
Can We Talk Meaningfully About Qualia?

Jordan Walters

In the first part of this paper I will survey the terrain of views towards qualia, then outline three views that are taken to be arguments for the existence of qualia. Then I will introduce a thought experiment from Daniel Dennett involving two coffee tasters, Chase and Sanborn, and formulate a modified version of Dennett's thought experiment with each of the three corresponding basic arguments for the existence of qualia.

The guiding thread behind all this is twofold: (1) the claim that, "the only things that can be referents of logically proper names are objects of existence and identities of which one cannot be mistaken about."¹ (2) The claim that qualia don't satisfy this condition.

This guiding thread can be expressed in the three following:

(P1) When a proposition p , contains a word that lacks a determinate truth condition, we have no epistemic access to form a belief about p .

(P2) If we cannot form a belief about p , any meaning that p has will not refer to the existence or identity of something which we cannot be mistaken about.

(C1) All theories of explaining, conceiving, or knowing qualia don't satisfy the conditions of P1 and P2, and thus, qualia-talk is not talk *about* anything.²

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Qualia is a special kind of stuff in the universe. It is the stuff that has the ‘raw feels’; the stuff that’s ineffable; the stuff that’s intrinsic; the stuff that’s private; the stuff that is “directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness.”³ It’s the way *things seem to us* and this seeming quality runs all the way down to the bottom of human experience. Think about it: everything that you have ever experienced, whether it’s numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, or aesthetic experience, all have that *seeming* quality.⁴ You are *there* and it is nothing other than *you* that is having any particular experience. This is essentially the debate about whether or not qualia exist. There are those who think that it can all be boiled down and reduced to something more basic (Dennett 1993; Ryle 1949; Lewis 1995).

On this side, there are different degrees of eliminativism. Some, like Lewis (1995) say that, “Qualia is a name for the occupants of a certain functional role that is spelled out in our tacitly known folk psychology.” Philosophers following in the footsteps of Ryle would might be inclined to say something like this: “Talk of the mental can be reduced to talk of publicly observable behaviours.” Whereas, Dennett would want to shift the burden of proof over to those who purport to have knowledge *about* qualia. Dennett himself writes, “I want to make it just as uncomfortable for anyone to talk of qualia—or “raw feels” or “phenomenal properties” or “subjective and intrinsic properties” or “the qualitative character” of experience—with the standard presumption that they, and everyone else, knows what on earth they are talking about.”⁵ On the other side, there are those who think that there is a debate to be had, and that *we do in fact* have epistemic access to “phenomenal properties” or “raw feels” (Nagel 1974). David Chalmers takes it that there are three basic types of arguments against those of the materialist or eliminativist persuasion: (1) ‘The Explanatory Argument’, (2) ‘The Conceivability Argument’, and (3) ‘The Knowledge Argument’.⁶

The Explanatory Argument (EA)	The Conceivability Argument (CA)	The Knowledge Argument (KA)
(P1) All the physical facts explain the underlying structure and function of something	(P1) It is conceivable that there be zombies	(P1) There are truths about consciousness that are not deducible from physical truths.
(P2) Explaining the structure and function of something does not explain consciousness	(P2) If it is conceivable there be zombies, it is metaphysically possible that there be zombies	(P2) If there are truths about consciousness that are not deducible from physical truths, then materialism is false.
(C1) Therefore, we could have all the physical facts and not have a single fact about consciousness. ⁷	(P3) If it is metaphysically possible that there be zombies, then consciousness is non-physical	(C1) Therefore, materialism is false. ⁸
	(C1) Consciousness is non-physical. ⁹	

What the EA, CA, KA all have in common is that they purport to undermine some materialist explanation of consciousness by pointing out *the way things seem to us*—that is, they all purport to demonstrate the existence of qualia. They do this by trying to undermine a materialist metaphysics that would have us think that qualia can be reduced down to physical properties of experiences, which are physical events (Lewis 1995). As Chalmers (2002) himself puts it, “Each denies a certain sort of close epistemic relation between the domains: a relation involving what we can know, or conceive, or explain.”

