

Review of *The Case for Qualia* (E. Wright, ed.)

This is a collection of nineteen essays on qualia by some of their foremost exponents. The book is divided into three parts: (1) philosophical defenses of qualia, (2) scientific defenses, and (3) defenses of qualia against attacks by qualia irrealists. The book also contains an introduction by the editor, Edmond Wright, himself an eloquent spokesperson for qualia. In his introduction he provides a useful history of the notion of ‘non-epistemicity’—the notion, roughly, that ‘sensory experiences [and hence qualia] do not carry “information” about entities, but are merely evidence, “natural signs” which can be interpreted according to the motivations of the observer, human or animal’ (p. 3)—and a précis of each of the essays to follow.

Since the book presents a case for qualia, the obvious question is: does the book present a dialectically effective case? That is, should reasonable and reflective opponents of qualia and qualia agnostics be moved by the arguments for qualia found on its pages? No. Both qualia realists, irrealists, and agnostics will find much to admire here. The arguments for qualia are interesting, always clever, and sometimes compelling (initially anyway). But qualia irrealists will not—or, at least, need not—be less confident in their qualia irrealism after reading this book. Principled, non-ad hoc responses can be mustered against the arguments for qualia found on its pages. Here I provide a sampling of what I mean.

Harold I. Brown presents a new argument from illusion. He argues that illusions (e.g., subjective contours, seeing certain colours) provide initial support for the conclusion that we perceive qualia because in illusions the items that cause a particular perception, what he calls the *external arrangement*, are qualitatively, and hence numerically, distinct from the immediate items of perceptual awareness, what he calls the *perceptual display*. He concludes that the best

explanation for this distinction is that the perceptual display is—always—a ‘brain-construct that is numerically distinct from the external arrangement involved in its causation’ (p. 49).

Brown rejects the usual direct-realist response to arguments from illusion—that we directly perceive external arrangements, but do not always perceive them as they actually are—for two reasons: ‘First, illusions are cases in which perceptual displays are qualitatively different from the relevant external arrangements, and qualitative difference implies numerical difference. Second, the way visual displays are generated makes it much more plausible that these displays are internal to the brain, not located at some distance from the brain’ (pp. 53-4).

But Brown’s reasons for rejecting this response are unconvincing. First, the direct realist is not committed to affirming that to perceive something directly is to perceive it as it actually is *in every respect*. If I am wearing blue spectacles, then things that are not blue will look blue to me, but I am still seeing them directly. Plausibly, therefore, in cases of illusion, we see objects directly, but our brains do some ‘filling-in’ (or some such thing), such that some of what we see is describable as a brain-construct.

Brown resists this claim, arguing that that what we see, in cases of illusion, is not a ‘heterogeneous compound of elements of the external arrangement and elements generated by our perceptual system’, since ‘given the coherent integration of the various elements of the perceptual display, we get a more intelligible picture if we consider the entire perceptual display to be a brain-construct’ (pp. 48-9).

But the reasoning here is flawed. Known brain-constructs—e.g., dreams, hallucinations—ordinarily produce disjointed and unintegrated ‘perceptual’ displays, so given the coherent integration of the various elements of the perceptual display in cases of normal (i.e., non-illusory) perception, we get a more intelligible (and phenomenologically sensitive) picture if we

consider the perceptual display to be, simply, an arrangement of extra-mental objects. Similarly, given the coherent integration of the various elements of the perceptual display in cases of illusory perception, we get a more intelligible picture if we consider the perceptual display to be an arrangement of extra-mental objects together with some brain-constructs thrown in (e.g., subjective contours).

Brown's second reason for rejecting the usual direct-realist response to arguments from illusion founders on an ambiguity concerning 'indirect'. While it's true that seeing things involves extremely complex visual processing—this is what the brain does to enable a creature to see a visible scene—it doesn't follow (not even, I would say, reasonably probabilistically) that we are always directly perceptually acquainted with brain-constructs. That is to say, while perception is indirect in the sense that it involves a series of causal intermediaries between the object and the percipient, it does not follow that it is indirect in the sense that it involves a prior awareness of something other than the external object.<sup>1</sup>

E. J. Lowe, in his essay 'Illusions and Hallucinations as Evidence for Sense Data', also argues that illusions provide evidence for qualia. As the title of his essay suggests, he prefers to call them sense data, defining them as '*private mental objects* which...we perceive *directly* whenever we perceive ordinary public objects, and by perceiving which we perceive those public objects only *indirectly*' (p. 59). It will not do, he says, to appeal to the usual cases of illusory perception—e.g., the straight stick that looks bent when it is half-immersed in water—to defend sense data, since these illusions can be accounted for without reference to private objects of any sort. The straight stick that looks bent in water, for example, 'may be explained by reference to an optical (refractive) image that is perfectly public' (p. 60). According to Lowe, however, there

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<sup>1</sup> See P. Le Morvan, 'Arguments against Direct Realism and How to Counter Them', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 41 (2004): 221-34, at 223.

is a sort of illusion that can't be explained without reference to private objects, viz., double vision. To illustrate this phenomenon, he invites the reader to hold up her finger about ten inches in front of her nose and focus her eyes on distant objects while still attending to her finger. The finger will then 'look double'. This illusion helps the sense data theorist, Lowe argues, because when 'my finger thus "looks double," I see two *private mental objects*—call them "*visual images*," if you will—by seeing each of which I see my finger only *indirectly*. No other account...satisfactorily explains the basis of the illusion' (p. 61).

