

Phenomenal Content and the Richness and Determinacy of Color Experience¹

for *Journal of Consciousness Studies*; 9K allotted; 7.7K wds here (w/out refs; 8.2K w/)

In a seminal article that has shaped much discussion in the philosophy of mind for the last twenty years, Joseph Levine (1983) called attention to a serious "explanatory gap" that persists between physical explanation and the "qualia" of our conscious, phenomenal experience. In a number of earlier pieces I have tried to develop a strategy for accounting for this gap that combined a narrow representationalist account of phenomenal *experience* with a projectivist, eliminativist (or "fictionalist") account of those *qualia*.² Roughly, the view is that our phenomenal experience consists in our standing in a specific causal/computational relation to specially restricted "sensational" sentences and/or predicates or other representations that are the outputs of sensory modules. The stability of this relation, and the associated stability of our idiosyncratic representations of ourselves and our conspecifics (and of things that look and act like them) leads us to project phenomena, "qualia," corresponding to these predicates, but there is no non-tendentious evidence for their actual existence: they play no causal/explanatory role in any true account of either ourselves or other people. Consequently, there is no reason to believe they exist; indeed, there is good reason to do without them. I thereby join a number of other philosophers (e.g., Loar (1990/2002), Tye (1995), Lycan (1996)) in thinking that the explanatory gap is therefore not a metaphysical gap in *the world*, but, rather, a certain sort of epistemic gap between physical and phenomenal *concepts* (and/or non-conceptual contents; the distinction won't be significant for purposes here). I differ from these other philosophers in the details about how those concepts should be understood. Unlike Lycan and Tye, I think their content needs to be construed relatively narrowly;³ unlike Loar, I think the internal representations need to have a more

1. Previous versions of some of this material were delivered at a conference on subjectivity in Dubrovnik, August 2003, and at a symposium on Joseph Levine's *Purple Haze* at the Pacific APA, March 2004. I'm grateful to audiences there, but especially to Levine, both then and over many years, for extended discussions of the issue, and to Cynthia Haggard for forcing me to clarify some distinctions.

2. See my (1988/96), (1992a and b), (1996), (1998), (2004); I provide a summary of the view in my (1997), as well as more briefly below (§1). I emphasize that I regard it as a "strategy," not anything like an adequate theory, since, as I will discuss below, there is (to put it mildly) a great deal about the view that still needs to be spelt out—here, as, of course, in the rest of psychology. Note that, for purposes of this paper I will follow Levine in describing my view as "fictionalist," though, to avoid the association with deliberate *fiction*, I prefer "eliminativist."

3. Lycan and Tye join many others, e.g. Dretske (1988), Millikan (2000) and Fodor (1990), in presuming what I call "Strong Externalisms" according to which the contents of primitive terms are "wide," constituted by genuine phenomena in the external world to which they are in various ways causally related. In my (2005b, 2006) I argue against such views, provisionally endorsing only a "weak externalism": *some* contents of *some* psychological states depend in *some way or other* upon *some* phenomena external to an agent's brain. A moment's reflection shows that it is only this weaker view that the stock (e.g. twin earth) examples for externalism support: the rest is speculative, and, I think, pretty dubious theory. My (1998) defense of the "narrow" content of sensational sentences (and my use of "narrow" throughout the present discussion) should be read as allowing for this weaker view, and consequently is only of "relatively" (or "weakly"?) narrow content.

substantial “projected” content than his mere “recognitional concepts” seem to me to possess; and, unlike nearly everyone⁴, I think there are no actual phenomena corresponding to these contents.

Levine (2001, hereafter “Haze”) has responded at length to my proposal, setting it out with admirable clarity, and raising an important problem for it that deserves extended discussion. In this paper, I want to distinguish this right problem from what seems to me to be Levine’s erroneous diagnosis of it. In §1 of what follows I briefly summarize my view (§1.1) and some arguments on its behalf (§1.2). One of my more controversial arguments involves my requirement for non-tendentious data (§1.3), Levine’s rejection of which seems to me to be based upon a conflation of properties with contents (§1.4). I argue that, as “irresistible” as Levine finds the postulation of qualia properties, he is not entitled to such a highly theoretical claim on the basis of his introspectible experience alone. Moreover, I argue, the qualia properties do no real work for him, nor for other “qualiaphiles” like Chalmers (1996), who insist upon them in even more ontologically rich ways. As Wittgenstein (1953/68:§271) put it, they are “wheels that turn but nothing turns with them.” What does do the work are our *representations* of these properties, with their intentional content, work that in general can be performed without there being in fact any actual properties represented.

