

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A PHENOMENOLOGIST?

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Arguments about bats,¹ inverted spectra² and deprived scientists named 'Mary'³ have failed to forge a consensus on the *qualia* question, i.e., on the question of whether there are intrinsic features of experience. The reason, we suspect, is that none of these arguments quite reach the core thought that motivates many of the friends of *qualia*. That thought is difficult to express, but apparently easy to hold. It is not simply that any scientific account of the mind or brain will necessarily leave something out. Nor is it that we are blind to certain features that other creatures might be capable of seeing. The thought, rather, is that we can never capture propositionally, scientifically or otherwise, the richness or kind of information presented by experience. What, exactly, can we not capture propositionally? Well, that is also difficult to capture. Words cannot adequately express a problem concerning a

¹ T. Nagel, 'What is it Like to be a Bat?', *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974), pp. 435–50.

² S. Shoemaker, 'The Inverted Spectrum', *Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (1982), pp. 357–81.

³ F. Jackson, 'Epiphenomenal *Qualia*', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1982), pp. 127–36.

purported feature of experience that words cannot adequately describe. The *qualia* problem itself, then, is a *qualia* problem. We might think of it as the meta-*qualia* problem. And what is a problem for the friends of *qualia* is also a problem for their enemies. If the problem cannot be stated, then any attempt to solve the problem will seem to miss the mark. What we require, then, is diagnosis. We require a way to capture clearly just what it is that cannot be captured.

In a recent paper, Diana Raffman presents a new argument for *qualia*, an argument that provides new focus for the *qualia* debate.⁴ We think Raffman's work relocates the debate to a better neighbourhood, a neighbourhood in which what tempts us to think *there must be qualia or phenomenal information* is highlighted. Raffman, we shall argue, locates the core thought shared by many of the friends of *qualia*. That thought is that our conceptual resources are inadequate for capturing the richness of experience. Experience is ineffably determinate. Moreover, Raffman's argument in support of this thought seems especially embarrassing to scientific-minded materialists, since the argument relies largely on well established empirical facts. We shall show, however, that Raffman's argument fails. So, if we are correct that her argument highlights what is tempting about *qualia*, we shall have shown that it is not tempting. But before getting to her argument, let us set the stage.

The received view

We might start by looking at any one of numerous arguments for the existence of *qualia*, but Frank Jackson's knowledge argument is, for us, an old-time favourite. Jackson imagines a scientist, Mary, who has been looking at her black and white computer monitor in a black and white room since birth. On her computer is the complete story of the physical universe, including the entire causal story of colour experience. So Mary knows all the physical facts. She is scientifically omniscient. None the less when Mary leaves her black and white room for the first time it seems certain that she will come to learn something new, e.g., how the redness of a rose seems to her. Since she already knew all the physical facts about the universe before leaving the room, her new knowledge must be non-physical.

As Raffman tells us, since Jackson's paper something like a received view among materialists has emerged. According to this view, there are no subjective facts that Mary comes to know, but simply different ways of knowing ordinary facts about the mind-brain. When Mary looks at the red rose, of course, she has an experience of the red rose. According to one version of the received view, which Raffman dubs the 'predicative variant' (hereafter PV), Mary's coming to know 'what that experience is like' is simply her coming to represent that experience, an experience she already knew about in her black and white room, in a new and idiosyncratic way.⁵ For

⁴ D. Raffman, 'On the Persistence of Phenomenology' (hereafter OPP), in T. Metzinger (ed.), *Conscious Experience* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995), pp. 293–308.

⁵ Defenders of this position include W. Lycan, 'What is the "Subjectivity" of the Mental?', in J. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. IV: *Action Theory and Philosophy of Mind* (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1990), pp. 109–30, and 'A Limited Defense of Phenomenal Information', in Metzinger, pp. 243–58; B. Loar, 'Phenomenal States', in Tomberlin, pp. 81–108.

instance, Mary's introspection results in the mentalese predicate RED-EXPERIENCE being tokened in Mary, and this is just the mode of presentation under which Mary knows about the experience when leaving her room. What Mary comes to know about, then, is just the first-order perceptual experience of the red rose. There is no additional information – no phenomenal information – about which Mary comes to know or with which she becomes acquainted. In what follows we focus on Raffman's criticism of PV, though what we say, with minor modifications, will serve as a general response to her criticism of the received view.

