Comments on Keith Frankish's "Qualia: The Real Thing?" for *Consciousness Online*

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I very much enjoyed Keith Frankish's paper, "Qualia: The Real Thing?", and I'm glad to have a chance to comment on it (and I apologize for the delay in getting these comments posted). In what follows, I'll try to do two things. First, I want to probe a little bit further on the notion he calls "Diet Qualia," and I'll explore a worry that Frankish has an overly restrictive conception of how they must be specified. Second, I want to talk a little bit about his overall conclusion that "We can either affirm the existence of classic qualia or deny the existence of subjective feels altogether. Chalmers or Dennett; there is no middle ground." As I'll suggest, even if Frankish is right about Diet Qualia, the truth of his conclusion depends in part on how exactly we are to understand the notion of Classic Qualia.

So, first, on Diet Qualia…

Diet Qualia are meant to capture "the explanandum for a theory of consciousness in a neutral way, acceptable to both physicalists and non-physicalists," (p. 1) but Frankish argues that there is no distinctive content to the notion. However we might try to flesh out the notion, he claims that we either inflate it into that of Classic Qualia or deflate it into that of Zero Qualia. (I won't rehearse here how Frankish defines these notions.) My worry, roughly, is that his arguments for this claim seem to suggest that there is *never* a way to specify an explanandum neutrally. And depending on how we take this suggestion, it seems to me either trivial or implausible.

So why might it be trivial? Well one way of putting Frankish's question about the proper explanandum of physicalist/non-physicalist theories is as follows: What is the debate between physicalists/non-physicalists a debate about? And so one way of putting his point about Diet Qualia is that we cannot say, in a contentful, neutral way, what this is a debate about. But is it really that surprising that there is no way to specify the subject of a controversial debate in a neutral way that has any real content? In the political sphere, at least, this seems completely obvious. Consider any heated contemporary debate – the abortion debate, say. Specifying the debate even in this minimal way might already seem to be partisan. One side of the debate might claim that to cast the debate as one about abortion is non-neutral, since what's at stake is really a woman's autonomy over her body. Or consider the debate about healthcare. Is it really a debate about the proper role of government, or about personal responsibility, or about basic human rights? Saying any of these things might be naturally construed as taking a side. So if the point that Frankish is trying to make were simply that specifying the subject of the qualia debate in neutral terms will inevitably be a partisan endeavor, then his point would be fairly obvious (as it is true of contentious debates in general), and not all that interesting.

But I take it Frankish does not mean just to be making this obvious point. So let's consider another analogy: The debate in the moral sphere between consequentialists and deontologists. Each of these two theories offers a theory of the moral rightness of actions. That is, moral rightness is the explanandum of these theories, and specifying the explanandum this way seems to be neutral between the two theories. But how contentful is the notion of moral rightness? Specified just in those terms, it may seem to be a "Diet" notion in Frankish's sense. Suppose we try to flesh it out further, to give it some content. Attempts to do so by, say, contrasting it with moral wrongness does not seem to help. But it seems that anything else we say will either "inflate" the notion into something that presupposes deontology, or "deflate" the notion into something that presupposes consequentialism. As soon as we start to say much of anything about actions, for example, we will have to take a stand on whether we are talking about the action considered in the light of its total consequences or considered just in terms of its "intrinsic" nature. Etc. It starts to look like the notion of moral rightness per se has no distinctive content of its own, independent of a theory about what it is. And this claim seems implausible to me. To my mind, it seems that we have an intuitive, pre-theoretical grasp on the notion of moral rightness, just as we have an intuitive, pre-theoretical grasp on the notion of subjective feel, i.e., of Diet Qualia.

I'd suggest that the problem here arises from taking moral rightness to be a Diet notion. It is a primitive notion, but that does not mean it lacks any distinctive content. And I would suggest that "subjective feel" has a similar sort of status. It too is a primitive notion, but that again does not mean it lacks any distinctive content. Our inability to say much about it without presupposing a theory does not, for example, imply that the notion of ineffability is written into it (and that it is thereby inflated into Classic Qualia) any more than our inability to say much about the notion of moral rightness without presupposing a theory implies that the notion of ineffability is written into it. It is often difficult to say too much about a notion that is a primitive without giving a theory of it.

So, to cast this point more generally, I think that Frankish has an overly restrictive conception of what a Diet notion must be like in order for it to have distinctive content. By definition, a Diet notion is meant to be neutral, and so we can't expect to be able to say too much about it without presupposing one theoretical framework or another. So, how do we get a handle on it? How do we even pick it out? Well, we might naturally pick it out demonstratively, and we then choose some word to capture what's been demonstrated. And we get a handle on it by way of our intuitions. Having picked out the concept, we then probe these intuitions to see which of the competing theoretical frameworks is the right one. But the fact that, when we probe these intuitions, we end up being either inflationary or deflationary does not mean that we can't pick out the concept in a neutral way. Rather, it means that probing our intuitions about the Diet notion helps to show which of the competing theoretical frameworks is the right one.

And now, before I run out of space, let me say a few words about Frankish's conclusion…

Recall that Frankish concludes by proposing that we must make a stark choice – we must either accept Classic Qualia, or deny the existence of subjective feels altogether. Now let's suppose (my worry above aside) that he's right about Diet Qualia – i.e., that the notion has no real content of its own. Still, that

alone does not mean that in accepting the notion of subjective feel we must thereby accept the existence of Classic Qualia. As Frankish defines Classic Qualia, they have four features: They are properties of experience that are intrinsic, ineffable, private, and immediately apprehensible. And it seems to me plausible that we could, in principle, be wrong about one of these features without having to abandon the notion of subjective feels altogether. For example, suppose that via some new technology we were able to "share" minds. (Or, absent new technology, perhaps we master the Vulcan mind meld.) In such a case, subjective feels might no longer be properly described as private. In this sort of case there would be subjective feels, but no Classic Qualia.

Could this be the case for *any* of the four features? Could we have subjective feels if experience had no intrinsic properties? No directly introspectible properties? Now I myself have previously suggested (in Kind 2001) that any qualia worthy of the name must be both intrinsic and directly introspectible. So I'm personally inclind to think that at least those two features are non-negotiable with respect to qualia. But are they also non-negotiable with respect to subjective feels? Consider someone like Paul Churchland, who suggests that we can directly introspect our brain states (Churchland 1985). If there were properties of brain states that were *directly* introspectible, such properties would not be classic qualia (since they would not be ineffable, nor (likely) intrinsic), but in this case, would we have to abandon the notion of subjective feel altogether? It doesn't seem to me intuitively obvious that we would.

Just as my thirst for a Diet Coke would never be satisfied by a Coke Zero, I can understand why someone looking for Diet Qualia would be thoroughly unsatisfied by Zero Qualia – to this extent, I think Frankish is right. But I don't want a Classic Coke either. For me, it's Diet Coke all the way. Likewise, someone looking for Diet Qualia, might not quite want Classic Qualia, but that's not to say that they give up on subjective feels altogether.

Thanks to Keith Frankish for contributing such an interesting paper to this forum, and thanks to Richard for giving me the opportunity to make some remarks on it. I'll look forward to continued discussion in the Comments!