But Levine doesn’t rest his belief in qualia on ontological appearances alone. He also claims that the specific intentional contents of experience can’t in fact be explained without reference to actual qualia, an issue to which I turn in §2. He provides two arguments. The first is an argument about the semantics of identity statements generally that rests on an externalist theory of content that seems to me rash (§2.1). The second is an argument about how specifically the “rich and determinate” content of experiences of color can’t be had by representations alone, but requires real qualia (§2.2). Now, I think he is importantly right to call attention to this richness and determinacy, especially of color experience, and how it is a problem for my view. I think he is mistaken in supposing that it is the *qualia themselves* that provide the solution to this problem, by serving, themselves, as their own mode of presentation (§2.3). I consider a proposal of Papineau (2002) and Balog (ms.) in this regard that assimilates phenomenal to quotation concepts. The proposal seems to me both phenomenologically dubious –one frequently entertains phenomenal concepts, mercifully without having the associated experience– and theoretically problematic: unlike the case of quotation, we have no idea how even a (facsimile of a) quale instanced in its own representation could be *read*. Indeed, as Levine himself acknowledges, we not only have no account of how qualia properties themselves could properly serve as the content of internal representations, we have no good account of phenomenal content at all.

But if we have no account of phenomenal content, then, there is no reason for Levine to insist that any account will require the postulation of qualia. I conclude (§3) that, while the problem of understanding the content of particularly the rich and determinate color experience is a problem for my view, it is in fact a problem for *any* view, computationalist, physicalist or dualist alike. The further *ontology* is of no use, whatever it may be. What is needed is a better psychology of phenomenal content. Despite what seems to be their immediate availability –and even how much vision theory can already tell us about them– there is something about the content of our own color experiences that seems peculiarly difficult to capture in any theoretically satisfying way.

4. Except radical eliminativists such as Quine (1960:264) and Dennett (1988/2002, 1991, 1995). Since they are eliminativist (or, anyway, instrumentalist) about the *whole* of mental ascription, and “superficialist” about its evidence, their denial of qualia differs from mine in a number of ways (see my (1994, 1995, 1997) and §1.3 below).

1. Summary of “Sensational Sentences”

1.1 CRTQ

My treatment of qualitative experience tries to locate it within the framework of a causal-computational theory of thought (CRTT), for which I believe there is considerable independent evidence. Let me emphasize, however, that I view CRTT not so much as a serious “theory,” but as a promising research program, within which, however, quite independently of qualitative experience, there are plenty of serious explanatory gaps. As Fodor (1983, 2000) has argued for some time, although CRTT may well be *necessary* for a theory of thought, no one yet has a serious idea about how it actually explains such basic processes as ordinary abductions and confirmation. Moreover, as Levine (1987), himself, has rightly pointed out, Quine’s argument for the indeterminacy of translation is simply a way of raising an explanatory gap for intentionality, quite apart from consciousness. Despite all this, I still think Fodor (1975) is right in claiming that CRTT is “the only president we’ve got.”

My proposal within the framework of CRTT is to treat qualitative experiences as involving causal-computational relations to specially restricted representations, the specialness of the representations consisting in, *inter alia*, their serving only as the output of sensory modules. They don’t freely combine, as other predicates standardly do, into logical complexes other than perhaps conjunctions—in this way they are “non-conceptual” representations expressing the same content as *unrestricted*, conceptual ones like “looks red.” Moreover, unlike unrestricted ones, they can’t be entokened in describing the states of other people, just as (the internal equivalent of) “I” can’t be used for that purpose either. The best we can do is to infer that other people themselves have such predicates, and consequently the subjectivity and experiences to which these restricted representations give rise. The narrow content of representations is determined by features of this special role, which provides the content of our sensory experience, analogously to the way that the role of a first-person indexical provides the similarly narrow content of our first-person (“I”) thoughts. The difference between the color-sighted and a color-blind person unaware of his lack is that the former can express the proposition [It looks red] using (what we can indicate in English by the pseudo-sentence:) “It’s R-ing,,” whereas the latter has to use some other device, e.g. “It’s F-ing,,” which might encode merely reflectances.

Sensational sentences also have something like a wide content—at any rate, a content that would be genuinely external were it real—but this wide content is a mistaken projection of their narrow content, a positing of peculiar “qualia” properties separate from the corresponding secondary properties, rather in the way, again, that the peculiar content of “I” thoughts often leads to a projection of “souls” separate from bodies. This sort of projection *needn’t* be mistaken—I see no reason to regard our ordinary projections of material objects from our sensory evidence as seriously mistaken. But, unlike the case of material objects, I see no non-tendentious reasons for believing in qualia. Indeed, their postulation seems as peculiar and otiose as Hume and Parfit have found the postulation of a soul.

