

2019

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Recommended Citation

Mangan, Allison (2019) "Qualia, the Heart of the Mind-Body Problem and Epistemology's Quagmire," *Augsburg Honors Review*: Vol. 12, Article 4.

Available at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors_review/vol12/iss1/4

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Qualia, the Heart of the Mind-Body Problem and Epistemology's Quagmire

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Qualia are layered and complex, a labyrinth of a concept, rife with debate as to their existence, state, and what they mean for our understanding of knowledge, relationship with the world, and ourselves. Thoughtful exploration into the complexities of what qualia are and how they relate to the mind-body problem will be wrestled with through research applied within this paper. Qualia can be found in philosophical debates surrounding epistemology and in branches across the spectrum, from Rene Descartes to Simone de Beauvoir. While not mentioned by name, the concept of qualia has played a large part in philosophy's quest to understand humanity, and by extension, to understand others who share our humanity. In our current culture of increasingly polarized political, racial, gendered, and cultural views, qualia are a concept that can shed light and insight for better understanding of those whose experience is fundamentally different from our own. Qualia offer a description to the nature of experience, and can offer a new way of understanding the barriers and divides between individuals. Understanding can break down the walls of fear that fuel divides, and qualia are one way to bring understanding into a world desperate for more.

In this paper, we will go over

the basic philosophic understanding of qualia today. We will see how consciousness is necessary for qualia, and why this makes defining qualia a challenge. Next, we will go over the explanatory gap of qualia. From there, we will see how qualia relate to the mind-body problem, and the early exploration of this problem through Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley. Additionally, we will go over the main schools of thought that surround the mind-body problem: materialism, idealism, and dualism. These schools cover a spectrum of views on the mind-body problem and offer solutions based on their respective frameworks. However, we will find that materialism and idealism fail to present a compelling solution to the mind-body problem, nor a framework that sustains qualia. Dualism, on the other hand, offers a framework that can better support solutions to the mind-body problem and qualia. Then, we will look at some more contemporary understandings of the senses and qualia's relationship to the mind-body problem. The goal of this paper is to give a general overview of qualia, the mind-body problem, and the various solutions philosophical schools offer. Ultimately, we will see how qualia and the mind-body problem relate to one another and gain a deeper understanding of the various views that surround these two



topics.

Let us start with qualia. Qualia come out of consciousness and are related to experience and the senses. Thomas Nagel explains qualia very concisely in his paper *What is it like to be a bat?* “the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism” (436). Qualia, as is reiterated again and again throughout discussion, is that they encapsulate the quality of to-be-like something. When an individual experiences anything, there is a particular quality unique to the experience for that individual. This intrinsic nature of qualia and experience is one of the main origins for its divisive and uncertain inquiry. But, there is a general consensus that consciousness is a requirement for qualia.

Like qualia, consciousness is not well understood in scientific terms nor agreed upon philosophically. Exactly what constitutes consciousness and what it is, is uncertain. This makes it particularly difficult to define qualia, since they rely on consciousness. However, it is agreed that humans have consciousness. This assumption is vital in any discussion on ethics, and for the most part, epistemology as well. So, understanding that consciousness exists, and humans have it, we can move forward.

Qualia come out of our consciousness, they “are intrinsic to their subjects” (Byrne and Tye 241) that is, there is no way for us to fully separate qualia from our experiences. As conscious creatures, our experiences in the world have “characters or qualities that consist of something it is like for conscious subjects to be in such

states” (Wright 90). What this means for us, is that our nature as conscious beings allow qualia to be intrinsic to our experience. Furthermore, since qualia are intrinsic to our experience, it is clear that they originate from mind. One way to illustrate qualia is the classic black-and-white room example:

Mary is raised in a black and white room in which she learns all the cognitive and functional facts about color vision. When she ventures outside that room for the first time, she learns (upon perceiving a ripe red tomato) a new fact about color vision, something she was not able to infer from her knowledge of the cognitive and functional aspects of color-vision. “This is what it is like to see red,” she might think to herself. “I didn’t know what that was like before”. (Wright 92-93)

Mary learned all she could, all of the facts about color and vision. But this is unable to give her qualia, since it does not arise from her sensory experience. She only knows what it is like because she experiences it, and this “what it is like” is required for qualia.

This also brings us to another one of qualia’s slippery traits, the explanatory gap. Mary might have read someone’s account of seeing red, and she herself might try to articulate what seeing red it like. However, she will fail. To further illustrate this idea, take this example; you and I both look at the same swatch of the colour orange. Do you see the same exact colour as I? Maybe. There is no way for either of us to be sure, we can only speculate and attempt to describe our understanding of our own experience. But can words clearly

convey the essence of our experience as we experience it? Doubtful. It seems likely or inevitable that, both of us have different qualia of this experience. If we perceive the same colour, it might prompt a different emotion, or thought, and certainly present you with a different experience than myself.

