

**CONSCIOUSNESS OR QUALIA: WHAT A CONVERSATION
FROM LEADING THINKERS IN THE FIELD MAY
SOUND LIKE**
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The following is an imaginary conversation on the ever elusive qualia, or the 'what is it like' feeling, or conscious experiences, that has left philosophers and cognitive scientists searching for answers. This article is meant to give the beginning reader an overall view of this phenomena. Qualia is the technical name for conscious experiences like seeing the colour red or listening to Handel's *Messiah*. The problem is that these conscious experiences are apparently nowhere to be found in our physical brains. Thus, it would not register on any physical system in the known world (although the results of it, such as neurons firing, would).

This mock conversation is between three different philosophical proponents of three different theories of the mind, and is what I imagine they would say if we were privileged to listen in on their conversation. The conversation will be taken from actual theories and statements made by the respective proponents themselves in their own words or paraphrased. The tetralogue will be between Daniel Dennett (a physicalist: one who believes the physical world is all there is, thus consciousness is an illusion), David Chalmers (a property dualist: one who believes that the natural world is composed of mental and physical properties, thus consciousness is that mental property of the universe), Alvin Plantinga (a substance dualist: one who believes there are things called souls; consciousness is a mental substance in its own right) and myself (a moderator) about qualia.

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KHALDOUN SWEIS: (KS) Thank you all for joining me to discuss the problem of qualia, or the hard problem of consciousness.

DANIEL DENNETT: (DD) Thank you for inviting us and paying us such a large amount of money Khaldoun, otherwise the only other way we would gather to meet is in an imaginary conversation. Now, let us begin by explaining what the problem is with conscious experiences called qualia.

KS: What is the best argument out there for why qualia are to be taken seriously?

DAVID CHALMERS: (DC) Other than Jackson's Knowledge Argument, I would say that conscious experiences are real but not a logically necessary element of our existence. They are not physical and the best way I think to demonstrate this is through the classic zombie argument. According to the zombie argument, you are asked to imagine that there is a zombie twin of yourself which is identical to you in every single way (cognitive properties, character traits, physical traits, history, and whose behavioural traits are indistinguishable from yours. This would be evident in all possible tests, including not only answers to questions but psychophysical tests, neurophysiological tests – all tests that any 'third-person' science can devise), except the zombie has 'no one home' that is, he is not conscious or does not have conscious experiences or qualia. Now, Dan, if you would pick it up from here, if we were to ask the imagined zombie, 'what do you see when I show you this (holds up a glowing red crystal)' what would he say?

DD: He would say, if he were savvy enough, 'I perceive electromagnetic radiation of the waverange of roughly 625–740 nm that impinges on the photoelectric device at the bottom of my obscure chamber, absorbed by the photochemical molecules that are sensitive to this wavelength, and then converted into electric pulses that go through optic fibres to the colour-recognition system that in turn activates my memory, language, motor and vocal systems causing me to tell you, "I see a red crystal."'

DC: But the zombie would not experience what you do when you see the red crystal. The zombie, according to the argument, would not experience your subjective experience of red.

DD: Yes, but you would be at a loss for words to explain this to your zombie twin or anyone else. In fact, I know of no way you could put that additional subjective ingredient to scientific tests. I believe the reason we cannot test them publicly is because they do not exist. Qualia are self created illusions, next to God, I think they may be the greatest delusion we have ever deceived ourselves into believing.

ALVIN PLANTINGA (AP): I will let your anti-God conjectures pass for now. In regard to qualia, you have a hidden assumption Dan. You are assuming that if something cannot be tested with the hard sciences, then it must be false.

DD: In a sense, yes or irrelevant.

AP: You are making the same mistake, my friend, that the late David Hume made over 300 hundred years ago. Your own statement fails to pass its own tests. Hume wrote that if we come across any text, we should ask if *'it contains any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion'*. As I said the problem with this is that it does not pass its own test. The very thesis of Hume does not contain experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence. Thus, it commits philosophical suicide.

DD: Alvin, if we apply your reasoning to the scientific method then we should throw that out too! That would be preposterous.

AP: Well, then we would need to revise our scientific methodology.

KS: Now regarding qualia and the zombie argument, my question is: how does one prove one is not a zombie if, according to the argument, a zombie is indistinguishable

from a non-zombie? It appears that one cannot prove one is not a zombie.

