

THE DIFFICULTIES OF DEVELOPING AN OBJECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstract: Thomas Nagel's end note of his famous essay "What is it like to be a bat?" introduced the speculative proposal of developing an objective phenomenology capable of enabling further empirical studies of consciousness. I will argue that such an endeavor inevitably faces two major difficulties in the first-order inaccessible qualia and second-order inaccessible qualia. The latter essentially comprise all of our qualitative contents associated with our experiences, as all qualia are private or inaccessible by other agents who do not share the same point of view, while the former should be seen as a subgroup of phenomenal contents that are temporarily or permanently unconscious or, more explicitly, unavailable to the agent to whom they belong to.

Keywords: objective phenomenology; inaccessible qualia; privacy; first-personal privilege; access.

1. Introduction

Consciousness seems to be one of the deepest mysteries that sparked the interest of scientists from many different fields like neuroscience, biology, cognitive sciences, psychology and philosophy alike. What is intriguing about the study of consciousness, as opposed to other at first glance unsolvable areas of inquiry that are related, for example, to quantum physics, is the apparent proximity to the subject, on one hand, and, on the

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other hand, the persistent failure of our investigations to result in any theory that could be considered consistent and coherent in the long run.

While some have argued that consciousness does not exist altogether in the way we intuitively think about it, and have thus rejected the mind-body problem, others have sought to explain it in the context of a dualist framework for understanding the mind, itself quite controversial. However, most have traced it back to how it appears to us phenomenologically. The most basic units that fuel our awareness about our experiences are qualia, which have been best characterized as “the subjective quality[ies] of experience” (Chalmers, 1996, p.4). These constitute the qualitative character of sensations, feelings, perceptions and, some have argued, even of thoughts and desires.

Qualia have been posited in order to untangle the intricate concept of consciousness,² but at the same time they have been used to prove that this domain of inquiry is almost impossible to study empirically. Thomas Nagel’s well-known article “What is it like to be a bat?” is the best example for the latter case. While not using the word “qualia” *per se*, he explained it by using the phrase “what is it like” and argued that the existence of such phenomena makes the study of consciousness subjective, and, as a result, impossible to study scientifically for the time being.

Is this metaphysical tension unavoidable? Nagel speculated about what could be done until scientific methods develop and become capable of giving insights into consciousness, and concluded that a solution could be the development of an “objective phenomenology”. I am of the opinion that the speculation is merely a theoretical one that cannot be applied properly, at least for the time being, because of two difficulties that arise when one might try to put it into practice. Both refer to utilizing certain qualia that are, as I have called them, either first-order inaccessible or second-order inaccessible.

² Interestingly, the tangle might be evidence for holism about what our mental words mean, e.g. in Quine and Ullian’s (1978) view. However, that would question the transition from consciousness *sui generis* to individual qualia. And so I leave aside this hypothesis in order to better appreciate the criticism neo-Wittgensteinians raise to Nagel’s view, which are both quite distinct from holism.

In the first part of this text, I will describe Nagel's framework in order to account for his definition of "what it's likeness". I will explain what second-order inaccessible qualia are. In the wake of a common critique that has inferred their incoherence from the fact that qualia are ineffable, I will argue that qualia do not seem to be entirely ineffable, only lacking in second-order access – and I will clarify why second-order inaccessible qualia are problematic in the context of an objective phenomenology. In the second part of this text, I will explain what I mean by first-order inaccessible qualia, namely the phenomenal contents that can be temporarily or permanently unconscious or unavailable to their owner, and I will explain why lacking access is an additional challenge to the project of devising an objective phenomenology.

2. Nagel's framework

2.1. *A critique of physicalism*

Thomas Nagel's article "What is it like to be a bat?" is, in a certain sense, a critique of reductionist solutions to the mind-body problem. He states: "Without consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless" (Nagel 1974), at least according to the physicalist tenet that every mental process can be traced back to either data processing or to brain activity. This is because with consciousness comes subjectivity, and there is mostly no objective or scientific way, as far as we now know, that could explain how subjective experience emerges.

No matter their function and their role in the way our minds work, Nagel says that subjective experiences cannot be explained in a physicalist manner, as experiences are observed phenomenologically and differently from a person to the other. Essentially, each of them is inevitably connected with a single point of view, and there is no account that could be given in order to prove that a certain general theory, however attractive to reductionists, could be tested and confirmed. This is how things stand,

at least, with current science. Thus we cannot, Nagel states, say that physicalism is false, we should just see it as an incomplete theory. If this is right, then there is no successful empirical endeavor to explain qualia or conscious mental processes more broadly. The next step would be to approach it using phenomenology.

