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'What it is Like' Talk is not Technical Talk

Abstract: *'What it is like' talk ('WIL-talk') — the use of phrases such as 'what it is like' — is ubiquitous in discussions of phenomenal consciousness. It is used to define, make claims about, and to offer arguments concerning consciousness. But what this talk means is unclear, as is how it means what it does: how, by putting these words in this order, we communicate something about consciousness. Without a good account of WIL-talk, we cannot be sure this talk sheds light, rather than casts shadows, on our investigations of consciousness. The popular* technical account *of WIL-talk (see e.g. Lewis, 1995, and Kim, 1998) holds that WIL-talk involves technical terms — terms which look like everyday words but have a distinct meaning — introduced by philosophers. I argue that this account is incorrect by showing that the alleged technical terms were not introduced by philosophers, and that these terms do not have a technical meaning.*

Keywords: 'what it is like'; phenomenal consciousness; technical terms; Nagel.

1. Introduction

Philosophers commonly talk about phenomenal consciousness by engaging in *'what it is like' talk* ('WIL-talk' for short). WIL-talk is the use of sentences ('WIL-sentences') involving phrases such as 'what is it like' and 'something it is like'. But it is not obvious *what* we mean when we engage in WIL-talk, or *how* we mean whatever it is we mean: how, by putting *these* words in *this* order, do we come to talk

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about phenomenal consciousness?[1] Indeed some have argued that this sort of talk is nonsensical (Hacker, 2002), or involves saying something false or trivial (Snowdon, 2010). One popular account of WIL-talk is that it involves *technical terms* — special terms which, although they look and sound like everyday words, in fact have a distinct meaning. David Lewis holds such an account: '"What it's like" [is] ordinary enough — but when used as [a term] for qualia, [it is] used in a special technical sense' (Lewis, 1995, p. 140).[2] And so does Alex Byrne: 'it is doubtful that "There is something it's like for so-and-so to φ" has some "special use to describe subjectivity" (dialects of analytic philosophy aside)' (Byrne, 2004, p. 215).

The meaning of these technical terms, according to the technical account, is such that we can use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness. Thus (as Janzen, 2011, argues) we can sidestep the arguments of Hacker and Snowdon — which concern non-technical, everyday language — and continue to use WIL-talk as we currently do. In this paper, I will show that the technical account of WIL-talk is false: WIL-talk does not involve technical terms.

We should care what the correct account of WIL-talk is because of the widespread use of this talk in discussions of consciousness. We are interested in consciousness for many reasons: it plays a central, significant, and immediate role in our lives, is a (perhaps the) significant mark of the mental, and is often taken to be the main obstacle to attempts to naturalize the mind. WIL-talk is used to define consciousness: 'phenomenal consciousness is the property mental states, events, and processes have when, and only when, there is something it is like for their subject to undergo them, or be in them' (Kriegel, 2006, p.

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[1]   Henceforth I will usually drop the 'phenomenal' qualifier: all references to consciousness are to phenomenal consciousness. For a characterization of phenomenal consciousness, see the examples of WIL-talk quoted in this section.

[2]   We might interpret Lewis as claiming here that it is only when we use the phrase 'what it's like' as an alternative to — i.e. as something like a synonym of — 'qualia' that the former is technical. But I don't think we should understand him in this way. Directly after the sentence quoted, Lewis says: 'You can say what it's like to taste New Zealand beer by saying what experience you have when you do, namely a sweet taste. But you can't say what it's like to have a sweet taste in the parallel way, namely by saying that when you do, you have a sweet taste!' This seems to be offered as support for the claim that 'what it's like' is a technical term. It's unclear what the argument is here, but what is clear is that 'what it's like' is not being used as a synonym for 'qualia' (replacing 'what it's like' in the passage with 'qualia' doesn't result in grammatical sentences, let alone synonymous ones). Instead it is being used in the way we are interested in. This suggests that Lewis holds the technical account.

