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Abstract

There is nothing that we could be more familiar with than our own consciousness. It seems to us that conscious experience consists of subjective qualia – the what-it-is-like to experience the redness of an apple, the taste of coffee, or any other sense datum. Explaining how these can come about from material causes is often referred to as the hard problem in consciousness. Daniel Dennett gives a materialistic explanation of consciousness by equating qualia to a magic trick; there are no qualia, there just seem to be. In this paper I will examine this explanation in light of Heidegger's critique of technological thinking. Consciousness enframed in this way stands as a one-sided explanation that covers over more than it reveals. It is still useful, however, to see that it is the very building blocks of our conscious experience – our qualia – that we challenge forth to give us this one-sided view of experience. Dennett's explanation of consciousness is correct, but it does not capture the truth of consciousness.

Consciousness Enframed: The Alētheia of Qualia*

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Abstract

There is nothing that we could be more familiar with than our own consciousness. It seems to us that conscious experience consists of subjective qualia – the what-it-is-like to experience the redness of an apple, the taste of coffee, or any other sense datum. Explaining how these can come about from material causes is often referred to as the hard problem in consciousness. Daniel Dennett gives a materialistic explanation of consciousness by equating qualia to a magic trick; there are no qualia, there just seem to be. In this paper I will examine this explanation in light of Heidegger's critique of technological thinking. Consciousness enframed in this way stands as a one-sided explanation that covers over more than it reveals. It is still useful, however, to see that it is the very building blocks of our conscious experience – our qualia – that we challenge forth to give us this one-sided view of experience. Dennett's explanation of consciousness is correct, but it does not capture the truth of consciousness.

We live in the information age. The Internet stands as the largest reserve of information in our history. There is not a question that can be asked that someone hasn't dared to answer. Many answers are uncontested facts: red light has a 700 nm electromagnetic wavelength. Some answers are ever-changing, on the cutting edge of research – like those in modern neuroscience. Other answers are not agreed upon, like what the Self is. Whatever the question, there is an explanation to be had. Even consciousness has been explained. Our answers are rigorous and the vast majority are undeniably correct, but are we any closer to the truth today than Aristotle was over two thousand years ago? In *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel Dennett uncovers the behind-the-scene workings of our minds; the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Dennett's account is a technological enframent and, though it shows us something interesting and true, it covers over more than it reveals. To do this I will first give an outline of Dennett's book, focusing on his method and the most shocking claims – that there is no self and that qualia (the sense datum we experience) cannot exist. I will then turn to Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology" to explore the nature of the correct and the true in terms of technological enframent. Lastly, I will show how Dennett's explanation of consciousness is a technological enframent and, though it says something correct about consciousness, it leaves out some of the most interesting parts of consciousness and therefore cannot be the truth.

Consciousness is like a magic trick. The key to understanding the magic is to realize that what you think you saw was an illusion. “What isn’t there, there isn’t to explain,” is the premise of Dennett’s theory of consciousness. The hard problem of consciousness is explaining how physical input causes our phenomenal experiences. For instance, I have my experience of red and I have the facts I know about physics and neuroscience. I know that a certain atomic structure will reflect the electromagnetic wave into my retina, a series of neurons will fire in my brain, and I will see red. The problem is that the atomic structure isn’t red – nor is the electromagnetic wave. And if you cut open my brain, you will not find the red in there, either. Despite this, there is undeniably the experience of red. Dennett acknowledges that there seems to be red – the magician pulls a rabbit out of his hat, or so it seems. Might we be mistaken about our own phenomenological interpretations of our conscious experience?

Dennett coins the term “heterophenomenology” for a method of investigating subjects’ claims about their conscious experience. This method assumes subjective experiences are fallible accounts of people’s inner phenomenological experience. Everyone considers themselves to be an expert on consciousness; what could we be more familiar with than our own consciousness? But we’re wrong. The more you probe into what people think they know about consciousness, the more you find inconsistencies. In heterophenomenology, accounts people give are viewed as texts that must be interpreted if we want to build a logical account of consciousness. Dennett hopes to recover from these fallible accounts of subjective experience something consistent to explain consciousness. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses what I see as a similar tactic of hermeneutics, claiming that there is no way to step outside of one’s subjective interpretation. Our experience is interpretation wall to wall; this is not relativism, as there is some recovery. The only place to start is with our own interpretations.

