about, say, lighting intensity constancy or room temperature constancy- or his own body temperature constancy. Moving to a condition inside his body does not change the intimacy of the epistemic relation in any special way” [1; p 236].

Room temperature does not have a strict, scientific, definition, since it relies on what humans are normally accustomed to, which may vary over time. In assuming that there is a set, definable, number of degrees Celsius to define room temperature – in the same way defining a taste such as bitterness would have a corresponding taste bud activation – Dennett is missing the defining, vague, element of a human’s raw feeling on the subject. What a human is accustomed to depends on the way it seems to him or her, which is why we cannot assume a strict number with regard to room temperature and why we cannot assume a corresponding

measure to how coffee tastes to Chase or Sanborn. Dennett is right that Chase and Sanborn may be in the dark about certain epistemic features in how their qualitative experience arises, but he has failed to show that they are in the dark with regard to knowing “*the way things seem to them*”.

Dennett argues against the ineffability of qualia.

V. Qualia’s Ineffability

Finally, we should address Dennett’s attack on the ineffability of qualia. Dennett states, “But it would be a mistake to transform the fact that inevitably there is a limit to our capacity to describe things we experience into the supposition that there are absolutely indescribable properties in our experience” [1; p. 244].

There are two ways to approach the assertion that there is an indescribable nature to the way things seem to us. The first, and harder to defend, is that the some properties that are currently indescribable will always be indescribable, regardless of whether our species’ capacities change over time.

The second, more hopeful, characterization of the sentiment that some properties in our experience are indescribable is that the indescribability is merely an ephemeral, contextual problem, and perhaps what may limit our capacity to describe certain features will change with either a newly developed capacity or future physics.

Dennett is right that we ought not to accept the position that current ineffability implies indefinite ineffability; however, he has not shown that we are warranted in abandoning talk of qualia nor shown that ineffability fails as a feature of qualia.

VI. Objections and Responses

Objection #1

We cannot rely on “future physics” as an adequate answer to qualia’s ineffability. Concerning the ineffable quality of qualia, “it is not enough to withhold our theoretical allegiances until the sunny day when the philosophers complete the tricky task of purifying the everyday concept of qualia” [1; p. 238]. In other words, to simply settle for a concept as unknowable is unacceptable.

Response to Objection #1

We do not mean to suggest that we should not pursue empirical routes to better understanding conscious experience; however, to assume that we should abandon talk of the intimate position we stand with respect to qualia seems unwarranted.

Compared to the total duration of our human species’ existence, only recently have we made scientific advances in understanding the mental. We have also done so in ways that would be unfathomable to previous generations, such as fMRI scans. In defending the commonplace concept of qualia, our aim is not to close off a particular way of understanding a phenomenon, especially a way of understanding a phenomenon that has served our species’ survival over an extremely long amount of time.

Objection #2

The commonplace assumptions about qualia simply arose out of evolution by natural selection and random mutation, and there is no reason that beliefs that are selected for survivability are truth-tracking. Therefore, even if our pre-theoretic intuitions about qualia served a useful function in the past, we should still not cling onto talk of useful fictions and claim that they are true.

Response to Objection #2

While this is a good point, our claim in this paper is that Dennett has not shown us to have good reason in rejecting the four commonplace, assumed, features of qualia. If it were the case that there were evidence that qualia does not exist, then objection #2 would stand. However, Dennett's stance did not present sufficient justification to abandon talk of qualia, and because of this, we are not clinging to a useful fiction when qualia's fiction-hood is still in doubt.

VII. Conclusion

Overall, although Dennett uses a plethora of intuition pumps, he does not show that we have conclusive reasons to reject the concept of qualia as a pre-theoretical, folk psychological, concept. Understanding qualia as having the features of being ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness is still defensible. In rejecting that Dennett's stance and intuition pumps, we have reason to doubt qualia in the pre-theoretical sense. We have argued that we should not abandon sensible talk of qualia.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Syed Adeel Ahmed, as well as Tulane University, for guidance and mentoring through the Business of Information Technology and Managing the IT Department courses in the Masters of Professional Studies program for Computing Technology. Also, thank you to the Tulane Philosophy Department and Ohio University Philosophy Department for helping cultivate a rich philosophic atmosphere.