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Citation for the published paper:

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"Externalising Qualia"

In: *A Philosophical Smorgasbord. Essays on action truth and other things in honour of Fredrick Stoutland*. Krister Segerberg and Rysiek Sliwinski

(eds.) Uppsala: Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University, 2003.

ISBN: 91-506-1673-0



Externalising Qualia

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1. Introduction

Many philosophers, for example Nagel (1974) and Chalmers (1995), argue that something essential is lost, and must be lost, if we try to reduce mental phenomena to physical phenomena. They claim that conscious mental phenomena have a peculiar qualitative aspect which cannot be accounted for in a physical theory. Colour experiences are a case in point. We all know how the redness of a ripe tomato appears to us; even those who, like myself, are colour-blind have a colour experience of a certain kind when looking at a red tomato and this experience is different from the colour experience when looking at e.g. red wine. I know how it feels to experience the colour tomato-red and I have a different feel when I experience the colour wine-red. Something analogous can be said about all kind of conscious sense impressions, be they visual, olfactory, auditory, gustatory or tactual. This subjective and qualitative aspect of all our conscious experiences is what is alluded to when it is said that there is certain *quale* attributable to all our conscious experiences. These qualia are lost, it is claimed, in any reduction of the mental to the physical; no physical description, however complete, can take these qualia into account. The core of the argument is that by necessity these qualia are subjective whereas a physical, scientific description is by nature objective.

I agree that these qualitative features of our experiences cannot be expressed in a physical vocabulary. However, I do not agree that this is an argument against reduction of the mental to the physical simply because we cannot talk about them in a mental language either. In reduction one cannot lose anything which never was part of the reduced theory. Furthermore, it is a mistake to use a generic name, 'qualia', for these features. It is even a mistake to use the expression 'qualitative features of our experiences', because such a formulation suggests that experiences are a kind of objects, things which we can talk about and which can be subject to predications, and that qualia are properties of these objects. This is not the case. The right stance towards the qualia problem is to adopt Wittgenstein's view on philosophical problems; we need philosophical therapy in order to see the conceptual confusion behind this pseudo problem. To solve the qualia problem is to dissolve it. This is my aim in what follows.

2. Reduction

The aim of reduction is to integrate one theory into a broader perspective so that we get a more comprehensive picture of reality. This is ideally accomplished by a strict derivation of the reduced theory from postulates in the target theory. However, such a strict derivation is never attained, not even in the paradigm case, i.e., reduction of thermodynamics to particle kinetics. What can be done in molecular kinetics is to derive the expression

$$pV = \frac{1}{3}Nmv^2$$

which gives an expression for pressure (p) times volume (V) in terms of the number N of molecules with mass m and mean velocity v . Comparing this with the ideal gas law of thermodynamics, i.e.

$$pV = nRT$$

one can identify absolute temperature T with mean translational kinetic energy $\frac{1}{2}mv^2$. But let us not forget that this identity is not *deduced*; rather it has the character of a decision or interpretation. Mean translational kinetic energy of the molecules of a gas is a theoretical concept whereas thermodynamic temperature is an observable, or at least is this property more observable than mean kinetic energy. One could say that identifying the two concepts makes the former theory better anchored in empirical phenomena.

When identifying two concepts taken from two theories one make them coextensional as a matter of decision or stipulation. It not to be expected that they were thus coextensional before the identification. In the example of the identification of phenomenal thermodynamics and particle kinetics the concept of temperature can be applied to electromagnetic radiation, which hardly could have been done before the reduction was accepted. Thus reduction, in the sense given here, involves some transformation of concepts in the reduced theory (and possibly also the target theory).

Let us return to the question of reduction of the mental to the physical. The aim of reduction of the mental to the physical is i) to give an analysis of mental predicates in terms of purely physical predicates; and ii) to derive laws, if there be any, in psychology from the laws of physics. The words 'physics' and 'physical' should here be understood in a broad sense, including all chemical and biological disciplines. The critics of reduction maintain that there are no concepts in the target theory which can be identified with qualia; they are lost, and must be lost, when we try to talk about our experiences using only physical concepts. It is obvious that they presuppose that we can talk about qualia in a mental language. That presupposition is wrong.

