Philosophy 355: Contemporary Philosophy
Fall 2008
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9am - 10:15am

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Class 8 - Against Qualia

I. Dennett and eliminativism

We have seen problems with every theory that sorts, or types, mental states according to folk psychology.
So, perhaps there is a problem with folk psychology.
This week, we look at a two-pronged attack on folk psychology.
Dennett denies that there are qualia, that our folk-psychological terms for our conscious experiences do not refer to anything.
Rorty and Churchland deny, more broadly, that there are minds, at least in the way that folk psychology depicts them.
Together, we can call this approach eliminativist, or Quinean.

Dennett notes that Einstein alleged that science could never give us the taste of soup.
Wittgenstein said that nothing would serve as well as something about which nothing could be said.
See this excerpt from *Philosophical Investigations* on private language and consciousness; see especially §293 on the beetle in the box.
Dennett wants to deny that qualia are anything, even something about which nothing can be said.
They are, in fact, nothing, p 413.

Dennett imagines a case of Chase and Sanborn, both of whom were tasters for, and loved, Maxwell House coffee.
After a while, both of them realize that they no longer love the same coffee.
Chase alleges that his qualia are the same, but his evaluations of those same sensations has shifted.
Sanborn alleges that his qualia have shifted.
The challenge is to determine whether they are correct, or whether they are mis-diagnosing themselves.
Perhaps the truth for each lies in between.
The point of the example is that if qualia are real, then there should be a fact of the matter about whether Chase and Sanborn are correct about their judgments.

Concerns about memory play a role in evaluating the case.
Both Chase and Sanborn claim to be able to compare their former quales with their present quales.
We can perform tests on their memories, by examining their abilities to discriminate.
If they fail such tests, then we have reason to believe that their memories are faulty, and that their claims are unsupported.
But, if they pass these tests, we still lack confirming evidence for their original claims.

We can also perform tests on their perceptual apparatus, their taste buds, to look for anomalies.
If Sanborn is right, there might be an obvious physiological explanation for the change in qualia, one which would not undermine their reality.
But, without a corresponding physiological explanation for the shift in qualia, there is no evidence to support Sanborn.

The general attack on the reality of qualia implicit in the Chase and Sanborn example relies on problems accessing our memories of qualia in order to perform intra-personal comparisons.
These problems, though, might be attributable to difficulties with memory, and not with the reality of

qualia.
Dennett slides from doubts about comparisons, in which memory does serve a role, to doubts about occurrent states, which may not be infected at all with the worries about memory.
Thus, even if we have difficulties determining the veracity of Chase and Sanborn's claims, the qualia I have now are not impugned.
Still, if qualia are inaccessible in memory, they may be useless to science, even if they are real.

The Chase and Sanborn case presents a challenge for the qualia freak.
If qualia are going to be real phenomena for which physical science must account, we should be able to rely on them to discriminate between Chase and Sanborn.
But, Dennett argues, there are reasons to think that qualia are just not substantial enough to play that role.

Dennett's argument mostly consists of characterizing the traditional notions of qualia, and then showing that there is nothing that has these characteristics.
He characterizes qualia as allegedly being:

a. ineffable (inexpressible);
b. intrinsic;
c. private; and
d. directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness, pp 411-2.

We arrive at the concepts of qualia by purifying, p 411.
We isolate qualia from their causes: both my brain state and the object impinging on my senses.
We locate our qualia purely behind Locke's veil of ideas.

II. Against ineffability

The claim of ineffability is really Nagel's claim, that we can not describe experiences in a way that would make them available to others.
Nagel used it to show the insufficiency of physical theories of the mind.
Nagel thinks that since we have qualia, theories which omit them are unacceptable.
Dennett is using ineffability to undermine the legitimacy of qualia.
If qualia are really ineffable, then we should suspect that they can play no role in legitimate, scientific explanation.

Moreover, we can eff the ineffable, at least in part.
The reason that our perceptual experiences have seemed undescribable is that they are highly sensitive, in a way that my language is unable to match.
Dennett compares my ability to discriminate sounds or colors to the complexity of the cut from a ripped Jell-O box.
The best way to describe the cut is just to find its match.
Similarly, the best way to describe my auditory experience is simply by comparing it to my own experience.
But, such experiences are not isolated from objective evaluation.
They are merely complex.

Dennett thus implies that if language were more fine-grained, more detailed, we could describe the

various phenomenal information properties (pips) of psychological events, p 429.
So-called phenomenal properties need not be ineffable, but also need not be seen as phenomenal (e.g. private and directly accessible.)

III. Against intrinsicality

Dennett uses the beer-drinking example to show that qualia have relational properties, and so are not purely intrinsic.
Every one's first sip tastes awful, but some people come to like it.
If tastes are acquired, then what we think about them shifts with our experience.
There is no single way that it tastes, independent of my past experiences.

Chase thinks that his qualia are the same, but his wife urges that once he adds the dislike he changes the experience, p 421.

In the cauliflower example, we are given a pill which makes us like cauliflower.
Since we never liked cauliflower, ex hypothesi, it would seem that the pill must change its taste.
But, another possibility is that it merely changes the way we feel about the taste.
The latter possibility is preferable, since it leaves the cauliflower alone.
But, it also means, again, that there is no way that it tastes, independent of my past experiences.

