

Of "qualia" and "what it is like"

Haoying Liu

School of Philosophy, Fudan University

ABSTRACT

In "Experience as a Way of Knowing" (this journal), the author tries to create some troubles for philosophers who believe in "qualia" or "what it is like". I think the author has underestimated the complexity of the issues, and I will voice my concerns in five sections. Besides presenting my interpretation of the author's position and challenging it, I will (1) challenge the author's treatment of the knowledge argument, especially the author's treatment of "this is what it is like to see red", (2) challenge the author's interpretation of "what-it-is-like" talk and the author's view that phenomenal properties are theoretical postulates, (3) challenge the author's rejection of "apparent properties", and (4) point out some issues with the author's interpretation of several authors who write about the knowledge argument.

KEYWORDS

consciousness; what-it-is-like; qualia; phenomenal concept; representationalism

In "Experience as a Way of Knowing" (this journal), the author tries to create some troubles for philosophers who believe in "qualia" or "what it is like". I think the author has underestimated the complexity of the issues, and I will voice my concerns in five sections. In section 0, I will present my interpretation of the author's position and raise some questions. In section 1, I will discuss the author's treatment of the knowledge argument, especially the author's treatment of "this is what it is like to see red." In section 2, I will question the author's interpretation of "what-it-is-like" talk and the author's view that phenomenal properties are theoretical postulates. In section 3, I will question the author's rejection of "apparent properties". In section 4, I will point out some issues with the author's interpretation of several authors who write about the knowledge argument.

0 The author's position

Some passages suggest that the author's position is a sort of representationalism of consciousness, probably an externalist view:

I understand that pains feel different from itches, but only when it is construed as: pains, *qua* experiences, are different from itches, *qua* experiences, and they are different experiences because by having them, we experience different things: damage of tissues vs disturbance of skin. Similarly, I understand that seeing red feels different from seeing green, but only when it is construed as: experiences of red are different from experiences of green, and they are different because by having

them, we experience different things: red vs green. (p. 11)¹

[W]e are acquainted with objects of experiences and their properties. By having a visual experience of a tomato, I am acquainted with the tomato and its properties: redness, ripeness, etc. Saying that *in an experience*, we are aware of the object of the experience and its properties amounts to saying that *by having an experience*, we are acquainted with the object of the experience and its properties. (p. 19)

But how could I recognize an experience of red, or remember it, or imagine it? I can recognize rose, iPhone, or my friends Trump and Biden, etc. But do I need to recognize my *experience* of rose in order to recognize rose? I can remember how Trump looks like. But do I need to remember my *visual experience* of Trump in order to remember how he looks like? I can imagine an iPhone be presented to me as a gift. But do I need to imagine an *experience* of iPhone in order to imagine an iPhone be presented to me as a gift? [...] We recognize *things and their properties*; we remember *things and their properties*; we imagine *things and their properties*. (pp. 19-20)

It is OK to hold this position. My concern is that the author has not given due respect to its difficulties, especially the “phenomenalist” idea that phenomenal properties and representational properties are not the same. Representationalism is not new. Neither is the phenomenalist challenge. The author is aware of this difficulty, as they says,

It might be argued that for bodily sensations like pain, itch, etc., they have no object. (p. 4).

Indeed these are difficult cases with externalist representationalism. However, the author doesn't address it at all, as they says immediately:

I am not sure whether that is true, but I will spare myself from getting involved in the mud. (p. 4)

Thus, the heaviest problem for representationalism is ignored. In the rest of this paper, the author doesn't discuss or mention this problem of representationalism, i.e., the separability of phenomenal and representational properties. I think this attitude isn't quite appropriate. I would recommend the author to acknowledge such difficulties and offer some due consideration, at least some reason to put it aside. For a recent (book-length) investigation on this topic, see Jiang 2023.²

The author follows representationalism. Moreover, they seem to have proposed a version of representationalism. And I find the author's proposal questionable. Here is how the author puts it:

Representationalists could simply claim that *by experientially representing* an object as so-and-such, one *is aware of* the properties of the object in the case of veridical experiences and *is seemingly aware of* the properties of the object in the case of non-veridical experiences. Since awareness is always conscious—one cannot be *unconsciously aware* of something, experiences are essentially tied with phenomenal consciousness. Since one must be aware of something from the subjective point of view, experiences are essentially tied with subjectivity. (p. 17)

When a red object appears red to me, I am aware of its redness [...] When an object that is not red appears red to me, though I am not aware of redness, I have an experience which, other things being equal, would lead me to form the belief that the object is red just as the experience that I have

1 All page numbers refer to the target article in this journal; all emphases in the quoted passages are in original.

2 蒋薇著:《现象意识和表征的可分离性:以身体感觉和情绪为例》,中国社会科学出版社,2023年。

as a result of seeing a red object, that is to say, I would have an experience *as if* I am aware of redness (p. 17)

