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Sara Copic

The Content of Consciousness: Do We Need Qualia?

Philosophy is the practice of coming to understand that with which we believe we are most intimately familiar – our social norms, the golden rule, learning, our consciousness (to name just a few). Of course, there is a sense in which we are all familiar with and understand consciousness: we experience it in our normal waking life. To borrow from Thomas Nagel, each of us knows “what it is like” to experience the world from a certain point of view. However, experience of, does not necessarily yield insight into, and it is perhaps our very familiarity with consciousness that deludes us into believing we comprehend it. When we begin to question this phenomenon, the very thing that defines who we are, we uncover that we hardly know our own minds.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, “The greatest chasm in the philosophy of mind – maybe even all of philosophy – divides two perspectives on consciousness.” The point of contention revolves around the existence of qualia, or intrinsic qualities of our experience, and our purported awareness of them. In other words, the question, “Is there anything in phenomenal consciousness that escapes or goes beyond the intentional, cognitive, and functional?” has spurred great debate in recent times, and brought about two main theories to answer the question.

These competing views are called intentionalism (or representationism) and phenomenism. Intentionalists claim that phenomenal conscious experiences, such as seeing red or feeling pain, are nothing more than intentional or representational mental contents. (There is a debate about the nature of this content, that is, whether it is “narrow” or “wide” content, a point which lies outside our scope.) In contrast, phenomenists argue that qualia (which, by definition, escape intentional, cognitive, and functional characterization) are real, and that we have first-person access to them. According to phenomenism, we can *attend to* and *be aware of* the vehicle of representation of our experiences, as well as of phenomenal characters that are intrinsic but do not represent anything. This paper will explore the chasm between intentionalism and phenomenism, and ultimately attempt a defense of the former.

First, let us develop a framework for our approach to consciousness, which is relatively uncontroversial in contemporary philosophy of mind. All of the topics discussed here will accord with physicalism, the idea that our universe only contains matter (atoms and their subparticles, bosons, and the like) and energy (fermions, light, etc.). Under the physicalist doctrine, all phenomena (including mental

phenomena) must be accounted for without invoking other kinds of substances. Thus, while substance dualism (the idea that there are physical and mental substances which have different and mutually exclusive properties) is out, property dualism is still in the game. Hence, both an intentionalist and a phenomenist could be property dualists, holding the view that mental properties (thoughts, beliefs, phenomenal experience) are fundamentally irreducible to their physical realizers (Heil 177). Since qualia preclude functional, cognitive, or intentional characterization, they must, if they exist, supervene on these mental properties. If qualia are real, supervenience would be true and intentionalism false (Block).

Secondly, the philosophical debate over the putative existence of qualia and their first person accessibility is a parcel of a greater debate about a paradigm of the mental called functionalism. In functionalism, mental states are part of a causal network. For instance, if you stub your big toe on your bed post, you are most likely, under normal conditions, going to experience pain. According to functionalism, this pain state was caused by your tissue damage, and in turn causes pain behavior and avoidance behavior (perhaps you wince, rub your toe, and watch out for furniture in your path in the future). Here, pain acts as a *causal intermediary* between tissue damage and pain behavior (Kim). The qualia debate factors into this because philosophers want to know if our phenomenal experience, “what it is like” for a subject to experience something, can be characterized functionally. If not, functionalism would prove to be an incomplete picture of the mind’s workings. Here, we will focus more specifically on the qualia debate, though issues about functionalism will be embedded within the discussion.

Several questions accompany the issues noted above. Are there such properties as qualia? If so, do we have first-person access to them, and how can we become aware of them? Why would qualia accompany or supervene on our conscious experiences (in a way, this question poses Chalmers’ “hard problem” in different terms)? What are the appeals of intentionalism versus phenomenism, or vice versa? How does each theory account for our phenomenal experience? What is the relationship between phenomenism and epiphenomenalism? Finally, if qualia exist, do they present a serious challenge for functionalism? Here, the exploration of these issues will be guided by the views of Gilbert Harman and Ned Block, who represent intentionalism and phenomenism, respectively.

There are three main arguments for qualia that Block and Harman both discuss. The most famous of these is the inverted spectrum argument, which we will explore last. Let us turn to the argument from awareness of qualia during experience. This argument takes the following form: When one experiences redness or pain, one is aware of an intrinsic quality of one’s experience, where “an intrinsic quality is a

quality something has in itself, apart from its relation to other things,” (Harman 664). An intrinsic quality of a subject’s experience (or a *quale*) cannot be characterized functionally, since functionalism defines mental events in terms of their relations to each other, to their physical causes, and to behavior. Therefore, functionalism does not offer a complete picture of our (conscious) mental activity (Harman).

