

SHOULD A MATERIALIST BELIEVE IN QUALIA?

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Should a materialist believe in qualia? Yes and no. 'Qualia' is a name for the occupants of a certain functional role that is spelled out in our tacitly known folk psychology. If materialism is true, there are no perfect occupants of the role, and hence no perfect deservers of the name. But in all probability there are imperfect occupants of the role, imperfect deservers of the name. Good enough deservers of the name? May they just be called 'qualia'? I say yes.

But I take this to be a case of semantic indecision. There is no settled answer to the question 'how good is good enough?'. In part, maybe, it is a political question. The foe (or friend) of materialism who wants to make it out to be something radical and bizarre is entitled to say that materialist 'qualia' are bogus, ersatz qualia; whereas a conservative materialist like me may say with equal right that qualia exist but are not quite as we take them to be.¹

'Qualia' isn't a term of ordinary language. Neither is 'phenomenal character' nor 'raw feel' nor 'subjective quality'. 'What it's like' or 'how it seems' are ordinary enough – but when used as terms for qualia, they are used in a special technical sense. You can say what it's like to taste New Zealand beer by saying what experience you have when you do, namely a sweet taste. But you can't say what it's like to have a sweet taste in the parallel way, namely by saying that when you do, you have a sweet taste!

Yet despite the lack of a folksy word or phrase, I still say that the concept of qualia is somehow built into folk psychology. My reason is that when philosophers tell us very concisely indeed what they mean by 'qualia', we catch on. I think they never say enough to introduce the concept from scratch to someone who doesn't already have it (whether or not he has the qualia themselves). But maybe they do say enough to serve as a reminder to someone who has the concept already, even if he has it in some inexplicit way.

Now I will say what I think the folk-psychological concept – and hence the definitive role – of qualia is.

Preliminaries: I will say *experiences* when I mean particular events of experiencing. These events are havings of *experiential states*, which are had repeatedly at different times and by different people. These repeatable states also are called 'experiences' – but not in this paper. An experience is of the same *type* as another if

¹ This is a reply, *inter alia*, to Robert M. Adams, 'Flavors, Colors, and God', in his *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) pp.243-262. Adams argues that 'it is a theoretical advantage of theism that it makes possible a [theological] explanation' of the correlation of qualia and physical states (p.250). In his final section, Adams notes that according to materialism there is no such correlation to be explained; but this, he says, is because the materialist is committed to a 'radical' and 'desperate' eliminativism about qualia. I disagree.

it is the having of exactly the same experiential state. An experience is *novel* if the subject hasn't had an experience of the same type before.

It is well known that by having novel experiences we gain mental abilities, often abilities we can gain in no other way. These include the ability to recognize experiences of the same type when they come again, and also the ability to imagine experiences of that type when not having them. Experiences of different types confer different such abilities.² Presumably it is because of properties they have that experiences confer these abilities; and experiences of different types must differ in their ability-conferring properties. A concept of qualia – a materialistically acceptable concept, but perhaps not the whole of the folk concept – is the concept of properties of experiences apt for causing abilities to recognize and to imagine experiences of the same type.

Maybe there is more to the concept than that, even before we get to the part I think is trouble. Maybe, for instance, it is part of the concept that the qualia of experiences are responsible for responses of pleasure, disgust, etc. And maybe it is part of the concept that the qualia of experiences are responsible for judgements of similarity-distance, e.g., the judgement that these two colour-samples nearly match whereas those two contrast strikingly; and in this way, the qualia of experiences constitute something akin to a metric space.

It may well be redundant to speak of both experiential states and of qualia. If E , F , . . . are various experiential states, then being a having of E , being a having of F , . . . are corresponding properties of particular experiences. Might it just be these properties that occupy the functional role of qualia (insofar as the role described so far is rightly so-called)? If so, no harm. Then these properties corresponding to experiential states are candidates – the best candidates around, in my view – to deserve the name of qualia. So if the state pain is C -firing, to take a toy example, then the distinctive quale of pains would be the property: being an event of C -firing.