The author makes the move of adding *awareness* to a representationalist account, so that one can distinguish perceptual experience from mere belief with the same content. The question is, how does this *awareness* happen? Without some account of what constitutes the awareness in perception, those who dislike representationalism will have room to introduce phenomenal properties back into the picture, in which case the resulting picture won't really qualify as a *representationalist* theory of consciousness, since the work of *making a mental state conscious* in that theory would not be done by the state's representational properties. And it's easy to follow a phenomenalist direction. Indeed, the author makes clear that awareness is closely tied to consciousness, subjective point of view, etc. It could be that the author is proposing that awareness can be used to explicate consciousness and subjectivity, but without a representationalist account of awareness with no mention of consciousness and subjectivity (also notice the author's emphasis on "*aware*", which is quite common when talking about *phenomenal states* or *subjective experience*), one may worry that by means of talking about awareness, the author is smuggling consciousness and subjectivity into the picture, making it *as if* we have a representationalist theory of consciousness. For this reason, the author's account of representationalism should be developed further, if they do want to establish this point in this article.

1 "This is what it is like to see red"

Think about Mary the color scientist who sees something red for the first time. If Mary's new knowledge shall be expressed in words, it is natural to put it as "*this is what it is like to see red*". (p. 4) Much of the author's attack focuses on ways to talk about phenomenal properties, including "*this*" as used in the statement of Mary's new knowledge. This section will address some of the author's attack on this point, but more will be said later in section 2, regarding "what-it-is-like" talk (henceforth "WIL"). The author claims that ordinary language doesn't talk about "qualia":

If there are qualia, why don't we have any terms in our ordinary language that denote them? (p. 4)

[W]hy don't laymen on the street have any terms for qualia and talk about them? (p. 4)

As far as I know, there are very few examples of phenomenal concepts in public language, even though there are a great number of philosophical papers on qualia and related issues. (pp. 8-9)

"Qualia" might be roughly taken to refer to phenomenal properties, conscious qualities, "what it is like", "how it feels", however you put it. If we understand "qualia" in this lite manner without adding further ontological commitment about its nature, then it seems to me that there *are* ways to say it in ordinary language, and we talk about it all the time. A gourmet tasting a dish and describing the taste can be regarded as talking about "qualia". A subject in a visual perception experiment who reports "I see yellow" when in fact she sees only red and green light flashing can be regarded as talking about "qualia". A long distance runner who describes the experience of running a marathon by saying "it feels like ..." can be seen as talking about "qualia". Even pointing to a red flower and saying "*this is what it is like to see red*" isn't going beyond ordinary language. Perhaps a representationalist would deny that these are cases of "qualia" talk and instead rephrase all of them in terms of object properties. I wonder if this move can be successfully implemented. But even if it is

technically possible, it seems question-begging against phenomenals, as representationalists are theoretically motivated here to rewrite all talks about experience into talks about objects.

A note about the use of “qualia” and its singular form “quale”. Personally I would not use these terms because they don’t seem ontologically lite enough. I recognize experiences and phenomenal properties, as far as they are treated as what one finds when reflecting upon one’s own experience (the process is also known as “introspection”). I think we should acknowledge at least “something” about conscious experiences which *mark* their differences to the subject. That “something”, call it phenomenal properties, or “qualia” if you like, is still ontologically puzzling, but denying its existence at all seems a leap too far. In what follows when addressing the author’s passages, whenever the author talks about “qualia”, I will understand the term as referring to phenomenal properties, which are recognized through reflection upon one’s own experiences, understood as theoretically thin, with no ontological commitment on anything like physicalism, dualism, idealism, etc.

The author considers one way in which one might refer to “qualia”, that is, by giving them labels such as “Qr” or “Qg”. Then the author complains against this method:

[I]t seems that if we like, we could coin many terms for qualia, for example, “Qr” for the quale of the experience of red, “Qg” for the quale of the experience of green, etc. [...] This way of coining new terms would make trouble for us. [1] First, the claim that my experience of red has Qr would be entailed by that every experience has a quale. As a result, if Mary knows that every experience has a quale prior to her release, she would learn nothing new if she learns that her experience of red has Qr after release. But Mary surely could know that every experience has a quale if that is really the case because she would have experiences in the black and white room. [2] Second and relatedly, if it is the case that every experience has a quale, then once I know that the object in front of me is red, I would be in a position to know that my experience of it has Qr without even putting my experience under introspection, given that I had experiences before. But isn’t it claimed that introspection is the (only) way for me to know (or know about) the qualia of my experiences? How could I know that my experience of red has Qr without even attending to it in introspection? (pp. 4-5) (“[1]”, “[2]” are added for ease of reference.)