Note that I diverge from other “representationalists” who claim that experience represents, “transparently,” *only* the external secondary properties, such as colors, themselves. I agree with Levine (Haze:p179n5) that experience also can represent “phenomenal” properties (think of them as what Jackson’s (1982) “Mary” might notice about *herself* when she first sees something red; I follow Levine in using the “-ish” suffix to indicate such properties). It’s just that, unlike Levine and other *non*-representationalists, I think we have no reason to believe that these projected, phenomenal properties—nor, come to think of it, the external secondary properties either—actually exist—nor the projected external, secondary

properties either. Both secondary and phenomenal properties are mere “intentional properties,” just as the soul is a mere “intentional object.”⁵

1.2 Brief Arguments for CRTQ

Why believe such a (even to my mind!) peculiar view? My main reasons are, very briefly, the following (see the references in fn 2 for fuller discussion):

(i) it offers a clear way to integrate qualitative experience into an independently motivated and promising research program;

(ii) it allows a consistent treatment of the apparent qualities of experience with the more obviously representational aspects, e.g. pains, itches and visual qualia seeming to have “location” and variable intensities;

(iii) it avoids the needless and problematic metaphysics and epistemology of real “qualia”: just what sort of physical properties are they? How do they interact with the brain? How come no one else can enjoy my reddish experiences by inspecting my brain?

(iv) it explains the “subjectivity” of the first-person by the restrictions on the relevant predicates, which cannot be used for the states of others any more than a first-person indexical can be. Each person would have available to them representations that only they can enjoy when they are receiving the output of certain perceptual modules, which they presumably self-ascribe using a first-person indexical, thus achieving a specific first-person perspective on the world;

(v) it avoids unwanted possibilities of these special properties being detached from the rest one’s cognitive structure, as in the case of zombies, arbitrarily divergent qualia, or of some “anaesthetic” that severed the connection between qualia and cognition;

(vi) it explains what seems to me the important problem in this area, what I call “the mind/body problem problem,” which is why there is a mind/body problem at all (why aren’t we all just happy scientists, taking surprising truths, such as that glass is a liquid, in stride?). For example, it avoids Levine’s problem of “gappy identities” (Haze:§3.6), since no such identities are being claimed about the projected qualia themselves. What we have instead are identifications of *experiences* of some qualia, *x*, with some computational/representational processes that have the content [*x*], which in turn can be identified with physical states of the brain in the way that similar states in a computer can be identified with physical states in it.⁶

5. By which I don’t mean that they must be reckoned in one’s ultimate ontology. While they are often the “objects” of our thoughts, *pace* Brentano and Meinong, purely intentional objects don’t exist, nowhere, nohow (cf. Cartwright 1960/87). Talk of them seems to me best regarded as simply an odd “projected” way we have of talking about intentional content: thus, *x* thinks about *Zeus* is just a way of saying that *x* has a thought with the content [*Zeus*] (I refer to contents by placing phrases that express them in brackets. Note that [*Zeus*] is not the same as *Zeus*, since the latter, but not the former, is supposed to have, e.g., a beard). In my (2006) I argue that talk of intentional inexistents pervades cognitive science, e.g., theories of vision and phonology.

6. Some gappiness may still attach to these identities, given the gaps that arguably attach to CRTT. These may be substantial: unlike Chalmers (1996), and despite widespread optimism among many, I think intentionality continues to be a really “hard” problem. But it seems to a very different one from the one that concerns Levine here, and one informed by more ample non-tendentious reasons to take it seriously.

1.3 Non-Tendentious Data

Another of the arguments I provided for my position is that the qualiophile can provide no non-tendentious, or non-question-begging reasons for believing in qualia. Typically, all the qualiophile does is insist that he just knows “immediately” that he has qualia. Of course, he might also try appealing to various bits of behavior and perhaps cranial phenomena on their behalf: wincing in the case of pain, scratching in the case of an itch, idiosyncratic activity in the visual cortex in the case of visual qualia. But all such evidence seems to me better explained merely by appeal to *representations* of qualia, than by the notoriously problematic qualia themselves. Thus, on my account, someone winces because they have a sensational representation with the content [pain], and scratches because of such a representation with the content [itch], and even her introspections and reports about these sensations –about how “ineffable,” “categorical,” entirely “private” they seem– can be explained by those self-same representations. Rejecting this account on the basis of introspective claims that one is “directly aware” of the qualia over and above processing the representations simply begs the question.⁷

Indeed –and this is my main reason for believing the view– were qualia to be posited independently of one’s representations of them, we would be faced not only with the usual “problem of other minds,” wondering whether anyone else had them, but with even more worrisome first-person doubts: it would seem nomologically possible to be clearly and unhesitatingly convinced one was in excruciating pain, as a result of representing oneself to be so in the above restricted ways, and yet still fail in fact to be –perhaps many of us would turn out to have the real qualia only half the time: only your physicalist or dualistic neurosurgeons would know for sure!⁸ This possibility strikes me as pointless and personally intolerable: having all the intentional *attitudes* of someone in pain –noticing it, hating it– is surely every bit as bad as being in pain. As Levine observes, “If qualia, or the qualitative characters of conscious experiences, entered the game only as theoretical posits, then of course they would be more trouble than they’re worth” (Haze:p133).

