



Quining diet qualia ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks whether we can identify a neutral explanandum for theories of phenomenal consciousness, acceptable to all sides. The ‘classic’ conception of qualia, on which qualia are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective, will not serve this purpose, but it is widely assumed that a watered-down ‘diet’ conception will. I argue that this is wrong and that the diet notion of qualia has no distinctive content. There is no phenomenal residue left when qualia are stripped of their intrinsicality, ineffability, and subjectivity. Thus, if we reject classic qualia realism, we should accept that all that needs explaining are ‘zero’ qualia – our dispositions to judge that our experiences have classic qualia. Diet qualia should, in Dennett’s phrase, be *quined*.

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1. Introduction

People disagree about the nature of phenomenal consciousness, most fundamentally about whether or not it is physical. Such disagreement presupposes that the parties share a common conception of what it is that needs explaining. That is, it is assumed that we can identify a theory-neutral explanandum, acceptable to those who argue for very different explanantia. I am going to argue that this assumption is false.

2. A theory-neutral explanandum?

What is the explanandum for a theory of phenomenal consciousness? A common answer is that it is the *qualia* of experience. ‘Qualia’ is a technical term introduced in its modern sense by Lewis (1929).¹ Lewis used it to refer to the raw, unconceptualized data of experience – ‘recognizable qualitative characters of the given’ (p. 121). Qualia, in his sense, are subjective, ineffable, and non-relational, and our apprehension of them is immediate and infallible (pp. 124–5).² Lewis thought of qualia as properties of sense data, which he took to be the objects of experience, but, with the rejection of sense-data theory, it has become common to think of them as properties of experiences themselves. So conceived, qualia are introspectable qualitative properties of experience that are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective. Such qualia may play a representational role, but they also have an intrinsic character that outstrips their representational content. In Ned Block’s phrase, they are *mental paint*: introspectable intrinsic features that are also vehicles of representation (Block, 2003). (Block also argues that there are qualia that do not represent at all; these he calls *mental oil*.)

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¹ For illuminating discussion of the origins of the term ‘qualia’ and of the relations between qualia and sense-data, see Crane, 2000.

² The term is used in a very similar way in Feigl (1958).

This use of the term ‘qualia’ has become fairly standard, and it is in this sense that Michael Tye denies the existence of visual qualia (1992, 2002) and Daniel Dennett argues that qualia should be ‘quined’ (denied to exist) (1988). I shall call qualia of this kind *classic qualia*.³

Classic qualia Introspectable qualitative properties of experience that are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective.

I should stress that this is intended as a generic conception. In practice, it may be necessary to qualify, or at least precisify, aspects of the definition in various ways, particularly the claims of ineffability and subjectivity. For present purposes, however, I shall ignore these details. The generic conception of classic qualia should be understood to include all variants that involve robust, if qualified, commitments to the relevant claims.

Now classic qualia do not look likely to yield to physical explanation. Intrinsic properties cannot be explained in functional or representational terms, which are the most popular routes for reductive explanation. Many physicalists, therefore, deny that classic qualia exist and begin with a less loaded conception of the explanandum. They do not assume that experiences have intrinsic, ineffable, subjective qualia, and propose instead that what needs explaining is simply the phenomenal character, subjective feel, raw feel, or ‘what-it-is-likeness’ of experience, where this may turn out to be something relational, effable, and objective. I shall label this watered-down conception *diet qualia*.

Diet qualia The phenomenal characters (subjective feels, what-it-is-likenesses, etc.) of experience.

Non-physicalists, too, often adopt this weaker notion as the core explanandum.⁴

The adoption of diet qualia as explanandum is now common in the literature on consciousness, and many writers explicitly distinguish between classic and diet qualia (though not under those terms), remarking that, although the former may not exist, there can be no doubt that the latter do. Here are three examples:

Many philosophers use the term ‘qualia’ liberally, to refer to those properties of mental states (whatever they may be) in virtue of which the states in question are phenomenally conscious. On this usage ‘qualia’, ‘subjective feel’ and ‘what-it-is-likeness’ are all just notational variants of one another. And on this usage, it is beyond dispute that there are such things as qualia.

I propose, myself, to use the term ‘qualia’ much more restrictedly (as some other writers use it), to refer to those putative *intrinsic and non-representational* properties of mental states in virtue of which the latter are phenomenally conscious. On this usage, it is not beyond dispute that there are such things as qualia. (Carruthers, 2000, p. 15)

Philosophers often use the term ‘qualia’ to refer to the introspectively accessible properties of experiences that characterize what it is like to have them. In this standard, broad sense of the term, it is very difficult to deny that there are qualia. There is another, more restricted use of the term ‘qualia’, under which qualia are intrinsic, introspectively accessible, nonrepresentational qualities of experiences. In my view, there are no qualia, conceived of in this way. They are a philosophical myth. (Tye, 2002, p. 447)

I take a qualitative character or quale as a phenomenal property of an experience that eludes the intentional, the functional and the purely cognitive. ‘Phenomenal character’ is a more neutral term that carries no commitment to qualia. Both the representationist and the phenomenist can agree that there are phenomenal characters, even though the former but not the latter thinks phenomenal characters are wholly representational. (Block, 2003, p. 170)

Diet qualia look like the theory-neutral explanandum we want. Non-physicalists can go on to argue that the phenomenal character of an experience is (at least partly) determined by classic qualia, which can vary independently of the experience’s physical properties. Physicalists, on the other hand, can identify phenomenal characters with representational or functional properties and explain away our intuitions about their intrinsicity – a popular strategy being to appeal to features of our phenomenal concepts. (Of course, physicalists can also argue for the existence of classic qualia, although they cannot identify them with functional or representational properties.)