58).[3] It is used to make statements about consciousness: 'We all know what it is like to undergo the visual experience of bright purple, the feeling of fear, or the sensation of being tickled' (Tye, 2009, p. 137), 'there is nothing it is like to be a zombie' (Chalmers, 2010, p. 107). And it is used to ask questions about consciousness: 'What is it like to be a bat?' (Nagel, 1974), 'What is it like to think that p?' (Pitt, 2004).[4] Simply put, it is rare for philosophers to talk about phenomenal consciousness without engaging in WIL-talk.

Given the ubiquity of WIL-talk in discussions of consciousness, it is imperative that we have a good grasp of what we mean when we engage in it. If we're not clear what we communicate by engaging in WIL-talk, then definitions, claims, and discussions will not be clear, and we will have no response to critics such as Hacker and Snowdon. Conversely, if we can get clearer about the meaning of WIL-talk, this may allow us to get clearer about the phenomenon that we talk about when we use it: consciousness.

But what we communicate by engaging in WIL-talk is unclear. Consider, for example, the WIL-sentence: 'there is nothing it is like to be a zombie' (Chalmers, 2010, p. 107). If we take the standard meanings of the words used, and combine them according to the apparent syntax of the sentence, Chalmers is saying that there is nothing that is similar to being a zombie. But this is not what he means. The whole point of zombies is that they are very similar to us indeed: in all ways but one — the phenomenal — they are just as we are. More generally, it is clear that WIL-talk is not concerned with similarity.[5] When faced with any kind of talk, the default hypothesis is that it works in the standard way: what it means is given by the meanings of the words used and the syntactic relations between them. As we've just seen, the standard account of WIL-talk is false. This shows that we need a non-standard account of WIL-talk if we are to be confident about what we mean when we engage in it, and if we are to have a response to critics.

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[3]   This is the standard definition of conscious states typically endorsed by both philosophers (such as Thomas Nagel, 1974, p. 436, and Michael Tye, 1997, p. 290) and scientists (such as Nicholas Humphrey, 2011, p. 7, and Christof Koch, 2012, p. 34).

[4]   As the quotations just given suggest, paradigm examples of phenomenally conscious states include perceptions, bodily sensations, and emotions; whether there is cognitive phenomenology is a matter of debate. Phenomenally conscious creatures include humans and (probably) bats, but not (philosophical) zombies.

[5]   This is widely recognized. See, for example, Nagel (1974, note 6, p. 440), Hacker (2002, p. 166), Lewis (2002, p. 282), Hellie (2004, p. 352–6), Lormand (2004, p. 318–22), and Snowdon (2010, p. 17).

Perhaps the most popular account of WIL-talk amongst philosophers of mind is the *technical account*: WIL-talk involves technical terms, and it is because of the presence of these terms that we can use it to talk about consciousness.

Establishing whether the technical account is correct is important. First, we might think that the real issue is not whether WIL-talk involves technical terms, but what philosophers mean when they engage in this talk.[6] But we need to deal with the former topic in order to make progress on the latter. If we are to clarify what is communicated when we use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness, we must know which instances of WIL-talk are the target of enquiry. If the technical account is correct, only instances which occur in philosophical contexts are relevant. If it is incorrect, then since — as I show in §4 — non-philosophers also engage in WIL-talk to talk about consciousness, we need to investigate a much larger corpus of uses.[7] Focusing narrowly on only a subset of relevant uses is liable to lead us astray. This is so in just the same way that, if we aim to describe swans, focusing on only a subset of the relevant animals — those found in the northern hemisphere, say — will result in claims that are not true of swans in general — e.g. that they are all white. Establishing the truth of the technical account, then, is required to ascertain what it is that we are giving an account of. It is not a distraction from clarifying what philosophers mean when they engage in WIL-talk, but a part of this task.

Second, if the technical account is correct, then what philosophers mean when they engage in WIL-talk is different to what non-philosophers mean. Thus while ordinary WIL-talk is concerned with our intuitive, pre-theoretical notion of consciousness, technical (philosophical) WIL-talk is about something else. This need not be a problem — perhaps the philosophical use is a precisification of the ordinary use. But it is certainly something we should be aware of

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6   This objection was put to me by an anonymous reviewer.