The persistence of phenomenology I

The problem with the received view, claims Raffman, is that it collides with 'the memory constraint'. The empirical evidence is overwhelming that our discriminatory abilities far outrun our conceptual abilities. We shall use Raffman's example of two just noticeably different shades of red, red_{31} and red_{32} . By hypothesis, we can discriminate a perceptual difference between an object that is red_{31} and one that is red_{32} . So, it seems, our experience of red_{31} is not exactly like our experience of red_{32} . According to PV, this perceptual difference might be explained in the following way. Our experience of red_{31} causes the tokening of a first-person introspective concept, RED₃₁-EXPERIENCE, and our experience of red_{32} causes the tokening of a different concept, RED₃₂-EXPERIENCE, and these two concepts are different. But the memory constraint holds that perceptual categories are not nearly so fine-grained. In other words, the empirical evidence suggests that we do not have the phenomenal concepts RED₃₁-EXPERIENCE and RED₃₂-EXPERIENCE. We cannot, for instance, re-identify an object that has red_{31} as having red_{31} . So here is Raffman's argument:

1. There is a difference in the way red_{31} and red_{32} seem to us
2. PV's explanation of this phenomenal difference is that red_{31} and red_{32} cause tokens of different phenomenal concepts
3. But the empirical evidence (the memory constraint) strongly suggests that we do not have phenomenal concepts corresponding to every just-noticeably-different colour experience

Therefore

4. PV cannot explain the difference in how red_{31} and red_{32} seem to us.

Defenders of PV, as Raffman notes, have a rejoinder. They can claim that the content of experience is only as fine-grained as what we can conceptualize, and thereby deny premise (1). Borrowing from a previous paper of Raffman's,⁶ we can put the point in this way. When looking at red_{31} and red_{32} together (or pairwise), we make two discriminations. First, we discriminate a difference. The defender of PV might say, for instance, that our experience causes the tokening of the mentalese predicate DIFFERENT-SHADE-EXPERIENCE. Second, we judge that both red_{31} and red_{32} are red (or scarlet, or crimson, etc.). As the defender of PV might say, the experience of either singly causes the tokening of the mentalese predicate RED-EXPERIENCE (OR

⁶ 'Vagueness without Paradox', *Philosophical Review*, 103 (1994), pp. 41–74.

SCARLET-EXPERIENCE, or CRIMSON-EXPERIENCE, etc.). However, when looking at either red₃₁ or red₃₂ singly, we obviously do not judge a difference. We judge differences only when making comparisons. So the tokening of the mentalese predicate DIFFERENT-SHADE-EXPERIENCE is caused only by pairwise experiences. Thus there is a difference between our pairwise experience of red₃₁ and red₃₂ and our experience of each singly, and so we can insist that, although we judge a difference when we experience them pairwise, there is no difference between our single experiences of either of them. Seeing a difference does not entail seeing a category difference. Just as someone might be able to tell that one bag is heavier than another only by picking them up simultaneously, someone might see a difference in colour between two objects only when looking at them pairwise. And just as the experience of picking each bag up singly might be phenomenologically the same, the experience of seeing each object singly might be phenomenologically the same.

Is the denial of premise (1) *ad hoc*? We think not. Premise (1) assumes that if we can judge a difference between two shades, then there must be a difference in how they appear to us. But we might arrange numerous colour squares, ranging from a clear instance of red to a clear instance of orange, in such a way that there is no noticeable difference between any colour square and its immediate neighbours. And we might ask subjects to determine, for each colour square, which colour it has. Our subjects begin by judging the first square to be red, the second square to be red, and so forth. But somewhere along the way our subjects will judge that a square is orange, and they will judge that it is orange although they judged the previous square to be red, and although, by hypothesis, there is no difference between their experience of the square that they judge to be orange and the previous square they judged to be red. So we conclude that (1) is false. Seeing a difference, seeing one thing as red and another as orange, does not entail a difference in perceptual content.⁷