This move seems innocuous, but I am suspicious of it. I am not convinced that there is any distinctive content to the notion of diet qualia (phenomenal character, subjective feel, etc.). To make the point, I shall introduce a third concept, *zero qualia*. The zero qualia of an experience are properties that dispose the subject of the experience to judge that the experience has various intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective qualitative properties. (This judgement, I assume, may be conscious or non-conscious and may be manifested in non-verbal as well as verbal responses.) In other words, zero qualia are those properties of experiences that dispose us to judge that experiences have classic qualia. (I assume that some philosophical prompting may be needed for this disposition to manifest itself and that its manifestation may be blocked by reflection on philosophical arguments against classic qualia.)

³ Although this conception is close to the original sense of the term, ‘classic’ here is primarily intended to convey ‘full strength’, rather than ‘original’. At the risk of mixing the implicit soft-drink metaphor, one might equally think of classic qualia as *qualia max*.

⁴ For example, David Chalmers uses the term ‘qualia’ in its diet sense, to refer to ‘those properties of mental states that type those states by what it is like to have them’, and he adds that his use of the term does not involve ‘any immediate commitment on further issues, such as whether qualia are incorrigibly knowable and whether they are intentional properties’ (Chalmers, 1996, p. 359).

Zero qualia The properties of experiences that dispose us to judge that experiences have introspectable qualitative properties that are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective.

(For convenience, I shall sometimes use the term ‘zero qualia’ for the dispositions themselves, as well as for their bases. Nothing turns on this, and context will disambiguate.)

Now, I take it that diet qualia are supposed to be different from zero qualia. Zero qualia are defined in terms of their cognitive effects, and an experience could have properties that dispose one to judge that it has classic qualia without it actually being *like anything* to undergo it. This is how it is supposed to be with philosophical zombies. My putative zombie twin judges that its experiences have classic qualia, even though it has no phenomenal consciousness at all.⁵ For the same reason, I assume that the concept of diet qualia cannot be the disjunctive concept *classic qualia or zero qualia*, since a zombie could have diet qualia in that sense.

Of course, it could turn out that the features that dispose us to judge that our experiences have classic qualia are in fact classic qualia themselves (assuming they are not epiphenomenal). *Token* zero qualia could be classic qualia. But that would be a contingent matter; there is nothing in the definition of zero qualia that requires it, and zero qualia could equally well take other forms, involving no qualitative aspect at all.

So an experience could have zero qualia without diet qualia. But what exactly would be missing? Well, a phenomenal character, a subjective feel, a what-it-is-likeness. But what is *that* supposed to be, if not some intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective qualitative property? This is the crux of the matter. I can see how the properties that dispose us to judge that our experiences have classic qualia might not be intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective, but I find it much harder to understand how a phenomenal character itself might not be. What could a phenomenal character be, if not a classic quale? How could a *phenomenal residue* remain when intrinsicality, ineffability, and subjectivity have been stripped away?

The worry can be put another way. There are competing pressures on the concept of diet qualia. On the one hand, it needs to be weak enough to distinguish it from that of classic qualia, so that functional or representational theories of consciousness are not ruled out a priori. On the other hand, it needs to be strong enough to distinguish it from the concept of zero qualia, so that belief in diet qualia counts as realism about phenomenal consciousness. My suggestion is that there is no coherent concept that fits this bill. In short, I understand what classic qualia are, and I understand what zero qualia are, but I do not understand what diet qualia are; I suspect the concept has no distinctive content.

3. Assessing diet qualia

I have claimed that the concept of diet qualia is vacuous. I shall now defend this claim by looking at some suggestions as to how the concept might be fleshed out. What we need is some account of the concept's sense, or primary intension. If the concept is to play the role required of it, this must be distinct from the senses of the concepts of both classic qualia and zero qualia, and it must identify a theory-neutral explanandum, acceptable to all sides. I shall argue that none of the suggestions does this satisfactorily.

Suggestion 1 (appearance): Diet qualia are properties with the appearance of classic qualia. They are introspectable properties of experience that *seem* to be intrinsic, ineffable, subjective, but may not really be so. This seems to give us what we need. The notion is weaker than that of classic qualia, but (arguably) stronger than that of zero qualia, which are identified by their cognitive effects, not their appearance.

Reply: If the suggestion is that diet qualia are introspectable properties that *dispose us to judge* that they are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective, then they are better classified as zero qualia. They are properties that dispose us to judge that the experiences that possess them have classic qualia, in this case by disposing us to judge that they themselves are classic qualia. If, on the other hand, the suggestion is that diet qualia involve some further phenomenal aspect beyond this disposition to judge, then I return to my original question: what is this aspect, if not the one distinctive of classic qualia? If an experience seems to have classic qualia, and if this does not mean simply that it disposes us to judge that it has classic qualia, then how can it lack classic qualia? How can there be an is/seems distinction in such a case?

