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THE PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY
(Associated with the Oxford University Department
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International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children – ICPIC website. The ICPIC Journal is entitled *Childhood and Philosophy*

The Philosophy Man: www.thephilosophyman.com/ Free P4C Resources, online

Sichting SOPHIA – The European Foundation for the Advancement of Doing Philosophy with Children

Websites

www.skeptic.com/junior_skeptic

<http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org>: a web site providing information and materials on children's philosophy, or teaching discussions for teaching philosophy to young children through discussions of children's literature

www.thinking-big.co.uk: more information about Stephen Law and philosophy.

Other Sources

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Law, Stephen *The Philosophy Gym*

White, David *Philosophy for Kids: 40 Fun Questions to Help You Wonder . . . About Everything*

BBC Documentary, *Socrates for Six Year Olds* (1990)

Eliminating Eliminativism

by Jason R. Harlan

One of the most fascinating and popular subjects in contemporary philosophy is that of the *Philosophy of Mind*. Its emergence as a distinct subfield is not surprising when one considers its interdisciplinary examination and impact. In the view of some, the *mind* looms as the last bastion for the *physicalist* to conquer. The competing notions of *dualism*, *pluralism*, and to a lesser extent, *idealism* still hold sway in some regions of not only popular thought, but in the academy as well. So long as these alternative theories of consciousness persist, the complete ascendancy of physicalism (or *materialism*) remains stunted. For materialism's opponents need only show that there is *at least one* substance which is neither physical in nature nor supervenes on the physical. Hence, it is the view of some, that the mind is just such an object.

But what exactly is the mind? The mind, or soul as defined in antiquity, is traditionally understood as a composite of related attributes. The three most common *metaphysical* aspects are its *incorporeality*, *intentionality*, and arguably *qualitative nature*. The problem, from the materialist's perspective is quite clear: if any object has the aforementioned defining characteristics, than physicalism *must* be false. This realization coupled with the abject failure of the *type* and *token identity theories*, *philosophical behaviorism*, and the difficulties facing *functionalism*—not to mention the various other forms of *ontological reductionism*—leaves little wonder why some materialists desire to do away with the notion of the mind as classically understood.

In recent years, the contention of consciousness centres on what has been coined the *hard problem* which refers to the issues facing physicalists when they attempt to explain *qualia* in purely material *monistic* terms. These complications are often underscored by thought experiments such as *Mary the Neuroscientist*, *What it is like to be a bat*, and the *Chinese Room* to name a few. Before proceeding further however, it seems appropriate to elucidate just what one means when they speak of *qualia* (or *qualitative nature*). One *general* understanding is that qualia are, “[T]he phenomenal properties of experience.” (Kind 2016). The term *phenomenal* traces its roots back to Immanuel Kant's distinction between the concepts of *phenomena* and of *noumena* where the latter is understood as referring to “[O]bjects and events ‘in themselves’ independent of the mind's attempt to know them. In contrast ‘phenomena’ referred to the very same objects and events insofar as they *are* knowable or known” (Pessin 2010). Simply put, a *quale* is the subjective feel of an experience i.e. how a certain pain feels or a specific food tastes, as well as emotions, moods, and thought occurrences etc. With this general understanding in the backdrop, one may refine the concept further. Some philosophers have magnified the general definition to highlight what they believe are its deeper conceptual underpinnings. These academics typically characterize qualia in the most restrictive sense as *ineffable*, *intrinsic*, *private*, and *directly apprehensible* (Dennett 1988). Although this more restrictive definition is far from granted by all philosophers, this position must be given consideration.