How might an intentionalist respond to this argument? Gilbert Harman responds by calling the premise into question. In fact, Harman claims that we cannot be aware of the intrinsic qualities of our experiences except in special cases that do not pose a problem for functionalism; for instance, you may be able to become aware of the intrinsic qualities of your experiences by observing your own brain in a mirror during a surgery (Harman), but this kind of access to the intrinsic qualities of your experience occurs from the third person perspective, and thus is not the same kind of access that phenomenists are talking about. It is important to note that access to our qualia, if they exist as defined above, is only a challenge for functionalism if it is first person access³. Harman claims that we can only be aware of our intentional mental content, meaning the objects that are represented and not the medium which represents them, although it can be easy to confuse the intrinsic quality of the represented object of our experience with the intrinsic quality of the experience itself (Harman). According to Harman, the premise of the argument from awareness falls prey to this confusion.

Harman invokes a very clear example to support his case. He writes that if you have a pain in your leg, “It is very tempting to confuse features of what you experience as happening in your leg with the intrinsic features of your experience. But the happening in your leg that you are presented with is the intentional object of your experience; it is not the experience itself” (668).

Harman invokes a useful analogy to showcase this point further. When looking at a tree, Eloise is aware of some features of her experience, specifically of the fact that her experience represents something, and of the intentional content⁴ that her experience represents (a tree). However, while looking at a painting of a unicorn, “she can turn her attention to the pattern of the paint on the canvas by virtue of which the painting represents a unicorn. But in the case of her visual experience of a tree, I want to say that she is not aware of, as it were, the mental paint by virtue of which her experience is an experience of seeing a tree” (667). In another example Harman writes, “When one is looking at a red tomato and one tries to turn one’s attention to the intrinsic features of one’s experience, all that one will be able to do is focus more on the object that is represented, that is, the tomato and the redness of it.” Both of these points serve to clarify why it is impossible, according to Gilbert Harman, to be aware of one’s

qualia (what he calls the “intrinsic features of experience”).

While Harman’s objection to the pro-qualia argument from awareness may seem like a minor victory for intentionalism (and by extension, functionalism), Ned Block attempts a defense of its premise in his article, *Mental Paint*. Block is one of the main proponents of phenomenism, and claims not only that qualia, intrinsic properties of our experiences, exist, but that there are some which represent intentional content, and some which accompany it but represent nothing at all. He calls the former sub-category of qualia “mental paint” and the latter “mental oil” (Block 34).

Block argues that Harman is wrong about awareness, though not about attention⁵. He argues that we can be aware

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of qualia, even when we are not attending to them. Block writes, “Another way to appreciate the point: stick your finger in front of your face, then focus on something distant. It does not seem so hard (at least to me) to attend to and be aware of aspects of the experience of the finger as well as of the finger” (7). However, this is a questionable appeal to intuition and introspection. When we perform the above exercise, the way the world is represented to us through perception changes, and we are aware of this change. We also become aware of (that is to say, attend to) certain features of our experience because of this change. However, it does not follow that we are aware of intrinsic features of our experience beyond those that Eloise was aware of in her perception of the tree. If we do become aware of some *quale*, then it is an indirect awareness that comes from our discovery of two very different perceptual experiences which represent the world differently to us.

However, it seems that for Block, the primary question is ontological: is there mental paint? Block asks more specifically, “is there anything mental in experience over and above its representational content?” (Block 7). It seems Harman’s views on the awareness issue are not inconsistent with the claim

that mental paint might exist, only that we cannot be aware of it. In other words, one can infer from Harman's argument that mental paint (if it exists) could never become part of our intentional content. (Of course, we will see later that Harman attempts to show two other arguments for the existence of "mental paint" to be fallacious.) Block claims there is something we can call mental paint and mental oil.

Can two people have the same intentional content when looking at an object, but have different phenomenal characters in their respective experiences?

Block tells us one way to see if there is a real issue over the existence of mental paint is to consider the inverted spectrum scenario, which we will address later (8). Another argument for qualia is the knowledge argument. It states that "what it is like"⁶ to experience a quale (to see something red, for instance) cannot be explained in purely functional terms because a person blind from birth could know all the physical and functional facts about color perception without knowing what it is actually like to see red (Harman 664). Harman attacks this argument by appealing to concepts. He claims that the premise is false because knowing what it is like to see something red requires your being able to represent red to yourself by invoking a concept, R, which a person who has never seen red before cannot have (Harman 671). Thus, the argument is flawed because its only premise is false.

