

Qualia and the Problem of Universals

Mark F. Sharlow

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the logical relationship between the question of the reality of qualia and the problem of universals. I argue that nominalism is inconsistent with the existence of qualia, and that realism either implies or makes plausible the existence of qualia. Thus, one's position on the existence of qualia is strongly constrained by one's answer to the problem of universals.

1. Introduction

The question of the reality of qualia is one of the most contentious issues in the philosophy of mind today. This question has many angles and facets; I will not try to summarize all aspects of the question here. Instead, I will point out a little-noticed feature of this question: its dependence upon another, seemingly unrelated, philosophical problem. Specifically, I will contend that the answer to the question "Do qualia exist?" depends upon the answer to the *problem of universals*. This latter problem is a very old philosophical issue which, at first glance, would seem to have little to do with present-day debates about the nature of consciousness.¹ I will argue that the solution that one adopts for the problem of universals constrains, and may even completely determine, the positions that one consistently can take with regard to the existence of qualia. One's answer to the problem of universals may force one (logically speaking) to deny the existence of qualia, to accept the existence of qualia across the board, or to hold that some kinds of qualia exist and others do not. Since most arguments for or against qualia make no contact with the problem of universals, it is likely that most such arguments leave out something important.

2. Qualia and the Nature of Properties

If qualia are anything, they are properties. Some philosophers tend to speak as though qualia are features of experiences, or else features of mental states or of brain states. (See, for example, [Dennett 2, pp. 17 and 373].) Other philosophers [Lewis, pp. 121-3] speak as though qualia are properties that exist *within* experience; this amounts to saying that qualia are properties that things seem to have. In either case, qualia are portrayed, either explicitly or implicitly, as properties. Some proponents of qualia might find that their conceptions of qualia do not quite fit into this mold. In particular, there is a tendency to

speak of qualia as if they were much like sense-data, traditionally conceived, and hence more like things or events than properties. But even if one speaks this way, one can think of qualia as features that things seem to have, and hence as properties of sorts. If this view is correct (and I will assume for now that it is), then the answer to the question "Do qualia exist?" depends in part upon the answer to the question "Do properties exist?"

The problem of universals, in simplest terms, is the question of whether multiply exemplifiable abstract entities, such as properties and relations, are real. Since qualia are properties, the set of positions that one consistently can hold with regard to the existence of qualia depends upon one's position on the existence of properties.

If you are a strict nominalist, and do not believe that properties exist at all, then your ontology cannot include qualia -- no matter how much you might want to believe in qualia for other reasons. Your picture of reality cannot include items like qualia, for the same reason that it cannot include items like squareness and tallness. Of course, you can speak of all these items, but you must understand your statements about them as mere figures of speech. When you speak of qualia, you cannot really mean to imply that qualia exist. This puts you in the same position as the most ardent opponents of qualia, who, while denying qualia, sometimes concede that one can speak as if qualia existed. If you are a nominalist, and if qualia are properties, then you must be an opponent of real qualia, on pain of inconsistency.

Someone might object to the preceding argument on the grounds that I have misconstrued the problem about qualia. According to this objection, the claim that there are qualia does not really commit one to the existence of qualia as real abstract objects. Instead, the objection goes, a philosopher of mind who claims that qualia exist is using "exist" in an ontologically noncommittal sense, much as a physicist speaks of mass without taking a position as to the reality of properties. But this objection ignores the nature of the controversy over the existence of qualia. Philosophers of mind who debate the existence of qualia are trying to determine what *really exists* in the machinery of the mind. They are not merely arguing about whether we can speak *as if* there are qualia (though that question may concern them as a side issue). They are not like the physicist, who

speaks freely of specific properties and relations and leaves it to others to determine whether properties and relations in general are mere figures of speech. Determining what entities are involved in consciousness is part of the project of the philosophy of mind -- and this determination is an ontological project. A philosopher of mind who says that there is no Cartesian ego *really means* that there is no Cartesian ego -- that there is nothing in reality that answers to the concept of a Cartesian ego. A philosopher who says that there is no Cartesian ego is not using "is" prephilosophically, as is a physicist who says that there is mass and there is time. There is no way around the fact that the philosopher really is denying the existence of a purported entity. Similarly, opponents of qualia really are trying to say that there are no qualia -- that if we inventoried everything in reality, we would not find qualia in stock. (At least this is the way I read those authors.) And this is exactly what a nominalist must say about qualia. Thus, a nominalist must be an opponent of the existence of qualia.