As we can see, qualia have a level of ineffability. “These experiences have in each case a specific subjective character, which it is beyond our ability to conceive” (Nagel 439). Whether the organism in question is a bat or a fellow human, qualia cannot be fully explained or understood by another. This may be due to the unique physiology behind our eyes, skin, muscles, neurons, and brain. While we may have the same basic physiology, these are still unique to the individual, since no one experiences the world through their senses the same as another (as far as we know). But, beyond the senses, this explanatory gap can also be due to our individual mental worlds: past experiences, biases, thoughts, and feelings about what we are experiencing. Most likely, it is due to both.

Because of the explanatory gap, qualia cannot be easily described or explained. Even a single event, a single quale, cannot be accurately described to another person. Rather, as we saw with Mary, qualia are tied to experience; qualia arise from experience and consciousness. This experience does not rely solely on external objects, while they may prompt internal phenomena, qualia are reliant on the subject’s conscious experience and intrinsic internal mechanisms that allow qualia to be generated. This relationship between qualia, which require the

mind, but also rest in some capacity on sensations, is what will be explored in the mind-body problem.

The mind-body problem is the general topic of how the mind (i.e. thoughts, emotions, experiences) relates to the physical realm (i.e. the senses, external stimuli). This problem arose as we understand it today during the Enlightenment period, when there was a general optimism in the humanity’s ability to know and trust in the senses. René Descartes and George Berkeley are two prominent writers from this period, whose work was impacted by the issue of qualia through the mind-body problem. This is largely because in order for us to give substantial stock to scientific inquiry, which is solely based on our theory and observations, we must also be secure in the reliability of the senses and the physical world. This line of thought naturally led to the question of how the physical aspects of existence relate to the internal ones. Materialism attempts to answer this question.

Materialism is a school of thought that offers a framework for dealing with the mind-body problem. In terms of the philosophy of the mind, it is “the view that the mind is the brain and that mental states are brain states. Mind and brain are one and the same-- they are identical” (Mandik 77). Thoughts, feelings, consciousness, and everything that constitutes the mind can be reduced to purely physical phenomena. One of the implications of this framework is that qualia *must* be rejected. As we have distinguished qualia, they have a “what it is like” quality that emerges from conscious experience. Qualia have no physical



manifestation, rather they are a non-material property. Therefore, qualia are *irreducible* to a purely physical phenomena. This idea of a non-material mental property is contradictory to materialism's framework. Thus, it cannot be accepted in materialism. A major issue that surrounds materialism is the question of consciousness; it is not until more recent years that consciousness has been contested to be solely a physical object. Most concerning, in materialist circles, there is debate as to whether consciousness exists (Ramsey). If it does, consciousness must be purely physical, and therefore can be localized within the human mind. However, there is no consensus within neurology, nor philosophy, that this is the case.

On the surface it would seem that materialism offers the best solution to the mind-body problem, since there is no separation between the mind and the body, there is no issue with reconciling the two. However, in order to have this solution, there are assumptions, logical leaps, and concessions that must be made. Firstly, we have to assume that everything in the mind is material, and concede that consciousness either does not exist, or that it is reducible to physical phenomena. The main implication of this, is that humans become reducible beings. Humanity's reducibility does not seem capable of being reduced to only physical phenomena. As of yet, materialism has been unable to account for the subjective qualities of experience (Agius 102; Stoljar), and this is exactly what qualia accomplish. Overall, the materialist framework fails to adequately deal with complex ideas of the mind, and, other than outright rejection, is incapable of finding

solutions to non-material concepts.

Descartes, and particularly Berkeley, sit away from materialism in their epistemological queries. Both of these philosophers offer insight into how qualia have been an unnamed, but central part in the mind-body problem. Before delving into Descartes, let us look at Berkeley's idealism.