DC: No, I know I am not a zombie and conscious because I am experiencing it! But you are correct, with a caveat: I cannot prove I am not a zombie to others because a zombie could appear to be doing the same things functionally.

KS: Robert van Gulick wrote that the zombie argument is unconvincing because 'when we imagine physical duplicates, we imagine conscious beings, whether we realize it or not, so asserting the conceivability of zombies begs the question against materialism.' What do you think about this rebuttal?

DC: The 'rebuttal' claims that the zombie's conscious-like *claims* themselves are formed by the same cognitive process as an ordinary conscious being's claims. So if the zombie could be mistaken about his or her own beliefs, this shows that I also could not trust my cognitive processes as reliable: thus, this throws strong doubt on our own claims that we are conscious. I anticipated this objection in my book, *The Conscious Mind*, where I suggested that the justification for my belief that I am conscious lies not just in my cognitive mechanisms *but also in my direct evidence*. The zombie lacks that evidence, so his mistake does not threaten the grounds for our beliefs. One can also note that the zombie doesn't have the same beliefs as us, because of the role that experience plays in constituting the contents of those beliefs.

KS: So what you are saying David is not that zombies have different cognitive beliefs, i.e. the same beliefs as we do of consciousness, but that they arrive at these beliefs from a different base than we do. The zombies may believe that they are conscious, but they arrived at this belief from something other than their experience, right?

DC: Correct.

KS: How then do you prove that I and the rest of the human race are not zombies?

AP: You cannot 'prove' to anyone: that is, to use forensic or third-person empirical evidence to prove that one is conscious or that one has a mind or, more challenging, that others have minds. As you all know, this resurrects the age-old argument regarding other-minds. I argue that you are epistemically justified in believing in other minds and thus that other people you live and work with are not zombies because of your experiences with your own mind. This belief is *properly* basic, thus it has no regard for 'provable' evidence to others – we would have to go against our own intuitions in order for us to believe that others are all zombies.

DC: Yes, and I would add that the zombie argument is not set out to prove I or anyone else is or is not a zombie. It was just an explanatory method to illuminate the fact that consciousness does not follow in a logically necessary way from its functional role. If it is not logically necessary but still exists, then it supervenes on the physical in a natural way – thus making room for my natural dualism or property dualism. It is only meant to show that if a zombie is conceivable, then it is possible (in any possible world), and if it is possible, then consciousness is logically necessary given the physical world. However, if one argues that consciousness is not logically necessary to exist; one would have to explain how it does exist. Either way, it follows there is something over and above the material world that needs explanation. Therefore, rigid materialism is false.

KS: So then we have no other option than to trust our intuitions on this one?

DD: Did you read my article 'Quining Qualia'? I gave fifteen reasons why we should doubt our intuitions regarding qualia. For example, it is counterintuitive that the earth you're standing on has a rotational velocity of approximately .47 km/sec – hurtling through space at nearly 67000 mph, and at the same time spinning around in circles at over 1000 mph – yet your intuition tells you that you are standing still. So if your intuition that you are standing still may be wrong, why not also doubt this other intuition as well if science says otherwise?

AP: What you say has some truth to it, however, you must admit that we can trust our intuitions for the majority of our decisions. Besides, naturalistic science has not been able to come close to explaining consciousness, let alone disproving it.

DC: Let me ask you this Dan, do you admit that you are a not a zombie?

DD: I believe that if you really look at the issue in depth you will realize we are all zombies! I am not denying that we experience pain, or that there is the experience of what it is like to see an apple (as opposed to seeing nothing). I don't deny the reality of conscious experience, and I grant that conscious experience has properties. I grant moreover that each person's states of consciousness have properties in virtue of which those states have the experiential content that they do. These properties are so unlike the properties traditionally imputed to consciousness that it would be grossly misleading to call any of them the long-sought after qualia. Qualia are supposed to be *special* properties, in some hard-to-define way. It may be that what we think of as concrete special properties are hard to define precisely because they do not exist! I argue that what is going on in our heads is not as mysterious as you qualia freaks would like us to believe it is. Given enough time we will find the functions behind what we know of as qualia. Moreover, you cannot prove that the qualia you experience today are the same ones you experienced yesterday or last year; this casts doubt on your 'infallible' beliefs regarding your own qualia. Can I prove there are no qualia? No, but I also cannot prove that space aliens did not abduct and replace you with a clone last night. However, I can give sensible arguments why we ought not to believe this. The same applies to consciousness. You qualia freaks cannot give any evidence other than your flawed intuitions for qualia. The burden of proof is on you to prove that your appeal to these subjective properties was not a mistake in the first place.