It may be objected that if experiences have introspectable properties, then they have more than mere zero qualia, since zero qualia are properties that dispose us to *judge* that experiences have introspectable properties, not properties that are *themselves* introspectable. But this is to misunderstand the definition of zero qualia. Zero qualia are properties that dispose us to judge that experiences have introspectable properties *that are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective*, and this is not incompatible with their being themselves introspectable, in a functional sense. Zero qualia are defined by their cognitive effects, and these effects may depend on the operation of introspective mechanisms. The objection holds only if we adopt a phenomenal notion of introspection on which introspected states by definition have a phenomenal aspect over and above zero qualia, and I see no reason to do that. (And I would, in any case, want to ask what this phenomenal aspect is, and how it differs from classic qualia.)⁶

Suggestion 2 (thought experiments): A more sophisticated version of the previous suggestion appeals to the role of thought experiments in fixing our grip on diet qualia. Thus, diet qualia are those introspectable properties of experience such that: (a)

⁵ I set aside worries about whether zombies possess full-blown phenomenal concepts; nothing turns on this.

⁶ Thus the view that we can directly introspect properties of brain states (e.g., Churchland, 1985) does not offer any support for diet qualia, as opposed to zero qualia. The introspective process may involve no phenomenal aspect beyond a disposition to judge that the states introspected have classic qualia.

it is conceivable there might be physical duplicates that lack them (zombies) or have inverted ones (inverts), and (b) Mary in her black-and-white room would not have complete knowledge of them. Again, this appears to fit the bill. The proposed notion of diet qualia is weaker than that of classic qualia, since the defining claims are epistemic not ontological. The claims are that it is *conceivable* that physical duplicates might lack the properties in question or have different ones, and that Mary would lack *complete* knowledge of them, which would be true if she lacked knowledge of them under some description. It is not stipulated that it is metaphysically possible for physical duplicates to lack them, or that Mary would lack knowledge of coarse-grained, ontologically distinct facts. Thus, it is not ruled out a priori that diet qualia are functional or representational properties. On the other hand (the suggestion goes), the notion is stronger than that of zero qualia, since zero qualia would not generate the intuitions in question. Zero qualia are cognitive dispositions, and, assuming cognitive processes can be functionally analysed, it is not conceivable that physical duplicates might lack them or have different ones, and not true that someone with complete physical knowledge would lack complete knowledge of them.

Reply: First, this does not adequately distinguish diet qualia from zero qualia. Suppose my current experience has a property, R, that disposes me to judge that R itself is an introspectable qualitative property that is intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective (a classic quale). Now, it is hard to see how physical facts could entail facts about intrinsic, ineffable, subjective properties, so if my current experience has R, then I shall be further disposed to find it conceivable that a (merely) physical duplicate of me might lack R. For the same reason, I shall be disposed to judge that I might have complete physical knowledge of my experiences without having knowledge of R. So, it seems, R is a diet quale in the present sense. Yet, there is nothing in the definition of R that makes it a qualitative property of any kind, and R also fits the definition of a zero quale: it is a property of my experience that disposes me to judge that the experience has an introspectable qualitative property (R itself in this case) that is intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective. It is true, of course, that when I consider R from a third-person perspective, as the basis of a cognitive disposition, I shall not be disposed to think that a physical duplicate might lack it or that complete physical knowledge would not guarantee knowledge of it. But it is from the first-person perspective that the thought experiments get their grip.

It may be objected that this reply trades on a weak notion of conceivability. A person with R-experiences would be disposed to judge that physical duplicates might lack R-experiences, but they would not be able to form a positive imaginative conception of what such a being might lack. Since R is not a qualitative property, they would not be able to form an imaginative conception of an R-zombie that distinguished it from a normal human. In Chalmers's terminology, they would find R-zombies negatively conceivable but not positively conceivable (Chalmers, 2002). But (the objection goes), we can form a positive conception of zombies, and it is this conception that is crucial in getting a grip on diet qualia. To the extent that the Mary thought experiment also involves forming a positive imaginative conception of the facts of which Mary is ignorant, the same objection applies to that case, too.

I have two responses to this. First, even if the objection is sound, it suggests that the thought experiments themselves are doing no work in helping us get a grip on the notion of diet qualia. For we need a prior acquaintance with diet qualia in order to form a positive conception of the relevant scenarios, and that acquaintance should already give us a grip on the notion. Second, and more importantly, what exactly is it that we imagine zombies as lacking when we form a positive imaginative conception of them? The properties in question must be ones that at least present themselves, in some substantive phenomenal sense, as non-physical, non-functional, and non-representational. Otherwise, they would not support the zombie intuition. That is, they must present themselves as something very like classic qualia. And now I ask the same question as before: how can something present itself phenomenally as a classic quale and yet not be a classic quale? How can there be an *is/seems* distinction here?

My responses to this and the previous suggestion can be summed up by posing a dilemma: Do experiences appear to have intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective qualitative properties – where this does not mean merely that they dispose us to *judge* that they have such properties, but that they present themselves phenomenally as having them? If they do not, then what reason is there to think that they have anything more than zero qualia? If they do, then how can they fail to have classic qualia? What better grounds could we have for thinking that our experiences possess intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective qualitative properties than that they present themselves phenomenally as having them?