So far, this seems fairly straightforward. However, and maybe you could have guessed, Block has an objection to this kind of argument. He claims that the intentionalist (he calls this the "representationist") must appeal to color words or "recognitional concepts" to make the above argument. In other words, the concept above which we dubbed R is either a color word (i.e. "red") or a wordless concept which enables one to recognize *that* (red) color. Block claims that this is a problem because someone who grows up in a black and white world and is never taught color words can recognize different colors when he is exposed to them, presumably because he has different phenomenal experiences of them. He claims that the representationist has no internal difference to appeal to, except one's knowing color words or recognizing different phenomenal characters (16-17). Here, we will delve into a brief and relevant digression in order to voice an objection to this argument — an objection which is consistent with phenomenism.

Can two people have the same intentional content when looking at an object, but have different phenomenal characters

in their respective experiences? For Block, there are two senses of the phrase "looks the same" which need to be clarified. In the first case, two people can look at the same object and perceive the same color — that is, the object "looks the same" to both of them because their experiences represent the object as having a certain color. However, there is another sense in which the phenomenal character of their experiences differs; specifically, their phenomenal characters are inverted. To both people, a given object (say, a ripe strawberry) *appears* red, but for one person the experience *feels* the way it feels for the other to look at the color of a jalapeno pepper. Here is the passage:

In what Shoemaker (1981) calls the intentional sense of 'looks the same', the [aquamarine] chips look the same (in respect of color) to Jack and Jill just in case both of their perceptual experiences represent it as having the same color. So I agree with the objection that there is a sense of 'looks the same' in which the aquamarine chip does look the same to Jack and Jill. But where I disagree with the objection is that I recognize another sense of 'looks the same', (the qualitative or phenomenal sense) a sense geared to phenomenal character, in which we have reason to think that the aquamarine chip does not look the same to Jack as to Jill (Block 29).

Now that we recognize Block's two meanings of the phrase "looks the same," we are in a position to argue against his objection regarding color concepts. Surely, one can recognize objects of different colors because they "look" different in the first sense of the word, meaning that one's experience represents the objects as having certain respective colors—this object *appears* red, that object *appears* blue. *We do not need the second sense of "looking"* (that is, our *feeling* which is accompanied by something *appearing* a certain way) *in order to distinguish between our experience of red and our experience of blue*. In other words, we do not need to talk of distinguishing between our phenomenal experiences in order to talk of color concepts, only of our perception of different colors. It seems Block has undone his own argument by making a distinction which is critical for phenomenism.

The final pro-qualia argument to be discussed here is the inverted spectrum. According to this hypothesis, it is metaphysically possible that two people could be functionally alike in all ways, but things that look red to one person look green to another, things that look yellow to one person look blue to another, and so on. Since these people are functionally alike but have different phenomenal experiences, functionalism does not give a complete account of our mental life (Harman 671). The inverted spectrum scenario is taken to reference Block's first meaning of "looking", that is, colors literally appearing inverted with respect to different people.

The people who are inverted with respect to one another still use color words in the same way, so their spectrum inversion is behaviorally undetectable.

There are some consequences that accompany the scenario depicted above. First, let us note that, “in the case of normal perception, there can be no distinction between how things look and how they are believed to be” (Harman 672). Harman points out that if two people are inverted with respect to each other, they will have different beliefs about the color of any given object. As a result, they must mean something different by their color words. However, “According to functionalism, if [two people] use words in the same way with respect to the same things, then they mean the same things by those words [. . .]. Some sort of philosophical argument is needed to argue otherwise. No such argument has been provided by defenders of the inverted spectrum” (673). This is an interesting and controversial point. We will see how it resurfaces in the next thought experiment.

There is another scenario related to the inverted spectrum called Inverted Earth. In the latter case, the same person’s phenomenal characters stay the same while the externalist representational content changes⁷. Inverted Earth is a place where “everything is the complementary color of the corresponding earth object. The sky is yellow, the grass-like stuff is red, etc. Second, people on Inverted Earth speak an inverted language. They use ‘red’ to mean green, ‘blue’ to mean yellow, and so forth” (Block 20). Additionally, if the wires in your brain were switched around, you would notice no difference upon your arrival on Inverted Earth. This is very important, because when you arrive and look at the grass, which is really red, and say something like, “What beautifully green grass!” Here, Block claims that you are wrong; it is only until you decide to adopt the language of Inverted Earth that your color words represent your experiences correctly⁸. According to Block,

“...after you have decided to adopt the concepts and language of the Inverted Earth language community and you have been there for 50 years, your word ‘red’ and the representational content of your experience as of red things (things that are *really* red) will shift so that you represent them *correctly*. Then, your words will mean the same as those of the members of your adopted language community and your visual experience will represent colors veridically” (20).