Idealism, like materialism, has a range of viewpoints, but at its core it is the antithesis of materialism. While materialism reduces everything to material substance, idealism brings everything back to the mind, "according to idealism, everything is either a mind or something that depends on the mind" (Mandik 45). Berkeley is the epitome of idealism thought; in his metaphysics, there is only the mind, and the external world that we perceive, originates from it. Idealism as a whole would be able to accept qualia as a concept, but in Berkeley's philosophy this does not seem to be the case:

All our ideas, sensations, or the things which we perceive, by whatsoever names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive--there is nothing of power or agency included in them. So that one idea or object of thought cannot produce or make any alteration in another. To be satisfied of the truth of this, there is nothing else requisite but a bare observation of our ideas. For since they and every part of them exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived; but whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflection, will not perceive in them any power or activity; there is, therefore, no

such thing contained in them.
(Berkeley 173)

To unpack this viewpoint a little, let us look at the first claim; that ideas, sensations and things perceived are inactive. This goes against the idea that the sensations and perception have no power, this would indicate that qualia are not possible. But it is understood that qualia are a type of activity that relate intrinsically to our experience.

As we have established, qualia are unique to an individual's experience and subjective to their owner. Qualia are an active quality of ideas and sensations, which Berkeley claims are inactive. Qualia are intrinsically intentional, and this directly contradicts Berkeley's conception of what ideas and internal phenomena are capable of (Wright 92). Furthermore, in Berkeley's metaphysics (which are inseparable from his epistemology) the mind is the only thing we can know. The external world is forever covered with doubt, and therefore, not "real" in the same sense as the mind; it is the mind that can account for reality. With the external world being unknowable, and the internal world being the only aspect we can know, qualia seem to pose a bit of a problem. Since the senses and experience are both required, at least in part, for qualia to arise, the concept of qualia partially rests on the need for material substance.

Like materialism, idealism gives a simple answer to the mind-body problem, particularly in Berkeley. Since there is no material world, the body is simply a product of the mind. So, there is nothing to reconcile between the mind and the body. But, in recent years there

has been less enthusiasm for idealism. Since it is quite difficult to completely reject the idea of material substance. Unless we accept idealism, the mind-body problem is still a question to be tackled.

While Berkeley is the poster child for idealism, Descartes is the father of dualism (Baker 11; Mandik 16). Since Descartes originally pushed the mind-body problem to the frontlines of philosophical thought, his account of dualism has been shown to have several issues with its argumentation, or lack thereof. Nevertheless, his philosophy is important to understand in order to have a firmer grasp on the mind-body problem and the qualia that come with it. In Descartes' philosophy, our internal mind is where we can begin with knowledge "so, my knowledge of my thought is more basic and more certain than my knowledge of any corporeal thing" (8). Our internal world is the most knowable aspect of existence to us. This is where idealism would stop, but Descartes endeavors to merge the physical with the immaterial through dualism.

To oversimplify dualism, it is the idea that the mind and the body/brain are two distinct things (Mandik 16). In Descartes, these two are completely separate and distinct from one another. The main question Descartes's dualism produces is if these two are separate, how do they interact? While we are not going to try to answer this question here, we will look at how qualia fit into the bigger picture of dualism. "Just as the physical world is 'populated' by physical objects (tables, chairs, human bodies), the mental world is 'populated' by mental objects



(mental events and states). Space is occupied by corporeal things, the mind by incorporeal things” (Baker 12). We can see from Baker’s description of dualism that qualia, which are classified as a “mental state”, fit nicely into both Descartes’ dualism and dualism as a whole.

So, Descartes and Berkeley sit along this gradient of accepting the mind before moving out to explore the external world. Berkeley rejects the idea that we can know of external objects through our senses, due to how the senses and ideas relate to consciousness and perception. We do find, however, that Berkeley and Locke sit on similar sides of the mind-body debate, in regards to how qualia impact our understanding of the mind-body problem.

In Berkeley’s first four sentences of section 25 in *Treatise Concerning Human Knowledge*, he goes over a summary of how he finds perception relates to ideas and sensations. Berkeley holds that the senses are indeed, the start of our perception, agreeing with Locke that we must gain our knowledge from some external source. Locke and Berkeley assert that this external source comes through our senses, and from there to our perception. From this, we form ideas and concepts, which we perceive. Bridging this gap between the senses and our experience of them has long been central to our understanding of the mind-body question.

Locke’s view of the mind-body problem is that perception is twofold, requiring both external input and the internal workings of the mind. This distinction is important for the formation of ideas and how perception

operates within ourselves. The senses are necessary for our perception to take place. Perception, the first faculty of the mind, makes it the threshold for our understanding and knowledge. According to Locke, the mind is passive in regards to perception, and sensation influences perception. Just as we can’t help but taste or feel, we cannot help but perceive sensory input. Thus, in Locke, with one’s perception so enwrapped in the senses, qualia are an aspect of the lived experience.