3. Properties and predicates in the realm of the mental

When people talk about qualia they use formulations indicating that they are property realists; they use expressions like 'a peculiar qualitative feature', 'a phenomenal quality' and the like. They express themselves as if qualia are properties of sensations and that these properties are lost out of sight in a physical theory about the mental.

Could an anti-realist about mental properties consistently hold that there is a problem with qualia? Perhaps he could. He could say that certain qualitative predicates used in the mental realm have no counterpart in the physical realm, and could not have any counterpart simply

because criteria of application of these qualitative predicates are subjective whereas physical predicates by necessity have objective, i.e., intersubjective criteria of application. So it seems that the qualia argument against reduction is independent of the issue of property realism.

In any case, if we want to talk about qualia, we need qualitative predicates. Predicates have criteria of application, more or less explicit and well-defined. Without criteria, no meaningful talk. Adherents of qualia presupposes, it seems, that criteria of application of qualia predicates are subjective and given in terms of felt experiences. It is presupposed that we can meaningfully talk about qualia from our subjective point of view, using a language containing phenomenal predicates. But that is false.

At first sight the idea that qualia are properties of experiences appears innocuous. Take for example my experience a moment ago of the colour of a ripe tomato at the kitchen table. This experience has a certain qualitative character, which I recognise when looking at the tomato. This quality I tentatively describe as my experience of the colour of a ripe tomato. It seems reasonable to say that there is a mental event, viz., my experience, and that it has a certain qualitative property, a *quale*, which we describe as 'the redness of red tomatoes'. Let us call this particular experience *a* and its qualitative character *Q*. Thus the statement that my experience a moment ago of the colour of a ripe tomato has a certain qualitative character *Q* can be abbreviated *Qa*.

Suppose my wife also have seen the ripe tomato a moment ago. Her experience is different from mine in the sense that it is a different token event. Let us call her experience *b*. Did she perceive the same qualitative aspect of the red tomato? I guess most people would say that of course she did; we all know how a ripe tomato looks like. We are inclined to say that we had the same *kind* of experience, our experience had the same quality.

Now, there is a complexion here, viz. that I am colour blind, I have difficulties with red-green contrasts. Does that mean that I have different qualitative experiences from people with normal colour vision? It seems obvious that the answer is yes. But how do we know?

One thing is quite obvious to me: I have different experiences of red-green *contrasts* as compared to people with normal vision. For example, I often have difficulties of seeing a red ball in the green lawn, (and still worse, an orange object on green background) whereas people with normal vision perceive such a contrast as clear and distinct. And it is easy to give external and effectively decidable criteria for telling whether someone has defective vision as regards colour contrasts. But the peculiar thing is that when it comes to intersubjective comparisons of the very colour experiences taken in isolation, no such criteria exist.

The method of determining whether someone is colour blind or not is to have him look at plates filled with differently coloured spots. Spots with colours contrasting to other spots make up certain figures, usually numerals, and I, like other colour blinds, cannot see some of these numerals. So the method is to check the ability to perceive contrasts. However, looking at one

colour at time I can most often tell what colour it has, I can usually tell whether something is red or green. (But for example dark brown and dark green is very difficult for me to distinguish.)

It is clear that the function of colour words is to classify externally observable objects; defective colour vision results in difficulties to classify external objects in the same way as people with normal colour vision.

When I tell people that I'm colour blind, they often ask me; how does red look for you? What should I answer? I usually say; it looks red of course!

But how do I know how red looks to others and how do others know how red appears to me? Perhaps our subjective experiences are completely different. Can we even know that two persons with normal colour vision have the same colour experiences? Is it possible that a person's colour spectrum is completely inverted as compared with other people? A natural response is to say that as a matter of principle one cannot compare one's own experiences with others, so the question is not meaningful. But I doubt that that is the correct answer.