Of [1]: Suppose that “Qr”, “Qg” are *names* of particular phenomenal properties, just like “Joe” and “Vladimir” are names of particular individuals. In that case, it just doesn’t seem right that “the claim that my experience of red has Qr would be entailed by that every experience has a quale.” One can know that every experience has a “quale” without knowing which particular “qualia” correspond to which experiences. Every experience has a “quale”, and so the experience of smoking has a “quale”. I know that much about the experience of smoking, but since I’ve never smoked, I don’t know the particular “quale” associated with smoking. By analogy, one can know that every country has a president, and thus one also knows that the US and Russia each has a president, without knowing that their presidents are Joe and Vladimir respectively. For the same reason, even if Mary knows that every experience has a “quale” prior to seeing red, without having the experience, she still doesn’t know the “quale” of seeing red — she still doesn’t know Qr.

Mary could be told prior to experiencing seeing red, that seeing red has a “quale” that is named “Qr”. In that case, there is a sense in which “she would learn nothing new if she learns that her experience of red has Qr after release.” That would be like a person who knows that the presidents of the US and Russia are called “Joe” and “Vladimir” respectively, and by meeting Joe and Vladimir in person, she would in some sense “learn nothing new if she learns that the presidents of the US and Russia are Joe and Vladimir respectively.” However there is also a sense in which one learns something significant: before meeting Joe and Vladimir, one knows them only by name, whereas

after the meeting, one knows them *in person*. Likewise, before Mary experiencing seeing red, she knows the “quale” only by name, whereas after having the experience, she acquires some direct knowledge of *it*.

Of [2]: I guess the author is thinking about a situation where one has “had the experience before” and is currently looking at something which is actually red, and seeing it as red. (The author’s description leaves a little room for imagining that the subject is facing a red object but isn’t actually seeing it, and knows that the object is red by some other means, such as being told that it’s red. However, it would be unclear in that case what “my experience of it” means. The matter would then be overly complicated.) If that’s the case under consideration, assuming that the subject knows *Q_r* from her past experience, it seems right that the subject in that situation is “in a position” to know that her current experience has *Q_r*, even if she is not undergoing introspection. After all, equipped with the right sort of phenomenal knowledge, she is *in a position* to know what her current experience is like; it doesn’t mean that she actually knows it or is entertaining an occurrent belief about her current experience. If she happens to be interested in her experience and attend to it, she would have an occurrent belief about *Q_r* and thus *know* that she is having *Q_r*. But even prior to introspection, given her past experience and memory, she is *in a position* to make a judgment about her experience.

The author doesn’t like WIL. I will say more about this in the next section. Here I will criticize the author’s discussion about Mary’s phenomenal knowledge expressed in terms of “*this* is what it is like ...” The author says,

There is another famous way of dubbing terms for qualia—Nagel’s way: what it is like to *see red*, what it is like to *taste vegemite*, what it is like to *smell skunk*, etc. [...] on a closer look, this is not really a new way of dubbing terms for qualia, as it might seem, for [1] what could we possibly mean by “what it is like to see red” except the quale of experience of red? Isn’t it supposed that “quale” is roughly synonymous with “what it is like to be in an experiential state”? [2] So, the claim that every experience has a quale is roughly the same as the claim that there is something it is like to have an experience. [3] As a consequence, the proposition that *this* is what it is like to see red would have no more cognitive content than the proposition that an experience of red has a quale. [4] As a further consequence, if Mary knows that every experience has a quale, when she comes to learn that *this* is what it is like to see red, she actually learns nothing new. (p. 5) (“[1]”, “[2]”, ... are added for ease of reference.)

Of [1] and [2]: The author tends to interpret WIL *in other terms*, especially “quale”. As I will explain in section 2, that is unnecessary. On the other hand, if “quale” and “qualia” are understood in a conceptually naive and ontologically less-committed manner, as I prefer, then paraphrasing WIL in terms of “quale” adds nothing theoretically significant to WIL. (The author repeats “quale” talk throughout the article. I will also insist on a “thin” reading of “quale” in my commentary.)

Moreover, in the passage above, the author seems to ignore the role of “*this*” in “*this* is what it is like ...” Thus, of [3]: Even granting the author’s reading of WIL in terms of “quale”, “*this* is what it is like to see red” does seem to contain more than “an experience of red has a quale”. Due to the occurrence of “*this*”, the former means that seeing red has “*this*” particular “quale”, whereas the latter refers to no particular “quale.” Therefore, of [4]: even if Mary knows “every experience has a quale”, by learning that “*this* is what it is like to see red”, she does get to know “*this*” particular “quale”, which amounts to knowing something new.