But is there not? Isn't it just as plausible that the object of vision, when one induces double vision in the way Lowe describes, is not a private mental image at all (never mind two), but rather the single finger in front of one's nose—which one sees double? Lowe has mischaracterized the phenomenon. He claims that 'one sees *two* visually very similar objects of some sort' (p. 62), which the sense data irrealist will say is false. One does not see two objects; one sees one object (a finger) double.

Lowe is familiar, of course, with this sort of response to the phenomenon of double vision and he rejects it on the grounds that 'basic trouble with all such accounts of double vision...is the fact that it is a purely contingent matter that we see *with our eyes* at all—at least if by "eye" is meant a certain physiologically identified part of the human body, rather than *by definition* "organ of sight." It seems perfectly conceivable that someone *without eyes*...should be made to experience the double vision phenomenon, by tampering suitably with his cerebral processes. Physiology can tell us under what conditions double vision is normally experienced in human beings...but it cannot tell us what double vision *is*, in the sense of what it *means* to say that something is seen "double"' (p. 63).

But it is not clear why the direct realist should be troubled by this. He will insist that, by appealing to facts about our eyes and their number and orientation, we can indeed explain what is going on when an object looks double in the situation described by Lowe, and we can do so without positing sense data. He will insist, further, that any creature, if it's actually *seeing* an object double—as opposed to experiencing something that's been artificially conjured up by tinkering with its brain—sees it directly. One could conceivably tamper with the cerebral processes of someone without eyes to make him experience what normal perceivers experience when they see something double (just as one could conceivably tamper with the cerebral processes of someone without a nose to make him experience what normal perceivers experience when they smell burnt toast), and in such a case perhaps the subject sees—or, better, experiences—what are describable as sense data. But it doesn't follow that, in ordinary cases of double vision like the one described by Lowe, the subject sees sense data. For it could be that while the subject experiences sense data when his brain is being tampered with, he sees (double) the actual worldly object when his brain is not being tampered with.

George Graham and Terence Horgan, in their essay 'Qualia Realism: Its Phenomenal Contents and Discontents', appeal to the self-presentational structure of consciousness to argue for qualia. They hold that 'for every conscious mental state, there is something it is like to be in the conscious state or to undergo the conscious state', and that 'in cases in which a conscious mental state does not possess a special sensory or sensory-imagistic "feel," it still possesses a what-it's-likeness (insofar as it is self-presentationally immediate). It still consists of a quale' (p. 95).

Now I think it's true that all conscious states are self-presentational, but I'm disinclined to say that a conscious state's being self-presentational is a matter of the subject of the conscious

state possessing a quale. This may seem like a terminological quibble, but it isn't, since a quale is an inner mental particular (a trope?), and to describe conscious states as self-presentational is not to hypostatize an inner mental item, but to describe their general structure.

The main argument of Matjaž Potrč's sometimes obscure essay 'The World of Qualia' is vulnerable to a similar objection. According to Potrč, qualia hold the experiential world together—they are its *cement*—since they inhere in intentional acts. How so? Potrč subscribes to Brentano's thesis that conscious states are reflexive, and necessarily so, i.e., the thesis that, necessarily, every conscious state, upon whatever object it is primarily directed, is concomitantly directed upon itself. But this inner-directedness is not 'contingently there in the act of intentional directedness; it is substantially and constitutively there' (p. 117).

Brentano's thesis has much to recommend it, but Potrč thinks it is necessary to analyze the reflexive structure of consciousness in terms of the having of qualia (p. 117). Qualia, he hypothesizes, are what hold the two intentional acts—my act of, say, thinking about *x* and my concomitant reflexive act of being directed at my act of thinking about *x*—together. His main argument for this thesis is based on the idea that 'the entire act of intentional directedness is qualitative; it comes endowed with the what-it's-like quality of experience' (p. 118); and the best way to explain where this quality comes from is in terms of qualia.

But it seems to me that the question of what binds the two intentional acts together is moot, or at least very puzzling, since if a conscious state's self-directedness is an intrinsic component of it, then the question of what holds a conscious state and its self-directedness together doesn't arise. According to Brentano, at least as I read him, when I think about *x*, there is a single *token* state—thinking about *x*—that instantiates two *types* of activity, the activity of thinking about *x* and the activity of being aware of thinking about *x*. Conscious states just have

that kind of structure. And there is no need to explain what holds those two types of activity together, and thus no need to posit qualia, any more than there is a need to explain what holds the whiteness and rectangularity of a white wall together.

Amy Kind, in her essay ‘How to Believe in Qualia’, argues that, contrary to widely accepted belief, there is phenomenological data for qualia. It is typically supposed that ‘our experience is *transparent*—when we attend to our experiences, our attention goes right through to their objects’ (p. 285), and this phenomenological data is taken to support the view that there are no qualia. Against this, Kind argues that phenomenology reveals that even mundane perceptual experiences—e.g., seeing a tree—have qualia. ‘Look at a tree’, she says, ‘focus on your experience, and then close your eyes and image the tree. Focus in on the greenness on [sic] your imaged experience. Now reopen your eyes, so that you’re looking at the tree. I predict that you will find features there, other than features of the presented tree, in which to train your attention. In particular, you can continue to attend to the greenness that you were attending to while your eyes were closed’ (pp. 295-6).

But the ‘greenness’ I was attending to while my eyes were closed was the greenness of a mental image, and if I attend to that while I am looking at the tree, then I am attending to what may be loosely characterized as a green quale. But that greenness isn’t part of my ordinary, non-imaged seeing of the tree. The only greenness there is the greenness of the tree.

There are many more points in this work that deserve detailed discussion, but I have filled my space. Let me just say that this is a thought-provoking book with a thought-provoking, but ultimately unpersuasive, set of arguments.

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