With the method of heterophenomenology, we can deconstruct consciousness. Let us start with the common assumption that consciousness happens all in one place. What I mean by this is that it seems as if when I am conscious of an event my experience of seeing and hearing happen at the same time, then, from some central location that I define as my Self, I interpret the event and make decisions about it. That is to say, all senses seem to flow into what Dennett calls the Cartesian Theater, and all decisions seem to stem from some central viewer I call me. From a modern neuroscience standpoint, this makes no sense. Our brains do not quite work the way that Descartes imagined it; the animal spirits do not swirl around the pineal gland, which is in turn remote-controlled by our souls (Descartes, 1989). In *Descartes’ Error*, Antonio Damasio paints a picture of several specialized areas of the brain communicating and modeling different aspects of our consciousness. No single one of them is in charge. This assumption of a central location of consciousness is not only under attack from neuroscience, but also philosophy. The Cartesian cogito-sum, I think-I am (Descartes,

1993), according to Heidegger, sets into the history of philosophy an illusionary subject-object split (Heidegger, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c).

The color phi experiment illustrates another problem with the Cartesian Theater. In this experiment, two dots are flashed on and off on a screen, giving the illusion that one dot is oscillating back and forth. If one dot is set to randomly change color, a subject will experience an oscillating dot that suddenly changes color at the midway point of the dot's spectrum. Setting aside the possibility of a premonition of what color the dot will change to there seem to be two explanations of this phenomenon of conscious experience, assuming the Cartesian Theater. The first explanation is that our unconscious mind re-writes our memory of what we experienced. The second is that we hold the experience in our memory until we have all the facts, at which point we show ourselves the experience as a whole. There is no way to test which of these is happening, and in reality neither is a satisfactory explanation. Dennett proposes the multiple drafts theory: there is no "finish line" that all the senses cross at the same time. Consciousness is like an essay, which is constantly being re-written. Which account a subject gives of his conscious experience will depend on which draft is filed as true.

Another assumption of consciousness that is difficult to explain is the Self. This Self would be the homunculus sitting at the control panel in the Cartesian Theater. My Self is what I identify as me, but does this concept end at my physical body? Or does it also include my house, my car, my likes, my desires? Where does the split occur between subject and object? Why not look at the Self as the story I tell myself? Who else could I be other than who I tell myself I am? Dennett uses the phrase "narrative fiction" to describe the Self. What is the self? Another magic trick; an illusion.

I view Dennett's theory of consciousness as a deconstruction: he has laid away the most central aspect of consciousness – the Self. From this new ground of consciousness without a Self, he explains what seem like qualia in terms of judgments. 'Qualia' is a term used in philosophy for the intrinsic properties of our sense datum – colors, tastes, textures, sounds, smells. He relates the issue of qualia to a tangled kite string, saying that sometimes it is more economical for us to buy a new kite string than it is to untangle the old string. However, we cannot escape our interpretation, so we must pull at the threads until we can see that it is truly unredeemable. Dennett has done this in his article "Quining Qualia." He ascribes four qualities to qualia: they are ineffable, private, intrinsic, and immediately accessible to perception. I agree that qualia must have these four properties, and nothing with these four properties could exist.

Frequently, qualia are used as the quintessential definition of ineffable. How can I describe to you what my inner, subjective experience of red is like? I can easily describe an object that is red, but for all I know, the way red looks to you could be drastically different from the way it looks to me. The inverted qualia thought

experiment addresses this very concern by asking you to imagine someone who sees an inverted color spectrum. There would be no way to tell whether or not this was the case; even though yellow looked different to us, we would have both learned that the sun was yellow, and even though his yellow might be what I would call red, we would both call this qualia yellow. Dennett gives a counter thought experiment, where a mad neuroscientist inverts someone's qualia while they sleep. He could do this in one of two ways: he could invert the actual qualia, or he could invert the memory of all previous qualia – and there would be no way to tell which one he had done. Even if he hadn't changed the actual qualia, it would seem like he had.

Hand-in-hand with qualia being ineffable, the phenomena that we are describing here are also intimately private. I cannot share with you my private qualia of red. In "Quining Qualia," Dennett responds to the notion of qualia being private with Wittgenstein's concept of a private language. By private language, Wittgenstein does not mean one that could be translated. The concept of qualia fits perfectly with what the private content of this language would have to be. We are given a picture of what a private language would look like in §258 of *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein describes having a sensation that is impossible for him to define. Every time he feels this sensation, he writes "S" on a calendar. He cannot say what it feels like, just points to it in his mind's eye when he feels it. Later, when he feels the sensation again, how does he know it is the same sensation? Could he be mistaken? The point of this example is that it does seem to depict a private language, but really every part of it has been communicated in a common language. If we were to question someone having such an indescribable sensation, we would probably get to the bottom of what the sensation sounded like, maybe, "Oh that's just gas!" Wittgenstein writes, "So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands" (§261). Our example of what looked like a private language turns out to be no such thing, and the notion of calling qualia private runs into insurmountable problems of communication. In §253 Wittgenstein talks about criteria of identity: what is it that allows us to talk about our sensations? If our sensations were not alike to each other, there would be no understanding one another when we talked about them. If I truly had a private, ineffable qualia that corresponded to what I call red, there would be no communicating that I was experiencing red, yet I have quite plainly communicated just that.