7   The importance of the truth of the technical account to the question of what we communicate by engaging in WIL-talk is made apparent in Janzen's (2011) rejection of the criticisms of WIL-talk put forward by Hacker (2002) and Snowdon (2010). Janzen asserts that philosophical WIL-talk is technical, and that since the criticisms apply only to non-technical WIL-talk, they miss their mark. If the present paper is correct, Janzen's argument fails because his assertion is false. But if it were true, then his argument would succeed, and it would do so in part because of the relevance of the technical account to ascertaining what WIL-talk means.

given that it is with the pre-theoretical notion of consciousness that we are ultimately concerned. If the technical account is incorrect, on the other hand, then this kind of subject-changing is less likely to be occurring.

The third reason why establishing the truth of the technical account matters is that it has consequences for current debates in philosophy of mind (the strategy I employ here is described by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 2011, §3). There is currently much disagreement about which sorts of mental states are phenomenally conscious: whether there is something it is like to be in a cognitive state (a belief, say, or a desire), and whether there such a thing as agential or moral phenomenology (*ibid.*; Kriegel, 2015). A second debate concerns the contents of perceptual experiences: is there a difference in what it is like to see a pine tree depending on whether one is an expert at recognizing pine trees, or a novice who can't tell one kind of tree from another (Hawley and Macpherson, 2011; Siegel, 2011)? If, as many claim, 'There is nothing that we know more intimately than conscious experience' (Chalmers, 2010, p. 3), it is surprising that these matters are controversial: surely we can answer them by simply examining our experiences. If WIL-talk involves a technical term then these disagreements are explained. If the relevant technical term gets its meaning from being embedded in a particular theory of consciousness, then those with different theories may well mean different things when they use the term. Authors in these debates have different background theories of consciousness and so have different technical notions in mind when they engage in WIL-talk. Thus they talk past one another. This can be avoided if participants in the debates are more explicit about their background theories, or employ terms that are not theory-laden. The truth of the technical account, then, has philosophical ramifications outside of our understanding of WIL-talk.

2. The Technical Account

The technical account of WIL-talk can be given as the conjunction of three statements:

> TECHNICAL: WIL-sentences involve technical terms.
> INTRODUCTION: These terms were introduced by philosophers.
> MEANING: It is because of the special meaning that these terms have that we can use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness.

By a 'technical term' I mean a word or phrase whose meaning is peculiar to — or closely connected with — a particular trade, discipline, or field of study. Some technical terms — such as 'hadron' and 'epiphenomenal' — have no counterpart in everyday language. Others sound and look like ordinary words or phrases, but have a different meaning. For example, the technical meaning of 'work' in physics — which is concerned with energy transference — is distinct from that of 'work' in everyday English — which is concerned with employment or effort. If WIL-talk involves technical terms, most plausibly they are of the second kind: as we saw above, on an everyday reading of WIL-sentences they are concerned with similarity.

It has been suggested to me[8] that the technical account is obviously false and so is not worth refuting. But although most writers who employ WIL-talk are not explicit about how they understand it, there is evidence that many prominent philosophers of mind adopt the technical account, and so do not find its falsity obvious. We've already seen that Byrne and Lewis accept this view. Here are some more examples. David Braddon-Mitchell and Frank Jackson say that, 'Recent interest in [the knowledge argument] arises particularly from Thomas Nagel, "What is It Like to be a Bat?" (the title tells you where the phrase comes from)…' (2007, p. 152). William Fish says that, 'Perceptual experiences are paradigmatically *conscious* experiences: they have a *phenomenology* or there is, in Thomas Nagel's influential terminology (1979), *something it is like to perceive*' (Fish, 2010, p. 2). P.M.S. Hacker (a critic of WIL-talk) says that, 'the mesmerizing turn of phrase "there is something which it is like", derive[s] from Thomas Nagel's paper "What is it like to be a bat?"' (Hacker, 2002, p. 160). And Jaegwon Kim says, 'The use of the expression "what it is like" in connection with consciousness is due to Nagel' (Kim, 1998, p. 181).[9]

Despite its popularity, we should reject the technical account. This is because we have good reasons to doubt the truth of both TECHNICAL and INTRODUCTION. I will consider these reasons in reverse order.

