

# ‘What Is It Like To ...?’

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*ABSTRACT:* Philosophers speak of ‘what it’s like to’ have an experience without taking account of how semantically various the phrase is. ‘Blindsight’ visual perception lacks detail.

*RÉSUMÉ :* Les philosophes parlent de «l’effet que cela fait» d’avoir une expérience particulière, sans tenir compte des variations sémantiques de la phrase. La «vision aveugle» manque de détails.

**Keywords:** Thomas Nagel, Frank Jackson, what it’s like, ideas, qualia, blindsight

Is there really *such a thing* as what it’s like to be a bat? a human? a heterosexual white male? a wine-taster? a Christian martyr? *Or* are the cases insufficiently alike, in fact, to justify ruling out the presence of a mere pun here? At any rate, since Thomas Nagel’s 1974 “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” the phrase has been confidently brandished in English-speaking philosophy to cover what Descartes, Locke, Berkeley and Husserl once called ‘ideas’ and followers of Wittgenstein thought that he had exploded for good.

Nowadays, though, the phrase ‘what it’s like to ...’ just strikes a good many in philosophy as quite unproblematic. We do, after all, think we know how at least to *try* to imagine what it is like to be another individual, or another creature, even; but when it comes to imagining what it’s like to be a lawn mower or a river, say, we know there is nothing there to imagine, cartoonish anthropomorphism aside.

Imagining what it is like to be another being does, certainly, involve imagining the other being’s states of belief and desire, wishes, suspicions, resolves and plans, but also the occurrent elements in the other’s mental life (insofar as

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it is accessible to immediate self-awareness): in the first place, of course, the onsets, growth, diminution and discontinuations of all those states, and then the mind's occurrent reasonings, decisions and imaginings—including imaginative value-judgments. Is that going to be enough to cover the other's (conscious) emotions? In general, what about the other being's qualia? But *are* there actually any of those?

The different sorts of case cited above do suggest that the phrase 'What is it like to ...?' might have a range of differing meanings. But, in that use of the expression crucial for the philosophy of perception, *unanalyzability*, perhaps, is what matters for the defence of the philosophical use of the phrase. It is held that an expert wine-taster knows, but cannot articulate (except through figures of speech), *what it is like* to experience fine—or even gross—differentiations in taste. Noting similarities and dissimilarities among the various taste sensations can't count, after all, as identifying what any of them is really like *in itself*. That such an expert has got ample discriminatory *know-how* is not in dispute. But are there *facts* the expert knows regarding *what it is like* to experience each of the different tastes that the expert is able to discriminate? Since the experiences are discriminable, *they* must differ from one another, and there must be facts about how they differ. But does the wine-taster *know* those facts—inexpressible as they are, literally, in public language?

It would be too cheap a victory for nay-sayers simply to rule that what cannot be expressed in public language cannot meaningfully be called 'real.' Then again, there is nothing untoward about being clear that two human faces, say, are similar or dissimilar without being able to specify the pertinent points of similarity or dissimilarity, although there must *be* such points of comparison, and they will be in principle specifiable in public language. Sufficiently skilled and attentive scrutiny would be in principle able to bring them to light. Yet, in the case of the different tastes, while there certainly will be physiological differences in what occurs as an expert samples various wines, and differing brainy effects that will result in the discriminations which the expert makes, the expert normally will not know what those are. Will the expert nevertheless know *what it is like* to taste this wine rather than that?

It isn't only Wittgensteinians who say 'no.' Peter Carruthers, for instance, affirms "an emerging consensus amongst naturalistically minded philosophers [on] the existence of purely recognitional concepts of experience" and "purely recognitional judgements of experience, of the form, 'Here is one of *those* again.'"<sup>1</sup>

Consider what it is for something to *look circular*. Isn't that a matter of its *looking* as if it were so shaped on one plane that every point at the edge of it was equally distant from a certain point within? Didn't learning the definition

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<sup>1</sup> Carruthers 2005: 14.

of circularity as a child come with a shock of recognition to readers, as to the writer of this—despite our already perfectly good discriminatory competence (like laboratory rats) when it came to visually distinguishing the circular from the noncircular? It was, though, only at that point that we could put words to the character of such a *look*. So it's altogether possible to know and to articulate what it is like to *have a visual experience as of something circular*; and it's possible, too, to have a perfectly good recognitional capacity in that regard *without* knowing what the visual experience is like. In the case of circularity, there really is a storable answer to the question, corresponding to the character of the sensory experience. Does this explain the feeling that there *must* be something similar, experienceable though not describable, with regard to the perception of 'secondary qualities'?

And yet, even Frank Jackson—who cannot get away from the conviction that there do at least *seem* to be indescribable 'phenomenal' seemings—even he now says such an *appearance* must be illusory. To resort, however, to any such conclusion—no qualia, but only the *appearance* of qualia—looks, *prima facie*, to be a massively implausible step. It is more likely, perhaps, that (under the influence of the history of philosophy) it only *seems* to Jackson that such seemings seem to occur.

What is it, though, which distinguishes the *experience* of normal, wide-awake visual observers from what 'blindsighted' experimental subjects feel, who honestly insist they can't see anything but still 'guess' much better than chance what is in front of their eyes? Leaving physiological explanations aside, can't we say normal observers are conscious, not just of a very few indefinite things relating to the state of their immediate environment, but of a vast flood of detail, and more again that's tied to different ocular stimulations (e.g., muscular) that they are currently undergoing? The blindsighted, on the other hand, are *consciously* aware, at most, of a bare (unreasoned) suspicion or two about what is going on in front of them.

So, if the question 'what it's like to' be sensuously conscious means the question what the nature of such consciousness is, insofar as this is something knowable in immediate self-awareness yet inexpressible in public language,<sup>2</sup> what reason need there be to insist there *is* any such thing as that?

There still are, though, plenty of other things for the 'what it's like' phraseology to denote, many of them really unproblematic.

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<sup>2</sup> A phrase like 'the way green things *look* to colour-sighted humans under optimal viewing conditions' definitely picks *something* out, but doesn't purport to express in so many words what it is—unless we can say *green* is how those things look. (The adjective 'green,' however, stands for a certain way that some physical surfaces are.)

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