If, on the other hand, you are a realist with respect to properties, then it is consistent for you to hold that qualia exist. Being a realist does not, in itself, force you to believe in qualia. However, there are many different kinds of realism -- and if you believe the right kind of realism, it may be obligatory for you to believe that qualia exist, on pain of inconsistency. I will argue for this last claim in later sections of this paper.

Before going further, I wish to point out that there are two different kinds of property that a quale might be. I alluded to these two kinds a few paragraphs ago. Now I will make them more explicit:

- (1) One might regard qualia as features of conscious experiences. For example, one might think of an experience of seeing green as possessing a special, subjective, phenomenal feature; this feature is the quale of green. Philosophers of mind sometimes talk about qualia in this way, as features of experiences -- or, alternatively, of mental states or brain states. (See, for example, [Dennett 2, pp. 17 and 373].) If one thinks about qualia in this way, then qualia are properties that conscious experiences (or mental states or brain states) can have.

(2) On the other hand, one might think of qualia as properties *found in* experience -- as qualities that are presented to us in our conscious experiences. (See, for example, [Lewis, pp. 121-3].) People often talk as if qualia were like this -- for example, when people speak of a perceived shade of green as a quale. According to this way of thinking about qualia, a quale is not simply a property that belongs to conscious experiences. Instead, a quale is a property that *seems to be exemplified*. For example, if one has a subjective experience of a shade of green, then this shade of green is a property that part of one's visual field seems to have. The old distinction between "physical color" (in the world) and "psychological color" (in the mind) reflects this way of thinking about the phenomenal aspects of experience. This way of thinking about qualia amounts to the categorization of the subjective qualities found in experience as properties that seem to be exemplified.

(I wish to emphasize that these two descriptions of qualia represent nothing more than two different conceptions of qualia. I am *not* claiming that there are two different kinds of qualia. Presumably, if there are any qualia at all, then all qualia are of only one of these two kinds.)

The impact of the problem of universals on the question of qualia depends upon which of these two understandings of qualia is correct. I will explore this impact separately for each of the two versions of qualia.

3. Qualia as Contents of Experience

Let us begin by examining the second conception of qualia: that of qualia as properties that seem to be exemplified. If qualia are like this, then the answer to the question "Do qualia exist?" hangs on the answer to the question: "Can a property that only seems to be exemplified exist?"

If you are a realist, then your answer to this question depends upon what kind of

realist you are. Some realists hold that a property exists only if it is exemplified. Other realists maintain that there exist properties that are only *possibly* exemplified. (See [Armstrong, pp. 80-81] for a brief discussion, and rejection, of the latter view.) According to this latter view, not every property P satisfies "For some x, x has P." Instead, there are properties which satisfy "Possibly, for some x, x has P," but which do not satisfy "For some x, x has P." Proponents of this view holds that the actual instantiation of P is not necessary for the existence of P; instead, the existence of P only requires the instantiation of P within (so to speak) the scope of a specific modal operator. Now take note of the following fact: "It seems that" is a modal operator every bit as legitimate as "Possibly." (See [Sharlow 1, pp. 53-54].) The phrase "It seems that" introduces an intensional (with an "s") context, just as do other modal operators like those of possibility, necessity, belief and knowledge. Once one accepts that a property may be only *possibly* exemplified and still exist, then it is not too implausible to suppose that a property may be only *seemingly* exemplified and still exist. In both cases, the property "exists" only within a modal context of some sort -- within a merely possible world (in the case of possibility), or a merely apparent situation (in the case of seeming). Indeed, in many cases, a property that *seems* to be exemplified is a property that *possibly* is exemplified. (One obvious example would be the property of being a pink elephant -- assuming that someone actually is hallucinating such an animal.)

Of course, a realist who believes that possibly exemplified properties are real does not have to believe, across the board, that seemingly exemplified properties are real. However, it may be difficult to successfully defend one of these beliefs without inadvertently providing at least some support for the other.