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[8]   I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

[9]   Peter Carruthers also holds what I'm calling a technical account, although he claims that WIL-talk is only 'quasi-technical' (2000, note 11, p. 14) (he doesn't explain what he means by this). William Lycan (1996) says that WIL-talk is ambiguous. He does not hold a technical account, however, since he does not appeal to the presence of technical terms to explain how we can use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness.

3. Not INTRODUCTION

We can see that INTRODUCTION is false by examining early uses of WIL-talk by philosophers. As is familiar, Nagel uses WIL-talk in his 1974 article: 'the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism… fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism — something it is like *for* the organism' (Nagel, 1974, p. 436).

T.L.S. Sprigge also engages in WIL-talk: 'One is wondering about the consciousness which an object possesses whenever one wonders what it must be like being that object' (Sprigge, and Montefiore 1971, p. 167). And B.A. Farrell uses WIL-sentences to talk about consciousness even earlier: 'When, for example, we look at a red patch, we all just *know* what it is like to have the corresponding experience' (Farrell, 1950, p. 181). A slightly earlier example — from 1946–7 — comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein: '…I know what it's like to see red, green, blue, yellow, I know what it's like to feel sorrow, hope, fear, joy, affection…' (1980, p. 19).[10] The earliest example of a philosopher engaging in WIL-talk to talk about consciousness that I've found is in Bertrand Russell's entry on 'Philosophical Consequences of Relativity' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1926:

> In the four-dimensional space-time frame there are events every-where… The abstract mathematical relations of these events proceed according to the laws of physics, but the intrinsic nature of the events is wholly and inevitably unknown except when they occur in a region where there is the sort of structure we call a brain. Then they become the familiar sights and sounds and so on of our daily life. We know what it is like to see a star, but we do not know the nature of the events which constitute the ray of light that travels from the star to our eye. (Russell, 1926)[11]

The way that Russell, Wittgenstein, Farrell, Sprigge, and Nagel engage in WIL-talk lacks three features that we would expect to see were they introducing technical terms. First, none of them tells us

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[10]   Nagasawa and Stoljar note that this was written in 1946–7 and that although the quoted fragment is in English the passage in which it is embedded is in German (2004, note 5, p. 25).

[11]   As some of the quotations given in §2 show, it is commonly claimed that the relevant technical terms were introduced by Nagel. While it is clear that Nagel's paper is responsible for popularizing the use of WIL-talk in academic discussions of consciousness, it is just as clear that he was not the first person to do this.

exactly *which* terms are the technical ones.[12] Technical terms are words or phrases that have a particular meaning within some discourse. It would be surprising if someone introduced a technical term without indicating which of the many words they use is the technical one. This would be especially surprising if the technical term had an everyday look- and sound-alike counterpart. But, as we saw above, the alleged technical terms in WIL-sentences are of this kind: unlike, say, 'hadron', we can't tell that the alleged terms are technical simply because they are not found in everyday language.

Second, none of these philosophers tells us *what* the alleged technical terms mean.[13] What it is to be a technical term is to have a particular meaning: one that is distinct from that of the term's ordinary counterpart (if there is one). It would be odd (and not very helpful) if these philosophers had introduced new jargon without indicating how this jargon was to be understood.

Might the meaning be given non-explicitly — by ostension, for example, or by being embedded in a theoretical framework? The third feature of these early uses suggests not. Proficient language users can often work out the meaning of an unfamiliar term by making use of context and their general knowledge. And perhaps this occurs in the early philosophical uses of WIL-sentences that we've seen (although the disagreement about how we should understand WIL-talk described above suggests not). But giving meaning by ostension requires more than using the term in such a way that one's readers can work out what is meant when one does — it requires an active attempt to communicate the meaning to one's audience. Our writers do not do this: none of them even indicate *that* they're using WIL-talk in a new, non-everyday, technical way. Instead they simply employ WIL-sentences in a non-self-conscious manner, without drawing attention to the language they use. Similarly, giving the meaning of a term via its place in a theoretical framework requires making plain that such a framework is offered. Our writers do not do this, most likely because they are not giving a theoretical framework at all.