The author seems to be aware of this point, as the author considers the objection that “When Mary sees red for the very first time, she learns that her experience of red has a *peculiar* quality” (p. 5), with the example of Mary’s knowledge considered as “My experience of red has *Q_{u-r}*.” (p. 5) The

author points out that perhaps this piece of propositional knowledge might be known by Mary even in the black-and-white room. (“[W]e might wonder why Mary could not know this proposition in the black and white room. Could we just tell her that human experience of red has Qu-r?”, p. 5) Not surprisingly, one may challenge the author by arguing that Mary’s knowledge of Qu-r after release is new. Below is the the author’s account of this challenge and their response:

One may argue that given that Mary hasn’t had any experience of red yet, her concept of this peculiar quality is pretty much impoverished: she *merely possesses* the concept of Qu-r without *mastering* it. After being released, Mary has an experience of red and therefore, masters the concept. [1] If we individuate knowledge more finely, we can say that Mary only knows_p (“p” for possessing) that human experience of red has Qu-r, when she only possesses the concept of Qu-r, in the black and white room, and Mary knows_m (“m” for mastering) that human experience of red has Qu-r, when she masters the concept of Qu-r, after being released. [...] [2] There are some obvious problems with individuating knowledge *that* finely. [...] if we individuate knowledge *that* finely, we would have to accordingly individuate belief *that* finely. As a consequence, my belief that elm trees are beautiful would be different from Jones’ (Jones is an expert on botany) belief that elm trees are beautiful. [3] But if they are different, they must have different truth conditions. This, however, seems clearly an unacceptable result. (p. 6) (“[1]”, “[2]” ... are added for ease of reference.)

Based on [1], the objection seems to be that Mary’s new knowledge can be captured by a distinction between *modes* of knowledge, a “possessing” mode and a “mastering” mode. Notice that this is a multiplication of knowledge *states*, not knowledge *content*. Two modes correspond to two sorts of knowledge states, but they can bear the same propositional content. Of [2], [3]: However, the author’s reply seems to be taking the distinction to be multiplying propositional content, which explains the comment in [3] that this distinction would result in different truth conditions for novice and expert beliefs of the same topic. If we understand the distinction as at the level of knowledge state rather than content, then we can allow Mary before and after seeing red (and novices and experts) to have different knowledge states of the same propositional content, and thus avoiding the charge of differing truth-conditions. A novice’s and an expert’s beliefs that elm trees are beautiful can be of the same content, and therefore of the same truth-conditions, but their knowledge states are admittedly different.

The author makes a point that is seemingly attractive to many, namely “phenomenal concepts are in fact *inexpressible* in public language” (p. 6), without much analysis of what “being expressible” means. Based on that, the author starts wondering how one gets to believe in phenomenal knowledge and concepts:

[I]f Mary’s new propositional knowledge is inexpressible in public language, why would we believe that she learns a new piece of propositional knowledge in the first place? Likewise, if phenomenal concepts are inexpressible in public language, why do we think that there are such concepts? (p. 7)

My answer is this. It could be that while something is inexpressible here, still there is something else which is expressible. By saying “*this* is what it’s like to see red”, one manages to convey that some particular experience is going on, that it is typically associated with seeing red objects, that (somewhat indirectly) one has little or no further words to talk about the experience, and perhaps (more indirectly) that the particular ongoing experience differs from that of, say, seeing green, and that the listener could get what the speaker is talking about if the listener is in the right position. Such expressions happen a lot when patients talk about their pains or discomforts, when gourmets talk about food tastes, and in countless other ordinary contexts. It is such practice that makes

plausible the idea that there are phenomenal concepts and phenomenal knowledge, even if there is “something” inexpressible in the relevant discourse. No theoretically weighty claims about phenomenal properties or “qualia” are necessary for appreciating such phenomenal “things”.

Following the discussion on how one comes to believe in phenomenal concepts, the author seems to suggest that we don’t know our own experiences. Some questionable comments on higher-order theories of consciousness are also involved:

Let me concede for this moment that there is a feel. [1] However, how do I know it or know about it? It seems that the only way for me to know it or know about it is to *feel* it. But when I feel the feel, am I just experiencing red? There doesn’t seem to be an additional mental act there when I am experiencing red—feeling the feel when I am experiencing red is nothing but experiencing red. [2] One might suggest that when I am experiencing red, my experience of red is at the same time under introspection and it is by introspection that I come to know that my experience of red has a special feel. [...] it is clear that this suggestion would multiply mental acts. The question is: why add an extra mental act when not necessary? [3] One might believe that actually there is a kind of necessity involved. According to some higher-order theories of consciousness, it is exactly because my experience of red is under introspection that it is a conscious mental state. [Author’s note: there is a footnote 8 here, citing Rosenthal.] But must my introspection that makes my experience conscious be conscious too? ... (p. 7) (“[1]”, “[2]”, ... are added for ease of reference.)

Of [1], [2]: I agree that there is no need to multiply mental acts when unnecessary. But it seems not implausible that *merely seeing red* and *realizing that one’s experience is of seeing red* are two mental acts. The former, which might be what the author means by “experiencing red”, is plain perceptual experience without introspection, where the subject assumes a “natural attitude” by thinking about the object alone. The latter, more reflective stance toward one’s occurrent experience goes beyond plain perception by involving introspection, with its focus on the experience instead of the object. So there is an additional mental act, i.e., introspection, but it’s not unnecessary, insofar as we shall distinguish between plain perception and introspection of perception. If one refuses to distinguish the two, I would recommend consulting one’s own experience.