Levine thus aims “to challenge the status of theoretical posit to which conscious experience is relegated, instead treating it as a basic datum that itself requires explanation” (Haze:p133). He supports this by a criticism of what would superficially appear to be a view similar to mine advocated by Daniel Dennett (1988/2002, 1991), whereby the “theory of consciousness ought to be constrained by everything we are tempted to say about our experience” (Haze:p133). Levine claims:

I maintain, however, that conscious experiences themselves, not merely our verbal judgments about them, are the primary data to which a theory must answer. –(Haze:p134)

Now I actually agree with Levine about this latter claim. For I agree that, understanding ‘judgment’ in the ordinary way that Dennett does, it’s not enough merely to produce a theory that agrees with our ordinary judgments. There seems to me every reason to think there are phenomena of *really seeming* that exist apart from merely the phenomena of merely *judging* one way or the other (at least as this is ordinarily understood

7. I hasten to point out that this situation with regard qualia is dramatically different from that of positing intentional states themselves (as Levine notes, Haze:pp143-4). *Pace* Quine and the Churchlands, these *are* needed to explain a wide variety of phenomena that can be specified independently of a theory of mind (my favorite examples are jokes: how could one hope to explain regularities in people laughing at jokes without adverting at least sometimes to the their content?).

8. In my (1995) I argue that this is this most profitable way to read the notorious passages of Wittgenstein (1953/68:§§240-308), which he (to my mind) needlessly burdens with his dubious argument against a “private language.” Note that, so understood, the issue here is not merely *epistemic*, concerning how we *know* we’re in pain, but *metaphysical*, concerning the possibility of having all the attitudes with the content [pain], but not the pain experience itself.

by Dennett); and, moreover (*pace* Dennett) things can seem to seem a certain way, and yet not seem that way at all. For example, as against Dennett's (1991) claims about there being no fact of the matter about whether it's the taste of beer or our preferences for it that have changed since childhood, it seems to me this could be settled by investigation of a person's gustation module, about which his superficial introspective judgments are perhaps hopelessly confused, mistaken or undecided (see my 1994 for discussion). So, on my view, unlike Dennett's, there is a question about the character of experience, one that is not always settled merely by asking people what they think their experience is like.

But, of course, none of this implies that Levine's own characterization of his experience in terms of the experience of *qualia* is correct. It may be true that, contrary to Dennett, there's a distinction to be made between "judgments" and what we regard as "conscious experience," and perhaps we can know *that* without much theory. But to take the presentations of experience as *veridical*, as about genuine properties, is not something experience alone can decide. The dispute between representationalists and qualia realists is a fairly abstract *theoretical* dispute, which it's hard to see how introspection alone could settle –as Brian Loar (1990/2002:p308) notes, "there is no introspective guarantee of *anything* beyond mere appearance." But to see the specific issue here, we need to be perhaps a little clearer than the literature generally is about the distinction between properties and intentional contents.

1.4. Properties vs. Contents

Expressions such as "experience of" (like "concept of" and "representation of") are *intentional*, in the "logical" sense that someone can have an experience of something, x, even though x doesn't exist. Thus one can have an experience of an hallucinated dagger without there being a dagger: the experience simply has [dagger] as its *intentional content*, which specifies what the experience is "about", especially in cases in which the thing it is about doesn't exist (see fn 4). Thus, it's at least logically possible that there be experiences (and concepts and representations) of qualia without there being any qualia.

This latter claim can be obscured by an unfortunate, widespread tendency in philosophy to not distinguish talk of intentional content from talk of *properties*. Particularly for purposes here, it's important to resist what I call *property profligacy*, which simply presumes without argument that there is a property for every predicate. Ontological postulations have to earn their explanatory keep, and I see no explanatory purpose served by supposing that, e.g., there actually are properties in the world corresponding to perfectly meaningful predicates like "round square" or "magical." Thus there is no contradiction in my supposing that there can be experiences that have qualia as their content, despite there being no actual (or even possible) qualia properties.

