

Qualia

QUALIA

The issue of 'qualia' is a complex and wide-ranging one in contemporary philosophy of mind. However, the concept itself is not very clear, and different philosophers use the term with slightly different meanings. There is no general agreement about whether qualia exist; nor about what the implications are if they exist; nor what it is for them to exist.

The idea of 'qualia' (single: 'quale') starts with the idea of 'phenomenal consciousness'. Consciousness, especially the sort of consciousness involved in perception, sensation, and emotion, has a 'feel' to it, a distinctive 'experiential quality'. The phrase often used to try to capture this experiential quality is 'what it is like'. There is something it is like to taste beer, to see a red rose, to feel sad. 'What it is like' here isn't meant to compare the experience to others, it is meant to pick out how the experience is for the subject. When we make comparisons between experiences, e.g. 'Seeing a red rose is like seeing a ripe tomato', we do so *in virtue of* what it is like to see a red rose in the sense meant here. It is the experience of redness that allows us to compare roses and tomatoes; and there is something it is like to experience redness. We can call the properties of an experience which give it its distinctive experiential quality 'phenomenal properties'.

Some people think qualia just are phenomenal properties. But this isn't accurate. Philosophers all agree that there are phenomenal properties; what they disagree about is whether the concept of qualia is the best explanation for these properties. Philosophers who believe there are qualia argue that phenomenal properties are best understood as *intrinsic, non-Intentional* properties of experience.

An intrinsic property is one that its possessor (in this case, the experience) has in and of its own, not in virtue of its relations to anything else. Think of the smell of coffee. It is the smell 'of coffee' because of its relation to the substance of coffee. That it is 'of coffee' is not an intrinsic property. But how that smell smells is an intrinsic property (people who believe in qualia argue), because it would be that smell even if it wasn't caused by coffee. The smell can't be reduced to some relationship *between* the experience of the smell and something else. Intrinsic properties of experience, then, also relate to the *identity* of the experience. On this account, pain wouldn't be pain if it didn't *feel* painful.

Intentional properties are properties of a mental state that enable it to represent what it does. Many philosophers, e.g. functionalists, believe that Intentional properties are based on causation. The smell of coffee wouldn't be of *coffee* if it wasn't reliably caused by coffee and not by other things. Intentional properties, then, are relational rather than intrinsic. They depend on the way the mental state 'hooks up' to the world and other mental states. Qualia, because they are intrinsic properties, are non-Intentional properties.

QUALIA AND FUNCTIONALISM

It seems that if qualia exist, functionalism cannot be a complete account of mental states. If phenomenal properties are qualia, then they don't fulfil any causal functional roles; so functionalism can't explain phenomenal consciousness. The objection suggests that there is something about consciousness – how pain feels, how red looks, how a rose smells – that can't be analysed in terms of functional role. Yes, of course, how pain feels is important to what it causes, e.g. it causes you to cry out or withdraw your hand from the fire. But the feeling of the pain isn't *just* these causal relations. Two kinds of examples are used to show this.

Absent qualia: the Chinese 'mind'. Suppose the mind just is the functioning brain. Suppose the population of China was fitted with radios which were connected up in just the same way that the neurons in the brain are connected up, and messages passed between them in the same way as between neurons. According to functionalism, this should create a mind; but it is very difficult to believe that there would be a 'Chinese consciousness'. If the Chinese system replicated the state of my brain when I feel pain, would something be in pain?

Inverted qualia: Suppose that you and I are looking at ripe tomatoes and fresh grass. We both say that the tomatoes are red, the grass is green. But the particular way tomatoes seem to me is the way grass looks to you, and vice-versa. Functionally, we are identical, and yet we have different colour experiences.

One standard reply is to say that in these examples, the brain and the Chinese population, or me and you, are *not*, in fact, functionally identical. There are going to be small, but very important, differences. There is a complexity about the causal relations of phenomenal qualities that the functionalist can appeal to. For example, 'red' is a warm colour, 'green' a cool colour. If you see grass the way I see tomatoes, will you describe the colour of the grass as 'warm'? To say there is no functional difference between you and me, yet we see colours differently, we have to change a great deal (you have to think of (what I call) green as a warm colour, and so on). Whether this is possible is unclear. If we specify the functional role of 'red' in enough detail, says the functionalist, maybe we'll see that whatever plays that functional role must be the phenomenal property 'red' and can't be 'green'. The same goes for other phenomenal properties, such as pain. For example, pain causes one to nurse the part of one's body that is in pain – what plays this role in the Chinese mind?

