Qualia: The Real Thing?

People disagree about whether consciousness, in the 'phenomenal' sense, can be explained in physical terms. Such disagreement presupposes that the parties share a common conception of what it is that needs explaining. That is, it is assumed that we can define the explanandum for a theory of consciousness in a neutral way, acceptable to both physicalists and non-physicalists. I am going to argue that this assumption is false. This may be an uncomfortable conclusion, but it needs to be faced.

1. Looking for an explanandum

What is the explanandum for a theory of phenomenal consciousness? The traditional view is that it is *qualia*, conceived of as ineffable, intrinsic, essentially private properties of experience, which are immediately apprehensible in consciousness (Dennett, 1988; for discussion of the origins of this notion, see Crane 2000). I shall call such properties *classic qualia*.

> Classic qualia: The ineffable, intrinsic, private, and immediately apprehensible properties of experiences.

Now classic qualia do not look likely to yield to explanation in physical terms. Certainly, intrinsic properties cannot be explained in functional or representational terms, which are the favoured routes for reductive explanation. For this reason, many philosophers start with a less loaded conception of the explanandum. They do not build ineffability, intrinsicality, and privacy into their conception of the explanandum, and propose that what needs explaining is simply the *subjective feel* of experience — the 'what-it-is-likeness' — where this may turn out to be effable, relational, and subjective only in a weak sense. I shall label this watered-down conception *diet qualia*.

Diet qualia: The subjective feel (what-it-is-likeness, phenomenal character, etc.) of experiences.

The adoption of diet qualia as explanandum is a common move in the literature on consciousness, and some writers explicitly distinguish between classic and diet qualia (though not under those terms), remarking that, although classic qualia may not exist, there can be no doubt that diet qualia do (see e.g. Carruthers 2000, ch.2; Crane 2001, ch3).

This looks like the neutral explanandum we want. Dualists can go on to argue that the subjective feel of an experience is an ineffable, intrinsic, private property, which can vary independently of its physical properties, while physicalists can identify subjective feels with representational, functional, or neurological properties, and explain away our intuitions about their ineffability, intrinsicality, and privacy (the most popular strategy being by appeal to features of our phenomenal concepts).

This move seems innocuous, but I am suspicious of it. I am just not convinced that there is any distinctive content to the notion of diet qualia. To make the point, let me introduce a third concept, which shall I call *zero qualia*. The zero qualia of an experience are properties that dispose the subject of the experience to judge that the experience has classic qualia and to make the usual judgements about the character of those qualia. (I assume that a person may have such a disposition even if its manifestation is blocked by reflection on philosophical arguments against classic qualia.)

Zero qualia: The features of experience which dispose us to judge that it has classic qualia.

Now I assume that diet qualia are supposed to be different from zero qualia. Zero qualia are defined in terms of their cognitive effects, not feel, and an experience could

have properties that dispose one to judge that it has classic qualia without it actually being *like anything* to undergo it. This is how it is supposed to be with philosophical zombies. Dave Chalmers' zombie twin judges that its experiences have classic qualia, even though it has no phenomenal consciousness at all. (I set aside worries about whether zombies possess full-blown phenomenal concepts; nothing turns on this.) Indeed, even if classic qualia do exist, they may not be the cause of our qualia judgements; there is a strong case for thinking that classic qualia would be epiphenomenal.

So an experience could have zero qualia without diet qualia. But what exactly would be missing? Well, a subjective feel*,* a what-it-is-likeness. But what is *that* supposed to be, if not something intrinsic, ineffable, and private? This is the crux of the matter. I can see how the properties that dispose us to judge that our experiences have subjective feels might not be ineffable, intrinsic, and private, but I find it hard to understand how a subjective feel itself might not be. What could a subjective feel be, if not a classic quale? In short, I understand what classic qualia are, and I understand what zero qualia are, but I don't understand what diet qualia are; I suspect the concept has no distinctive content.

2. Examining diet qualia

I have claimed that the concept of diet qualia is vacuous. I shall now defend this claim by considering some suggestions as to how the concept might be fleshed out. In each case I shall argue that the attempt either inflates the concept into that of classic qualia, deflates it into that of zero qualia, or fails to provide a neutral explanandum.

Suggestion 1: It is intuitively obvious what diet qualia are. They are those properties in virtue of which our experiences are phenomenally conscious, and we have an immediate intuitive grasp of what phenomenal consciousness is. As Block

famously put it, quoting Louis Armstrong (or, according to some, Fats Waller): 'If you got to ask, you ain't never gonna get to know' (Block, 1980).