The serious challenge posed by the mind, or qualia more specifically, to physicalism cannot be understated. In the view of some materialists the problem could be fatal if not answered. Nevertheless, the physicalist is not without response. One available maneuver, however radical it may seem at first, is that of *Philosophical Qualia Eliminativism* (or *Eliminative Materialism*) which holds that there are *no qualitative states*. To put it

bluntly, there is nothing that it is like to feel the breeze on one's face, to have an epiphany, or experience pain. Some proponents of this perspective merely write a check payable to some future scientific discovery which will supposedly show empirically that the mind is reducible to the material or to physical supervenience. Such assertions typically cite the past success of scientific discovery in order to add an element of credibility to the assumption. Although plausible, its opposite is *equally* plausible and therefore this type of exercise is utterly unfruitful. There have been, on the other hand, legitimate attempts to offer philosophical reasons to hold the eliminative materialistic position. The champion of the eliminativist stance is none other than the eminent philosopher Daniel Dennett.

In his landmark paper titled *Quining Qualia*, Dennett outlines a number of what he calls 'intuition-pumps' designed to erode our confidence in the notion of qualia as defined in the restricted sense. There is much at stake to be sure; if successful, he has rescued materialism from its potential demise. If he fails, then there must be some other way to get qualia into the materialistic worldview—if such a thing is even possible. Dennett seeks, through each of his intuition-pumps, to show that—when it comes to qualia—the aforementioned characteristics do not apply, and hence there are no such things as qualia. In one such intuition-pump titled *alternative neurology* he posits the classic notion of *qualia inversion*. Historically, this idea takes two subjects who, from all *behavioural tests*, have the same reactions to the colour blue for instance. However, in reality they experience different colours from one another. Nevertheless, the two have been educated and socialized to label their experiences by the same name and, by extension, display the same outward behaviour.

In the thought experiment *alternative neurology* however, Dennett removes a contrasting second subject and internalizes the qualia inversion for only one. Dennett unpacks the thought experiment thusly, that when the single subject awakes from sleep he notes that objects normally associated with the color green i.e. grass, appear red and objects usually associated with the color red i.e. stop signs appear green—and so on. Dennett then posits that this inversion was the result of an *evil neurosurgeon's* tampering with the subject's brain in some way while he was unconscious. Although the subject *identifies the disparity*, Dennett claims that he is unable to distinguish between the two options. The first of these is that the doctor adjusted the subject's *optical nerve*, and the other that his *memories of colour* were manipulated. According to Dennett, the fact that the subject is unable to determine which of the two options has occurred—without third person assistance—shows that “the state of his 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.” (Dennett, 1988).

In another one of his popular thought experiments, called *the experienced beer drinker*, we are introduced to a person who is a connoisseur of beer. During what can be best described as an interview, the drinker is asked to recall his first sip of beer and contrast this experience with that of what he now encounters. The interviewee cites that his *first drink* was *unpalatable* yet, with continual use, he now appreciates the taste. When pressed on what has changed, the experienced beer drinker is said to *infer* that the taste of beer itself has changed. Dennett here suggest that the drinker has disconfirmed the *intrinsic* and *directly apprehensible* aspects of qualia, instead making the qualitative experience *extrinsic* and *relational* in nature.

But are Dennett's thought experiments successful in curing mankind of their benign qualia delusion? In this author's view, they do not. The reason is simple: he argues against qualia *as an infallible epistemic tool by uncovering the causes* of the qualia in question. Even if one grants that qualia are not any better at revealing their *causes* than other objective methods i.e. neuroscience, what would this show? This revelation would only prove that qualia *themselves* cannot always identify their own cause. This is far from the conclusion that there are no such things as qualia. In fact, it assumes the existence of qualitative experience.

In order to see this mistake more clearly take the *neurosurgical prank* thought experiment. In this scenario the subject *experiences colors* and, based on a perceived divergence from some reference point, infers that something has occurred. Granted he may be unsure of its cause, optical nerve tampering or memory modification, but there remains something that it is like to experience the colours regardless of their inversion, there is something that it is like to perceive the divergence, and further still, there is something that it is like to be confused as to how this could have happened.