Now, there are many ways to resist these three arguments, but for the purpose of this essay I will only need one way. As stated at the beginning of this paper I will argue that (P1) when a proposition *p*, contains a word that lacks a determinate truth condition, we have no epistemic access to form a belief about *p*. (P2) If we cannot form a belief about *p*, any meaning that *p* has will not refer to the existence or identity of something which we cannot be mistaken about. (P3) Thus, all theories of explaining, conceiving, or knowing qualia don’t satisfy the conditions of P1 and P2, and thus, qualia-talk is not talk *about* anything. The EA, the CA, and the KA, although intuitively appealing, are not reasonable objections to a materialistic theory of qualia. But don’t just take my word for it, let’s now see if I can demonstrate the truth of P1, P2 and P3.

Let's look at some cases where people are purportedly talking meaningfully about qualia. Dennett's hallmark case is what is known as *Chase and Sanborn*.¹⁰ The thought experiment goes something like this: Mr. Chase and Mr. Sanborn work for Maxwell house and they were experts in making sure that Maxwell house coffee always tasted the same. One day, Mr. Chase confessed to Mr. Sanborn that the coffee no longer tasted as it did when he started working for Maxwell house; and it's not that the coffee has changed in taste, it's that his taste has changed. Mr. Chase just doesn't like *that taste* anymore. Mr. Sanborn confesses that he feels the same way, with one exception; he thinks that his *tasters* (that is to say, his taste-analyzing perceptual machinery) have changed. He still loves *that taste*. Dennett proceeds to analyze the thought experiment put forth.

He claims that there are three possible explanations for Chase's change in taste:

- (C1) Chase's coffee-taste-qualia have not changed, but his reactive attitudes have.
- (C2) Chase is wrong, his qualia have shifted slowly over the years without him noticing.
- (C3) Chase is somewhere between (1) and (2)¹¹

Dennett also claims that there are three possible explanations for Sanborn's change in taste:

- (C1) Sanborn is right; his qualia have shifted
- (C2) Sanborn's standards have shifted and he is misrepresenting his past experiences
- (C3) Sanborn is somewhere between (1) and (2)¹²

In what follows we will follow Chase and Sanborn on a philosophical journey lasting three days, where Chase and Sanborn try to give an account of their qualia experience.

DAY 1: Chase and Sanborn explain (and hopefully rigidly designate) their qualia

Let's assess the case of Chase and Sanborn in light of the EA. The EA would state that *there really is something* that was there, that isn't there anymore; i.e., there really was this way in which either Chase or Sanborn were fully acquainted with their old taste of coffee. The EA would say that we need to explain how the phenomenal property of "the-taste-of-coffee" was there at one point, but isn't there presently if the coffee is the same. Proponents of the EA would say that since there was a change in the phenomenal property but no change in the physical property there must be some way that either Chase or Sandborn have this first- personal acquaintance about *the way it feels* to drink that particular cup of Maxwell house. Therefore, the EA seems to show us that there is this special knowledge of the phenomenal property that either Chase or Sandborn possess.

However, the EA is mistaken because it overlooks the crucial fact that we can know what it is like to have some special epistemic access to a phenomenal property absent from the experience of the thing that has that property. In other words, Chase has no way of knowing whether or not his coffee-taste-qualia have changed or his reactive attitudes have changed. Remember that the EA holds that, *explaining anything, entails explaining qualia*. But in this case, there is no way to show that we are actually talking about qualia or for that matter explaining *anything*. Absent of a criterion of assessing whether or not (P1) (P2) or (P3) are true of either Chase or Sandborn we cannot reasonably hold that there is an explanatory gap because to do so, we first need evidence that we are talking about something that needs further explaining. But we don't even have the confidence that we are identifying *the qualia* of our experiences because our naming of an 'x' as qualia does no work in pinning down whether or not that 'x' is a change in our taste, a misrepresentation of our past experience, or our reactive attitudes. If this indeterminacy holds then the EA cannot be said to provide an *explanandum*; just empty attempts at an *explanans*. Thus, any proposition about Chase or Sanborn's qualia must contain a referent with an unspecified meaning. It might be a meaningful proposition—it is metaphysically possible that it has

a referent we don't know about—but *we* can't analyze it, and thus, we can't say that we are talking *about* something. My conclusion to the EA is that it doesn't give us the epistemic resources to talk *meaningfully* about qualia. But maybe the CA will give us some sort of acquaintance with qualia, and thus allow us to talk meaningfully about them?