To emphasize these points, contrast what these philosophers say when they engage in WIL-talk with what Nagel says when he *does*

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[12]   Nor, as a rule, do proponents of the technical account. Lewis (1995, p. 140) is an exception.

[13]   The same is true of most adherents of the technical account. Janzen (2011, p. 281) is an exception in that he gives the meaning of WIL-sentences.

introduce a technical term — 'subjective character'. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Nagel says, 'We may call this the subjective character of experience'. Here Nagel indicates *that* he is introducing a technical term, tells us *which* term is technical, and — by using WIL-talk — tells us *what* it means.

Given the way that Russell and others use WIL-sentences, it is not plausible that they are introducing technical terms. Thus we should reject INTRODUCTION, and so the technical account of WIL-talk.

4. Not TECHNICAL

Another reason for rejecting the technical account is that TECHNICAL is false: WIL-talk does not involve technical terms. We can see this when we acknowledge that there are many examples of WIL-talk being used to talk about consciousness that come from outside philosophy (and outside specialist discourse in general), some of which precede early philosophical uses. Further, there are no differences in meaning between philosophical uses and non-philosophical uses. So the alleged technical terms used by philosophers have the same meaning as the non-technical terms used by non-philosophers: they are not technical terms at all.

Before giving some examples, it's worth distinguishing my argument against TECHNICAL from four others that might be offered. First, we might describe and defend a positive account of WIL-talk and show that it entails the falsity of TECHNICAL. But such an approach will only persuade those who accept the proffered account of WIL-talk. My argument shows that, even without committing to any particular account of WIL-talk, we should reject TECHNICAL.

Less demandingly, we might aim to show that — regardless of the details — the correct account of WIL-talk is (as Lycan, 1996, Lormand, 2004, and Hellie, 2004; 2007, have argued) a *compositional* one: i.e. one according to which the meaning of WIL-sentences is composed out of the meaning and arrangement of their parts.[14] (Such accounts will tend to be non-standard because they hold that the syntax of, or words involved in, WIL-sentences are not as they first seem to be.) But the correct account's being compositional is compatible with WIL-talk being technical talk. After all, the correct account of the meaning of 'There are six types of quark' is a

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[14] I'm indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this argument.

compositional one. But, because 'quark' is a technical term, this (and all other 'quark'-talk) is technical talk.

A third argument against TECHNICAL is offered by Hellie (2004) and Stoljar (forthcoming). They note that non-philosophers both under-stand WIL-talk and have engaged in it since the mid-1960s. This is correct, but it doesn't go far enough: these facts are compatible with a technical account according to which technical terms were introduced some time before the mid-1960s — perhaps by Russell, Wittgenstein, or Farrell — and then spread outside of philosophy. My argument shows that such an account should be rejected.

A fourth argument is given by Stoljar: if WIL-talk is 'technical, one could reasonably worry that the notion of consciousness at issue… is technical too. But it is presumably of no interest that there is some technical notion of consciousness…' (*ibid.*, pp. 22–3). This argument fails for three reasons. First, a *term's* being technical doesn't guarantee that the related *notion* is technical. 'Epistaxis' and 'tmesis' are technical terms, but the notions of a nosebleed and of inserting one word inside another — 'fan-bloody-tastic' — are not technical ones. Second, even if the notion is technical, it doesn't follow that it is of no interest — perhaps investigating the technical notion will lead to insights concerning the non-technical notion. Third, even if a technical account entailed that philosophers were discussing a problematically technical notion of consciousness, this would give us no reason to reject the account. Instead, it would give us reason to consider whether philosophers are talking about something other than con-sciousness *in the intuitive, pre-theoretical sense* when they engage in WIL-talk. As noted earlier, it is not clear what we communicate when we engage in WIL-talk. Thus we can't reject TECHNICAL by *assuming* that what is communicated is the same for philosophical and non-philosophical WIL-talk.

As promised, here are examples of WIL-talk being used in the way we are familiar with which come from outside of philosophy. The first is from 1891: 'Neither does he know what it is like to be scorched by lightning, but he has experienced the shrivelling effects of unrequited longing' (unknown, 1891, p. 541). A comparison is made here between what it is like to be scorched by lightning and the experience of undergoing unrequited longing. The latter is concerned with the subject's conscious states, so presumably that is also what is of interest in the lightning case too.