1.2. Qualia observed phenomenologically

Nagel says that an “organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism-something it is like *for* the organism” (Nagel, 1974). He stresses two particular words to make sure no confusion arises by using them. “Something is it like to be a bat” is not in any sense a comparison, or a sort of intensional definition of necessary conditions that should be met in order for an entity to be a bat. This is why the question “What is it like to be a bat?” is not answered by “A bat is such and such, it has wings, but is not a bird, it flies, but it does not have feathers, etc.” Nagel did not ask what “bat” means, but rather what bat experiences are like for their experiences. I would, as he did too, try to not use the word “feel” because this is commonly associated with emotions or sensations, and we are not asking how the bat feels. What we want to refer to is the complex way in which a bat interacts, more or less uniquely, with its environment – not necessarily the behavior or the mental processes that trigger interaction, but what it is like *for* the bat to be alive and perceive certain things differently from other species and maybe from other bats might do.

Let each experience have a content associated to it, that may or may not cause behavior. There is no correct way to experience seeing a certain color, for example. The redness Mary sees when given a red rose may not be the same with the redness I see when given the same rose. It could have a different nuance, or it could be seen as a different color altogether in the case of another species or of a person with color blindness. And there is no way in which we can say the redness one sees is the right one, as we

do not know and we cannot take a guess or predict based on certain biological characteristics the redness another individual might experience.

2.3. Qualia as private intrinsic entities

We cannot experience echolocation as bats do even though we understand all the principles behind it, just as Mary the neurophysiologist cannot identify the red color in Frank Jackson's (1986) thought experiment, even though she knows all the factual physical information about that particular color. Our imagination is limited, as is the way we observe things. We cannot imagine something that does not abide by the physical laws about space and time, which could very well be arbitrarily chosen as a result of us interacting with the environment in a certain way. We might try to imagine how the world is experienced by a bat by imagining having certain physical characteristics that a bat has, but this would not solve the problem. By picturing ourselves with wings, poor vision, and an extra sense, that of echolocation, we would not experience things as a bat. We would still be protagonists in this conceptual architecture that tries to put us in the point of view of a bat.

No matter how hard we might try to escape our mind, we cannot really change our point of view. This is partly because of the brain structure that is clearly different across species. We cannot adapt our minds to such an extent as to extrapolate our experience and to perceive the content associated with a bat's experience. We cannot even comprehend how someone from the same species, and implicitly with the same brain structure as us, experiences a certain thing, as it does not necessarily follow that similar beings have similar ways to interact with the world. For example, we cannot tell what it is like for another human being to dream, or for that matter what it is like to dream for a person who is blind from birth. This limit is not an epistemological one, but rather a metaphysical one. We cannot know what it is like to be a bat, or what it is like to experience a blind person's dream, as long as we are ourselves and we cannot change our point of view.

In order to close or diminish the explanatory gap which is created once we acknowledge the existence of qualia, Nagel says that it might be possible to design new concepts and methods, that do not draw upon either imagination or empathy, but nevertheless can explain or define partially the subjective character of experiences to agents that do not have them. In a certain sense, these could reduce the extensional area associated with a particular instance of a quale. Nagel does not necessarily refer to intermodal analogies between different experiences, but to the structural features of perception, which could be understood more objectively once a specific language is developed.

3. Second-order inaccessible qualia

3.1. A possible misunderstanding

I will use Peter Hacker's article "Is it anything there is like to be a bat?" in order to explain where common understanding falls short and misinterprets qualia as being not only entirely ineffable, but also incoherent. Hacker views qualia through the lens of the phrase already discussed "there is something which it is like". He concludes that Nagel gives us two ways to identify consciousness, one for a conscious creature, and one for a conscious experience:

“(1) A creature is conscious or has conscious experience if and only if there is something which it is like for the creature to be the creature it is.

(2) An experience is a conscious experience if and only if there is something which it is like for the subject of the experience to have it.”
(Hacker, 2002, p. 160)

The problem with the first inference is that at no point did Nagel want to say that there is something it is like for a bat to be a bat in that sense. A question such as "What is it like for X to be X?" would ask, as Hacker points out, for "a description of the role, the rights and duties, hardships and satisfactions, the typical episodes and experiences of a

person who is an X". If we change it a bit, "What is it like for you to be X?" or "What is it like for you to V?", where "V" could be replaced by any verb associated with an experience, then we might have answers containing personal impressions and attitudes regarding all the things mentioned. What is it like for me to smell freshly baked bread? It is surely enjoyable, and it brings back some childhood memories. This would be the answer such a question calls for. But this does not refer to qualia or any necessarily qualitative components to perceiving reality.

Nagel did not mean the verb "to be" in a sense that asks for a definition or for a description or attempt to explain what the Idea of a Human or the Idea of a Bat is, in the Platonic sense. Such an identification could surely make the concept be seen as ineffable. Hacker seems to be aware that he might be misreading Nagel: "But one may reply, this is not what was meant at all." Here he was in the right.