Levine, himself, agrees one oughtn't be profligate about properties:

Realism about a domain means thinking of it as ontologically independent of how we conceive it. It must always be open to claim that though we think of the world as containing such-such properties, in fact it doesn't.
–(Haze:pp11-2)

Nevertheless, he consistently thinks of his experience as disclosing the existence of *phenomenal* properties. For example, when he introduces "the second important dimension [besides subjectivity] that requires explanation," he refers to it as:

qualitative character itself:... reddish or greenish, painful or pleasurable and the like. From within the subjective viewpoint I am presented with these qualitative features of experience, or "qualia" as they're called in the

literature. ... In fact, as will emerge in the course of my argument, the explanatory gap between physical properties and qualitative properties is a symptom of the subjectivity of consciousness. –(Haze:p7)

Indeed, apparently he finds the belief in properties here “irresistible”:

The temptation to believe that there has to be some genuine distinction in properties corresponding to the representations of reddishness and its physical correlate is cognitively irresistible. –(Haze:p91)

Indeed, in re-phrasing the problem as one about whether some alien had qualitative experiences, he insists it must be understood in terms of properties:

I’m not asking whether or not to extend my use of the term “reddishness” ...to the alien...I want to know whether or not it has this sort of experience, whether or not it instantiates a certain property... If one feels there really is a contrast here, as I do, then it seems to commit one to the claim that reddishness is a genuinely independent property. (Haze:p89; see also p91)

Now, I quite agree that whether an alien has a certain qualitative experience is not in general a matter for merely verbal decision. But this doesn’t entail that it must be a matter of metaphysically independent properties. For a narrow representationalist, it can be a matter simply of whether the alien is in a state with the same intentional content, whether or not that content picks out a genuine property.⁹

2. Levine’s Arguments

In the course of his book, Levine does provide two arguments for thinking that qualitative experience must involve experience of actual qualia properties. The first, made quickly in passing, is a general semantic argument that involves an implicit but, I think, insufficiently critical appeal to a theory of content, which I address in §2.1. The second argument is the one I take to be the more important one, regarding the richness and determinacy of qualitative experience, which I address in §2.2. In §2.3 I’ll consider his and others’ further claims about the “substantive content” of phenomenal concepts, but will conclude, with Levine, that we actually haven’t any account of how such substantive content would be possible, or really do any good.

2.1 Rash Theories of Content

According to Levine’s “semantic” argument, qualia properties are needed to explain the explanatory gappiness of claims that would identify qualia with physical states:

9. In conversation, Levine has pointed out to me that in quoting these specific passages here, I am slightly misconstruing the structure of his argument, which, at this point, was simply taking for granted the postulation of qualia properties, postponing discussion of the eliminativist option until later (see Haze:146ff, discussed in §2.2 below). Fair enough; but I think it is nevertheless worth quoting just how “irresistible” Levine does find that postulation, especially in view of how widely this lack of resistance is shared in the field.

Note that the eliminativist could, of course, agree that the predicate “x is an experience with content [y]” itself picks out a genuine (e.g. a CRTT) property. The issue here is whether the content [y] itself picks out a property, such as the “reddishness” with which Levine is concerned in this passage.

The point is that an intelligible request for explanation seems to entail a distinction in properties of the one thing we're representing on both sides of the identity sign. ... What other account of conceptual difference is there, except to appeal to distinct ascriptive modes of presentation, which brings with it appeal to distinctive properties? –(Haze:p87)

In a footnote to this passage, he does consider the possibility of invoking the concept/property distinction in turn for the “ascriptive” terms, so that the identity might express the fact that two concepts pick out the same property, but he replies that this “only pushes the question back to the identity claims involving those properties, so no real progress is made” (Haze:p188n9).¹⁰

Levine seems to be presupposing here a certain view about intentional content of identity claims, viz., all modes of presentation must ultimately be explained by reference to different, actual worldly properties. Now, to be sure, the current philosophical world is largely on his side: according to strongly externalist theories of content (see fn 3), there needs to be a property for every primitive predicate we can think. But, aside from semantic desperation, I see no reason to think these theories are true. Indeed, providing we resist property profligacy, there are plenty of (even necessarily) non-referring but perfectly contentful terms and predicates: e.g., “Zeus,” “angel,” “magic,” “soul,” “phlogiston.”¹¹ Of course, a strategy for some externalists is to claim that all such empty terms must ultimately be “analyzed” into terms that do refer.¹² But such a claim, familiar from the empiricists, Russell, and the Positivists, has yet to be shown to be plausible, especially in view of the attacks upon it by Quine (1956/76), Kripke (1972) and Fodor (1998). If this is the source of Levine’s worries about qualia, it seems to me he would be wiser to hold out for a better theory of content.

A brief methodological aside about such a theory. For reasons that are increasingly obscure to me the more I’ve thought about it, it seems to have been a presumption of modern philosophy that a theory of content (or meaning) should be relatively easy to come by, say, by mere philosophical reflection. Thus, when Quine (1960:ch 2) raises his famous conundra about translation, readers thought it was not unreasonable for him to proceed to declare translation (and the whole of mentalistic psychology!) “indeterminate.”¹³ Similarly, philosophers such as Dretske, Millikan and Fodor are prepared to commit themselves to theories of mental content of astounding generality, usually on the basis of relatively few examples, driven, I think, by the fear that, without such a theory, we would not be entitled to insist upon the reality of our minds! Such a presumption and its attendant fears seem to me inappropriate. Although it would be terrific to have a satisfactory theory of content –and much of what these authors say are valuable ideas along the way– there is no special rush: intentional psychology and our mental lives are not holding their breath. They are supported well enough by the vast (again, non-tendentious) evidence of at least some intelligent activity in the world. If the last century has taught us anything, it is that the provision of an adequate theory, either of the mind or of intentionality, is stunningly more difficult than has been supposed. In particular, under-

10. This is just a development of the “distinct property model” of identities that Levine discusses from Smart (1959); see Haze:p47.