Some philosophers agree that qualia must not be private and ineffable, and that the qualia of red that I talk about must be like the qualia of red that you talk about (Tye, 2009). But still, these qualia are irreducible to physical causes. There is some intrinsic phenomenal property of red that we undeniably see when looking upon a red object. It is interesting that these properties have to be intrinsic. We cannot talk about intrinsic properties without also discussing extrinsic properties. The intrinsic properties are the necessary properties; extrinsic properties are incidental. For example, let us discuss

what it is to be a chair. An intrinsic quality is the quality of being a place to sit; an extrinsic quality could be the material and design of the chair. The intrinsic quality of red, on the other hand, would be the experienceable qualia red I see, whereas an extrinsic quality of red would be the red things I see in the world. Dennett draws our attention to how there is no true, hard and fast line between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. For example, we say the redness of the chair is incidental, but the molecular makeup of its fabric –which causes the redness – is not. We say where it came from is an extrinsic property, unessential to its “chairness”, but the chair is dependent upon where it was made.

If the intrinsic properties of qualia are taken to be the defining aspect of qualia, how do we explain the taste of beer, coffee, or wine – or any other acquired taste? It is true that I believe red looks the same to me today as it did ten years ago, but the hoppy flavor of beer brings a much different experience to me than it did when I had my first sip. Do we want to say that the intrinsic nature of qualia can change? Or might it be more understandable that the qualia are just as dependent on time and other factors as is anything that we might call an extrinsic property? And so, as Dennett says, “Properties that ‘seem intrinsic’ at first often turn out on more careful analysis to be relational” (Dennett, 1988).

The last property frequently ascribed to qualia is that of being immediately apprehensible and undeniable. This is the property that seems most obvious to me. When I see the red chair, I take no time deliberating on its redness. In fact, when I see something I don’t immediately recognize and later decide it was an abstract chair, I spend no time deliberating on the colors it is made up of. Taking the empirical stance of Locke, qualia are to me the simple ideas through which we take in all information about the world (Locke, 1959). We could compare our qualia to pixels in a photograph: when I look at a scene, it is by distinguishing various shades of colors that I am able to make out shapes and forms of the objects in the scene, just as by various shades of colors and pixels a printer can produce a picture of any viewable scene. It seems that only through introspection can I get to the simple ideas that make up my more complex ideas. In everyday usage, I say that I see a chair – not that I see various shades of red, then judge it to be a chair. No, I instantly judge it to be a chair. Because of these quick judgments I make about objects, I am able to process immense amounts of data in my everyday life. I go somewhere new, look around, and make judgments on a large scale of what I see. I do not, pixel by pixel, qualia by qualia, present the world to myself.

The world shows itself to me in countless judgments that I build up into complex ideas before I even know I’ve made a judgment. In simplest terms, this is Dennett’s explanation: there is no hard problem of consciousness, no central self, only countless judgments; these judgments seem like qualia, they seem like a self, and this seeming is the magic trick of consciousness. “Qualia-philies” are people that can’t let go of the

magic; they don't want the trick to be explained. Personally, I find that judgments can account for and correspond to the way I experience consciousness; I can see through the magic. But the qualia-lover wants to say, "You haven't really explained anything, you've at best explained consciousness away!" But I think this does give a good explanation of consciousness; it doesn't explain it away, it explains it from one view: the materialistic reductionist view. It doesn't explain what it seems like to be conscious, but it explains the material causes of consciousness.

An explanation from one view point can be correct, but it cannot be the truth. The physical description of red is not going to be of much practical use to the artist. For Heidegger, there are two modes of unconcealment: challenging forth and bringing forth. Challenging forth is the enframing of judging a thing to be a this and not a that. Bringing forth, on the other hand, is a letting. The flower brings itself forth when it blooms. Heidegger says,

Bringing-forth propriates only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call revealing. The Greeks have a word *alētheia* for revealing. The Romans translate this with *veritas*. We say 'truth' and usually understand it as the correctness of representation (1993c, p. 318).