3.2. Wittgenstein's take on the matter

The difference between having experience E and experience E itself seems, in Hacker's view, who is the leading authority on the philosophy of Wittgenstein, to be rejected on the basis that there is no distinctiveness that we can talk about in seeing, hearing, or smelling something rather than something else. We might just describe feeling pain by associating with the experience attributes that show the unpleasantness of the experience. But we seem to omit the case in which one could associate the qualitative feel of an experience with the qualitative feel of another experience, and thus using language we could, for example, refer to the "what it's likeness" of having a headache that is closer than the "what it's likeness" of having a back pain, as opposed to the "what it's likeness" of experiencing pain from a sore throat. Similarly, the qualitative experience of smelling a rose is arguably something that can be expressed in words, at least in terms of the similarities between it and the qualitative experience of smelling a violet and the dissimilarities which could arise when comparing it with smelling a lemon. By using this kind of

comparisons between different qualitative inputs, along with metaphors or allegories, one might be able to point out to the particular distinction between having an experience as opposed to another, which could show the concept is less ineffable than previously thought.

Hacker, however, is right in airing Wittgenstein's qualms about private languages. As long as what we aim to refer to is entirely subjective, it would not make sense to use a word in public discourse whose ontic counterpart is only accessible to ourselves. In other words, if we want to explain how we perceive redness in an apple, then it seems that we should know how to explain to others what particular shade of red we associate with that particular apple. But our language is indeed limited as we cannot point inwardly to how certain things appear to us. All of our qualia are private and intrinsic, so they are first-order accessible only to us, and second-order inaccessible to any agent that is not us or that does not share our point of view. I have called these first- and second-order in relation to the number of points of view through which access is "transmitted". First-order access is acquired in only one solitary medium, supposedly through a single barrier, while second-order access is "conducted" through two mediums and, thus, two barriers.

3.3. An apparent solution and a remaining problem

What if we do not need to point inwardly at all, one might ask. It is plausible that the person to whom we want to communicate the specific nuance of red has seen the same particular nuance at some point in their life, but associated probably with another experience, or in our case with another object. That is to say they have some sort of ontic counterpart to our perceived redness, but their qualitative feel is not necessarily associated with the same experience as ours. Maybe the redness I see in the apple is the redness that the other person sees or has seen in a rose. Thus, the challenge might consist in developing language so as to allow one to be more explicit about their qualitative feels and coordinate with others when talking about a specific quale. If one describes the redness in

the apple properly, it might make the other person think of the redness they remember the rose as having. Absent fit, approximation might be enough for communication.

A problem persists: we cannot account for how an objective phenomenology would be developed, considering the fact that the points of reference between subjects would not coincide, because the association would be needed to be verified in order to see if the newly developed language reaches its goal or needs refining. We have already acknowledged that second-order inaccessible qualia cannot be verified. Maybe the redness of the apple one sees is similar enough to that of a rose someone else remembers having seen. That could be at no point verified accordingly. The two individuals would never know if they meant or thought of the same shade, or if the approximations are right. Devising concepts that can supposedly help minimize the explanatory gap would, then, not benefit from an objective necessary feedback measuring overlap between individual qualia, for such qualia are second-order accessible. (Might advanced neuroscientific imaging methods or artificial prosthetics which would connect minds help? Currently there is no consensus on how to match these to qualia.)

4. First-order inaccessible qualia

4.1. "Unconscious" qualia

Qualia are first-order accessible when they are poised for access by thinking, introspection, or other cognitive processes that are not automatic. Consider an example proposed by David Armstrong, that of an absent-minded long distance truck driver, who is thinking of other things and who, as a result, arrives at his destination without realizing he has drove past curves and other cars, past hills, and valleys:

"After driving for long periods of time, particularly at night, it is possible to 'come to' and realize that for some time past one has been driving

without being aware of what one has been doing. It is natural to describe what went on before one came to by saying that during that time one lacked consciousness." (Armstrong, 1981, p. 59)

We do not question in this case that the driver had sensorial qualitative perceptions about the road (qualia), because without them one could not arrive at the destination successfully, without getting the truck involved in some accident or another. The proof for the existence of qualia in such a case lies in the unconscious decisions based on the qualitative basis of what the road looks like, which signs can be seen on the sides, what positions the other cars have in traffic, etc. and what should be done, for example, when the driver is informed through visual stimuli that the road gets narrower, that the truck is too close to another car, or that there is a sign announcing a crossroad or a speed restriction. The driver seems to be aware of something and to act upon these "impressions", but at the same time, he is not focused on them consciously.