Higher-order theories of consciousness (HOT) don’t have to enter here. Its presence here, in my view, is due to some misconception about HOT. Of [3]: Citing Rosenthal, the author claims that according to some HOT, “it is exactly because my experience of red is under introspection that it is a conscious mental state.” But that seems wrong. According to HOT, a conscious state requires a lower-order state being represented by a higher-order state in the right way. Thus if one has a conscious experience of seeing red, then one’s lower-order sensational state of color is represented by a higher-order state. HOT doesn’t hold that the higher-order state is necessarily introspective or conscious. Therefore, it’s wrong to construe HOT as saying that seeing red is conscious “because my experience of red is under introspection.” Higher-order representation itself doesn’t amount to introspection. (In HOT, introspection requires yet another higher-order state at a higher-level. Thus regular conscious perception consists of a first-order state of sensation and a second-order state of representing the first-order state (the second-order state itself being unconscious), while introspection of this perception requires adding a third-order state that represents the second-order state, thereby rendering the second-order state conscious. The third-order state itself doesn’t have to be conscious.)

2 “What it is like”

The author is unfriendly to talks about phenomenal properties, including words like “reddish”. The attitude is shown in the following passage:

Some have used the term “reddish experience” and “reddish” is supposed to express a phenomenal concept. [1] But what could they mean by “reddish experience” except experience with the quale of an experience of red? I believe that nobody would take any experience to be reddish literally. [2] Then “reddish experience” is just another term for experience of red and “reddish” is defined (implicitly?) to mean *having the quale of an experience of red*. [3] Some have dubbed “Qr” for the quale of experience of red, and then take “Qr” as a term expressing a phenomenal concept. But first, “Qr” is a symbol instead of a term; second, even if it were a term, clearly it acquires its meaning *by definition*: it is defined to be a term that picks out the quale of experience of red. [4] “Pain” sometimes is also taken to express a phenomenal concept, as well as “red sensation.” But clearly, by “pain” we usually mean the unpleasant *experiences* rather than the phenomenal character of them resulted from damage of tissues, etc. [...] [5] Through these examples, we can see that first, all of these terms expressing phenomenal concepts are *defined* to be phenomenal terms; second, they are defined in terms of *quale* or *phenomenal character*. (p. 9) (“[1]”, “[2]”, ... are added for ease of reference.)

Of [1]: Experience can be *reddish*, what’s wrong with that? Experience is probably not red. I believe that few would take any experience to be literally red. But being *reddish* is not being *red*. So it doesn’t follow that an experience cannot be reddish. Moreover, the author uses “quale” to explicate experiential terms like “reddish experience”. But I see little point of introducing “quale” here, as if “quale” would make “reddish experience” clearer. Mary doesn’t need the term “quale” to know that “*this* is what it is like to see red” or “*that* is what it is like to see green”. As soon as Mary grasps “*this*” or “*that*”, we can introduce the terms “reddish” or “greenish” to her. No need of the more general term “quale”, as if by pointing at or grasping “*this*” or “*that*” we already know what “kind of things” they are. Thus, of [2]: The term “reddish” is not defined in terms of “quale”, not a theoretical term defined by something else esoteric. Likewise, of [3]: If “Qr” is introduced to Mary to refer to the “*this*” in her newly acquired phenomenal knowledge, then “Qr” isn’t defined either; rather it may be a name, with a referent. If my reasoning so far is plausible, then claim [5] is groundless.

The author’s fondness of “quale” continues in their comments on the philosophical parlance of WIL:

[W]hat could we possibly mean by “what it is like to see red” except the quale of experience of red? (p. 5)

Nagel’s way of coining phenomenal terms, “what it is like to see red,” etc., are not really a different way from defining them in terms of quale. (p. 9)

The treatment of WIL isn’t so much different from that of “reddish” or “Qr”. My argument above against the unnecessary and artificial explication of these terms in terms of “quale” applies here as well: no need of the term “quale” to make sense of WIL. I would also like to note that WIL in itself should be considered as a phrase that means to invite its audience to think about phenomenal properties *without* theoretical presumption on what “kind of things” they are: just examine the four words in this phrase, “what”, “it”, “is”, “like”, and try to dig out something ontological from them. (Of the semantics and communicative force of WIL, I would recommend Hellie 2004, 2007; Stoljar

2016; Gaskin 2019; D' Ambrosio & Stoljar Forthcoming; Liu Forthcoming.)³

Based on the questionable idea that phenomenal terms like WIL are “defined” in terms of “quale”, the author raises a question about the term “quale”, apparently intending to undermine the use of this term, and thus demolishing the use of other phenomenal terms as well:

So, though [...] there are phenomenal terms in public language, they are *phenomenal* terms only because they are *defined in terms of quale by philosophers*. [...] Now the question is: how does “quale” acquire its status of being a categorical term for phenomenal properties? (p. 9)