Reply: This suggestion tends to inflate the concept of diet qualia. If we have an immediate intuition as to the nature of diet qualia and if this is all we can say about them, then they seem indistinguishable from classic qualia — features of experience that are ineffable, private, and immediately apprehensible in consciousness. Put another way, if diet qualia are *not* ineffable, private, and so on, then why are we forced to resort to handwaving of this kind?

Suggestion 2: Diet qualia are properties of experiences that *seem* to be intrinsic, ineffable, and private, but may not really be so.

Reply. If the suggestion is that diet qualia are properties that *dispose us to judge* that they are intrinsic, ineffable, and private, then they are better classified as zero qualia. They are properties that dispose us to judge that the experiences that possess them have classic qualia, in this case by disposing us to judge that they themselves are classic qualia. If, on the other hand, the suggestion is that diet qualia involve some further dimension of seeming beyond this disposition to judge, then I return to my original question: what is this extra dimension, if not the one distinctive of classic qualia? If an experience seems to have classic qualia, and if this does not simply mean that it disposes us to *judge* that it has classic qualia, then how can it lack classic qualia? How can there be an is/seems distinction in such a case?

Suggestion 3: Diet qualia are those properties of experiences that our phenomenal concepts track, whatever their nature.

Reply. This is a deflationary suggestion. For if such concepts track the properties to whose instantiation they are normally causally sensitive, then phenomenal concepts will track zero qualia — the properties that dispose us to apply phenomenal concepts

to our experiences. Now, it could be that our phenomenal concepts do in fact track classic qualia (assuming the latter are not epiphenomenal), but this would be a contingent matter, and the description 'the properties tracked by phenomenal concepts' would not serve as a neutral explanandum for a theory of phenomenal consciousness. (The parties may allow that it is an open question whether subjective feels are ineffable, intrinsic, and private, but they will not allow that it is an open question whether they are feels at all.)

Suggestion 4: Diet qualia are properties of experiences for which we can possess introspective recognitional capacities. As Carruthers puts it, 'Phenomenally conscious events are ones which we can recognise in ourselves, non-inferentially, or 'straight off', in virtue of the ways in which they feel to us, or the ways in which they present themselves to us subjectively' (Carruthers, 2000, 14) (Carruthers stresses that the claim is not that phenomenally conscious properties *depend* on our recognitional capacities for them; as he notes, that would be to beg the question in favour of a higher-order thought account. Rather, the claim is that they are the *object* of those capacities.)

Reply. Depending on how we interpret this suggestion, it tends either to deflation or inflation. If the suggestion is that diet qualia are just those features of experience that trigger the application of introspective recognitional concepts, and if classic qualia judgements involve the application of such concepts, then the notion of diet qualia reduces to that of zero qualia: diet qualia are simply properties that dispose us to make classic qualia judgements. And since they are defined in terms of their cognitive effects, rather than feel, they cannot serve as a neutral explanandum. On the other hand, if the idea is that diet qualia are properties that trigger recognitional capacities specifically *for subjective feels* ('which we can recognise … in virtue of the

ways in which they feel to us'), then this suggestion depends on an unexplicated notion of subjective feel. What are these feels we recognise, if not classic qualia?

Suggestion 5: Diet qualia are what is *given* or *presented* to the subject in experience. (For historical discussion of the relation between this notion and that of qualia, see Crane 2000.)

Reply: The problem here is that the notion of the given is one that is itself in need of elucidation. One way to understand it is in terms of non-conceptual intentional content; what is presented to the subject in experience is a sort of raw perceptual data. There may be worries about this notion, but let us set them aside and assume that the given in this sense is a real phenomenon, which stands in need of explanation. However, it cannot serve as a neutral explanandum for a theory of phenomenal consciousness. To identify diet qualia with a form of intentional content would be to beg the question against classic qualia realists, who want to argue that subjective feels are intrinsic, non-representational properties.

There is a pattern here. Attempts to elucidate the notion of diet qualia either appeal to introspection, refer to cognitive effects, such as a tendency to trigger the application of phenomenal concepts, or identify a phenomenon that is clearly distinct from classic qualia. Those in the first class inflate the concept into that of classic qualia; those in the second class deflate it into that of zero qualia; and those in the third class do not pick out a neutral explanandum. I suspect that any further suggestions would fall into one of these three classes.

3. Explaining diet qualia?

I have argued that the notion of diet qualia has no distinctive content. If there are no classic qualia, then all that needs explaining (as far as the 'hard problem' goes) is zero qualia. This is not a popular view, but it is one that is tacitly reflected in the practice

of philosophers who offer reductive accounts of consciousness. Typically, these accounts involve a three-stage process. First, diet qualia are introduced as a neutral explanandum. Second, diet qualia are identified with some natural, usually relational, property of experience, such as possession of a form of non-conceptual intentional content or availability to higher-order thinking. Third, this identification is defended by arguing that we would be disposed to judge that experiences with this property have ineffable, intrinsic, private feels. In the end, diet qualia are not explained at all but simply identified with some other feature, and what actually get explained are zero qualia.