Unfortunately there is more to the folk-psychological concept of qualia than I have yet said. It concerns the *modus operandi* of qualia. Folk psychology says, I think, that we *identify* the qualia of our experiences. We know exactly what they are – and that in an uncommonly demanding and literal sense of 'knowing what'. If I have an experience with quale Q , I know that I am having an experience with quale Q , and I will afterwards remember (unless I happen to forget) that on that occasion I had an experience with quale Q . It is by producing this identifying knowledge that a novel experience confers abilities to recognize and imagine. Recognition: when Fred first tasted Vegemite, he found out that it caused an experience with quale Q . Afterwards, when he has an experience that has quale Q , he knows he is having an experience that has quale Q , so he infers that he is having an experience of the same type as before; and so he may at least guess that he is again tasting Vegemite. Imagination: Fred knew all along, supposedly, how to imagine an experience having quale Q . But only when he had tasted Vegemite did he know

² See Laurence Nemirow, 'Physicalism and the Cognitive Role of Acquaintance', and David Lewis, 'What Experience Teaches', both in William G. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) pp.490-519.

that by imagining an experience with quale Q , he would be imagining an experience of tasting Vegemite.

Call this the *Identification Thesis*. Why do I think it must be part of the folk theory of qualia? Because so many philosophers find it so very obvious.³ I think it seems obvious because it is built into folk psychology. Others will think it gets built into folk psychology because it is so obvious; but either way, the obviousness and the folk-psychological status go together.

I spoke of 'an uncommonly demanding and literal sense of "knowing what"'. Let me elaborate. I say that according to the Identification Thesis, the knowledge I gain by having an experience with quale Q enables me to know what Q is – identifies Q – in this sense: any possibility not ruled out by the content of my knowledge is one in which it is Q , and not any other property instead, that is the quale of my experience. Equivalently, when I have an experience with quale Q , the knowledge I thereby gain reveals the essence of Q : a property of Q such that, necessarily, Q has it and nothing else does. If, for instance, Q is essentially the physical property of being an event of C -firing, and if I identify the qualia of my experience in the appropriate 'demanding and literal' sense, I come to know that what is going on in me is an event of C -firing. Contrapositively: if I identify the quale of my experience in the appropriate sense, and yet know nothing of the firing of my neurons, then the quale of my experience cannot have been essentially the property of being an event of C -firing.

A materialist cannot accept the Identification Thesis. If qualia are physical properties of experiences, and experiences in turn are physical events, then it is certain that we seldom, if ever, identify the qualia of our experiences. Making discoveries in neurophysiology is not so easy!⁴ So if the Identification Thesis is indeed built into folk psychology, then those physical properties are imperfect occupants of the definitive folk-psychological role of qualia, and imperfect deservers of the name. They may yet deserve the name well enough.

Should a materialist believe in qualia? Yes: he should believe in imperfect but good-enough deservers of the name, occupants of the part of the folk-psychological role we get by leaving out the Identification Thesis. And no: he should not believe

³ Adams, for instance, speaks of our 'first-person' way of identifying qualia (*op. cit.*, p.259). And Saul Kripke seems to be relying on the Identification Thesis in *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) p.152, when he writes that 'pain . . . is picked out by its immediate phenomenological quality . . .' and concludes that 'pain' can be a rigid designator although it is not introduced by rigidifying any accidental description of pain.

⁴ If we know exactly what the qualia of our experiences are, they can have no essential hidden structure – no 'grain' – of which we remain ignorant. (If we didn't know whether their hidden 'grain' ran this way or that, we wouldn't know *exactly* what they were. Whatever we might know about them, we would not fully know their essence.) But if nothing essential about the qualia is hidden, then if they seem simple, they *are* simple. We may assume that if a property is structural, then it is so essentially. Then it is a consequence of the Identification Thesis that if we fail to notice structure, there is no structure there to notice. But we do fail to notice structure. So the simplicity of the qualia is a consequence of the Identification Thesis (*inter alia*), and so a derivative part of the folk-psychological concept of qualia. Here is another part of that concept that a materialist should disown.