4. Condition for meaningful predication

The very point of making a statement is to say something true. So what are the truth conditions for a statement of the form 'my experience *a* has the subjective phenomenal quality *Q*'? As the quality *Q* is a subjectively experienced quality, the truth conditions cannot be subject to intersubjective control. So I must check for myself whether my present sensation really has the quality *Q* or not. As *Q* is a predicate it must be meaningful to ask whether it applies to more than one object, i.e., more than one token experience. Observe the difference between asking whether a *physical object* has a particular property and asking whether *my experience of a physical object* has a particular property. We can ask whether the tomato which I am looking at really has the colour of ripe tomatoes and people can agree or disagree about the answer. A completely different question is whether my *subjective experience* has a certain property or not. This is the question whether a private language is possible or not and Wittgenstein has given strong arguments to the effect that such a language is not possible.

Wittgenstein's argument against a private language depends crucially on his notion that if a term, a linguistic item, public or private, is to have any use and hence any meaning, there must be effective criteria by which the correctness of the use of the item in question can be decided. And if the occurrence of the state of affairs to which the linguistic item applies is strictly private, there is no distinction between a term really being correctly used and merely appearing correctly used. It follows that talk about criteria for use of such a term is a misrepresentation of the situation. Wittgenstein concluded that we cannot really say that a linguistic item refers to something *strictly* private, a state which has no connection whatsoever to something publicly accessible (1953, §§ 243 ff. esp. § 304). I think Wittgenstein is correct on this point. What is needed in this context is merely an extension of his argument to predicates purportedly used for talking about phenomenal qualities of conscious experiences.

I urge the reader to try to formulate a sentence which says that her experience of, say, an object with a certain colour has a certain qualitative property. One cannot with good meaning say anything like 'my present experience of green grass is green'; such a statement is trivially true. If you instead try something like 'my experiences are green like the greenness of grass' you have in fact not said anything about the qualitative properties of your experiences *per se* but classified them using an intersubjective criterion; your present colour experience belongs to a specified class which tentatively could be defined as all those experiences caused by green grass observed under normal conditions. Whether different people have different qualitative experiences of this particular colour (assuming for a moment that this expression makes good sense) is irrelevant for the question whether they will agree or disagree about the truth of the statement. The only thing that counts is whether two individuals agree on the classification of external states of affairs or not.

Predication is the same as classification. The content of making the statement 'Qa' is that the speaker identifies a certain object referred to by 'a' and maintains that it belongs to a certain class, viz., the class of objects satisfying the predicate Q. And classification, to be meaningful, requires intersubjective criteria. (Extension to polyadic predicates is trivial) So even in the realm of our subjective sensations we describe them by using concepts whose meaning are given in terms of publicly accessible state of affairs.

The fact that we have no choice but to describe our experiences in terms of external objects, properties or features could be described as a kind of *externalism*: we *classify* our experiences in terms of external and publicly accessible objects and features. The very *process of having a subjective experience* is something which occurs in our brain and mind, but the *classification of these experiences*, and hence their description, is done by using external circumstances. Davidson has a similar stance concerning the contents of our thoughts; they occur inside our skulls but their classification and description is performed by using external state of affairs.¹ Davidson points out that externalists such as Putnam are correct in maintaining that identification of the contents of our thoughts is done by using external conditions, but wrong when concluding that our thoughts are not in our heads. Our *thought processes* are going on in our heads, for sure. However, when we shall describe what we are thinking *about*, i.e., describe the *content of our thoughts*, we must turn to external state of affairs. The criteria for identification of a particular thought are external. The conclusion is exactly similar in the case of our sensations. They occur in our minds (or heads if you like), but their identification, classification and description can only be done using external state of affairs.

One could object that we can have thoughts about imagined states and events which do not occur, in which case it appears not reasonable to claim that the contents of these imaginations are not external. I think a reasonable response can be given, but it is hardly necessary do go into

topic in this context, since qualitative experiences which one never has had cannot, I think, be imagined. Of course we can imagine that for example a banana is red instead of yellow, but the imagined state of affairs is a never seen combination of a shape of banana and the colour red, both being described by using external criteria.