DAY 2: Chase and Sanborn try to imagine themselves as zombies

Let's tackle the problem of Chase and Sanborn with a version of the CA that *zombifies* Chase and Sanborn; that is, let's treat them as if they were philosophical zombies.

(P1) It is conceivable that Chase and Sanborn are zombies.

(P2) If it is conceivable Chase and Sanborn are zombies, it is metaphysically possible that Chase and Sanborn are zombies.

(P3) If it is metaphysically possible that Chase and Sanborn are zombies, then consciousness is non-physical.

(C1) Consciousness is non-physical.

I'm going to argue that when a proposition *p*, contains a word that lacks a determinate truth condition, we have no epistemic access to form a belief about *p*.¹³ Chalmers tells us that it is part of the zombie argument to suppose three things: (1) "It is conceivable that there be a system that is physically identical to a conscious being, but that lacks at least some of that being's conscious states", (2) These zombies will look identical from a third-person point of view, and finally, (3) that things will be different from the first-person point of view.¹⁴ To sum up, zombie Chase and zombie Sanborn will show up for work at the same time as *real* Chase and Sanborn; they will even talk about coffee the same way, and report changes in qualia, but deep- down-inside we know that *they don't have the conscious experience that we do*.

There is a great deal at stake in saying that it is possible to conceive of zombie Chase and zombie Sanborn. So, let's try to understand what it would look like for the first premise of this argument to be meaningful. We would have to know what it would be like to separate ourselves from supposed intrinsic, ineffable, and private experiences; to experience everything from the third-person point of view. In other words, we would have to know that 'there is an 'x' and that 'x' is a property of my experience.' But how could we know this? How could Chase and Sanborn, sitting in the corporate lounge of Maxwell House talking about what it would be like for *them* to exist without their conscious experience know this? Again, let's return to the three possible explanations that we have accounting for either Chase or Sanborn's taste in the coffee. Let's just try to imagine what it would be like for them to conceive what it would look like for one to be true and the other to be false. Let's say that Sanborn is convinced with the truth of the first possibility.¹⁵ Does he have any reason to suppose that this is the case over the truth of the second possibility?¹⁶ No. He has no criterion to assess whether the first possibility of the second possibility is correct—or even whether some possibility in-between is correct. He can't *conceive* of what it would look like for one to be true and the other false because he has no epistemic access whether or not his qualia have *really* shifted or if he is simply misrepresenting his past experiences. To think that it is possible to conceive that Chase and Sanborn are zombies is to say that it is possible to distinguish between the purported phenomenal qualia and what we understand to be the experience of the qualia. For it to be possible would be to think that we can conceive of a separate epiphenomenalistic world, which entails that we have the capacity to *refer* to this world. But, Kripke's causal theory of reference would seem to suggest that, if this separate world exists, we would be able to know and refer to our qualia.¹⁷ But since zombie Chase and zombie Sanborn can't distinguish between what it would look like to refer to their qualia, they aren't really referring to it at all, they are just using folk psychological shorthand to muddily describe some aspect of their experience.¹⁸ If both the EA and the CA don't give us the epistemic resources to talk meaningfully about qualia maybe the KA does?

**DAY: 3 Chase and Sanborn give a phenomenological account
of their coffee experience**

Let's tackle the case of Chase and Sanborn with a version of the KA that swaps out consciousness for the taste of coffee:

(P1) There are truths about *the taste of coffee* that are not deducible from physical truths.

(P2) If there are truths about *the taste of coffee* that are not deducible from physical truths, then materialism is false.

(C1) Therefore, materialism is false.