The simplicity of the qualia is a premise of Adams' argument that we cannot hope to explain the correlation of qualia and physical states within a future science of dualistic psychophysics (*op. cit.*, p.253).

in perfect deservers of the name, occupants of the entire role. It is not altogether wrong to call him an 'eliminativist'. But see how little he eliminates, how much he retains.

To conclude, I distinguish the Identification Thesis itself from two harmless look-alikes. A materialist can and should accept these look-alike theses. That makes his position seem less radical; it softens the blow of rejecting the Identification Thesis in its full-strength, materialistically unacceptable form.

First, there is no reason to deny that the broad, *de re* content of my knowledge does, in the strongest sense, identify the qualia. Hitherto, I have been denying that the narrow *de se* and *de dicto* content of my knowledge identifies the qualia. But broad content is constituted partly by my narrow *de se* self-ascriptions involving acquaintance, partly by the identity of the objects of acquaintance. Thus I may know *de re* of Fred that he is a burglar, but without in any sense identifying Fred.⁵ Likewise I may know *de re* of a certain physical property that it is among the qualia of my present experience, but without identifying the property in question.

Second, there is no reason to deny that we know what the qualia of our experiences are in a not-so-demanding, not-so-literal, everyday sense of 'knowing what'. Suppose that the essence of a chemical element is its atomic number. I have forgotten the atomic number of potassium. So in the demanding sense, I no longer know exactly which element potassium is. Yet I still know what it is in the sense that I have a rich cluster of descriptions of potassium. These include egocentric descriptions in terms of the relations of acquaintance, linguistic and otherwise, that I bear to potassium. By some everyday standards, that counts as knowing what potassium is. Likewise, 'individuating by acquaintance',⁶ I know who various people are even though I do not know their essences – anyway, not under any plausible version of essentialism I can think of.⁷ And likewise, though I don't know the essences of the

⁵ I self-ascribe the property: staring at a burglar; I am in fact staring at Fred, though neither in the demanding sense nor in any everyday sense do I know who I am staring at. That is how I believe (and maybe also know) *de re* of Fred that he is a burglar. See David Lewis, 'Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*', *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979) pp.513-543, esp. pp.538-543.

⁶ See Jaakko Hintikka, 'Knowledge by Acquaintance – Individuation by Acquaintance' in D.F. Pears (ed.), *Bertrand Russell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972); and David Lewis, 'Individuation by Acquaintance and by Stipulation', *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983) pp.3-32.

⁷ The case of identifying a person (or a thing) is unlike the case of identifying potassium, or identifying a quale. But how to describe the difference is a controversial question in the metaphysics of modality. Potassium is spread over many possible worlds; there is a clear candidate – atomic number – for being its essence; and this essence can be known. Likewise for qualia, at least if they are indeed physical properties such as the property of being an event of C-firing. On my own view people are strictly speaking confined to single worlds, though they have other-worldly counterparts; their essences consist of properties they share with their counterparts; the counterpart relation suffers from semantic indecision, and so likewise does the line between essential and accidental descriptions; essences are knowable insofar as they are determinate, but the line between knowing someone's essence and simply being well-informed about him (which is the line between identifying him in the 'demanding' and in the 'not-so-demanding' sense) disappears. On another view, someone's essence is a non-qualitative haecceity; that essence never can be known. So the only *useful* sense of identification is the 'not-so-demanding' sense. On yet another view, the essence of a person is the property of originating from a certain sperm and egg; you might hope to know who someone essentially is at least if you are the technician who

various qualia of my experiences, I do know what relations of acquaintance I bear to these qualia. So in some not-so-demanding everyday sense I know what these qualia are, even if the full-strength Identification Thesis is false.⁸

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⁷ *continued. . .*

presides over the *in vitro* conception of a test-tube baby; but no, you only swap the problem of knowing the person's essence for the problem of knowing the essence of the sperm and egg seen under your microscope. You gain nothing. Again, the only useful sense of identification is the 'not-so-demanding' sense.

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