Suggestion 3 (demonstrative identification): Another suggestion is that we can identify diet qualia demonstratively. We are introspectively aware of diet qualia and can mentally indicate samples of them: the distinctive feel of the experiences of seeing a crimson poppy, stubbing one's toe, smelling coffee, and so on. And (the suggestion goes) the concept of diet qualia is dependent on such demonstrations. It is the concept of properties of the same general kind as *that* and *that* and *that*, referring to token feels associated with the various sense modalities. Again, this seems to provide what we need. Demonstrative identification offers a direct way of picking out a phenomenon that is neutral between different theories of its nature. An ancient astronomer and a modern one could both demonstrate typical stars, even though they had radically different theories of what stars are. Thus, this notion is weaker than that of classic qualia, which is theoretically loaded. Yet it is also distinct from that of zero qualia, whose application does not depend on introspective demonstration.

Reply: The problem with this suggestion is that demonstration will identify a common explanandum only if all parties demonstrate properties of the same general type. But in fact people differ radically as to what we are aware of in introspection. Some claim that we can directly introspect properties of experiences themselves (e.g. Block, 1990; McGinn, 1991; Peacocke, 1983), whereas others hold that experience is wholly *transparent*, and that when we try to introspect our experiences, we are aware only of properties of the objects of those experiences (e.g. Dretske, 1995; Harman, 1990; Tye, 1995; Tye, 2000). I shall call the former *anti-transparentists* and the latter *transparentists*. (Anti-transparentists need not deny

that we can directly attend to properties of external objects; their claim is merely that we can *also* directly attend to properties of experiences themselves.)

Transparentists still talk of our having introspective awareness of phenomenal character, but they deny that this involves direct awareness of properties of experiences themselves. Some transparentists regard introspection as a form of *displaced perception*, in which we see that something is the case by perceiving something else that is reliably correlated with it, as when I see that my blood pressure is high by seeing the reading on a blood pressure monitor (Dretske, 1995; Tye, 2000). On this view, awareness of phenomenal character is awareness of facts, not properties:

Awareness of that ‘feel’ is not direct awareness of a quality of the experience. It is awareness that is based upon direct awareness of external qualities without any inference or reasoning being involved. Introspective awareness of phenomenal character, I maintain, is awareness-*that* – awareness that *an* experience with a certain phenomenal character is present. (Tye, 2000, p. 52)

A more radical version of transparentism identifies the phenomenal characters of experiences with properties of the external objects perceived. Tye now advocates this view:

Phenomenal character is manifest to us in our being aware of the external qualities. We cannot focus on it in any way that separates it from our focus on external things and qualities. Thus, if I say, while viewing a ripe tomato, “*This* is what it is like to experience red,” the referent of my demonstrative is simply the color represented by my experience. It is to the color that I attend – and *that* is what it is like for me to experience red. The story could hardly be simpler. On this view, the phenomenal character of the experience of red in a case of veridical perception is a feature of the surface the perceiver sees. The surface itself has the phenomenal character. (Tye, 2009, p. 120)

Now, the dispute between transparentists and anti-transparentists is an obstacle to the proposed demonstration-based concept of *diet qualia*, since the concept will pick out properties of radically different types when applied by each party. For anti-transparentists it will pick out introspectable properties of their experiences; for transparentists it will not. On the displaced perception model, introspective demonstration will pick out properties of external objects, and though this may yield factive awareness of something called ‘phenomenal character’, this is clearly not the same property anti-transparentists identify, since it is not directly introspectable. (What exactly it *is*, on this view, is unclear. When we think, pre-theoretically, that our experience has a certain phenomenal character, what kind of property are we attributing to the experience, on the displaced perception model? *Post*-theoretically we might judge it be a certain kind of representational content, but surely that is not built into the concept of phenomenal character?)⁷ Finally, on the more radical transparentist view, introspective demonstration picks out properties of external objects. So, demonstration will not identify a common explanandum.

It may be objected that this reply confuses explanandum and explanans. Transparentists and anti-transparentists may in fact be demonstrating properties of the same type; it is just that they offer different accounts of the nature and location of these properties. Compare the ancient and modern astronomers again. Both demonstrate stars, though they differ radically about the nature and location of stars. There is a problem here, however. For there is a strong case for thinking that in order to identify a spatio-temporal particular demonstratively one must be able to locate it and track it in egocentric space (Evans, 1982, chap. 6). If this is right, then it undercuts the proposed objection. For if transparentists and anti-transparentists are in fact attending to properties of the same general type, then one or other of them must be radically mistaken as to their egocentric location – either mistaking properties of the mind/brain for properties of external objects, or vice versa. (A third option is that both are mistaken, and the properties located somewhere elsewhere altogether.) Such mistakes are surely incompatible with the ability to locate the token properties correctly, so at least one of the parties will not succeed in thinking a demonstrative thought at all. Thus, either the different parties are identifying different things or at least one has not succeeded in identifying anything at all. And, either way, a common explanandum has not been established. A similar problem does not arise in the case of the ancient and modern astronomers, since both can adequately locate stars in egocentric space.