Again, I'm going to argue that when a proposition p , contains a word that lacks a determinate truth condition, we have no epistemic access to form a belief about p .¹⁹ So, let's try to understand what it would look like for the first premise to be meaningful. For Chase and Sanborn to know that P1 is true they would have to know the following: There is a separate realm of experience that has causal effects on us but is not reducible down to physical reality. On this view, there is a problem with how we can be said to be acquainted with something that doesn't have causal powers in the physical world. Recently, Michael Tye has put forth an argument against this position called the 'Acquaintance Hypothesis.'²⁰ Although he deals with Frank Jackson's problem of Mary and her supposed phenomenal experience of colour, I will substitute Mary for Chase and Sanborn and colour for *the taste of coffee*. The argument would look something like this:

(1) Qualia are physical properties of experiences. Let Q be such a property.²¹

(2) Chase and Sanborn have been locked in a room since birth with a big book called 'Everything you can ever know about the taste of coffee'. They read this big book over and over again, and thus they know all about Q and they can know that a given experience has Q before release, although—before release—they are not acquainted with Q .

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- (3) After release Chase and Sanborn get acquainted with *Q*, but they do not acquire any new item of propositional knowledge by getting acquainted with *Q* (in particular they already knew under what conditions normal perceivers have experiences with the property *Q*).

The KA hinges on the idea that there is *something special* about our knowledge of *the taste of coffee*, but as I have shown here, there is nothing special *about* that knowledge, there is only a series of special occurrences where we have the taste of coffee that seem special to us. In other words, knowledge about *the taste of coffee* is a knowing-how and not a knowing-that. This means that there is nothing special about it that is over and above the physical; just ways of talking. Now, imagine Chase and Sanborn when they are released from their room and they jump up and down about the *taste of coffee* and in unison exclaim: “*The taste of coffee! Ah, it is unlike anything I have ever experienced. Indeed, somebody must have ripped a page out of our ‘Everything you can ever know about the taste of coffee’ book.*” What could they possibly be talking about? Is it knowledge? I think, alongside Dennett, that Wittgenstein’s ‘beetle in a box’ example is a good illustration to understand what is going on here:

“The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*; for the box might even be empty—No, one can “divide through” by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.”²²

What Wittgenstein is trying to get at in this example is that certain words or phrases in our language disguise themselves as if they functioned like definite descriptions, but they really are in the business of *naming* and not describing; and these names need not have a meaningful referent. Well, if the EA, the CA, and the KA don’t give us the epistemic resources to talk meaningfully about qualia then what does?

So, can we talk about *Qualia*?

So, is there anything that give us the epistemic resources

to talk meaningfully about *Qualia*? Nothing. There are no epistemic resources that we have to talk meaningfully about qualia. Qualia are not objects of knowledge because all sentences containing qualia terms lack determinate truth conditions, and thus we cannot be said to have the epistemic access that we need to form a belief about a sentence purporting the existence of qualia. If we cannot say whether a sentence that purports knowledge of qualia is true then even if the purported qualia sentence has meaning, it doesn't necessarily designate the existence or identity of something. I have shown that the three theories of explaining, conceiving, and knowing qualia don't satisfy the conditions of meaningfulness that is needed. Thus qualia-talk isn't talk *about* anything. In my view, there is nothing to explain about qualia; nothing to conceive, and nothing to know.

If you find that you still aren't convinced let's take another look at an argument that hinges on Chalmers conceivability argument.²³ Let Q be the claim that 'it is conceivable that qualia are non-reducible phenomenal properties.' Let R be the claim that 'qualia cannot be wholly reduced to physical properties of experiences. If Q then it is possible that Q. If it is possible that Q then R. This can be illustrated as follows:

1. Q
2. $Q \rightarrow \diamond Q$
3. $\diamond Q \rightarrow R$
4. R

Now, let's suppose the opposite and perform a *reductio ad absurdum*.

1. $\sim Q$
2. $\sim Q \rightarrow \sim \diamond Q$
3. $\sim \diamond Q \rightarrow \sim R$
4. $\sim R$

This can be read as follows: Suppose that it is not the case that it is conceivable that qualia are non-reducible phenomenal properties. If it is not the case that it is conceivable that qualia are non-reducible phenomenal properties then it is not possible that it is conceivable that qualia are non-reducible phenomenal properties. If it is not possible that it is conceivable that qualia are non-reducible phenomenal properties then it is not the case that qualia cannot be wholly reduced to physical properties of experiences.

