

Still Epiphenomenal Qualia: Response to Muller

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Received: 4 July 2008 / Accepted: 11 July 2008 /
Published online: 29 July 2008
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Abstract Hans Muller has recently attempted to show that Frank Jackson cannot assert the existence of qualia without thereby falsifying himself on the matter of such mental states being epiphenomenal with respect to the physical world. I argue that Muller misunderstands the commitments of qualia epiphenomenalism and that, as a result, his arguments against Jackson do not go through.

Keywords Franks Jackson · Qualia · Epiphenomenalism · Higher-order thought

In his seminal paper “Epiphenomenal Qualia”, Frank Jackson defended the claim that qualia are epiphenomenal with respect to—i.e. fail to directly causally interact with—the physical world (Jackson 1982). Hans Muller has recently argued that Jackson’s very action of penning “Epiphenomenal Qualia”, or his discussing the thesis contained within it, falsifies this claim of epiphenomenalism (Muller 2008). According to Muller an assertion of qualia’s existence, something which is, itself, a physical/behavioural event, is incompatible with the claim that qualia are causally inefficacious with respect to the physical world; he writes: “One seemingly cannot say, ‘I have qualia and they are causally inert’ without falsifying that very claim via the act of asserting it.”¹ Muller’s argument for such incompatibility is grounded in reflection on the following “counterfactual” argument:

If Jackson had never had the experience of feeling pain (i.e., having that quale) he would not have written his now famous article in which he tried to convince the rest of us that qualia are both real and causally impotent with respect to the physical world.²

I do not think we should accept Muller’s argument. It seems to me that one can assert the existence of qualia without thereby falsifying the claim that qualia are epiphenomenal with respect to the physical world. The reason why we should not accept Muller’s argument is that Muller provides no reason for thinking that it is Jackson’s qualia *itself*

¹Hans Muller, “Why Qualia Are Not Epiphenomenal,” *Ratio*, 21 2008, p. 88.

²Ibid.

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which causally interacted with the physical world and which caused him to write “Epiphenomenal Qualia” instead of, say, Jackson’s *belief* in qualia. It seems to me that Jackson can respond to Muller’s argument by claiming that his qualia caused him to have the belief that he possesses qualia and that it is this later, *belief*, state that is the direct cause of his writing the paper in question. On this explanation, the epiphenomenal status of qualia is preserved insofar as such states fail to directly causally interact with the physical world; rather, Jackson’s *belief* in the existence of qualia directly causally interacts with the physical world by bringing about, perhaps with the help of other attitudinal states, an assertion of qualia’s existence. The aforementioned story I’ve just sketched about what causes one to assert something seems to me to be much more natural than the picture assumed by Muller. That is to say, you assert *P*’s existence, at least in part, because you *believe* that *P* exists. Granted, your belief that *P* exists may, in certain circumstances, have been brought about by *P* itself. But where *P*=qualia, this is all compatible with Jackson’s view since he holds that qualia, whilst itself unable to directly cause anything in the physical world, may cause *other mental states*.³ There seems to be no reason to rule out that the states in question are beliefs that as well as being caused by one’s qualia are also about them. If this is right, then an assertion of qualia’s existence can, *contra* Muller, be fully compatible with Jackson’s view. The epiphenomenalist with respect to qualia can therefore agree with Muller that Jackson would not have written “Epiphenomenal Qualia” were it not for his experiencing qualia, but they should disagree with Muller that this shows such qualitative states *themselves*—instead of, say, *belief* in such states—were directly causally responsible for such action. Qualia can remain epiphenomenal with respect to the physical world, yet still support the relevant counterfactuals in Muller’s statement, by virtue of their causal interaction with their possessor’s belief states.

Another way Muller tries to press his argument is based upon the introspection of qualia. He claims that Jackson holds the following four inconsistent propositions to be true:

1. Qualia are real.
2. Qualia can cause other mental states.
3. Qualia can be introspected.
4. Qualia do not have the capacity to contribute to causing behaviour.

Muller claims that once we grant 1–3, it is not possible to grant 4; his reasoning goes as follows: “Either qualia, *qua* the content of subjective experience, are potential objects of introspection or they are not. If they are, then they will make a difference to behaviour and hence to the physical world.” (Muller 2008, p. 90) It is not at all clear why one should automatically think that this is the case, however. As previously noted, it is not clear why the causal chain from qualia to physical behaviour cannot go via the subject’s qualia-caused *belief* that they experience qualia and thereby remain consistent with Jackson’s claim that qualia *itself* never directly causally interacts with the physical world. In fact on some higher-order theories of consciousness this is very close to how introspection is alleged to work; on some views, one is aware of one’s phenomenal states by virtue of those states causing higher-order beliefs which are

³ See Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 p. 133.

about those phenomenal states (see Rosenthal 1986). Jackson himself appears happy enough to go along with this possibility, given that he writes:

For all I will say, it may be that you have to hold that the instantiation of *qualia* makes a difference to *other mental states* though not to anything physical. Indeed general considerations to do with how you could come to be aware of the instantiation of *qualia* suggest such a position.⁴

Since Jackson's view is not that *qualia* are causally inefficacious *full stop*, he is free to hold that it is the mental effects of *qualia* (possibly a higher-order belief state, say) which are the direct cause of any assertion of *qualia*'s existence. This story does not violate the claim that *qualia* fail to directly causally interact with the physical world. Propositions 1–4 are consistent.

Perhaps Muller might object that, given the story I've told about a subject's *qualia* causing their belief in *qualia* and this latter state then causing the subject's assertion of *qualia*, in the above circumstances *qualia* really *do* have a capacity to "causally contribute to behaviour", albeit indirectly, e.g., via the relevant belief state. Proposition 4, it might be objected, comes out *false* on my line of defence. "So be it," is my reply, since nothing as loosely stated as 4 shows up in "Epiphenomenal Qualia" as Jackson's statement of *qualia* epiphenomenalism. All Jackson, *qua* *qualia* epiphenomenalist, should be read as committing to is the claim that *qualia* do not *directly* cause anything in the physical world. This commitment is compatible with many things. It is compatible with *qualia* being a direct causal effect of the physical domain. (This happens to be Jackson's view, though an epiphenomenalist about *qualia* could just as well defend parallelism and hold that there exists absolutely *no* causal interaction between the mental and physical domains.) It is also compatible with *qualia* being the direct cause (and/or effect) of other mental states, such as, e.g., higher-order beliefs, say. With these possibilities left open the *qualia* epiphenomenalist is free to claim that their assertion of *qualia*'s existence (a behavioural and hence *physical* event) is *not* the direct effect of their *qualia* itself, but is instead the direct causal result of a *belief* state; specifically, their belief that they experience *qualia*. The fact that this belief state may be directly caused by *qualia* matters not; as we can now appreciate, such a possibility is left open by the *qualia* epiphenomenalist and is wholly compatible with the *qualia* epiphenomenalist's claim that *qualia* never directly cause anything in the physical world.

If what I have said here is right, then Muller's arguments fail to show that assertions of *qualia*'s existence falsify the claim that *qualia* are epiphenomenal with respect to the physical world. One can assert that *qualia* exist and that they are epiphenomenal without fear of contradiction.

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⁴ Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," p. 133. Emphasis in original.