Consciousness: 
Dennett, “Quining Qualia”

1. Motivating and Locating the Traditional Notion of Qualia

(IP1) Cauliflower: Dennett dislikes the smell and taste of cauliflower and can’t imagine how you could like that taste. Surmises that maybe you experience a different taste. (Suggests that there is such a thing as the way something tastes that can be abstracted away from “everything else that is going on”.)

(IP2) Wine-Tasting Machine: The wine tasting machine might produce nice descriptions based on chemical analysis, but it doesn’t experience what we do when we taste wine. There is something it is like for me to taste wine, and it’s something over and above whatever information processing is going on under the surface. The Wine-Testing machine’s information processing isn’t accompanied by “raw feels”, “subjective episodes”—in a word, qualia—but ours is.

Qualia: What can we say about these qualia? Here are some features theorists have given to them (and not without some intuitive justification, Dennett admits):

i. They are ineffable.
ii. They are intrinsic features of states.
iii. They are private.
iv. They are directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness.

Dennett’s Bold Claim: There are no qualia. It’s a confused notion and it’s high time we ditched it.

Question: Couldn’t we have a minimal notion of qualia (one that’s not committed to the above list of properties)? How about: The qualitative or phenomenal features of sense experience.

Dennett: Fine, but explain what ‘qualitative’ and ‘phenomenal’ mean. I bet you’ll be led back to something that looks like my list.

Dennett: “I suspect, in fact, that many are unwilling to take my radical challenge seriously largely because they want so much for qualia to be acknowledged. Qualia seem to many people to be the last ditch defense of the inwardness and elusiveness of our minds, a bulwark against creeping mechanism. They are sure there must be some sound path from the homely cases to the redoubtable category of the philosophers, since otherwise their last bastion of specialness will be stormed by science”.

Thanks for the free psychoanalysis, Dennett! This passage, and others like it peppered throughout the reading are ad hominem arguments. An ad hominem argument attacks the intellectual opponent herself, not the particular belief she holds that is in question. He hasn’t given us any reason no to believe in qualia here, he’s just painted those who do believe in qualia in an unflattering light. It’s a more sophisticated and intellectually dressed up version of calling one’s intellectual opponent a “jackass”.

Moreover, it doesn’t look like a very good characterization of the folks he’s arguing against. Block and Nagel would happily embrace a scientific theory that explains qualia!

2. “Paradox”

(IP3) The Inverted Spectrum: Coordinated verbal behavior hiding different subjective feels.

(IP4) The Brainstorm Machine: Moral: “no intersubjective comparison of qualia is possible, even with perfect technology”.

Dennett’s claims here are verificationist? How so?

(But verificationism is complete and utter nonsense. Don’t take my word for it; just apply the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness to itself.)
But isn’t this case testable in principle?

(IP5) Neurosurgical Prank: “You wake up one morning to find that the grass has turned red, the sky yellow, and so forth. No one else notices any color anomalies in the world, so the problem must be in you. You are entitled, it seems, to conclude that you have undergone visual color qualia inversion.”

Dennett: Phew! Qualia seem like justifiable properties after all. But it is not so! See (IP6):

(IP6) Alternative Neurosurgery: Two way things could have gone down in (IP5):
  i. Invert qualia-producing channels.
  ii. Invert memory access links.

Dennett on (IP6): “Nothing in the subject’s experience can favor one of the hypotheses over the other. So unless he seeks outside help, the state of his own qualia must be as unknowable to him as the state of anyone else’s qualia. Hardly the privileged access or immediate acquaintance or direct apprehension the friends of qualia had supposed “phenomenal features” to enjoy!”

Qualia Freak: It doesn’t follow from the fact that the agent can’t decide between the two hypotheses that “qualia must be as unknowable to him as the state of anyone else’s qualia”.