DC: I think Dan makes some good points, but Dan's explanation is functional. This explanation of consciousness

from a third person perspective misses the phenomena we are trying to deal with. He is not addressing the 'hard problem', which is *not* a problem about how functions are performed. For any given function that we explain, there remains a nontrivial further question: why is the performance of this function associated with conscious experience? This is something Dan refuses to acknowledge. Consciousness uniquely lies at the centre of our epistemic universe; we deny it only by lying to ourselves.

DD: David, if you want us to believe you, you must provide independent evidence for your pontificating. What evidence do you have which proves that a 'hard problem' even exists other than your intuitions? Again, the burden of proof is on you qualia freaks to prove that your appeals to these subjective properties are not mistaken.

DC: First of all, it is not just my intuitions, but also the intuitions of the rest of human kind, except you and your ivory tower friends, of course. You want presumably behavioural or functional evidence to explain phenomenological experience, and I answer that you are missing the point. If it turns out that it cannot be explained in terms of more basic entities, then it must be taken as irreducible, just as it happens with categories such as space and time. There is no independent evidence for them either. Your challenge presupposes that the only explananda that count are functions, such as discrimination, integration, reaction, and report.

DD: Granted, but you assume it is a brute fact.

DC: I concede that conscious experience is a brute fact of nature. Besides it is *prima facie* obvious to most people that there is a further phenomenon here: in informal surveys, the large majority of respondents indicate that they think something more than functions needs explaining.

KS: David, is not your last argument based on the fallacy of common assent? Truth ought not to be arrived at from the consensus of the majority of people, no matter how much their intuitions tell them it is so, correct?

DC: True, but I do not argue that because the majority of people believe in conscious experiences, there are in fact

conscious experiences. Rather, I argue that 'I' have undeniable conscious experiences and that it is confirmed by the majority of rational like 'minded' adults. Excuse the pun.

AP: David, again, I do not think that you need to prove this intuition to Dan or to anyone for it to be rational. Things like perception and memory are real events in our everyday lives which do not require rigorous arguments in order to justifiably believe in them. Phenomenal consciousness is, as you said, the centre of our epistemic universe. It is implausible that all we experience are, just as Dan wrote here, 'electromagnetic happenings in your brain.'

Furthermore, when the evidence is examined as a whole without a naturalistic bias, we would find that substance dualism is still rational to uphold.

DC: What evidence are you proposing? Are you trying to resurrect Cartesian dualism?

AP: Not all substance dualists necessarily embrace Cartesian dualism. What evidence, you ask? Given the following features of our humanness, it is reasonable to conclude that they are aspects of our immaterial nature – what many of the ancients called the "soul" (psyche, ψυχή):

- (I) Qualia: what we have been discussing all along, which is very much real yet not physical in any way which can be computed or investigated empirically, would make sense coming also from a non physical entity.
- (II) Intentionality: *aboutness*–*directed* towards the content of an object which only conscious beings have. We can examine this neuronal event as carefully as we please; we can measure the number of neurons it contains, their connections, their rates of fire, the strength of the electronic impulses involved, the potential across the synapses with as much precision as you could possibly desire; we can consider its electro-chemical, neurophysiological properties in the most

exquisite detail; but nowhere, here, will we find so much as a hint of content.

- (III) Private Mental States: Only conscious beings have personal and immediate access to these states – they are not subject to third person analysis like physical objects. Dan, I never claimed these are infallible.
- (IV) Immaterial Mental States: These have no spatial extension and no location which are necessary for physical states.
- (V) Unity of Consciousness: Only conscious beings experience the world as a unified whole and able to reflect on that unity (AKA, the Binding Problem).
- (VI) Personal Identity: A continuity of numerical personal identity of persons requires more than physical continuity across time and space.
- (VII) Downward Causation: What transpires in the mind undoubtedly has causal reactions in the body. Property dualism, which is your position David, is committed to the causal closure of the physical, thus cannot account for this, however substance dualism can.

DD: Very interesting points, however they are not without major problems Alvin.

KS: Sorry to cut you off Dan, but I am running out of space in my article. Thank you all for meeting with me and I look forward to our next gathering where we can discuss this further.

DD, DC and AP: Unless you come up with some vast sum of money it is unlikely we all will meet again, until then please continue to use us as imaginary people in your articles.

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