

## ON THE EXISTENCE OF QUALIA

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The notion of qualia (as qualitative Properties of our conscious experiences) is introduced through discussion of Daniel Dennett's Paper «Quining qualia», where Dennett tries to show that the traditional concept of qualia is so thoroughly confused, arguing that it should be completely abandoned. Choosing the eliminative materialist's position, he denies the existence of qualia as mental properties. The Author's intention is to show that Dennett's arguments for denying the existence of qualia are, at least, not conclusive.

One of the most interesting issues in contemporary philosophy of mind is: how to explain the qualitative character of conscious mental states and processes? The question is important because if we can find any plausible explanation of that problem it would certainly have important implications for the important traditional philosophical issue, namely — the mind-body problem. But what does that mean: »the qualitative character of conscious mental states and processes«? It is clear (for those who have luck not to be blind) that there are distinctive qualitative features in seeing red in comparison with those in seeing green, for example. Obviously, introspectibility is the crucial property of our mental states and processes that allows us to determine their qualitative character. There is always »something that it is like« to see blood, to listen to Beethoven, to smell a lilac, to feel a pain, to touch cold metal, to taste a lemonade, etc. In referring to that »something that it is like«, to that qualitative character of our conscious experience, philosophers usually use the term *qualia* (pl. *qualia*) trying to emphasize the qualitative aspect which other mental states, such as beliefs, intentions, etc. lack. Such mental states (with nonqualitative character) are paradigmatic examples of so called propositional attitudes — mental states whose content can be specified by a proposition. Such characterization (in the form of propositional attitudes) seems rather plausible for beliefs and intentions, but difficulties appear when we try to apply it for the introspectible qualitative property characteristic for the smell of a lilac, for example. Even if everyone knew the smell of a lilac, there would be no conclusive objective

evidence for determining the identity or nonidentity of subjective experiences caused by smelling the lilac. Moreover, I am not even sure if my present experience of smelling the lilac is identical to my analogous experience that occurred 5 years ago. As we can see, we have serious troubles just trying to individuate the entity. But, moreover, even if we put aside that problem, I wonder are there any possibilities for translating the mental entities into verbal or symbolic (propositional) medium without residuum. In other words, I want to emphasize the fact that propositional specification of the qualitative character of our subjective experiences still remains an open question. So what do we have as a help in understanding the nature of qualia? Unfortunately, it seems that only introspection appears as a bridge that connects us with our mental content — unfortunately, because that bridge is not a reliable one.

Anyway, we must accept the unpleasant fact that it is hard even to define the notion of qualia or maybe it is better to say that there are no consensus in defining such a notion. At first sight, it seems that we all know very well what qualia are, especially on the epistemic level, but agreement very soon disappears at the ontological or semantical level of explanation of that »mysterious« entity. Some philosophers have founded their strategy, concerning the problem of qualia, in denying the existence of qualia. For them, qualia are simply not real entities at all. However, the only evident fact is that philosophers' intuitions about qualia extremely differ. For some of them the problem of the existence of qualia is just a pseudoproblem, which can be easily solved relying on progress in such sciences as physics, neurophysiology, chemistry or biology. For others, qualia are one of the last ditches (with emotions, of course) in defending the notion of mentality, which is seriously undermined by scientific discoveries in the twentieth century. The optimism of the former (we may call them materialists comes as a result of progress in the so-called neurosciences (for example: neuropsychology, neurophysiology, neurology, etc.), and, also, in the field of artificial intelligence. But, the greater their euphoria, the stronger are the latter in defending the existence of the content of consciousness (with qualia as one of the most useful defense weapons).