4.2. A new dimension to phenomenal consciousness

In order to be conscious, it seems, one would have to have the ability to access qualia and to be able to represent them cognitively in order to monitor their relationship with thought and action. This ability, which in a sense could be correlated with attention, has been called direct awareness. Kriegel explains why it would be necessary to have direct awareness as follows:

"It is unlikely there could be anything it is like for a subject to be in a mental state she is unaware of being in ... [consequently] intransitive self-consciousness is a necessary condition for phenomenal consciousness: unless M is intransitively self-conscious, there is nothing it is like to be in M, and therefore M is not a phenomenally conscious state." (Kriegel, 2003, p. 106)

Ned Block tries to unravel this additional dimension of qualia by setting forth the distinction between A-consciousness or access

consciousness and P-consciousness or phenomenal consciousness. He also gives examples that support the hypothesis that phenomenal consciousness on its own, without A-consciousness, can be part of unconscious mental states, just as in the case with the truck driver. The picture can get even more complicated if we consider that qualia can be unavailable to their owner not just temporarily – based on the voluntary or involuntary choice of attending a certain quale as opposed to another in a moment and being able nevertheless to shift the focus to it in the following moment – but also permanently, in the case of phenomenal contents that are continually inaccessible to thinking routines or introspection. These might lack first-order accessibility because of the arbitrary, supposedly present-from-birth mental architecture that does not allow the introspection of certain subjective qualities an individual might experience.

4.3. Different degrees of first-order access

First-order access can be measured in degrees of how much of the perceived phenomenal contents can be “used” or “opened” in thinking and other cognitive processes. The degree associated with a certain quale might determine one's capacity to reflect upon the explanations that might be given by an objective phenomenology in order to explain – to oneself and others – that particular quale. Similarly, the degree of introspectability associated with a certain quale (how easy it is to introspect) might determine whether it can be effectively identified by an agent and compared to other instances both for understanding its characteristic features and for attempting to report these perceived specificities of a singular “what it's likeness”. Thus, a prerequisite for an agent involved in objective phenomenology is a certain degree of access to both thinking and introspectability for most of the qualia that the agent has. If a sufficient degree of accessibility is not found throughout one's perceived phenomenal contents, then the objective phenomenology could not be completed because one might consider that the degrees of first-

order access differ from one agent to another, and cannot be, at least intuitively, covered in an objective and generally comprehensible manner. Arguably, the existence of qualia that cannot be stored in the memory and accessed subsequently affects the act of inventing concepts, which needs to be rooted in what one has qualitatively experienced previously.

If qualia come in different degrees of first-order access for thinking and introspection, then there might be a degree insufficient to let an agent think about or introspect certain qualia. If there is such a degree of access insufficient to let an agent think about or introspect certain qualia, then there is a degree of access that does not let an agent understand certain qualia. If an agent cannot understand certain qualia, then she or he cannot devise a set of concepts in order to enable others to approximate that particular quale, or, for that matter, receive any valuable insights from a set of concepts that were made by others in order to help him understand his qualitative experience. This is another way in which first-order totally or partially inaccessible qualia can be seen as a complication for developing an objective phenomenology.

The premise in both of the two cases rests on the existence of degrees of first-order access, and also of hidden qualia. These surely can be considered controversial, but others such as Block or Searle, have argued that phenomenal conscious instances come in degrees of access poised for thinking routines. Moreover, from these degrees it seems only natural to consider that if there are such different levels, then there should also be a minimal level, which would make a quale hidden and an agent incapable of reflecting about it or introspecting about it (Shiller, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Starting from Nagel's famous paper that has accounted for the explanatory gap that is unavoidable once one accepts the existence of qualia, I have tried to assess the proposal of developing an objective phenomenology. I have pointed out at two difficulties which might be

faced when one would try to embark on such a journey, and have argued against an apparent unsurpassable obstacle, that of the ineffability of qualia, which seems to be a representative misunderstanding for those that would want to reason that the concept of quale is incoherent, and therefore does not exist in reality. The first difficulty lies in the lack of second-order accessible qualia, or qualia that are not private. This makes it impossible for two agents to check or have an essential feedback that would allow them to find out if they have reached the same quale with the use of the concepts and language that they have developed. The second one lies in first-order inaccessible qualia, which are fundamentally qualia that do not have a certain degree of access poised to thinking or introspectability, and which therefore cannot be either understood, explained, or overlooked in the context of an objective phenomenology.

The reason I have raised these concerns is not because I believe Nagel's proposal is futile. Rather, I think that, at least for now, there seems to be no way to bridge the explanatory gap for a future science of consciousness. Phenomenology can offer valuable insights, but not necessarily in the objective, or, better said, objectual way that Nagel envisioned. For example, the existence of hidden qualia—or qualia that become accessible to us in varying degrees—may require us to reconsider atomistic assumptions in favor of more relational, holistic approaches.

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