In Dennett's view the defining attributes of ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly apprehensible mean that qualia grant the agent *infallible knowledge of their causes* and by extension any claim made about the qualia is therefore infallible. However, it seems to me that the *inference of a cause is not part of the experience* but thought *about* an experience or quale. When one speaks of qualia as being *immediately apprehensible in consciousness*, it may be defined by saying that one cannot be mistaken about the fact that they are experiencing something i.e. pain. By example, imagine that while a man is running he experiences a pain.

While he continues to run he wonders, “What would cause such a pain?” He then theorizes that he is dehydrated. Later, during a regularly scheduled checkup, he finds out that he has cancer and the tumor was the cause of the man’s pain. The man, as it turns out, may be mistaken as to the *cause* of pain but he is nevertheless certain that he *experienced* pain. This confusion between the qualia and inferences to what caused the qualia is a recurrent theme throughout Dennett’s work.

In the experienced beer drinker, as with the coffee tasters, the subjects know that their *propositional attitudes* towards their respective substances have changed. Yet when pressed as to the *cause* of their change of heart they respond differently but not contradictorily. For, in principle, it just may be the case that Sanborn’s taste buds have changed and Chase may have switched his attitude towards the taste of Maxwell House coffee in the light of being exposed to different brews. Still yet, they may both be mistaken as to the cause of their attitude change but the fact remains, there is something that it is like to experience drinking that brand of coffee, though inferences about the *causes* of qualia or *second-order qualia* (propositional attitudes) only show that there is *something* which was *experienced*; *something* that can be *defined* by the agent, *causes* questioned, and, in some cases, the *private* experiential sensation’s *cause* may be discovered *publicly*.

Once this conflation is understood i.e. his objectifying the subjective, the wind—so to speak—is taken from the intuition-pump’s sails as heretofore presented. For the same can be said concerning the attribute of privacy. For sake of argument one may acquiesce that some as yet unknown technology, *the brainstorm machine*—another of Dennett’s thought experiments—is realized and there, in a room, reside three persons. Two of the three are conjoined to the device and the third monitors the projections of their visual experiences. But have these projections made *public* the otherwise *private* directly apprehensible qualia of the two men? Not at all, the only occurrence is that the third gentleman is experiencing *what it is like* to watch a projection and contrast it with another. In other words, he still does not know *what it is like* for any of the other subjects to experience their qualia. He only knows his *own experience of perceiving* the projections of images supposedly emitting from the others. Hence the qualia remain, and must remain, private. In short, neither discovering the objective cause of a quale nor learning about it, through mechanical means or otherwise, relieves one of their third person status for they are always the one perceiving and, all the while, experiencing the qualia they seek to disprove.

Lastly, Dennett turns his sights on the concept of ineffability. Through the thought experiments of *the osprey cry* and *the guitar string* Dennett seeks to straightforwardly demonstrate that we can indeed *adequately describe* qualia albeit not exhaustively. The conclusion is plain, if something is partially effable than it cannot be ineffable. Qualia are partially effable, therefore qualia are not ineffable. But hold on a second ...is it true that, if something is partially effable than it cannot be ineffable? If correct, then when one states that anything is ineffable it becomes effable because *ineffability* is descriptive of the subject. However, one may interpret the notion of ineffability in its plain sense. When one says that they are experiencing “ineffable joy” the hearer presumably understands the broad concept of joy and recognizes that what their friend is experiencing transcends the confines of linguistic expression. Within this framework it is not improper to speak of qualia as being ineffable. Not to mention, if there are no qualia what is it exactly that one is attempting to express in the first place?

In closing, it appears, from this author’s autodidactic research, that far from eroding the idea of qualia as ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly apprehensible, Dennett has inadvertently confirmed the qualities he set out to eliminate. Much like a man who tells himself he does not exist, the aforementioned intuition-pumps assume the very thing they seek to undermine or they mistake causes or thoughts about the substance for the quale itself. So if qualia cannot be eliminated, then Dennett’s version of *Eliminative Materialism* must itself be eliminated.

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