11. Indeed, if recent theories of vision and phonology are to be believed, some of the basic contents deployed by the visual and phonological systems, e.g. [circle], [cone] may not apply to anything at all; they may be the result simply of tractable computations in the brain (see my 2006). Note that these strong externalist theories are not entailed by the “weak externalism” I endorsed in fn 1.

12. Two other strategies are either simply to indulge in property profligacy (as in Fodor (1990)) or to resort to the even more desperate measure of denying that such empty terms have any content at all, as in Millikan (2000) and Taylor (2003). I criticize these strategies in my (2005b).

13. Kim (1993:194-6) explicitly draws such a conclusion from Davidson’s gloss on a Quinean semantics.

standing the nature of concepts is likely at least as difficult as understanding the principles of a Chomskyan grammar (see my 2005b). This, at any rate, seems to me the presumption one should bring to the difficulties of understanding our concepts of the phenomenal.

Returning to Levine's worry, it is, in any event, a mistake to suppose that rich differences between intentional states require genuine worldly properties: two ideas of non-existent properties --say, [magical] and [dephlogistonated]-- may occasion enormous differences in the experiences of thinking them. It's not the real, existent objects of our thoughts that explain the differences they make to our experience: it's presumably something about the way we encode or otherwise incorporate them into our mental lives, and once one has specified these different ways then it would seem that any actual properties drop out, at least as a way of internally distinguishing the experiences.¹⁴

2.2 Richness and Determinacy

Levine raises a second, more troublesome argument, specifically against my view that qualia properties should be regarded as having no more reality than magic (for which, he and I agree, there is a concept but no property):

The fundamental problem I see with treating reddishness like magic derives from the very source of the explanatory gap itself: the determinateness and substantiality of our conception of qualitative content. It is the richness and determinacy of the mode of presentation of my concept of reddishness that causes the problem in the first place, since it is this factor that makes any purported identity with physical or functional properties gappy. ... On Rey's view the difference [between reddish and greenish qualia] has to consist in the difference between the two representations. But I don't see how you can get the representational difference to do the work it has to do without there being a difference in the properties represented... --(Haze:pp146-7)

Richness and determinacy are recurring themes of his discussion from the beginning:

By saying that the conception is "determinate," I mean that reddishness presents itself as a specific quality, identifiable in its own right, not merely by its relation to other qualities. --(Haze:p8)

He nicely contrasts this richness and determinacy with the "thinness" of demonstrative concepts, like [this] and [that]:

I point blindly in front of me and say "I wonder what that is." I have no more substantive idea of what I'm pointing at than that it's an object occupying space. ... [W]ith phenomenal concepts, such as our concept of a reddish quale, there is a "thick" substantive mode of presentation. We are not just labeling some "we know not what" with the term "reddish," but rather we have a fairly determinate conception of what it is for an experience to be reddish. --(Lev:pp82,84)

14. I realize that current "disjunctivists" (e.g., Snowdown (1980-1), Campbell(2002)) don't share this view, but I'm unpersuaded by their reservations. See my (2005a) for discussion.

Now, I think Levine is right to press the case that phenomenal concepts are richer and more determinate than mere *demonstrative* ones. But the question is how to explain this difference. On my view, part of the character of an experience will be provided by the structure of the sensational sentences themselves: unlike pure demonstratives, the restricted predicates of vision, for example, are presumably parameterized for hue, saturation and tone, as well as relative position in a 2-1/2D retinocentric grid. I also assume that many such predicates also give rise to what I call a certain “characteristic processing” that is constitutive of having an experience of a specific sort. Thus, sensational representations of an itch at a certain location involve a desire to scratch at that location; of a sour taste, a disposition to pucker; of pitches, associations with different degrees of bodily tension; of pain, serious aversion. It is this further processing that I presume provides the basis for the narrow content that, on my view, distinguishes one kind of experience from another.