A realist who believes that only actually exemplified properties are real is stuck with the conclusion that there are no qualia of kind (2) as defined in Section 2 -- with the potential exception of qualia that are really, not just seemingly, exemplified by physical objects. In view of the fact that qualia are phenomenal, psychological qualities, we can safely assume that this exception is empty. (A physical object can exemplify physical green; how can a physical object, apart from our experiences of it, actually exemplify

psychological green, or the *feel* of green?) Thus, a realist of this kind can only believe in qualia of kind (1). As I will show in the next section, such a realist may actually be compelled to believe in qualia of kind (1).

4. Qualia as Properties of States or Experiences

Qualia of kind (1) are properties exemplified by conscious experiences -- or, depending upon the details of one's account of qualia, by mental states or by brain states. In this section, I will argue that some kinds of realism require us to believe in properties that possess the most important features of these qualia. I will begin by defining a particular property which has some of the salient features of a quale of kind (1). I will define this property as a property of brain states. Those who prefer to think of qualia as properties of experiences, mental states, or something else can change the definition and the argument accordingly.

Let us call a state of a human brain a *b-state* if any person whose brain is in precisely that state would experience the color blue. If the phenomenal aspects of a person's experiences are uniquely determined by the goings-on in that person's brain (as materialists, at least, probably must believe), then the set of b-states is well-defined.² One can foresee certain potential objections to the concept of a b-state. I will try to dispose of two of these objections before I proceed.

(Objection I) Many materialists (especially followers of Dennett) might argue against the concept of a b-state on the grounds that the content of experience is not determined by a single, temporally sharp state of the brain. (Dennett's theory in *Consciousness Explained* implies there generally is no fact of the matter about the content of an experience until after the putative time of the experience has passed; see [Dennett 2, pp. 134-6].) This objection misses the mark because our definition of b-state does not require a b-state to be a state of an instantaneous temporal slice. To accommodate Dennett, we might have to take the b-states to be non-instantaneous

states, defined at stretches of history instead of at single slices. There is nothing suspect in this idea of a non-instantaneous state. This idea of a state makes sense for the same reason that a news commentator can make sense when speaking of "the state of the world over the past year."

(Objection II) A strict behaviorist or an eliminativist, who does not believe in experiences at all, might argue that we should not say that humans experience blue. However, such a person still could say that most human brains sometimes go through states which, in everyday language, are called states of experiencing blue. No harm is done to anyone's position if we adopt these states as our b-states. Thus, we can define b-states in such a way that even behaviorists and eliminativists must accept that humans sometimes are in b-states.

With these two objections out of the way, we continue the argument. Realists typically hold that things exemplify a common abstract object if those things have what prephilosophical discourse calls a "common feature". (For example, all square things exemplify the abstract object which can be called squareness.) Certainly, all b-states have a common feature; they have something definite, and most significant, in common. One might wonder what, if anything, the b-states have in common with one another at the neurophysiological level. However, this last question does not matter to our present argument, since the b-states, as we defined them, certainly have something in common at a behavioral level at very least. Hence if realism is right, then all of the b-states exemplify a common abstract object. Call this abstract object Q.

According to the view (1) of qualia (with brain states as the items that exemplify qualia), the quale of blue is a property shared in common by all and only those brain states that are associated with the experiencing of blue. Q is a property of this sort. What is the difference between Q and the alleged quale of blue?

One apparent difference is that the quale of blue is "given" in experience; that is, the subject has access to the quale. However, the subject also has a kind of access to Q.

Certainly the subject, if able to see blue and if possessed of ordinary self-awareness, can respond selectively to those states of his/her brain that have Q. (People who see and talk about blue things do this all the time.) If the subject learns the definition of Q, then the subject can say when his/her brain is in a state having Q. Thus, the subject has a degree of access to Q, as to the quale.

A major philosophical issue related to qualia is the issue of the first-person character of consciousness. It is worth noting that the property Q has a kind of first-person accessibility. If you have first-person access to the fact that you are seeing blue, then you also have access, in a slightly less direct way, to the fact that your brain states have Q. Of course, you cannot tell exactly what your brain is doing, but if you already know that your brain is in a state with Q if and only if you are experiencing blue, then you can tell at once that your brain is in a state with Q. Also, if there are facts about your experiences of blue that are third-person *in*accessible (as some philosophers would claim), then there are facts about Q that are third-person inaccessible as well. For example, if no one but you can tell how it feels to you to see blue, then no one but you can tell how it feels to have a brain state that has Q. Thus, Q has a kind of first-person accessibility, and also has a kind of third-person *in*accessibility provided that experiences of blue have third-person *in*accessibility.