Since R has a negation in the claim itself, negating it

creates a contradiction and proves the opposite to be the case: ~Q: It is not conceivable that qualia are non-reducible phenomenal properties. Of course, all of this hinges on accepting my claim that it is not possible to conceive of qualia. But I think that I have done a good job in securing that as a possible premise because in all the cases (EA, CA, and KA) I have shown that we don't have the epistemic resources to talk meaningfully about qualia, and thus all qualia-talk is contained in propositions that lack determinate truth-conditions and don't satisfy tenable conditions of meaningfulness. The alternative that I wish to propose is that qualia talk is best understood as picking out—or naming—occupants of the part of a folk-psychological role.²⁴ This also explains why we can make sense of our qualia-talk. For it's not that we don't know what we are doing when we engage in qualia-talk. *We know* perfectly well what it means to say that, 'the Maxwell House just doesn't taste as good as it used to.' We are making a report about what we subjectively think that coffee tastes like. Does this mean that qualia-talk isn't useful? No. It is just as useful as talking about properties that 'are what they are' because we project them onto the world. Gold has no *intrinsic* value, and before humans existed it didn't have the property of *being valued*. But it is a useful fiction to pretend that gold coins are a valuable commodity. Qualia-talk is like this. It is a useful way of knowing one's way around in the world, but it doesn't refer to the capital "W" WORLD. What we *do not know* is what it would look like to explain that experience *as* having a qualia-element absent from the physical element (EA). What we *do not know* is what it would look like to conceive of ourselves experiencing the qualia-in-themselves (CA). What we *do not know* is what it would look like to be able to directly refer to qualia-phenomena (KA).

So, can we talk meaningfully about qualia; can we get our feet off the ground and have a good solid debate about them? Yes and no. Yes, if we relegate them to the lower case "w" world. No if we think that they are part of the fabric of reality or a part of the capital "W" world.²⁵ We do need to *earn the right* (to borrow a phrase from Blackburn) to talk about them in the right instances, but just because we *earn the right* does not mean that they *really exist*.²⁶ In short, we should be fine in using and engaging in qualia-talk in our everyday sense; we just have to know that deep

-down-inside it's just a way of talking and nothing more. What follows from this is that commitments to a materialist position must become agnostic about the existence of qualia and adopt a form of soft-eliminativism instead of the heavy-duty eliminativism.

Notes

1. Scott Soames, *Philosophy of language*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 33.
2. Let me expand on this last premise. When I say that qualia-talk is not *about* anything I don't mean that speakers who claim to be talking about qualia aren't talking about anything. Rather, I mean to use the word 'about' in a strict sense to imply that for a thought to be *about* something it must be truth-conditional and thus make an identity claim.
3. David, Chalmers, *Philosophy of Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 239.
4. Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1, No. 19 (1956), 253-329.
5. Chalmers, *Philosophy of Mind*, 239.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 232.
13. Ibid., 233.
14. In this case, the word is 'conceivable' and we can't understand what it would be to believe this first premise—that is, 'conceivable' is a sense without a referent.

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15. Chalmers, *Philosophy of Mind*, 233.
16. (1) Sanborn is right; his qualia have shifted.
17. (2) Sanborn's standards have shifted and he is misrepresenting his past experiences.
18. Saul Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (New York: Springer, 1972), 253-355.
19. I think that Lewis has a good explanation for what zombie Chase and zombie Sanborn would be trying to name: "But in all probability, there are imperfect occupants of the role, imperfect deservers of the name." David Lewis, "Should a materialist believe in qualia?," in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995), 142.
20. Although in this case it isn't a word, but rather, this dubious phrase: *the taste of coffee*.
21. Michael Tye, *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).
22. Let this property be *the taste of coffee*.
23. Chalmers, *Philosophy of Mind*, 233.
24. Ibid.
25. Lewis, "Should a materialist believe in qualia?," 142
26. Here, I mean to make the distinction that the capital "W" WORLD contains the things that have the properties that they have independent of our naming them so. Things like Water being H₂O and Heat having the property of expanding metal at uniform rates. The lower case "w" world designates those things that have their properties in virtue of our treating them as such. They are not real strictly speaking, but it is a way of getting around because for the bulk of our everyday lives we live in the lower case "w" world and mostly everything we talk about exists in the lower case "w" world. We only end up talking about the capital "W" WORLD when we are doing things like metaphysics, mathematics, physics, or anything *a priori* for that matter.
27. Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 167.

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