It may be suggested that demonstration does at least provide a common explanandum for all *anti-transparentists*, whether they are physicalists or dualists. Even here, however, there are problems. Consider the position advocated by Rosenthal (2002, 2005). Rosenthal is an anti-transparentist; he holds that experiences have introspectable sensory qualities, which are the distinctive properties by which we classify them. The sensory properties of an experience correspond to the physical properties of external objects that cause the experience, and the patterns of similarity and difference among them are homomorphic to the patterns among the corresponding physical properties. Now, on this view, it is natural to suppose that if we introspectively demonstrate the sensory qualities of an experience – the distinctive properties by which we classify it – then we shall be picking out its *diet qualia* (feel, phenomenal character, what-it-is-likeness). But this is too swift. For Rosenthal maintains that states with sensory qualities can occur non-consciously; we can have an experience with the sensory quality of, say, pain or mental red without it being *like anything* to have it. A sensory state becomes phenomenally conscious only when it is the target of a higher-order thought to the effect that one is in that very state. But then the sensory qualities of an

⁷ Because of this unclarity, it is also unclear whether, on this view, we are *correct* to judge that our experiences possess phenomenal character. Indeed, it is arguable that the displaced perception view is a zero qualia position, on which all that needs explaining are our judgements about phenomenal character.

experience must be distinct from its what-it-is-likeness, since the former, but not the latter, can occur non-consciously. So, it seems, when we demonstrate diet qualia, our attention should be directed, not to the sensory qualities of our experiences, but to distinct properties produced when these qualities are targeted by a higher-order-thought. This is somewhat confusing, and it is unclear where these latter properties are supposed to be located. (Are they properties of the first-order experience, of the higher-order thought, of both together, or of something else?) Thus, even for anti-transparentists, it seems that demonstrative identification of diet qualia is not a simple matter and is likely to be heavily theory laden.

These are brief considerations, of course, but I think they suffice to cast doubt on the idea that we can rely on demonstrative identification to get a neutral, pre-theoretical grip on the explanandum for a theory of consciousness.

Suggestion 4 (recognition concepts): The next suggestion is that we can identify diet qualia by reference to the conceptual capacities associated with them. For example, Carruthers writes:

Phenomenally conscious events are ones which we can recognise in ourselves, non-inferentially, or ‘straight off’, in virtue of the ways in which they feel to us, or the ways in which they present themselves to us subjectively (Carruthers, 2000, p. 14).

That is, diet qualia are properties of experience for which we can possess introspective recognition capacities. (Carruthers stresses that the claim is not that phenomenally conscious properties *depend on* our recognition capacities for them, as some higher-order thought accounts claim. Rather, the claim is that they are the *object* of those capacities.)

Reply: If the suggestion is that diet qualia are just those features of experiences that dispose us to apply introspective recognition concepts to the experiences, then they are not distinct from zero qualia. For to classify our experiences under introspective recognition concepts of the sort Carruthers describes, is, I assume, to make classic qualia judgments. Hence, on this view, diet qualia would be properties that dispose us to make classic qualia judgments, which is what zero qualia are. Of course, it could be that our introspective recognition concepts do in fact track classic qualia (assuming the latter are not epiphenomenal). As I noted earlier, token zero qualia could be classic qualia. However, this would be a contingent matter, and there is nothing in the description ‘the properties to which introspective recognition concepts refer’ which specifies that the properties in question should be qualitative ones. On the other hand, if the idea is that diet qualia are properties that trigger recognition capacities *specifically for subjective feels* (‘which we can recognise . . . in virtue of the ways in which they feel to us’ as Carruthers puts it), then this suggestion depends on an unexplicated notion of subjective feel. What are these feels we recognize, if not classic qualia?

Suggestion 5 (the given): It may be suggested that the notion of diet qualia can be understood simply as a watered-down version of Lewis’s original concept, removed from the framework of sense-data theory and without commitments to intrinsicality, and so on. The idea is to think of diet qualia as what is immediately given or presented to the subject in experience (rather than features of the given), without stipulating that this is something intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective.

Reply: The problem here is that the notion of *the given* is one that is itself in need of elucidation. One way to understand it is in terms of non-conceptual intentional content: what is given to the subject in experience is raw, unconceptualized perceptual data of some kind. However, so understood, the notion does not identify a theory-neutral explanandum. To identify diet qualia with a form of representational content would be to beg the question against believers in classic qualia, who want to argue that phenomenal characters are intrinsic, non-representational properties. On the other hand, if what is given is specifically *phenomenal* content, then ‘the given’ is simply another word for diet qualia, and we return to the questions of how we identify phenomenal contents and how they differ from classic qualia. So, this suggestion, too, fails to identify a substantive theory-neutral explanandum.

Suggestion 6 (primitive concepts): The final suggestion I want to consider is that diet qualia concepts (the concepts of particular phenomenal properties) are primitive ones, acquired through direct introspective acquaintance with the properties they refer to. (Chalmers calls such concepts ‘pure phenomenal concepts’; Chalmers, 2003.) Hence, there is no need for an independent analysis of the notion of diet qualia of the sort I have been seeking.