The persistence of phenomenology II

Raffman contends, however, that the above strategy for saving PV is untenable given the empirical evidence. It turns out that a small number of determinate shades (the unique hues) can be re-identified. So the empirical evidence suggests that we have determinate phenomenal concepts for those hues. And our experiences of the unique hues are no more determinate than our experiences of the other hues. As Raffman says (OPP p. 302),

since our experiences of unique and non-unique hues are introspectively similar in respect of their determinateness, yet conceptualized in radically different ways, introspection of these experiences cannot be explained (or explained exhaustively) in conceptual terms. In particular, it is not plausible to suppose that any discriminable hue, unique or otherwise, is experienced or introspected in a less than determinate fashion.

So the argument is this:

⁷ We get this case from Raffman's 'Vagueness without Paradox'.

1. If PV is correct, then either our concepts are so fine-grained that we have different perceptual concepts for red_{31} and red_{32} , or our experience of red_{31} and our experience of red_{32} are phenomenally the same (i.e., our experiences of these shades are determinable, but not determinate)
2. But we have empirical evidence that our perceptual concepts are not so fine-grained as to permit different perceptual concepts for red_{31} and red_{32} (the memory constraint)
3. And we know that our experiences of some shades (*viz.*, the unique hues) are determinate (e.g., we can re-identify them)
4. Furthermore, there is no difference in the determinateness of our experiences of the unique shades and the determinateness of our experiences of the other shades
5. Thus, from (3) and (4), our experience of red_{31} is determinate, and so phenomenally different from our experience of red_{32}

Therefore, from (1), (2) and (5) by *modus tollens*

6. PV is false.

But now, it seems to us, we can and should deny (3), which assumes that if we can re-identify some colour, then our experience of it must be determinate. In other words, if we can re-identify red_1 as unique red, then our experience of red_1 must be phenomenally different from our experience of other shades which we do not so categorize. But a series of colour squares coloured red_1 , red_2 , red_3 , red_4 , etc., might be arranged so that there is no noticeable difference between red_1 and red_2 , or between red_2 and red_3 , and so forth, though red_1 and red_3 are noticeably different, red_2 and red_4 are noticeably different, and so forth. Now we ask subjects to look at each square and identify which has unique red. There are two possibilities we need to consider. First, they might consistently identify the square coloured red_1 as unique and not the square coloured red_2 . Then they will identify the red_1 square as unique, but not the red_2 square, though there is, by hypothesis, no difference in their experience of either. Alternatively they might sometimes judge the red_1 square as unique, and at other times the red_2 square as unique, but not judge the red_3 square as unique. Then it will be the case that they sometimes judge the red_2 square as unique, but not the red_3 square, though, by hypothesis there is no difference in their experience of either. Obviously we can continue retelling our story for other shades of red until we reach a shade that our subjects never judge to be unique. We conclude that premise (3) is false. Judging that there is a colour category difference between two shades does not entail that there is a phenomenal difference between the experiences of those shades.

The persistence of propositions

At the beginning of our paper we suggested that the *qualia* problem is itself a *qualia* problem. Experience purportedly provides ineffable knowledge about *qualia*, and with it the knowledge that something ineffable is left out of any description we might give of our experiences. At least that is the thought shared by many of the friends of

qualia. The very significant contribution of Raffman's argument is that it provides a way to focus on, and to analyse, that thought. And we believe that once that thought is made clear, it is also clear that it can be resisted. By explaining what she wants explained without appeal to *qualia*, we have earned the right to pass by the *qualia* problem and the meta-*qualia* problem in silence. Experience provides us with knowledge of the world and contributes to our abilities to cope with that world, but none of this results from gaining phenomenal information. To put it another way: experience is the best teacher, but it does not teach phenomenology.⁸ And if experience does not teach phenomenology, then what else could? There is just nothing that it is like to be a phenomenologist.⁹

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⁸ This is a play on the title of David Lewis' paper 'What Experience Teaches', in W. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 499–519.

⁹ Our thanks to Robert Epperson and Jody Graham for helpful discussion.