Levine (Haze:p147) notes my recourse here to such processing, but worries that it papers over the problem. After all, at least one of the things that motivates my eliminativist (or fictionalist) view is the difficulty of *identifying* qualia with physical, functional roles. But, Levine asks:

If characteristic processing, essentially functional role...captures what seems present to us in our experience of reddishness, then why bother with the fictionalism? –(Haze:pp147-8)

This, however, mistakes my motivation. The fictionalism doesn't serve to identify qualia with some *better* candidate than functional role; rather, as I indicated in §1.2 #(vi), it serves to explain Levine's own observation of the “gappiness” of such identifications, i.e., *why we are so reluctant to accept them*. It is because they are an illusory *projection* of simple, categorical properties in an “inner world” from stabilities in our experience that we are puzzled, and unwilling to identify them with a certain functional role. The *fictionalism* addresses not the *mind/body* problem –what addresses *that* is my *functionalism* (i.e..CRTT); the fictionalism addresses, rather, “the *mind/body* problem problem”: why we resist being simply good scientists and accepting a CRTT account.

However, it would be glib to leave things at that. Although I've suggested some plausible examples of characteristic processing that may begin to capture the content of many conscious experiences, I think Levine is right to worry that I haven't directly addressed how they might capture the content of color ones. It's one thing to point out that itches are connected to desires to scratch, and pains with serious aversion, quite another to say what distinguishes an experience of red from one of green. Levine doubts that this difference can be captured merely by differences in the representations alone, and I think what's bothering him about my further reliance on “characteristic processing” is that, at least in the case of color, it's extremely hard to see what to cite.

I think it's no accident that color experiences have figured so prominently in the philosophical discussions of qualia, and especially in Levine's discussion of the explanatory gap. Color experiences do seem to display a richness and determinacy not shared to the same degree by most other experiences. Arbitrary portions of a continuous spectrum of external differences are perceived as dramatically different properties: indeed, there seems to be nothing about red, green, yellow and blue experiences *by themselves* that even suggest they are related on any sort of continuum with one another. Of course, we know this is due at least in part to the particular structure of retinal sensitivity, with its special cells responsive to different ranges of wave-lengths. But how does that fact alone explain just how *dramatic* the differences are? Why shouldn't the differences be as relatively innocuous as the step-wise differences in pitch on a piano? Why the extraordinary display of the rainbow? Why shouldn't the difference between red and green be no more vivid than the distinction between an experience of middle C and G?

What's additionally troublesome about this richness of at least these color experiences is that they are at the same time peculiarly *passive*. Unlike the itches, tickles, pains, bitter tastes and high pitches that I mentioned above, *they don't seem to involve any constitutive connections with any other states*.¹⁵ At any rate, there don't seem to be any specific associations, responses or desires that seem peculiar to each of the distinctive (un-mixed) color experiences that would come close to capturing their individual richness, in the way that a desire to scratch comes close to capturing an itch. Doubtless there are further, as yet unknown, constitutive connections with other states of the visual system, and, though it's not hard to imagine these being the source of *some* sort richness, it's extremely hard to imagine how such connections would explain the *determinate* richness of, e.g., red and green. Of course, there are the connections with *judgment*, e.g., that one is indeed having a color experience of a certain sort; but, on pain of circularity, those connections alone can't provide the *content* of a color experience (the content of [reddish] can't be specified merely in terms of a disposition to judge that an experience has that very content). If one doubts, as I and many do, the reality of such "secondary" properties as colors themselves, then one can't rely on the content being supplied externally. So what provides the content of rich, passive experiences like those of color?

I don't mean to suggest that something like these same problems don't arise for other sensations, many of which, such as those of musical timbre (e.g., a trumpet vs. a flute), have an undeniable richness and determinacy that is also not obviously connected to other states. But the color cases are striking in this regard, and it's a merit of Levine's discussion to focus our attention on them. Another merit is that it invites us to focus on these rather more specific features somewhat independently of other features –"consciousness," "privacy," "subjectivity"– that, I think, can unnecessarily confound the discussion (as it occasionally does even Levine's (Haze:pp7,9,165-7)). Richness and determinacy seem to me particularly difficult problems that would persist even if the problems surrounding these other features were solved.

2.3 "Substantive" Content

Levine believes that it is this richness and determinacy that requires the existence of qualia. The passage I quoted at the beginning of the last section continues:

But I don't see how you can get the representational difference to do the work it has to do without there being a difference in the properties represented, which there can't be if the properties don't exist. In other words, how can there be a difference between reddish and greenish if there weren't any reddish and greenish in the first place? –(Haze:pp146-7)

Well, again, there is the logical point that there can, of course, be differences in properties represented without the properties existing, as with [magical] and [dephlogistinated]. But perhaps, nevertheless, the actual properties would help in capturing the difference between color experiences.

This, at any rate, is a suggestion Levine seems initially to endorse:

When I think of what it is to be reddish, the reddishness itself is somehow included in the thought; it's present to me. This is what I mean by saying it has a "substantive" mode of presentation. In fact, it seems the right way to look at it is that reddishness itself is serving as its own mode of presentation. –(Haze:p8)

15. It is this striking richness and passivity of color experiences, and the serious possibility that color experiences might be symmetrical in color space, that gives rise, of course, to the problem of "inverted qualia," so much more plausible in the case of colors than in that of, say, itches and tickles

It is an idea advanced by a number of authors. Loar (1990/2002:p300) mentions it in passing, and Papineau (2002:116-25) and Balog (ms.), for example, propose modeling phenomenal concepts on quotational ones: just as a representation of the word “apple” –e.g., “‘apple’”– arguably contains the word “apple” as a proper part, so would a (canonical?) representation of a phenomenal state contain that state.