Another objection to identification of Q with the quale of blue arises from the conviction that a quale is something "immediate" for consciousness -- not an abstract, and abstractly defined, property like Q. But this feeling is groundless, since a quale, as ordinarily understood, already is an abstract object, and in fact is defined in a rather abstract way. (To convince yourself of the last point, think carefully about the meaning of the familiar phrase "phenomenal qualities of experience.") If we refuse to accept that Q is a quale, then we have simply refused to identify one abstractly defined, first-person accessible property with another.

Still another objection to the identification of Q with the quale arises from the view that qualia must be something in addition to the physical substance of the brain. One is most likely to hear objections along these lines from dualists, although advocates of

emergent properties might pose similar objections. However, these objections lack force for a realist, for the following reason. Properties, on the realist view, have an existence of their own, distinct from the existence of the things that exemplify them. This is the case even for properties that have reductive scientific explanations. (For example, metallic objects exemplify the abstract property of metallicness, even though the metallic behavior of matter has a reductive scientific explanation.) If realism is right, then Q is an abstract entity distinct from the material of the brain -- for the same reason that metallicness is an entity distinct from a piece of metal. Thus, Q is, in a sense, "above and beyond" the physical substance of the brain. (One emphatically should *not* read this last statement as an assertion of substance dualism.)

Does the property Q have all of the features that qualia should have? The answer depends upon the details of one's understanding of qualia; some people may have to give up some of their ideas about qualia to see Q as a quale. However, Q has enough of the central features of qualia to make the identification of Q as a quale relatively strain-free.

We conclude that a realist should believe in qualia, or at least in properties having the most central features of qualia, if qualia are properties of brain states. The same conclusion would follow if we had taken qualia to be properties of mental states or of experiences.

5. Concluding Remarks

The arguments in this paper suggest that the answer to the question "Do qualia exist?" is strongly constrained by the answer to the problem of universals. Whether you can believe consistently in qualia depends upon what you believe about the ontological status of abstract objects.

In a sense, the problem of the ontological status of qualia is *parasitic* upon the more general problem of the ontological status of properties. This statement is not meant to demean the problem of the status of qualia, but simply to emphasize the fact that the answer to the first problem depends upon the answer to the second. If certain kinds of

realism are true, then qualia are real, period -- regardless of how much the qualophobes may inveigh against them. If nominalism is true, then qualia simply are not part of the ontology of the world, regardless of any arguments put forth by qualophiles. Certain kinds of realism allow for qualia, but place constraints on what qualia can be. Most importantly, if you refuse to take a position on the ontological status of properties, then you will have no firm grounds for claiming either that qualia exist, or that they do not exist.

These conclusions have broad implications for the current debate over the ontological status of qualia. In particular, our conclusions suggests that certain lines of argument about qualia miss the point. Particularly suspect are those anti-qualia arguments that deploy baskets of facts about brain function, computation, perceptual oddities, etc. to debunk qualia (for example, in [Dennett 2]). If certain kinds of realism are true, then qualia are real, period, regardless of the details of how the nervous system works. The status of abstract objects has a much greater bearing on the reality of qualia than do the details of neuroscience; the question of the scientific utility of qualia has very little bearing here. The problem of the existence of qualia is irreducibly an ontological problem -- or perhaps even a logical problem. To find a solution to this problem, one must rely, at least in part, upon old-fashioned ontological analysis. Scientific facts, even when supplemented with some science-based philosophical reasoning, are not sufficient to do the job.

Notes

1. Within the context of the debate over consciousness, Dennett (in [Dennett 1]) has addressed one aspect of this problem and has proposed what he calls a "mild realism" with regard to patterns. Despite appearances, this has little to do with the traditional problem of universals; see my critique in [Sharlow 2].
2. I realize that I am ignoring a number of issues about supervenience here. What I am asserting here does not, I think, require a resolution of these issues.

References

- [Armstrong] Armstrong, D. M. *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989.
- [Dennett 1] Dennett, Daniel C. "Real Patterns." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 88, no. 1 (Jan. 1991), pp. 27-51.
- [Dennett 2] Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.
- [Lewis] Lewis, C. I. *Mind and the World-Order*. London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.
- [Sharlow 1] Sharlow, M. F. *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.
- [Sharlow 2] Sharlow, M. F. "Platonizing the Abstract Self." Preprint, 2004.