For me, the most interesting is the attitude which says that the notion of qualia should be completely abandoned (as we have abandoned the notion of phlogiston or elan vital), because it is seriously flawed and may lead us in a completely wrong way. Consequently, the problem of qualia is, in fact, a pseudoproblem, because the reality of qualia is denied either as content of consciousness or even as mental representation of properties of

the external objects. In short, it is a position that treats qualia as nonexistent objects. Paul and Patricia Churchland are, amongst others, philosophers who hold that position, but I think it is most explicitly represented in Daniel Dennett's paper »Quining Qualia«<sup>1</sup>. According to my view, the explanation of qualia is still a problem, not a pseudoproblem. So, in this paper, I shall try to prove that Dennett's arguments, against the existence of qualia, are, at least, not conclusive. I agree with Dennett that the source of misunderstandings lies in the notion of qualia, but I do not agree that eliminative materialism is the adequate strategy for understanding the nature of phenomena that occur in our consciousness.

The term qualia has its origin in the seventieth century, but it didn't become widely accepted until the structuralist movement in psychology. Structuralists introduced the term and considered qualia as simple, uninterpreted elements of experience, so qualia were, according to their doctrine, one of the basic objects of their examinations. On the philosophers' side in 1923, C. D. Broad presented a classical version of the theory of qualia<sup>2</sup>, but, in English, the term qualia is introduced in 1929 by C. I. Lewis<sup>3</sup>. In the last 20 years the problem of qualia has become one of the most intriguing issues in the focus of philosophers' interest. We may say that the initial motivation for the revival of interest came in 1974, with a paper of Thomas Nagel: »What Is It Like to Be a Bat?«, which is nowadays treated as a classic in the field of philosophy of mind. In that paper Nagel tries to emphasize the gap which every objective theory must overcome, if it aspires to explain the mind-body problem. That gap is founded on the existence of the subjective character of experience, and, consequently, on the existence of qualia. After that paper lots of papers appeared as an attempt to show that the alleged subjective character of experience is just an illusion and that it can be captured with objective explanation. Whether only attempts or real successes, as a result we have various physicalistic, behaviouristic or functionalistic theories in explanation of qualia. On the other side, we have numerous papers representing a defense of irreducibly mental features — qualia. From the present perspec-

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1. The expression »to quine« is used in an ironical sense, and its meaning: »to deny resolutely the existence or importance of something real or significant.« Dennett took from *PHILOSOPHICAL LEXICON*, (1978), whose editor was Dennett himself.
  2. C. D. Broad (1923): *SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT*, Routledge and Kegan Paul; London.
  3. C. I. Lewis (1929): *MIND AND THE WORLD ORDER*, Charles Scribner; New York.

tive, it is obvious that we'll have to wait for a consensus when we talk about qualia. I think it is the speculativity of arguments that disables us to have a final judgement, but, I hope we can find an adequate solution with a »little« help from scientific discoveries.

But, let's attend to Dennett's paper, which is divided into three partes. In the first part he shows what philosophers usually mean when they use the term qualia. He, also, examines the relation of the notion of qualia and the human experience. In the second part Dennett tries to destroy the traditional concept of qualia giving an excellent example with a case of a putative qualia inversion, and in the third part he tries to explain why the traditional (or shall we say folk-psychological) concept of qualia seems so attractive, and how its acceptance can cloud the real truth about qualia. Of course, he also offers a solution for that problem (which is a pseudoproblem, in his opinion) — complete abandonment of the misleading concept of qualia. There are two aspects of his strategy for denying the existence of something that tradition calls qualia. When Dennett proves that traditional concept of qualia has no extension he takes a position of eliminative materialism. According to that philosophical position our folk-psychological concepts necessarily mislead us in understanding the internal states and processes specific for our »mentality«, so, they deserve a thorough revision or complete abandonment, elimination (as in the case of *elan vital* or *phlogiston*). They should be replaced with concepts which extension includes only physical entities. This is the reason why only materialistic theories (for example matured neuroscience) can explain and predict our internal states and processes. The second aspect of Dennett's strategy is based on the tradition of philosophical behaviourism, which assumes that conceptual confusion is the real source of philosophical problems. According to the philosophical behaviourists, in principle, it is possible to describe all our internal states and processes taking into account only our observable potential or actual behaviour. That kind of description should refer only to our reactions to stimuli and to the dispositional properties for reacting, which means that qualia get their meaning with operational definitions, because they are nothing more than physical properties that can be defined as a result of a particular set of operations.