This means that you will come to believe that ripe tomatoes are green, that the sky is yellow, and so on. In Block’s revised version of Inverted Earth, there are two consequences of the Inverted Earth thought experiment. “The phenomenal character of your color experience stays the same. That’s what you say, and why shouldn’t we believe you? [. . .] But the

“According to functionalism, if [two people] use words in the same way with respect to the same things, then they mean the same things by those words [. . .]. Some sort of philosophical argument is needed to argue otherwise. No such argument has been provided by defenders of the inverted spectrum” (673).

representational content of your experience, being externalist, shifts with external conditions in the environment” (21). This argument has been the most difficult for the intentionalist to topple. However, in his article, “Inverted Earth, Swampman, and Representationism,” Michael Tye offers a fierce objection to Block’s inverted earth argument. Tye defends an externalist approach to memory and claims that the subject’s claim that his or her phenomenal experience on Earth and Inverted Earth are the same relies on an assumption about the accuracy of memory which can legitimately be called into question. In short, Tye claims that because we have good reason to doubt our memories of phenomenal experience (partly because remembering is unlike looking at a photograph, where all the represented content is shown accurately), the Inverted Earth argument does not offer a serious objection to functionalism. In fact, it cannot even show us that qualia (“mental paint”) must exist.

By now, it should be evident that the phenomenist’s only way to defend the existence of qualia rests on suspicious assumptions about memory. Then again, one could attempt a philosophical defense of why two people who are inverted with respect to each other use the same color words, but mean different things. However, it is doubtful that this argument alone could warrant a theory about the phenomenal content of consciousness.

- 1 In philosophy of mind, supervenience denotes a kind of dependency relationship between mental and physical phenomena. According to the supervenience thesis, there is an asymmetry between the mental and the physical, which results from the fact that possession of the former depends on possession of the latter. See Heil’s or Kim’s *Philosophy of Mind* for further explanation.
- 2 Epiphenomenalism presents the view that the mental is only an effect of physical underpinnings; while mental processes may seem causally efficacious to us, they are in fact causally inert in every way (Heil 185).
- 3 The issue of first person access originated long before the qualia debate entered the scene of philosophy of mind. However, it is particularly important here because in order to make a strong case for qualia, one may need to invoke first person awareness of them.

For instance, if I am experiencing something red, I must be aware of the redness (the intentional content of my experience) and of the way this content is represented to me. The question is, even if the latter is possible, does it pose problems for functionalism? In other words, is my awareness of the vehicle of representation intentional or phenomenal?

- 4 What is intentional (or representational) content? In perception, it is the way our world is represented to us. For instance, a ripe strawberry is represented as of a certain hue, value, and intensity (we generally just say it is represented as red). There are other forms of intentional content, but they do not have to correspond to something actual. For instance, I could have a hallucination of an image or, like Ponce de Leon, search Florida for the Fountain of Youth; in both cases, my intentional content does not refer to something actually in the world (Harman 664).
- 5 Here, it is important to clarify the difference between awareness and attention. Imagine having a conversation in your living room, when you hear the air conditioning turn off in your house. When this happens, you suddenly recognize that you were aware of the humming sound produced by the system, the whole time although you were not attending to it while you were talking with your friend. Or, to use Block's example: "For example, one might be involved in intense conversation while a jackhammer outside causes one to raise one's voice without ever noticing or attending to the noise until someone comments on it-at which time one realizes that one was aware of it all along" (Block 7).
- 6 "What it is like" has become a common phrase which denotes phenomenal consciousness in philosophy of mind. It is borrowed from Thomas Nagel's influential article, "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?"
- 7 Block discusses this scenario in some detail in his paper, "Mental Paint," although he also wrote an article called "Inverted Earth."
- 8 Why does Block say that you are wrong in calling the grass green, even though you experience it the same way you experienced grass on the real Earth (because your "wires" are switched)? He claims that it is for the same reason you are wrong to call Twin Earth water "water" in Hilary Putnam's famous thought experiment (Block 20).
- 9 For further reading on this issue, see Tye's "Inverted Earth, Swampman, and Representationism," and specifically section II of this article on Block's assumptions regarding memory.

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