A second example comes from a translation into English (made in 1912) of Anton Chekhov's *The Sea-gull*:

> Nina: And I should like to change places with you.
> Trigorin: Why?
> Nina: To find out how a famous genius feels. What is it like to be famous? What sensations does it give you? (Chekhov, 1912)

Nina asks for the same information in three different ways, one of which involves a WIL-sentence. The other two ways ask about Trigorin's *feelings* and *sensations*, so we know that it is Trigorin's conscious states that Nina is interested in.

Note that these examples give us further reason to reject INTRO-DUCTION: both were published at least seventy-five years before Nagel's paper and at least twenty-five years before Russell's encyclo-paedia entry.[15] This means that the use of WIL-talk to talk about consciousness was not an innovation of philosophers.

The next example is from a newspaper description of a blind man: 'His great regret is that his normal sight at birth was too early to allow him to remember what it is like to see' (unknown, 1938, p. 7). The fourth example is from 1969: 'Drug-inspired psychedelic art tried to portray what it's like to "see sounds" and "taste colors" while on an LSD trip' (Cain, 1969, p. F17). Again, this is clearly concerned with (altered, synaesthetic) conscious states.

A book review from 1987 shows WIL-talk once again being used to talk about the experiences of the blind: 'His description of what it is like to "see" as a blind man is fascinating and inspiring' (Kirsch, 1987). Coming up to the present, in the last example I will give the writer tells us about his emotional state: he feels afraid (at the time, Gaza was the target of Israeli airstrikes). He then uses a WIL-sentence to ask about the conscious states of children in Gaza — about how they feel: 'When I think of the future, I feel fear. I feel fear and I am a 34 year old man. What is it like for the children who live here in Gaza? What is it like for their parents?' (Damo, 2012).

We've seen six examples of WIL-talk being used to talk about consciousness that come from outside philosophy (and outside specialized discourse more generally). Some of these examples pre-date

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15 It has been suggested to me (by an anonymous reviewer) that these examples are some-how anomalous since they are 'literary' English. I haven't found more prosaic examples of non-philosophical WIL-talk from this early period, but I suspect that this is because the sources that linguistic corpora of these periods rely upon tend towards the literary and the formal since these are the sources that have survived. But even if all early uses of WIL-talk were literary, that wouldn't show that they are technical, philosophical uses. And that is what matters here.

philosophical uses, while others are contemporary with them. The use of linguistic corpora or internet search engines will allow the reader to find many more examples. These non-philosophers use WIL-sentences to talk about the conscious states associated with bodily sensations, perceptions, and emotions just as philosophers do. There is no difference in meaning — in precision, in scope, or in nuance — between these non-philosophical examples and the WIL-talk philosophers engage in. So whatever meaning the alleged technical terms employed in WIL-talk have, it is the *same* meaning that their everyday, non-technical, look- and sound-alike counterparts have. But an alleged technical term that means the same as its everyday counterpart is no technical term at all. Thus we should reject TECHNICAL.

Before concluding, I'll consider two objections to my argument against TECHNICAL. The first goes as follows.[16] It's true that philosophers and non-philosophers alike use sentences of the form 'What it is like to…' to talk about consciousness. But what is not true is that the ellipsis is filled in in the same way by philosophers and non-philosophers. My response is that, if we look at the examples I've given (and at others that can be easily found), it looks as if the ellipsis *is* filled in in the same way by philosophers and non-philosophers alike: both are concerned with what it's like to see, for example, or to undergo an emotion. But perhaps all the objector needs is that *some* ways philosophers fill in the ellipsis are *not* ways non-philosophers complete the sentence. To make the objection concrete, let's imagine that the claim is that philosophers sometimes talk about what *conscious states* (or *qualia*) are like, while non-philosophers only talk about what *the world* is like (*cf.* Lycan, 1996, p. 77; Carruthers, 2000, pp. 127–8).

