

## **Leopold Stubenberg**

### Consciousness and Qualia

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When you have ruled everything else out, then what you are left with, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. This adage from Doyle describes the path taken by Leopold Stubenberg in his book, Consciousness and Qualia. He spends most of the work critically examining and then discarding potential explications of consciousness before finally, in the last chapter, offering his own theory, carefully selected to avoid the pitfalls that did in rival accounts. He delivers a bold and simple slogan that distills the essence of his view: “To be conscious is to have qualia” (262).

Stubenberg embraces a “first-person” approach to the study of consciousness, rather than one rooted in the third-person perspective. Whereas we ask from the third-person perspective, “do sensations exist?”, according to Stubenberg we ask from the first-person perspective, “How are sensations (the existence of which is beyond doubt) possible?” (51). This motivates a stringent “principle of phenomenal adequacy” that must be adhered to by any theory of consciousness (36-38). We must be able to “try the theory on” and “see” if there is anything it is like to be someone who instantiates the theory. According to Stubenberg, “If trying on a proposed account. . . yields the result that having these kinds of qualia in this particular manner is like nothing, then the account must be rejected” (38).

Stubenberg thus picks out two basic questions as crucial to explaining consciousness. First, what are the nature of qualia? Specifically, how do they fit into the natural world? Second, how do we have qualia? Why is there something it’s like to experience them? Stubenberg considers the theories of Armstrong, Dretske, Lycan, Pollock, Rosenthal, and Tye, and concludes they all embrace a similar strategy for dealing with the “nature” and “having” problems. They propose that qualia are physical entities, either properties of the brain or of objects in the world. That answers the nature problem. Because such qualia can exist without anyone having them, the above theorists must posit a further representation of the qualia by the conscious subject. This addresses the having problem.

However, Stubenberg argues that this sort of solution fails to deliver the goods of consciousness. “Lighting up” qualia from outside by representation fails to meet Stubenberg’s principle of phenomenal adequacy. When we “try the

theory on,” it remains possible that we do not have the qualia. Stubenberg argues that representational solutions to the “having” problem are “ultimately unilluminating. [They do] not let us see how the representational activity is supposed to result in phenomenal feel” (182). We are prevented from reducing qualia into well-behaved natural entities, because the only available candidate for the job of lighting up qualia, representation, fails to adhere to the principle of phenomenal adequacy. So we need qualia that light up by themselves, yet somehow fit into the natural world.

In response, Stubenberg proposes a radical Russellian solution. He posits “self-presenting” qualia that “are had just in case they are instantiated” (263). The qualia are also “bearer-less,” requiring no underlying substance, mental or physical, for their existence (273). The qualia are “had” by the self, which is construed as a bundle of “percepts” made up of these qualia (287). In virtue of being made of self-presenting qualia, we have them, and because they are self-presenting, there is something it is like to have them. By importing the Russellian monist ontology, Stubenberg argues we can accept qualia into the natural order, so long as we understand that this conception of the natural is not the standard substance/attribute model.

Space considerations prevent me from delving into the subtleties of Stubenberg’s proposal, but I will briefly raise some concerns I have with the account. First, how can we come to know or believe anything about our qualia on Stubenberg’s account? In order to avoid positing inner items we know infallibly, Stubenberg claims our qualia self-present in a “non-cognitive” manner (280). But how is the gap between qualia and cognition to be crossed? Stubenberg does not offer a suggestion. In addition, the motivation for Stubenberg’s first-person approach was that we know about our qualia “beyond doubt” (51). How do we know about our qualia beyond doubt if they present non-cognitively?

Another question concerns the bundle theory of the self. If the self is just a bundle of qualia, how do we account for the apparent unity of our consciousness? It seems much more than just non-cognitive states self-presenting to one another like name tags at a party: “Hello, I’m red,” “Hello, I’m lumpy.” The resources of the bundle theory are ill equipped to handle this problem.

Finally, Stubenberg’s proposal requires a radical shift in our metaphysics. Consider this implication of his theory: “One’s qualia make up the elementary particles, which make up the atoms, which make up the molecules. . . which make up the brain” (302). This may fit with Stubenberg’s principle of phenomenal adequacy for a theory of consciousness, but it is in conflict with a realist conception of the natural world. This is an unfortunate trade-off. I contend that Stubenberg’s principle of phenomenal adequacy sets the bar too high. If we temper our investigation of consciousness with the third-person

perspective, we will have the best chance of finding a theory of consciousness that both explains our phenomenal experience, and preserves the real world “out there.” This strikes me as the proper principle of adequacy on any theory of consciousness.