To illustrate this, I shall look briefly at Peter Carruthers account of phenomenal consciousness (Carruthers, 2000). (I choose this, because it is, in my view, one of the most successful and sophisticated accounts so far developed.) Carruthers is admirably clear about his explananda and strategy. He is an eliminativist about classic qualia (which he calls simply 'qualia') and argues that our intuitions about intrinsicality, ineffability, privacy, and so on need explaining away, rather than explaining. That is, all we need to do is to explain our dispositions to *judge* that our experiences have feels with those properties (2000, 93-4, 182). And Carruthers takes this need to be a major force in shaping a theory of phenomenal consciousness. Thus, outlining the case for a form of dispositionalist higher-order thought (HOT) theory, he writes:

> The overall argument-form goes something like this, then: since anyone instantiating a dispositionalist HOT system will naturally come to believe that they have qualia, we can conclude (by means of an inference to the best explanation of this fact) that phenomenal consciousness is constituted by the availability of analog contents to HOTs … (Carruthers, 2000, 185)

However, Carruthers insists that there is also a need to offer a substantive explanation of diet qualia (which he calls 'subjective feels'), and he develops a

particular form of dispositionalist HOT which he argues can do this. The core idea is that experiences acquire feel through becoming available to a theory-of-mind faculty which can understand the is/seems distinction and deploy recognitional concepts of experience. If our experiences are available to such a system, Carruthers argues, we shall tend to judge that they possess a subjective dimension:

> So wherever previously the subject could discriminate one colour from another, say, and was capable of thoughts of the form, 'This is distinct from that', then the presence of the HOT consumer system renders the subject capable of thoughts of the form, 'This has a distinctive *seeming* distinct from the *seeming* of that' or 'This *experience* is distinct from that'. (ibid., 241)

Moreover, Carruthers argues — and this is the crucial bit — experiences available to such a system will actually *possess* a subjective dimension. Appealing to consumer semantics, Carruthers argues that availability to the HOT system confers *dual content* on experiences: they represent both states of the world and themselves as experiences of those states — for example, both *red* and *experience of red*. And it is in virtue of this dual content, Carruthers argues, that experiences have their characteristic subjectivity:

> [E]ach phenomenally conscious experience has its distinctive form of subjectivity by virtue of acquiring a higher-order analog content which precisely mirrors, and represents *as* subjective, its first-order content. (ibid. 243)

Now consciousness may well involve the sort of mechanisms Carruthers describes. But still there is no real *explanation* of subjective feel here. Subjective feel is simply *identified* with possession of dual content. Why should having dual content confer a subjective feel? If the suggestion seems plausible, it is, I suggest, because of the link between possession of such content and dispositions to entertain *thoughts*

about the subjectivity of experience of the kind Carruthers mentions. The power and persuasiveness of the account comes from its ability to explain our disposition to judge that our experiences have a subjective dimension – from explaining zero qualia, rather than diet qualia.

Let me stress that I do not regard this as a major weakness in Carruthers's theory. I think he does a good job of explaining what needs to be explained, if we reject classic qualia realism. My complaint is that the account is mis-sold as a theory of diet qualia. Nor is the complaint specific to Carruthers's account. There can be no substantial explanation of diet qualia — not (or not just) because of the familiar explanatory gap, but because the concept of diet qualia has no distinctive content at all. If we reject qualia realism, then *all* our intuitions about qualia need explaining away, including the intuition that experiences have a subjective feel at all.

4. Choosing one's explanandum

If what I have said above is right, then the fundamental dispute about consciousness should be over the nature of the explanandum, not the explanans. The concept of diet qualia confuses the issue by leading us to think that both sides can agree about what needs to be explained, and that the core dispute is about whether the explanation can be a reductive one. If I am right, then the fundamental choice point comes right at the start, in the choice of explanandum — classic or zero qualia. The former may demand a non-reductive approach; the latter presents no special problem for reductive explanation. (Of course, strictly speaking, the choice is not between explaining *only* classic qualia or explaining zero qualia. Classic qualia realists will still need to explain zero qualia, so the real choice is between explaining *both* classic qualia and zero qualia and explaining only zero qualia.)

What I am proposing, then, is a divisive strategy. 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. (For what it's worth, my own choice is for irrealism, but nothing that has been said above turns on that.) And given that one's choice here is likely to reflect fundamental metaphysical and epistemological commitments, it may be that engagement between the two sides becomes impossible. This is a depressing prospect, but it's better to face up to it than foster an illusion of consensus.

References

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