In Dennett's opinion we make a big mistake if we think that we can isolate qualia, or, in other words, the way things look, sound, feel, taste, smell to us from:

1) stimulation (in this case Dennett has big troubles in explaining the occurrence of mental images, which, in my opinion,

can occur without observable external stimulation. Of course, his answer is that the traditional concept of the mental image should be abandoned for the similar reasons as in the case of qualia)<sup>4</sup>

2) non-perceptual influence (I have to say that this is a very important aspect of our problem. We can't deny that memory, for example, has great significance in assumed qualia production. But, how to isolate, and especially how to measure, its influence still remains a serious problem. I think that our present poor understanding of human cognitive organization should not serve as a reason for a claim that we can not in principle measure, for example, the influence of memory on producing the mental image of skunk's smell)

3) behaviour (this is not so obvious. Most of the people have strong intuitive appeal that something »mental«, for example qualia, occur between the appearance of stimulus and the reaction to that stimulus. I shall try to support that intuition with the following example: Every experienced telegraphist is certainly well acquainted with the timedifference in his reactions to audible signals of Morse code (when he was unexperienced in telegraphy he needed much more time for his behavioural reaction). His behavioural reaction usually consists of writing an appropriate symbol for various signals. Let us imagine two telegraphists — one is experienced and the other unexperienced. Imagine, that at the same time, they have the same stimulus — for example, the sound that represents »E«. It is obvious that their behavioural reaction will differ in time. Why is it so? Of course, to be a good telegraphist is a learned skill and the reaction time also depends on abilities, memory, concentration or some other factors. But, the question is: can we isolate in time their reaction, their behaviour from the appearance of quale. I think we can, in a rough way, but, in principle, it is possible. In my opinion quale appears approximately at the same time, which can be proved with telegraphists' reports based on introspection, but, behavioural reaction obviously differs, which means that we can look at qualia and behavioural reaction as distinctive entities)

4) belief (at this point I also disagree with Dennett. Let's consider an argument from illusion, based on consuming LSD. Imagine that we have an experience of seeing a deep hole painted

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4. For more detailed picture, see his papers: »The Nature of Images and the Introspective Trap«, in: *CONTENT AND CONSCIOUSNESS* (1969), Routledge and Kegan Paul; London, and: »Two Approaches to Mental Images«, in: *BRAINSTORMS: PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS ON MIND AND PSYCHOLOGY* (1979), MIT Press/A Bradford Book, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

pink, as a result of LSD influence. So, our belief is that we have a Pink object in front of us. For the sake of argument, let us assume that we are, at the same time, aware that our experience could be the result of drugs, and, in that case, is not based upon a real existence of the pink hole. To prove that the pink hole is, in fact, an unexisting object, let's imagine that we take a walk over the unexisting pink hole as a reaction to our experiential data. In such example we would have two beliefs: epistemic and ontological. Epistemic belief would be that the hole is pink coloured. According to the first premise of my argument, our hallucinating experience is produced by LSD influence, but, at the same time, it seems plausible that our epistemic belief is induced by something, which means that our epistemic belief has some kind of a cause, and I can not see any plausible cause except the appearance of our hallucinating experience of the pink hole. Moreover as far as I can see we do not any object out of the conscious domain that can serve as an explanation for our epistemic belief. This means that there are no external cause of our epistemic belief (remember that we do not believe that the pink hole really exists), which leads us to the conclusion that there must be some kind of an internal cause. Of course, according to my view, it is most plausible to postulate the existence of qualia as an internal causes of, at least, some of our epistemic beliefs. However, Dennett may (or must) say that the cause of our epistemic belief is only LSD. Such a theory should have to seek explanation for the epistemic beliefs on the unconscious level of cognitive information processing. But, in that case, the phenomenological level would be left completely unexplained and the predictive power of the theory would be near to nothing. However, it seems that it is possible to treat phenomenal features of our experiences as causes of our epistemic beliefs, which presupposes that they can be isolated. The second belief is of an ontological nature, because it serves us as a ground for believing that data presented by our consciousness may not correspond to external reality. In our case, such data correspond only to our specific hallucination. In the case of ontological belief it is obvious that it has no constitutive influence on epistemic belief (that the hole is pink coloured), so, it appears that we can isolate much easier quale from this kind of belief).