Consider also the phenol-thiol-urea example.
Some portion of humans find it extremely bitter; some find it tasteless, and whether you find it bitter or tasteless depends on your genes.
(I don't know about phenol-thiol-urea, but I had a similar experience with litmus paper.
Also, we can use prop strips (n-6-propylthiouracil) to determine whether you are a supertaster.)
Dennett argues that if we got rid of all of the humans with a genetic ability to taste it, then we would think that it is intrinsically tasteless.
If we did the reverse experiment, and got rid of all the humans with a genetic inability to taste is, then we would think that it is intrinsically bitter.
The taste is thus relational, rather than intrinsic.

One response to Dennett's beer, cauliflower, and phenol examples would be to claim that all those objects have intrinsic tastes to those who taste them, and lack intrinsic tastes to those who do not.
Remember, the intrinsicality is supposed to be a property of the qualia, not of the object tasted.
We already know, from the primary/secondary distinction, that objects have taste properties only relationally.

As Dennett later notes, the intrinsicality of secondary properties of objects has long been abandoned.
But, the question here is about the intrinsicality of the properties of my experience.
Dennett thinks that we should abandon intrinsicality for qualia just as we abandoned it for public objects.
But, the argument from analogy is weak, in part because we were able to give up the intrinsicality of color, or pain, or hot and cold, as publically observable properties, because we retained it as a property of my mental states.
Dennett's main argument is that philosophers have not provided a good account of what it means for a property to be intrinsic.
But, it seems clear that we know what we are talking about, even if necessary and sufficient conditions

are difficult to come by.
And, what's wrong with 'non-relational'?

Dennett also cites worries about visual field's being intrinsically right-side up, p 423.
This example is much stronger; recall Rosie's mirror example.
There seems to be no fact of the matter about whether the field is inverted and people adjust, or whether their field becomes resolved.
If Dennett's interpretation is correct, then the intrinsicality of my qualia seems lost.

IV. Against privacy

Against privacy, Dennett argues that qualia are not really private, but to the extent that they are, they are illegitimate.
Uncharitably, this is a bit like saying that I didn't steal the money, but if I did steal it, I had a good reason.

To show that qualia are not really private, Dennett argues that third-person assessments of our qualia may be much better than first-person assessments.
In fact, Dennett takes this to be the moral of the memory problems that Chase and Sanborn faced.
In general, our own memories are liable to errors.
Videotape is much more reliable than memory, for most of us.

Dennett also points out that third-person assessments are better than first-person assessments in cases where we evaluate lighting intensity, or our own body temperature.
In such cases, we look to objective measures, over our own apprehensions.
If we had good evidence for the immediate, and infallible, apprehension of qualia, then we would override third-person considerations.
But, considerations of memory especially, seem to erode our confidence in our first-person access.

For these reasons, empirical testing will not settle the Chase and Sanborn cases.
For, we can never know if the problem arises from faulty memory, p 420.
Still, even if third-person assessments are somehow more reliable, first-person assessments seem private.

To show that qualia are illegitimate if private, Dennett relies on a positivist argument: statements which refer to qualia are unverifiable.
Consider again the problem of inverted spectra.
It seems as if there is no way to determine whether two people have inverted spectra, since they would both agree in behavior.
Dennett imagines a tube connecting two brains, so that one person can see, with eyes closed, the visual field of the other.
At first, the grass looks red, the sky looks yellow, and I think that we have inverted qualia.
Then, we invert the tube and the colors look the way they ordinarily do.
We do not know which way is the right way to turn the tube.
One can strengthen the problem by surgically inverting portions of the brain of one individual, to invert the spectra.
But, that individual would not know whether his or her memory has failed, or if the colors are really different.

It looks as if both inter-subjective and intra-subjective comparisons of qualia are impossible.
If we can not, even in principle, compare these properties, we should be wary of thinking they are real.

Furthermore, qualia are only private in the sense that my access to them is highly idiosyncratic, p 428.
Their privacy, Dennett alleges, consists only in the fact that I alone get to respond to them.

V. Against qualia being directly or immediately apprehended

The Cartesian claim that we have direct access to our mental states entails that our experience is incorrigible.
We can not fail to seem to see red, or seem to be in pain, even if we are not actually seeing red or in pain.
The examples of cerebral achromatopsia undermine the idea that qualia are immediately apprehended.
Some subjects appear to be missing qualia.
But, others similarly can not verbally report on their qualia, even though they can perform non-verbal tasks which make it clear that they must be experiencing colors, p 424.

Similarly, consider Dennett's final intuition pump, of the guitar string, p 430.
We do not immediately hear all the harmonics, but we can be trained to hear them.
Similarly, we can train ourselves to discriminate all sorts of tastes in wine.
Not only does our ability to train up our senses once again cast doubt on the intrinsic properties of our qualia, but it seems that these properties are neither directly or immediately apprehended.
We have subjective authority, in a limited sense, but not infallibility or incorrigibility.

Consider again the Chase and Sanborn case.
Dennett argues that there is no fact of the matter whether Chase or Sanborn is right, or neither is.
Still, many of his arguments rely on problems with memory and intra-personal comparisons.
These problems may be essentially epistemic.
That is, even if qualia are real, they may be useless in science.
Thus, the response Dennett tends to get to his arguments resists his eliminative conclusion, p 417.
Still, Dennett has at least given reasons to avoid qualia in physics.

VI. Conclusions

Dennett attacks the reality of qualia.
By itself, Dennett's argument may seem less than fully satisfying.
He seems to be making a mistake against which Descartes warned.
That is, can we really deny that there are facts about our conscious experiences?

On the other hand, if we put Dennett's arguments within a broader eliminativist context, they may become more palatable.
If lots of our folk-psychological theory turns out to be wrong, maybe our intuitions about our own experiences can be re-worked.