Reply: In the present context, there are two problems with this suggestion. First, it is not clear that there is a neutral version of the suggestion that does not beg the question against reductive physicalists. (There may also be a problem finding a version that is acceptable to transparentists, but I shall set that aside for now.) Physicalists do not accept that phenomenal properties are ontologically primitive, so they will need to find a version of the suggestion on which the primitiveness of phenomenal concepts does not entail the primitiveness of phenomenal properties. The view that phenomenal concepts are recognition ones is, arguably, such a version. However, I have already argued that it does not underwrite a distinctive notion of diet qualia, and it is not clear that there is any alternative version of the primitive concept view that is acceptable to physicalists. The second, related, problem is that it is not enough simply to say that phenomenal concepts are primitive concepts acquired through introspection. For we might have primitive concepts for non-phenomenal, neurological properties, acquired through the operation of functionally defined introspective mechanisms. Such concepts would not be phenomenal ones, and zombies could possess them. So we need to specify that the primitive concepts in question are ones specifically of *phenomenal* properties of experience. And, once again, I ask what it is for a property to be phenomenal if it is not to possess the hallmarks of classic qualia.

We have reviewed various suggestions as to how the notion of diet qualia might be elucidated. I have argued that none is successful; there is no viable ‘diet’ notion of qualia which is stronger than that of zero qualia yet weaker than that of classic

qualia and which picks out a theory-neutral explanandum. I turn now to a general objection to the line of argument I have set out.⁸

4. Diet notions and diet qualia

The objection I want to consider is that I am setting the standards for a satisfactory notion of diet qualia far too high. In many debates we can have a perfectly good intuitive grasp of what we are talking about which is neutral between different theoretical conceptions of the subject. Such theory-neutral ‘diet’ notions are common throughout philosophy and science: think of the concepts of justice, emotion, light, causation, star, art, and so on. These conceptions may be relatively thin ones (they have to be in order to do their job), but that does not mean they are vacuous. Of course, when we start to theorize about the phenomena in question, we may find our notions of them shifting in various ways, to incorporate new or different commitments, but this does not show that we had no viable neutral notion to start with. And – the objection goes – the notion of diet qualia is in no worse order than other everyday diet notions.⁹

One might respond to this with scepticism about the existence of theory-neutral notions generally, arguing, in a Quinean spirit, that all concepts are to some degree theoretically embedded and that no clean separation can be made between pre-theoretical and post-theoretical conceptions. I do not propose to take this line, however. For I maintain that there are special problems with the notion of diet qualia, not common to diet notions generally. There are several points to make.

First, a diet notion must have *some* distinctive content; it must pick out a distinct object or property and must afford some way of getting a cognitive grip on it, whether through demonstrative identification, application of a recognitional capacity, or locating it within a wider framework of relations. In the case of diet qualia, I have argued in the previous section that no distinctive content of this kind can be assigned to the concept.

Second, the notion of diet qualia is not an everyday one. In the case of vision at least, we have no everyday words for phenomenal features of experience, and philosophers are forced to coin terms both for the generic phenomenon (‘what-it-is-likeness’, ‘raw feel’, ‘phenomenal character’, etc.) and for specific phenomenal properties (‘mental red’, ‘reddishness’, ‘red prime’, etc.). Moreover, as those who have taught introductory philosophy of mind know, it can take some effort to get lay-people to grasp the notion of phenomenal character and to distinguish properties of experiences from properties of objects perceived. Of course, people do say (usually quite correctly) that they see colours, hear sounds, feel pains, and so on. But, pre-theoretically, such statements indicate awareness of properties of external objects or of the speaker’s own body, and some argumentation and intuition pumping is needed in order to construe them as involving claims about properties of the speaker’s mental states.

Third, even setting aside concerns about its vacuousness, the notion of diet qualia does not pick out an explanandum that is genuinely theory-neutral. For although it is often said that no one denies that diet qualia exist, there are some theorists who do just that. They hold that there is nothing to be explained about consciousness beyond certain capacities and dispositions, and they either deny the existence of phenomenal consciousness outright or claim that it be analysed functionally. Chalmers calls these *type-A materialists* (Chalmers, 1997). (Most physicalists, by contrast, are what Chalmers calls *type-B materialists*, who accept the existence of phenomenal consciousness as a conceptually distinct fact, but argue that it can be explained in physical terms.) The most famous type-A materialist is, of course, Dennett, and I take it that he would want to quine diet qualia as well as classic qualia.¹⁰ And given this, it is wrong to claim that the notion of diet qualia identifies a common explanandum for all theories of consciousness, since to do so would be to beg the question against type-A materialism. In fact, a genuinely theory-neutral explanandum would have to be specified in a very general way, perhaps as ‘the distinctive properties of experiences of the kind we call “conscious”’.

Fourth, the concept of diet qualia is, I contend, itself a theoretical one, which serves to support a particular view of consciousness.¹¹ The practice of drawing a distinction between classic and diet qualia (between qualia in the Lewisian sense and what-it-is-likeness, phenomenal character, etc.) is a fairly recent one, with most examples coming from the last 25 years.¹² And the diet notion often plays a specific theoretical role: namely that of facilitating an approach that combines reductive physicalism with realism about phenomenal consciousness. (I am not suggesting that this is the *motive* with which theorists introduce it, merely that it is the role it actually plays in the debate.) In other words, the diet notion serves as a starting point for reductive

⁸ It might be argued that there is at least theoretical space for a notion of diet qualia. Suppose that experiences have introspectable properties over and above zero qualia, but that these properties do not have the features of classic qualia. Then we shall need an intermediate, diet notion of qualia. My response is to ask what features these putative properties do have. If they are simply qualified versions of the features of classic qualia (intrinsicity, ineffability, subjectivity), then the properties qualify as a form of classic qualia, as defined earlier. If the features are distinct from those of classic qualia, then we need to know what they are and why we should regard them as defining a form of qualia.