Given that, as I have argued earlier, phenomenal terms don't have to be defined in terms of “quale”, the question itself is ill-motivated. Nevertheless, the author's discussion that continues deserves some attention. So let's follow the author's path and proceed. Regarding the question of how “quale” becomes a “categorical term”, the author says,

[1] It seems that there are two ways in which “quale” could be introduced as a categorical term, one is by being defined through other phenomenal concepts: the category of the things picked out by phenomenal terms “p1,” “p2,” ... , if they constitute a category. The other is by being defined through stipulation: the category of so-and-such things. [2] Obviously, the first way requires that there be phenomenal concepts expressible in public language before “quale” being defined through them, which, as shown above, is hardly the case. ... (p. 9) (“[1]”, “[2]” are added for ease of reference.)

Of [2]: The author rejects “the first way” of introducing “quale”. But that rejection is based on the idea that phenomenal terms are defined in terms of “quale”, which I have criticized. Concepts of individual phenomenal characters, call them “reddish”, “Qr”, “what it is like to see red”, etc., not defined by “quale”, can be introduced pretheoretically. Then the “categorical” term “quale” may be a result of generalization from the particular cases which these phenomenal terms stand for. So I would prefer “the first way” identified by the author.

Of “the second way” of introducing “quale” into the discourse (“stipulation”), the author quoted from several sources. Looking at the passages cited (pp. 9-10), one can find both examples of “qualia” and synonyms. If the examples are doing anything, I think their function should better be understood as making the audience/reader to think about particular phenomenal properties and (hopefully) do some generalization from these cases. That would in fact be close to the “first way”, for the phrases about particular examples of “qualia” (which are used to *explicate* the term “qualia”) in fact function like phenomenal terms referring to the “qualia” in particular cases. (As for the synonyms, I wonder if they themselves are clear enough to define “quale”. These terms, including “quale”, might be considered as a cluster of terms about similar things. We use some terms among them to gesture toward others.)

Guided by the idea that thinking and talking about phenomenal properties are theoretically

3 Hellie, B. 2004. "Inexpressible Truths and the Allure of the Knowledge Argument." In *There's Something About Mary*, edited by P. Ludlow, Y. Nagasawa, and D. Stoljar, 333 – 364. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Hellie, B. 2007. "'There's Something It's Like' and the Structure of Consciousness." *The Philosophical Review* 116 (no. 3): 441–463. doi:10.1215/00318108-2007-005. Stoljar, D. 2016. "The Semantics of 'What It's Like' and the Nature of Consciousness." *Mind* 125 (no. 500): 1161–1198. doi:10.1093/mind/fzv179. Gaskin, R. 2019. "A Defence of the Resemblance Meaning of 'What It's Like'." *Mind* 128 (no. 511): 673–698. doi:10.1093/mind/fzx023. D'Ambrosio, J., and D. Stoljar. Forthcoming. "Two Notions of Resemblance and the Semantics of 'What It's Like'." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2022.2075453. Liu, H. Forthcoming. "'What it is like'." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2022.2161069.

motivated (consistent with the questionable idea that WIL and other phenomenal terms are “defined” by “quale”), the author says,

Though one may unconsciously slide from that red is phenomenally different from green to that experience of red is phenomenally different from experience of green, I rather think that this slide is undoubtedly pushed by various philosophical arguments, one of them is Nagel’s famous argument that psychophysical reduction is impossible. (p. 12)

Then the author launches an examination of the relevant discussion in Nagel (1974).⁴ However, one can “slide” to a focus on experiences without knowing Nagel, if only one can take introspection seriously, which doesn’t require theoretical background. Many students in classes of intro philosophy of mind can do this, without a close reading of Nagel. (Some students cannot get the point, but many can.) Thus, even if Nagel’s argument is problematic under the author’s examination, it doesn’t show that the “slide” (or, the shift of perspective to attend to experience) itself is problematic.

The author says, “One surely would wonder why we would believe that there is something that it is like to be a bat, if we cannot fully apprehend what it is like to be a bat.” (p. 13). The author then discusses Nagel’s answer in terms of one’s self-knowledge of “what it is like to be us”, and criticizes Nagel’s appeal to self-knowledge by concluding that “qualia are just posited without being adequately argued for.” (p. 13)

A couple of responses. First, we do not fully apprehend other minds either, but we do reasonably believe in other minds and believe that there is something it’s like to be another person. If this sympathetic understanding is applicable to non-human animals as well (we have strong evidence that most mammals have pain experiences), then why cannot one believe that there is something it is like to be a bat?

Second, the author seems to think that holding that “we know what it is like to be us” is not “adequately argued for”. I doubt if this point needs an “adequate” argument, or if any argument for it could be more convincing than the point itself. Patients may not know the nature of their pain, but they do know that they are in some sort of pain. Thus, I can understand the author’s challenge to phenomenal self-knowledge from a theoretical point of view, but I do find this challenge a bit puzzling.