There are, however, at least two serious problems with this latter proposal. In the first place, it is phenomenologically implausible. Phenomenal concepts seem to be deployed all the time without a trace of the corresponding experience, as I might do right now as I entertain various such concepts –[turquoise], [itch], [nausea], [ecstasy]– which, I assure the reader, do not in the least appear to be true of my experience at the moment. Indeed, the proposal would seem to have the extraordinary consequence that one couldn’t coherently deny one was having a certain experience: my claim, for example, that I’m presently not experiencing intense pain would nevertheless involve my, quotationally, experiencing intense pain!¹⁶

More importantly, the analogy with the quotation convention presupposes the very answer to the question we are seeking, viz., what is the content of a phenomenal concept? Understanding how to use “mention” quotes involves understanding their roughly demonstrative content –[the string of symbols enclosed by these marks]– and having a fairly good purchase on their intended referents: letters, symbols, strings.¹⁷ But the questions raised by Levine’s discussion are precisely how to understand the corresponding content of a phenomenal representation, and the qualia being represented. Which properties of the representation are picked out by this corresponding demonstrative of a phenomenal representation? How are those properties appreciated, incorporated into our mental lives? It is not hard to imagine a machine programmed to process quotation marks and read off the symbols enclosed by them. But how might a machine read the qualia? What are qualia that they could be even sufficiently well specified to be read in this way?

Although Levine feels partial to this view, he recognizes its problems:

The mere fact that a representation of a sensory experience involves recreating a facsimile of the experience in order to represent it doesn’t explain how the facsimile itself makes a cognitive difference –how it enters into the cognitive significance, or the content of the representation.

–(Haze:p86)

Reflection on this problem seems to me to raise an even more fundamental one: *why think that putting the qualia property itself into the representation would do any good?* The passive richness and determinacy of color experience won’t be explained by the qualia property unless we have an account of its richness and determinacy, as well as an account of how that richness and determinacy could be so passively appreciated by the mind. But then we would need an account of how that richness and determinacy got *represented*; i.e., we’d need an account of phenomenal concepts in addition to an account of these qualia properties, and, as Levine himself concludes, “that’s something we don’t have” (Haze:p86).

16. Papineau (2002:118-21) claims that at least in *imagining* phenomenal states one is instantiating “faint copies” that “resemble” the original state. But how could a faint copy of an intense pain serve as any sort of instance of *intense* pain? In any case, it would then be self-vitiating to claim that one wasn’t even experiencing a *faint* copy of an intense pain. Balog (ms.) acknowledges the problem and hopes in future work to handle it by distinguishing “direct” from “indirect” phenomenal concepts, the latter depending upon the former. I’m sceptical, but I think I should hold my reasons until the proposal is spelt out in detail. In any case, her view would need to answer my second objection.

17. This is easily exaggerated. Just what *words* or other standard linguistic items are is a topic of considerable controversy. At the risk of damaging my credibility beyond repair, I should mention that in my (2006) I argue that these sorts of things don’t exist either: they are just as much intentional inexistents as are qualia. But I ignore these issues for the present.

But, of course, if we don't have an account of the content of phenomenal concepts, then why think there is no way to "get the representational difference to do the work it has to do without there being a difference in the properties represented" (Haze:p147)? Why isn't it an open question?

3. Conclusion

Indeed, I think it *is* by and large still an open question, and the value of Levine's discussion consists in his forcing us to see that it is. My only reservation about his discussion is that he, like many others, keeps burdening this question with the "irresistible" postulation of qualia properties that, for the reasons I've indicated here, seems gratuitous.

The problem of characterizing particularly the richness and determinacy of the content of our color experience turns out to be a lot harder than I think many of us have supposed. This is perhaps unsurprising, given how much harder the problems of characterizing concepts in general have turned out to be. But it's important to see that this is a problem not only for my CRTT proposal, but for *all* existing proposals, physicalist and dualist alike. Postulating qualia properties, whether in the brain or in some special realm will be of no help unless we have an account of how those properties are assimilated into a person's cognitive life; and it's hard to see how they could be assimilated without being *represented*. But, if we have an account of how they can be represented, then we would have an account of phenomenal concepts; and if we had that, then, I submit, we'd have no more need of actual qualia properties than would an account of the content of Greek theology have a need of any actual Greek gods. As I think we find with many other questions in this area, ontology is no substitute for psychology –and not much help in it either.

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