⁹ Amy Kind argued this point in her commentary on an earlier version of this paper.

¹⁰ Dennett writes: ‘Philosophers have adopted various names for the things in the beholder (or properties of the beholder) that have been supposed to provide a safe home for the colors and the rest of the properties that have been banished from the “external” world by the triumphs of physics: “raw feels,” “sensa,” “phenomenal qualities,” “intrinsic properties of conscious experiences,” “the qualitative content of mental states,” and, of course, “qualia,” the term I will use. There are subtle differences in how these terms have been defined, but I’m going to ride roughshod over them. In the previous chapter I seemed to be denying that there are any such properties, and for once what seems so is so. I am denying that there are any such properties’ (Dennett, 1991, p. 372).

¹¹ For a version of the classic/diet distinction that explicitly acknowledges the theoretical status of the diet notion (under the name ‘raw feel’), see Kirk, 1994, p. 27.

¹² It is tempting to speculate that the practice is to a large extent a response to the publication of Dennett’s famous attack on classic qualia in his 1988 paper ‘Quining qualia’.

theories that aim to *take consciousness seriously*, in Chalmers's phrase. Thus, the notion needs to be rich enough to vindicate the intuitions to which property dualists appeal but weak enough to be open to physicalist explanatory strategies. I have already argued that there is no notion that meets these constraints. There is no phenomenal residue left when qualia have been stripped of their problematic features. But the thing to note here is that, so conceived, the notion of diet qualia is a theoretical one, and that its theoretical commitments enter, not in the process of explanation, but in that of establishing a target that is *amenable* to physical explanation. (It is true that many non-physicalists also employ the diet notion. Without speculating about the motives of these theorists, I suggest that this reflects the changed focus of the debate and serves to avoid begging the question against type-B physicalists.)

5. The diet/zero shuffle

I have argued that the notion of diet qualia has no distinctive content. If there are no classic qualia, then all that needs explaining (as far as 'what-it-is-likeness' goes) are zero qualia. This is not a popular view, but it is one that is tacitly reflected in the practice of philosophers who offer reductive accounts of consciousness. Typically, these accounts involve a three-stage process. First, diet qualia are introduced as a neutral explanandum. Second, diet qualia are identified with some natural, usually relational, property of experience, such as possession of a form of non-conceptual intentional content or availability to higher-order thinking. Third, this identification is defended by arguing that we would be disposed to judge that experiences with this property have intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective qualitative properties. In the end, diet qualia are not explained at all but simply identified with some other feature, and what actually get explained are zero qualia. I shall call this *the diet/zero shuffle*.

To illustrate this, I shall look briefly at Peter Carruthers's account of phenomenal consciousness (Carruthers, 2000). (I choose this, because it is, in my view, one of the most clear and sophisticated accounts so far developed.) Carruthers is admirably clear about his explananda and strategy. He is an eliminativist about classic qualia (which he calls simply 'qualia') and argues that our intuitions about intrinsicality, ineffability, privacy, and so on need explaining away, rather than explaining. That is, all we need to do is to explain our dispositions to *judge* that our experiences have feels with those properties (2000, 93–4, 182). And Carruthers takes this need to be a major force in shaping a theory of phenomenal consciousness. Thus, outlining the case for a form of dispositionalist higher-order thought (HOT) theory, he writes:

The overall argument-form goes something like this, then: since anyone instantiating a dispositionalist HOT system will naturally come to believe that they have qualia, we can conclude (by means of an inference to the best explanation of this fact) that phenomenal consciousness is *constituted by* the availability of analog contents to HOTs ... (Carruthers, 2000, p. 185)

However, Carruthers insists that there is also a need to offer a substantive explanation of diet qualia (which he calls 'subjective feels'), and he develops a particular form of dispositionalist HOT theory which he argues can do this. The core idea is that experiences acquire subjective feels through becoming available to a theory-of-mind faculty which can understand the is/seems distinction and deploy recognitional concepts of experience. If our experiences are available to such a system, Carruthers argues, we shall tend to judge that they possess a subjective dimension:

So wherever previously the subject could discriminate one colour from another, say, and was capable of thoughts of the form, 'This is distinct from that', then the presence of the HOT consumer system renders the subject capable of thoughts of the form, 'This has a distinctive *seeming* distinct from the *seeming* of that' or 'This *experience* is distinct from that'. (Carruthers, 2000, p. 241)

Moreover, Carruthers argues – and this is the crucial bit – experiences available to such a system will actually *possess* a subjective dimension. Appealing to consumer semantics, Carruthers argues that availability to the HOT system confers *dual content* on experiences: they represent both states of the world and themselves as experiences of those states – for example, both *red* and *experience of red*. And it is in virtue of this dual content, Carruthers argues, that experiences have their characteristic subjectivity:

[E]ach phenomenally conscious experience has its distinctive form of subjectivity by virtue of acquiring a higher-order analog content which precisely mirrors, and represents *as* subjective, its first-order content. (Carruthers, 2000, p. 243)

Now consciousness may well involve the sort of mechanisms Carruthers describes. But still there is no real explanation of subjective feel here. Subjective feel is simply *identified* with possession of dual content. Why should having dual content confer a subjective feel? If the idea seems plausible, it is, I suggest, because of the link between possession of such content and dispositions to entertain *thoughts* about the subjectivity of experience of the kind Carruthers mentions. The power and persuasiveness of the account comes from its ability to explain our disposition to judge that our experiences have a subjective dimension – from explaining zero qualia, rather than diet qualia. Carruthers is doing the diet/zero shuffle.