If criteria for identification of subjective experiences are expressed in terms of external state of affairs, it is possible that two persons have exactly the same kind of experience. This might seem clearly wrong; it has often been said that no two persons can look at the same thing from exactly the same angle and hence no two persons can have exactly the same experience. This argument misses the point. Identity criteria for the content of our sensational states are usually not that fine-grained and independent of the degree of fine structure. When two people look at the same thing, for example a robin, from two different angles, ordinarily, they both describe their mental states as 'seeing a robin', although a detailed description of their visual fields would show some differences. Our cognitive apparatus works in such a way that the conscious experiences are not experiences of elements of visual fields such as patches of colour, contours, etc. Rather, our internal data processing results normally in a perception of objects against a background. Hence if two people see the same object against roughly the same background, we usually say that they both see the same thing. In short, perceptual states are usually described in terms of external objects. The same goes for shapes and colours. If two people look at a round plate, one from above and one from the side, their visual fields are different; from above the plate appears round whereas from the side it appears elliptic. But if asked how the shape of the plate appears to them, they will usually both say that it appears round. Our visual apparatus works in that way; when we move around in space and look at the objects, the physical stimuli emanating from one and the same object changes dramatically. But what is important for our ability to navigate in the environment is not these variances but that there are invariances behind the differences and these invariances are best described as physical objects. Colour vision works similarly.

Classification of observable properties, i.e., properties had by external physical things, and classification of subjective experiences of these properties coincide necessarily. So the common sense idea that we all have the same colour experience when looking at a ripe tomato is in fact correct, despite the fact that we cannot have the experiences of other people and despite the fact that two people might look at the same tomato from different angles and being stimulated by light of slightly different wave length distribution.

It is illuminating to compare the present case with Wittgenstein's 'beetle in the box' thought experiment in §293 of *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a situation in which everyone has a box which no one else can look into. All claim that they have a beetle in their box. But how do they know? The question whether different people have the same sort of

¹ D. Davidson: *Knowing ones own Mind*. pp. 15-38 in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford

thing in their boxes cannot as a matter of principle be answered. Indeed they may not have anything at all. But what could be meant by someone saying that he has a beetle in his box? Wittgenstein concluded that if we construe the grammar for expressions for experiences as terms referring to some kind of private mental objects, these objects cancel out as irrelevant.

It is important to notice that in this imagined situation the beetles in the boxes have no causal connections to external states of affairs. Wittgenstein's argument is aimed to show that it is impossible to say anything about a subjective experience completely unconnected to what goes on around us. But qualia are not of that kind; qualia are thought to be features of sense experiences, experiences caused by external state of affairs. (Experiences of inner states such as pains and dreams are also thought to have qualitative features, but this raises problems of its own which can be disregarded for the time being.)

An experience is a mental event, an event occurring at a particular time and place and in a particular person. This kind of event can be talked about, but only in terms of external state of affairs. The same is true of its qualities. Qualities of experiences can be talked about using external properties, just as inner states can be talked about using criteria in terms of external states.

I can imagine two reactions to this conclusion. Either one could say; fine this argument shows that, after all, qualia is no obstacle for reduction. The qualitative aspect is in fact not lost in the reduction, it only so appeared. An alternative response, perhaps more plausible, is to say that I have failed to address the qualia problem: nothing is said about the subjective inner experiences *per se*. To those who take the latter stance my response is: tell me what your own experiences of red tomatoes are like and do that without referring to external objects and state of affairs. I submit you will fail.

It does not follow that qualia does not exist. One can consistently claim that there exist qualities of which I can have direct personal knowledge, what Russell called knowledge by acquaintance, and at the same time accept that these experiences cannot be talked about. Suppose this is the truth about the matter. It is nevertheless no obstacle for reduction of the mental to the physical.

The conclusion is thus that we have two options but neither of them results in any argument against reduction. Either we say that qualia are properties of experiences which can be talked about, or we say that qualia cannot be talked about as a matter of principle. In the former case qualia do not cause any obstacle for reduction since criteria for the use of qualia terms are external and objective and can be integrated into a physical theory. In the latter case qualia are neither an obstacle for reduction since they cannot be part of any theory about the mental and hence qualia cannot be lost in reduction. Therefore there is no qualia problem which reductionists must solve.

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