3 Of “apparent properties”

The author thinks that the reason why many philosophers believe in qualia is that they believe in “apparent properties”. As the author explains, if we consider a case where an object appears red but is not red:

Though redness seems not to be a real (objective) property, it nevertheless seems to be a real property in the sense of being existent, for it seems crystal that I am *aware of redness* vividly in my experience when the object appears red to me—I could not be aware of something that doesn’t exist. If we say that F is an apparent property if an object appears F to me, then it seems that redness is a paradigm of apparent properties. (p. 14)

The above passage should suffice to give an idea of what “apparent properties” means. However, I think it’s not quite right to consider *being red/redness* as apparent properties. Rather,

4 Nagel, T. 1974. “What is it Like to be a bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83 (4): 435–450. doi:10.2307/2183914.

appearing red is an apparent property. The author wants to argue against apparent properties (“we don’t have to posit apparent properties” (p. 3, abstract)), and I don’t think the author intends to say that there is no such property of being red. (I don’t understand why the author claims that the property of appearing red is “weird”. (p. 15))

The author then tries to undermine apparent properties. The intuition behind the acknowledgement of apparent properties, as the author puts it, is this, “when we have an experience, we are aware of some properties in the experience.” (p. 15) The author holds that there are two reasons for it, first, “when an object appears red to me, I am aware of redness in my experience”, and second, “an object would not appear red to a creature with radically different perceptual apparatus”. (p. 15) The author then criticizes both reasons. I won’t challenge the claim that these two propositions are what makes the “we-are-aware-of-some-properties-in-the-experience” view legitimate. But I find the author’s criticism of them unconvincing.

First, regarding the idea that “when an object appears red to me, I am aware of redness in my experience”, I think the author is right to pick up difficult cases like illusion and hallucination, and try to rewrite it in a manner that avoids commitment to “apparent properties”. But that may be insufficient to dissipate the worry. Below is the relevant passage:

When I see a red object, we might claim that I am aware of its redness just as we would claim that I am aware of the object. [1] But we make this claim only because I will, other things being equal, judge that the object is *red* and my judgment will be true, that is, redness is instantiated by the object. [2] When an object that is not red appears red to me, just as I might claim that the object *appears* red to me when I know that the object is not red, I might claim that I am aware of redness even though I know that the object is not red. But just as we should not interpret the claim that the object appears red to me literally, we should not interpret my claim that I am aware of redness literally either. [3] What I mean by the claim that I am aware of redness is just that I will, other things being equal (e.g., if I do not know that the object is not red), judge that the object is red. Once interpreted as such, the claim would not make us committed to any apparent properties. (pp. 15-16) (“[1]”, “[2]”, … are added for ease of reference.)

The author’s strategy seems to be rewriting talks of “something appears F” or “someone is aware of F” (in [2]) into “someone will judge that the object is F, other things being equal” (as in [1] and [3]). However, the judgment of F or the tendency of making such judgments seems to have a cause. In virtue of what is the judgment that the object is red occurring? If the judgment is caused by a perceptual state in which something appears red, then the judgment and the state that reveals the appearance wouldn’t be the same. Moreover, if one is told that something is F without really having that thing appearing F to her, it also seems true that one will, “other things being equal, judge that the object is F”. Therefore, “something appears F to someone” is different from “someone will judge that the thing is F (other things being equal).” Having something appearing so-and-so thus involves more than the tendency to judge that something is so-and-so.

Second, the author criticizes the idea that “an object would not appear red to a creature with radically different perceptual apparatus”. Here is the relevant passage:

[1] It is true that when the perceptual apparatus is different, there must be some corresponding difference in perception. [2] We might therefore claim that creatures with different perceptual apparatus would perceive *differently*, or put it in another way, perceive *in different ways*. [3] However, by this claim we should only mean that creatures with different perceptual apparatus would perceive by instantiating different kinds of properties pertaining to their perceptual apparatus, physical or nonphysical. It doesn’t follow that objects of experiences would be perceived *as different*, or *as in a different way*, or put it in another way, it doesn’t follow that objects of

experiences would appear differently to those creatures. An object can be perceived differently or in different ways but *as the same* nonetheless. [4] A cubic object could be perceived *as the same*, say, as cubic, in different ways: by sight, by touch, or by supersonic echo. That is, the object would *appear cubic* to creatures with radically different perceptual apparatus. [5] It is also true that in order for a creature to perceive something *as red*, that is, in order for something to appear red to a creature, the creature must have the appropriate perceptual apparatus: things cannot appear red to a bat. But this should not be regarded as a reason to deny that red objects could appear red to creatures with radically different perceptual apparatus that is capable of perceiving red. (p. 16) (“[1]”, “[2]”, ... are added for ease of reference.)