Qualia Freak: What’s unknown in (IP6) is how to hook up present qualia with memories and memoried-linked language and concepts. It shows that we don’t have privileged access to past qualia from past subjective episodes and insofar as concepts/language are linked to those past episodes, we aren’t infallible in employing language and concepts to describe and categorize qualia. But no one was claiming (or they shouldn’t have been if they were) that we have direct and infallible access to the intrinsic features of past qualia. Obviously anything that’s mediated by memory is indirect. Insofar as language and concepts are hooked up to these memory traces, the concepts and words I employ might be messed up when I describe my present qualia. That’s okay. None of this suggests any paradox with qualia.

So: Friends of qualia can just agree with Dennett’s assessment of (IP6). A verificationist would see this as a problem for the view, but surely Dennett doesn’t think verificationism is so obvious that he can just assume it….

3. Why the Concept of Qualia is Confused

(IP7) Chase and Sanborn: Maxwell House tasters. Both used to like MH coffee and now don’t.
  i. Chase claims that MH still has the same taste to him. He just went from liking that taste to disliking it.
  ii. Sanborn claims that MH tastes different to him now. He still likes the way it originally tasted to him; he just doesn’t like how it tastes now.

Dennett’s Commentary on (IP7): Since both of them make claims that depend on the reliability of their memories, is there any way to check on this reliability?

Three possibilities for Chase:
  (i) he’s right, (ii) his qualia have slowly shifted; he’s in the circumstance Sanborn thinks he (Sanborn) is in, or (iii) his qualia and judgments have shifted over the years.

Qualia Freak: Of course Chase can’t test these hypotheses or prove his favorite one (even to himself). What follows? Can’t we say that he at least has direct, private access to his current qualia—he knows how they feel—even if he makes mistakes in hooking them up to memory traces?

Dennett: “But if absolutely nothing follows from this presumed knowledge—nothing, for instance, that would she any light on the different psychological claims that might be true of Chase…what is the point of asserting that one has it? Perhaps people just want to reaffirm their sense of proprietorship over their own conscious states.”

Qualia Freak: The point in asserting it is that it seems obviously true. Why does it need to shed light on your worry (it’s agreed that it doesn’t) in order to be true? Is there any reason to think that it would have to shed light on your worry if it were true? Your verificationism has blossomed into something downright bizarre.
Dennett: “It’s seems easy enough... to dream empirical tests that would tend to confirm Chase and Sanborn’s different tales, but if passing such tests could support their authority (that is to say, their reliability), failing the tests would have to undermine it”.

Qualia Freak: The sort of evidence that an empirical test would give here would be very indirect indeed. We presume that qualia have neural correlates, but, since we never see why a given neural state would have to be accompanied by a quale (let alone this one), we’re going to have to be making a lot of tenuous assumptions to make the experimental test relevant to qualia.

Qualia Freak: Anyway, and more importantly, I don’t think that individuals can speak with absolute authority about their past qualia. And insofar as concepts and words are bound up with past qualia, their application to current qualia will also be susceptible to error.

Dennett: “Chase or Sanborn might complain that these properties the neuro-physiologists choose to call “qualia” are not the qualia they are speaking of. The scientists’ retort is: “If we cannot distinguish [the various hypotheses concerning Chase’s qualia], we certainly cannot support either of your claims. If you want our support, you must relinquish your concept of qualia.”

Again, what must Dennett be assuming in order to make sense of this?

(IP7’) Chase’s wife tells him that he’s confused, for if he’s now not enjoying MH coffee and he used to enjoy it, he must have different qualia.

Dennett: “But this conclusion, if it is accepted, wreaks havoc… with the traditional philosophical view of qualia. 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.”

Conclusion: “We have now reached the heart of my case. The fact is that we have to ask Chase which way he wants to go, and there really are two drastically different alternatives available to him if we force the issue. Which way would you go? Which concept of qualia did you “always have in the back of your mind,” guiding your imagination as you thought about theories? If you acknowledge that the answer is not obvious, and especially if you complain that this forced choice drives apart two aspects that you had supposed united in your pretheoretic concept, you support my contention that there is no secure foundation in ordinary “folk psychology” for a concept of qualia. We normally think in a confused and potentially incoherent way when we think about the ways things seem to us.”