What is important is that, Dennett denies the distinctiveness of qualia from memory or beliefs or dispositions to react to certain stimulus and concludes that there are no such things as qualia. Contrary to his view, I think that qualia exist and that the deceiving inability for clear differentiation of qualia from their

effects (beliefs and behaviour, for example) comes from the unresolved ontological status of qualia and not from their unexistence. Since the nature of consciousness is, unfortunately, still an unresolved problem, we have to except the fact that it is very hard to bring definite conclusions about the ontological nature of entities that characterize our consciousness.

But, let's attend to Dennett's excellent examples that stand in favor of his view. The first example refers to intrapersonal qualia shift in the case of Chase and Sanborn — two professional coffee tasters. When they began to work, they thought that the Maxwell House coffee was the best tasting coffee in the world. But, after six years they agree that they don't like it any more. For what reasons? Chase believes that his aesthetic attitudes have changed and Sanborn thinks that something's wrong with his taste receptor. The question is: can we believe them? What is undeniable is that their statements rely on memory and that they liked the coffee, but now they don't. The rest is doubtful, which means that we are not sure whether Chase's quale has really remained the same or has it gradually shifted, or may it be that Chase's taste buds have slightly changed. Similar problems can be applied to Sanborn's case. Such vagueness obviously shows that there is no incorrigibility in the claims about our experiences. If we admit it, is the existence of any particular quale still an empirical fact? Are qualia just hypothetical constructs? Of course, Dennett positively answers to the second question, but I believe it is the first question that deserves an affirmative answer. I think the right formulation of that question would be: can we get any information from experience? Or: is there any available information in the phenomenological domain? I would say — yes. I can accept that memory has great influence in production and recognition of almost every quale, I can also accept that the introspection based claims are not incorrigible, but, these two premises do not force me to conclude that our experience (or introspection) can not offer us any novel information I think it still remains an open question.

Dennett's second interesting example refers to the taste of beer. Is it an acquired taste? Do we really learn to enjoy the flavour of the first sip of beer? It is very hard to accept it, because almost everyone would say that they disliked the way the first sip of beer had tasted to them. But, where does the joy of drinking beer come from? Or, in other words, how come the beer tastes so bad to beer drinking beginner and so good to experienced beer drinker? It seems plausible to say that the long-term experience of beer drinking changes the very taste of beer (in that case, the result is not an acquired taste), which leads us to

trouble in determining the sharp distinction between quale and the reaction to quale. In that trouble lies the convincingness of Dennett's example. It becomes difficult to individuate the entity (in our case, quale of beer taste), if we can not divide it from its assumed reaction. The problem of individuation raises the question of intrinsicity of qualia. It is important, because Dennett denies the traditional concept of qualia, and, according to Dennett, tradition treats qualia as properties which are:

- 1) intrinsic
- 2) directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness
- 3) ineffable
- 4) private.