Acknowledging that such a creature would have different perceptions from ours ([1]), the author tries to rewrite this perceptual difference in a way that avoids difference in content or object. The goal is to make it such that if something appears F to us, it could also appear F to creatures which perceive differently ([3]). I suspect that one who believes in “apparent properties” may find the author’s move question-begging. But leaving aside this point, the author’s rendering seems to leave out some important differences among the perceptions of different creatures, even if these creatures can perceive the same external objects or properties. Consider the author’s example in [4]: one can perceive something as cubic by sight or touch or other means, but there is still difference among these different ways of *appearing* cubic. Sight and touch can both bring appearance of being cubic, but the relevant visual appearances and tactile appearances differ, and so different “apparent properties” of being cubic seem to find their places. Therefore, the specter of “apparent properties” lingers: even if one acknowledges that “red objects could appear red to creatures with radically different perceptual apparatus that is capable of perceiving red” ([5]), it doesn’t rule out the possibility that objects’ *appearing red to us* differs from their *appearing red to them*. “Apparent properties” are not yet eradicated.

Because the author’s attack of the “two reasons” for the “we-are-aware-of-some-properties-in-the-experience” view is unconvincing, I find the author’s attack on apparent properties wanting.

4 Do Conee, Lewis, and Jackson believe in qualia?

The author thinks that some physicalist respondents to the knowledge argument, including Conee, Lewis (and Nemirow), and Jackson (in 2000s), believe in qualia.

Of Earl Conee, a supporter of the “acquaintance hypothesis” regarding Mary’s phenomenal knowledge, the author says,

For example, Conee [...] believes that what Mary acquires upon release is knowledge by acquaintance with experience of red and acquaintance with experience of red consists in experiencing phenomenal redness. But what is phenomenal redness given that it is not redness, the objective property we are aware of when we see a red object? The only answer is that phenomenal redness is just the quale of experience of red. (p. 18)

Again, in what sense does Conee believe in “qualia”? I wonder if Conee is holding that much theoretical commitment about “phenomenal redness”, besides Mary’s new knowledge of “this”. If Conee’s commitment to “qualia” is no stronger than the “thin” reading of “qualia” that I prefer, then I don’t think attributing the belief in “qualia” is causing much damage.

Of David Lewis, who supports the “ability hypothesis” of Mary’s phenomenal knowledge, the author says:

Though it is not entirely clear whether advocates of the Ability Hypothesis believe in qualia, it seems that if there are no qualia, how Mary could acquire the ability to recognize, remember, and imagine an *experience* of red by having an experience of red would be a mystery. (p. 18)

First, again, I think that the amount of theoretical commitment could be minimal, if “qualia” shall be involved here. But furthermore, it does seem that Mary manages to “acquire the ability to recognize, remember, and imagine an *experience* of red” after seeing red for the first time. So, if the author says that this feat cannot be done without there being “qualia”, isn’t “qualia” necessary to explain Mary’s growth in know-how? Then we do have a reason to believe in “qualia”, correct?

Of Frank Jackson, I’m afraid the author might have misinterpreted him. Here is the relevant passage quoted by the author,

Rather, [Mary] is in a new kind of representational state from those she was in before. [1] And what is it to know what it is like to be in that kind of state? Presumably, it is to be able to recognize, remember, and imagine the state. [2] Once we turn our back on the idea that there is a new property with which she is directly acquainted, knowing what it is like to sense red can only be something about the new kind of representational state she is in, and the obvious candidates for that “something about” are her ability to recognize, imagine, and remember the state. [3] Those who resist accounts in terms of ability acquisition tend to say things like “Mary acquires a new piece of propositional knowledge, namely, that seeing red is like *this*” but for the representationalist there is nothing suitable to be the referent of the demonstrative. (p. 18, quoted by the author from Jackson) (“[1]”, “[2]”, … are added for ease of reference.)

The author then says,

[Jackson] is saying that upon release, Mary is *directly acquainted with a new property* by being in a new kind of representational state, and the result of the acquaintance with this new property is the *ability to recognize, remember, and imagine* an experience of red. (p. 18)

[I]t seems that Jackson in fact does believe in qualia—he just takes qualia to be the intentional property of an experience with which one *could be directly acquainted by having the experience*. (p. 18)

But it seems to me that Jackson is expressing the opposite view. Jackson says in [2], “Once we turn our back on the idea that there is a new property with which she is directly acquainted …”. If we interpret “turn our back on the idea that *P*” as meaning the same as “reject *P*”, then the relevant sentence should be read as saying that, if we reject “the idea that there is a new property with which [Mary] is directly acquainted”, then knowing what it is like to sense red shall be understood otherwise, perhaps as some cognitive abilities. If the reading I am suggesting here is correct, then the author may have misunderstood Jackson’s position.

5 Conclusion

The paper under examination is ambitious. It is almost trying to accomplish four (or more) tasks in one (not-very-long) paper. But the work could have been done with some more consideration. While the author has succeeded in showing the relevance of representationalism to the many issues related to the knowledge argument, the author’s rationale is perhaps insufficient to disturb a qualia freak.