When an idea shows itself, we say it is true if we believe it to correspond to the world, but there can never be a full disclosure; I cannot view an object from all sides at once. Viewing the front of the chair covers over the back. The same goes for ideas. I cannot mathematically describe light in a way that blinds me, as looking directly into the sun does. And even if we described everything we know about the sun, and we did it mathematically, scientific, then artistically, and mythologically, we could not hold all that shows itself in our minds at one time and we would still fall short of capturing all that is the sun. We can only capture one side at a time, and in our modern time we will challenge forth that side to be a description – an enframing – that can be called upon when desired.

The concept of enframing shows itself in Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" as a challenging forth out of concealment. What is revealed comes forth out of concealment; it becomes unconcealed. When I judge the Rhein to be a source of power for a hydroelectric power plant, I am challenging it forth out of unconcealment and creating a standing reserve of power. Challenging forth is a mode of unconcealment that creates a standing reserve. This is not true for a windmill – it must wait for the wind, and does not unlock and store the wind's energy.

The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth. Such challenging happens in

that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing. But the revealing never simply comes to an end. (Heidegger, 1993c, p. 321-322)

Wikipedia is a standing reserve of knowledge. The information we can find there has been gathered by demanding that it show itself. For example, the electromagnetic wave is information gathered from challenging our environment with exact mathematical calculation, and then written down to stand in reserve until someone wants to know what light is. We typically say something is true if it corresponds to reality, but here we are viewing truth as what is shown. Correspondence is limited in describing reality because reality cannot be captured from all sides at once. One cannot come up with an exhaustive list of all the potential uses for a river – one could challenge it forth to do almost anything with enough ingenuity. The typical understanding of truth thus fails to correspond to the everyday experience of reality.

In trying to make a reductionistic explanation of the judgments and observations that I make in life, I come across this strange concept of qualia. Qualia are then given this status of being an insurmountable obstacle to explaining consciousness in materialistic terms. Galen Strawson writes, "assuming that materialism is true, the existence of conscious experience is the greatest unsolved problem of physics" (1992, p. 1). Strawson goes on to criticize Dennett by writing, "He is then left with the phenomenon of there seeming-to-be-phenomenology, and it is now this phenomenon that stands in need of explanation. . ." (1992, p. 4) This obstacle seems unnecessary to me: not only is the concept of qualia intangible, but also explaining my consciousness down into terms of simple judgment seems to be a more logical reductionistic claim. As I said earlier, my experience of a scene is processed quickly because I judge the objects in the scene to be this or that. When I reflect deeply on how it is that I take in this information and I come to the very sense datum that must make up the smallest reducible building blocks on my conscious experience, I can once again say that I quickly interpret this data by making a judgment: that is red. These judgments are more numerable than words in any language. We do not have specific words for the multitude of ways that tomato soup can end up tasting bad. Nonetheless, if I reflect on what it is that makes this tomato soup taste bad, I can come across the judgment that it is burnt, or too salty, or too sweet. What it is like for the soup to taste this particular way is a quintessential idea of what a qualia must be. But what quicker way for me to make a judgment, than for every judgment to correspond with what it is like to have that judgment? And, with that, I feel that Dennett has reduced consciousness into materialistic explanations.

But an explanation of a chair is not a chair. An explanation of consciousness, in the same way, does not capture consciousness. In fact, explaining consciousness covers

over the very thing that makes consciousness so special: conscious experience. When I give to you an explanation of a chair, you cannot sit in it. Likewise, if I was an expert on bats, I could probably give you an incredibly detailed explanation of what it is like to be a bat. But no matter how you challenge forth an explanation of bat consciousness, you will never have the conscious experience of being a bat (Nagel, 1982). It would be impossible to step out of your own interpretation of the explanation of being a bat, and your own history of not being a bat.

In conclusion, though we might be able to give a whole account of consciousness reduced to materialistic explanations, this does not present us with the truth. Dennett's theory of consciousness is a challenged-forth, one-sided explanation, where the qualia magic trick of consciousness has been transformed into a standing account to be ready-at-hand. Thus, it is consciousness enframed; it gives an account that I believe is correct, but in doing so it has nothing to say about what it is like to be conscious. There is a world of difference between explaining why the trick seems to be magic and experiencing the magic. Our explanation is correct but the truth of the matter is consciousness, and as Heidegger says, "The correct always fixes upon something pertinent in whatever is under consideration [but] . . . the merely correct is not yet the true" (1993c, p. 313).

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