Other functionalists accept the objection, and modify their theory. Not *everything* about the mind can be explained in terms of functions. Qualia depend not just on functional states, but also on the specific *physical* properties of the system that realizes the functional states. How pain feels to us isn't (just) a matter of what causes it and what effects it has, it also depends on our physiology and the specific chemicals in our brains. However, mental states are still nothing more than physical states playing a functional role.

The difficulty with this response is that it starts to say that pain is identical with a physical-functional state *in us*. Is pain multiply realizable or not?

The point is that what makes pain pain is *how it feels*. In the world as it actually is, that might depend on particular facts of physiology. But it doesn't seem *metaphysically* impossible that some other physical state would feel just like pain. And to feel just like pain is to *be* pain. Qualia can't be reduced to physical or functional properties, or even a

combination of the two. If this argument is correct, we will have to embrace some kind of property dualism. We'll see another argument for this conclusion in the next section.

THE 'HARD PROBLEM' OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Property dualism is the view that, although there is just one kind of substance – that identified by physics – there are two different kinds of property, mental and physical. Mental properties depend on physical properties and substance to exist; but at least some mental properties cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of physical (or functional) properties. For this reason, property dualism challenges physicalism. The previous section raised the possibility that phenomenal properties are an example. In this section, we expand the argument to consciousness generally.

Anyone who claims that the mind is just the brain, that mental states are just brain states, faces a very difficult challenge. How could conscious experience have arisen in the brain? Consciousness involves a 'point of view', and there is something it is like, for a conscious creature, to be that creature. Consciousness is available to us first-personally, 'from the inside'. This 'first-personal' view onto the world doesn't fit into a scientific account of the brain or how the brain works, because that account is entirely 'third-personal'. To say that experience *is* a brain process is completely puzzling: how *could* it be, given that conscious experience and brain processes can only be described from different points of view? When we describe a brain process scientifically, we remove all reference to the first-personal. But consciousness is first-personal. So we can't be talking about consciousness when giving a scientific description.

This is known as the 'explanatory gap'. We cannot explain the phenomena of consciousness, especially phenomenal properties, using the terms available to us from science. This is an epistemological argument, about explanation and understanding.

Zombies

A famous thought experiment puts the argument metaphysically, claiming that the properties of consciousness cannot be physical properties.

A 'zombie', in the philosophical sense, is a physical replica of a person – you, for instance – but without any experiential consciousness. It therefore has identical physical properties to you, but different mental properties. Of course, zombies are not physically possible, i.e. given the physical laws of the universe as it is, any being that has identical physical properties to you will also have consciousness. But it seems that zombies are at least conceivable (I've just described them), and some philosophers argue that they are therefore metaphysically possible.

Now if consciousness were *identical* with physical properties, it would be impossible for a creature to have the same physical properties as you but not have consciousness. If A is identical to B – if A is B – then you can't have A without B or vice-versa; they are the same thing. So if zombies are possible – if a creature could be physically identical to you but not have consciousness – then consciousness is *not* identical to any physical properties. This is property dualism.

The standard physicalist response is that, although zombies are conceivable, they aren't in fact possible. What we are able to imagine as conceivable is not always a reliable guide to questions of identity and what is possible. For example, it is imaginable that water is not

H₂O; however, given that water *is* H₂O, it's not in fact possible that water isn't H₂O. Of course, there could be something *just like* water that isn't H₂O (it falls as rain, is transparent, drinkable, etc.), but if it isn't H₂O, it just isn't water. So it's not possible for water not to be H₂O. Likewise, we might argue that if zombies are physical replicas of people with mental properties, they cannot lack mental properties themselves. We are, in fact, imagining people.

However, this analogy doesn't work. In the case of water, what we are imagining is just like water. That's why we get confused and think that it is water, when it isn't. But when we imagine zombies, we are not imagining something just like a person. Zombies lack consciousness, and a creature without consciousness is *nothing* like a creature with consciousness. For example, to be in pain is nothing like not being in pain.

Furthermore, we can explain how it is that water is H₂O; there is nothing puzzling here. Water is precisely the kind of thing that would have a chemical formula. But, as we saw above, we cannot explain how it is that any physical property could be consciousness. Consciousness is not the kind of thing that could be identical with a physical property. Perhaps it is really the explanatory gap, rather than what we can or can't conceive of as possible, that supports the argument for property dualism.