Perception, as it is the first faculty of the mind, exercised about our ideas; so it is the first and simplest idea we have from reflection, and is by some called thinking in general. Though thinking, in the propriety of the English tongue, signifies that sort of operation in the mind about its ideas, wherein the mind is active; where it, with some degree of voluntary attention considers any thing. For in bare naked perception, the mind is, for the most part, only passive; and what it perceives, it cannot avoid perceiving...

whatever alterations are made in the body, if they reach not the mind; whatever impressions are made on the outward parts, if they are not taken notice of within; there is no perception...

So that wherever there is sense, or perception, there some idea is actually produced, and present in the understanding (Locke 138).

Here, what Locke is describing with perception, is essentially qualia. Qualia fit into Locke’s theory of the mind and his solution to the mind-body problem. The senses allow perception

(which also requires consciousness) to lead to ideas, and by extension qualia.

We can see from Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" that he is a dualist, and this makes the mind-body problem a constant factor in terms of understanding qualia. Until Locke, the interaction between the mind and the external world was chalked up to God. This classical cause is especially embedded in Berkeley's understanding of the mind-body problem.

Experience ties directly into perception in Locke's philosophy; the senses and perception aspects of experience. For, our senses garner experience from which we formulate ideas and perceive the world (i.e. the blind man example). It is only through experience that we can come to know certain things about our external world. For example, just by looking at a soft cat one cannot know how its coat feels to the touch. Likewise, we can never know what it feels like to another person. They may agree that it is soft, but is their concept of soft the same as another person's soft? We will never know, since we are so beholden to our singular perception. Locke takes this into account with his concept of perception and experience.

A problem arises from Locke's idea that the senses are our sole base for knowledge. With Locke, because we are locked so completely into our own little perception viewpoint, the more experiences we can gather, from the most senses, the greater the amount of ideas and knowledge we gain. However, reasonable people would not agree that a deaf or blind person is any less knowledgeable than someone who has

hearing or sight. After all, compared to the mantis shrimp, we are blind; and compared to a dog we are essentially deaf. But, we would not say they are more knowledgeable than we are. Likewise, a person with sight would not have a much greater understanding of what someone else sees than a blind person would have of someone who can see. Since, we cannot really begin to understand another person's perception of the world, we are greatly limited to cross referencing any data we have about the external world. Furthermore, with the explanatory gap, it would seem that even with identical experiences two people may not have the same "knowledge".

However, Frédérique de Vignemont's writings about the mind-body problem, would show how the senses can be overridden and qualia can be based off of "unfactual" information. She points to the rubber hand hypothesis, which demonstrates how "the spatial content of bodily experiences is shaped by the body map which can be distorted and includes extraneous objects" (Vignemont 89). In the rubber hand experiment, subjects experience a rubber arm as their own, despite having no feeling in the foreign object, they can feel sensations and react when the arm is threatened. But does this then make that quale "false" in some sense? Or is it just as real as qualia that come from senses as typically experienced? These are just a few of the questions that surround qualia.

Would language then be our main mode for knowledge? Following the assertion that people lacking a sense are no more or less knowledgeable than people with the standard faculties



in terms of cognition. Regardless of our sensory input, we are able to conceive abstract ideas and reason even with extremely limited sensory input. Furthermore, with our senses susceptible, qualia become extremely subjective. Berkeley would vehemently deny this, as he sees language as an inhibitor for understanding.

Simone de Beauvoir deals with the mind-body debate as well. In her *The Second Sex*, she rejects the idea that females are inferior to males based on biology. She says “the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped” (66). Here we see that the mind-body interaction directly impacts qualia. For our experience is based on how our bodies interact with the world. However, her framing includes society, which is not a component in this paper.

Regardless, for Berkeley, the mind-body problem is resolved; only the mind exists and the senses and body muddle our perception and understanding of the nature of reality. But, for Locke and others the issue is still alive and well. We have given a general overview of what qualia are, and how it relates to the mind-body

problem. Consciousness is a necessary condition for qualia, but, it seems, so are the senses. As we have seen, many philosophers have argued about what the senses and consciousness means for our understanding of the world. Materialists attempt to reduce mental phenomena to a material cause, while idealists argue that material is dependant on the mind. Meanwhile, dualists accept both the material and immaterial and are faced with uniting the two. With the identification of qualia, this exchange has only gotten deeper. Due to qualia’s immaterial nature and its dependance on sensory input, it has caused issues for both materialism and idealism. Dualism, on the other hand, is not contradicted by qualia. Throughout this paper, we have found that the combination of qualia’s ineffable quality and the explanatory gap indicates that our experiences are inherently imbued with subjectivity through qualia. With qualia collapsing into our experiences, it may be near impossible to separate the qualia from subjective experience itself. This makes it even more imperative to continue to explore the concept of qualia, which can only yield a better understanding of our perception of the world.

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