But, let us return to intrinsicity. Intrinsic property is usually defined as property belonging to the inner nature of an entity, and is opposed to extrinsic property, which doesn't belong to inner nature of something and derives its nature from relational properties of that entity. Among other things, it implies the existence of intrinsic properties which are somehow atomic, unanalyzable. On the other side, we have typically relational or extrinsic properties. I admit that this distinction (intrinsic — extrinsic) is rather obscure because there are no reliable criterium that can help us to determine which properties are relational and which are not. For example, try to determine is the bitterness an intrinsic or a relational property! Is our attitude or reaction to some food in any way constitutive in sensing the bitterness of that food? If it is, we must accept the fact that the bitterness of food is paradigmatically an extrinsic property. This shows the importance of »the beer taste« example, because it explicitly shows the weakness of the position that defends the existence of intrinsic properties. But, is there any intrinsicity in objects at all? Dennett thinks that we should give up on intrinsicity, but i don't. The question of the existence of intrinsic properties is a traditional philosophical problem, and I think the burden of answering it lies on epistemology. Our epistemic ability to grasp the intrinsic properties is highly doubtful. This means that we can have only belief (not knowledge) about the existence of intrinsic properties, but, this does not mean that there are no such properties. But, how to individuate those candidates for intrinsic properties in the case of qualia? I think it is only the qualitative similarity (not sameness) we can rely on. The question of determining the boundaries of qualitatively similar classes of properties still remains. That is the real problem. It is a problem, because our epistemic abilities are not perfect. We are not subtle machines which strictly determine the distinction between two tastes, smells or whatever. Of course, that does not mean

that we should reject all experiential information as completely unreliable. It only means that we still do not have firm epistemological ground. Dennett offers an example from sense modality (taste) which is less reliable than visual modality, for example. If we look more carefully we can see that it is much easier to determine, in visual modality, the distinction between quale and reaction to quale. For example, let's imagine a man who once was a passionate communist and now he is completely disappointed with his political ideas. Once he liked the red colour (as one of the most prominent communist symbols), and now it seems so disgusting to him. Do you really believe that his attitude changes his seeing of red? Is his reaction constitutive for his quale of red? I would say — no. It refers only to the change of attitude, but his quale has still remained the same.

Are qualia directly accesible in our consciousness? According to Dennett — no, we can have only indirect access via reference to our idiosyncratic dispositional capacities for responding to certain qualitative properties. What does that mean? It means that we have some kind of detectors for detecting qualitative properties of our experiences, or, in other words, mediating tools for inner ostension, I agree with Dennett only when we talk about recognition of our previous experiences, but, what about learning new information? For example, when a child is smelling for the first time the smell of lilac. Of course, in that case the child must have dispositional capacities for smelling the lilac, but I can't see any mediator or detector in acquiring the first information about the smell of lilac. I think it is the thesis which denies the incorrigibility of our introspective abilities that led Dennett to the conclusion that there is no direct accesibility of qualia in our consciousness. But, incorrigibility is senseless when we talk about acquiring new information. So, it seems that there are cases when qualia are immediately apprehensible in consciousness.

In Dennett's opinion our consious experiences have only practically ineffable properties which means that we can, in principle, give verbal (or symbolic) description of our qualia. As an example of such practically ineffable property Dennett takes the shape property of one half of the torn piece of paper. Is it an adequate analogy? I think it is completely misleading, because we can easily imagine a feasible algorithm for describing the shape property of torn paper, but I don't have the faintest idea about such algorithm if I want to describe the way the lilac smells. Besides it, we have the closely connected problem of the privacy of qualia: can qualia be explained in any objective way? Dennett thinks that qualia are private only in the sense of idi-

osyncratic. But, what about a possibility of idiosyncratic uniqueness? Can we escape from ineffability (and privacy) in such cases? Also, the unresolved problem of other minds seems the unsurmountable obstacle for any objective explanation of conscious experience.

After all, I hope that my (sketches of) arguments have showed that the notion of qualia still deserves the philosophers' attention, in spite of the fact that it needs some (but not complete) revision.

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Boran Berić: O POSTOJANJU QUALIA

#### Sažetak

Pojam qualia (kao kvalitativnih svojstava naših svjesnih iskustava) uvodi se kroz diskusiju o članku Daniela Dennetta »Quining qualia« gdje Dennett pokušava pokazati neutemeljenost tradicionalnog pojma qualia, zalažući se za njegovo potpuno odbacivanje. Odabirući poziciju eliminativističkog materijaliste on poriče postojanje qualia kao mentalnih svojstava. Autorova namjera je da pokaže da Dennettovi argumenti za negiranje postojanja qualia, u najmanju ruku, nisu konkluzivni.