Let me stress that I do not regard this as a major weakness in Carruthers's theory. I think he does a good job of explaining what needs to be explained, if we reject classic qualia realism. My complaint is that the account is mis-sold as a theory of diet qualia. Nor is the complaint specific to Carruthers's theory. Consider Rosenthal's account again, on which conscious experience occurs when states with sensory qualities are the target of higher-order thoughts. If we are aware of intrinsic sensory qualities of experiences in this way, then this might explain why we are disposed to regard our experiences as having a

phenomenal character that is intrinsic, ineffable, and so on. But it does not explain how experiences come to *have* a phenomenal character that is distinct both from the sensory qualities themselves and from our cognitive dispositions. So at best what is explained here are zero qualia.

In fact, it can be argued that all physicalist explanations of consciousness do the shuffle. For (as property dualists rightly point out) whatever physical or functional mechanisms are proposed as the basis of consciousness, it will always be possible to conceive of those same mechanisms operating in the absence of any ‘feel’. This is true whether we think in terms of intrinsic, ineffable classic qualia, or of the elusive phenomenal residue of diet qualia. In neither case can physical theory gain any conceptual purchase. And, on a plausible view, this means that no reductive explanation of the putative feel has been given. It may be the case, however, that we cannot conceive of these mechanisms operating in the absence of a disposition to *judge* that a feel is present, and such accounts may thus offer an explanation of zero qualia. And what plausibility they have, I suggest, trades on this conflation.¹³

To sum up, there can be no physicalist explanation of diet qualia – not (or not just) because of the familiar explanatory gap, but because the concept of diet qualia has no distinctive content at all. If we reject classic qualia realism, then *all* our intuitions about qualia need explaining away, including the intuition that experiences have a phenomenal character at all.¹⁴

6. Implications

Suppose the arguments above are sound and that the notion of diet qualia is vacuous. What implications does this have for the debate about consciousness and the strategies of the various parties?

The chief moral is that the fundamental dispute about consciousness should be over the nature of the explanandum, not the explanans. The concept of diet qualia confuses the issue by leading us to think that both sides can agree about what needs to be explained, and that the core dispute is about whether the explanation can be a reductive one. If I am right, then the fundamental choice point comes right at the start, in the choice of explanandum: classic qualia or zero qualia. The former may demand a non-reductive approach; the latter present no special problem for reductive explanation.¹⁵

The major challenge is to Chalmers’s type-B materialists, who want to ‘take consciousness seriously’, but seek to offer reductive explanations of it. The moral is that they cannot do both. One cannot have one’s phenomenal cake and eat it. Assuming they do not concede that classic qualia exist, these theorists should adopt a type-A materialist position, and accept that there is nothing to explain beyond zero qualia. (Whether this means taking consciousness less seriously or more seriously depends on your perspective.) Although this would seem to dictate a major change of strategy, it would be more in presentation than substance. For, as we have seen, in practice reductive theories of consciousness are typically geared to explaining zero qualia, which are tacitly conflated with diet qualia.

For those who believe that classic qualia exist, a fairly minor strategic shift is in order. Instead of taking it as a datum that diet qualia exist and then arguing that diet qualia are best understood as classic qualia, these theorists should simply argue for the existence of classic qualia. For zero qualia theorists, of course, there are no implications.

To sum up: We can either affirm the existence of classic qualia or deny the existence of phenomenal character altogether. (For what it’s worth, my own choice is for the latter option, but nothing that has been said above turns on that.) And given that one’s choice here is likely to reflect fundamental metaphysical and epistemological commitments, it may be that engagement between the two sides becomes impossible. This may be a depressing prospect, but it’s better to face up to it than foster an illusion of consensus. Diet qualia should be quined.

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¹³ Richard Brown has pointed out to me that the diet/zero shuffle is reminiscent of the putative fallacy identified by Ned Block in what he calls the ‘target reasoning’, which involves conflating functional and phenomenal concepts of consciousness (A-consciousness and P-consciousness) (Block, 1995).

¹⁴ Is there a diet/classic shuffle, analogous to the diet/zero one? I suspect so. As noted earlier, many non-physicalists begin with the same thin conception of qualia that physicalists adopt. I would argue, however, that the thought experiments commonly used to support a non-physicalist position tacitly depend on a richer, more classical conception of qualia; it is because we think of qualia as intrinsic and non-functional that we can imagine zombies and inverts, rather than the other way round. If this is right, then some non-physicalist theorists may be doing a diet/classic shuffle. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this question.)

¹⁵ Of course, strictly speaking, the choice is not between explaining *only* classic qualia and explaining zero qualia. Classic qualia realists will still need to explain zero qualia, so the real choice is between explaining *both* classic qualia and zero qualia and explaining only zero qualia.

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