Even if this claim is true, it doesn't show that philosophical and non-philosophical WIL-talk differs in meaning in a way relevant to my argument. It is no surprise that, when φ and ψ differ in meaning, so too do 'What it is like to φ' and 'What it is like to ψ'.[17] And that the meanings differ is no reason to think that one involves a technical term that the other does not. (It might be that one of φ or ψ is, or involves, a technical term, of course. But if so, this doesn't shed light on facts about meaning particular to '*what it is like*'-talk.) To make the point by way of an analogy: both government economists and

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16   Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this to me.
17   Likewise for 'what α is like' and 'what β is like'.

'ordinary' people are interested in claims about cost. But while the economists might be interested in the cost of some military hardware, or how much a tax cut will cost the state, ordinary folk might be concerned with more mundane matters: how much a laptop, or a pint of milk, costs. But this doesn't show that 'cost' or 'what it costs' is being used to mean different things by the two groups and so it gives no support to the idea that economists' 'cost'-talk is technical while that of ordinary people is not.

The second objection is that we might say that, when philosophers engage in WIL-talk to point to characteristically *philosophical* problems, they are engaged in technical talk, even though what they mean is no different to what non-philosophers mean when they engage in WIL-talk.[18] The suggestion here is that there is a sense of 'technical' (different to the one defined above) according to which a term is technical if it plays a central role in pointing to a philosophical (or other technical) puzzle, even if the term means the same as it does when used in other ways. We can, of course, use 'technical' in this way if we want to, but whether a term is technical in this sense does not bear upon what is communicated or meant when we use it: it means the same as it does when used in other circumstances. The reason why we are interested in whether WIL-talk is technical is because we want to get clearer about what is communicated when we use WIL-talk. That WIL-talk is technical in this alternative sense doesn't shed light on this issue.

5. Conclusion

To summarize the evidence against the technical account: when we look at early uses of WIL-sentences in the consciousness literature, we do not find what we would expect to find if writers were introducing — or even just making an early use of — technical terms. These authors don't indicate that they're using technical language, don't tell us which terms are technical, and don't tell us what special meaning the technical terms have. Further, we find non-specialists using WIL-talk to talk about consciousness before we find specialists doing this. Thus we should reject INTRODUCTION. And what non-specialists mean when they engage in WIL-talk is no different to what specialists — philosophers and scientists — mean when they engage in it. This

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[18] This objection was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

shows that TECHNICAL is false. Since two of the three statements that make up the technical account of WIL-talk are false, we should reject it.

Why is the technical account so popular if, as I've argued, the evidence against it is so compelling? I think three facts are relevant here. First, the correct account of WIL-talk is not the standard account — what we mean when we utter WIL-sentences doesn't follow straightforwardly from the standard meanings of the words we use and the (apparent) syntax of the sentences. Second, the ubiquity of WIL-talk in specialist discussions of consciousness is due to the success of Nagel's 1974 paper: language that is commonly used in discussions of consciousness after this date was not so frequently used before this date. The technical account purports to explain both of these facts: the standard account fails, it says, because WIL-talk involves technical terms, and we don't find it much before 1974 because that is when the technical terms were introduced. The third fact is that there has not been much investigation of WIL-talk: of what it means or of how it means what it does. Thus the *prima facie* plausibility of the technical account has often gone unchallenged. It's not surprising that this account is popular even though, once we consider the issue more carefully, we can see that it is false.

The aim of this paper has been negative: to show that we should not accept the technical account of WIL-talk. But, if successful, it shows the need for future, positive work. WIL-talk is important because of its widespread and central use in discussions of consciousness. But what we mean when we engage in WIL-talk is obscure, and some have argued that this talk should be abandoned. We cannot simply assume that by engaging in WIL-talk we are shedding light, rather than casting shadows, on the object of our investigations: consciousness. Rather, we need an explanation both of what we communicate when we engage in WIL-talk, and of how we do this. Providing such an account will make it less likely that we talk past one another, lack clarity, or (if critics of WIL-talk turn out to be correct) utter falsehoods, trivialities, or nonsense. But an account of WIL-talk also has the potential to provide positive benefits: it may allow us to be clearer both about the content of claims and arguments concerning consciousness, and about how we should respond to these claims and arguments.

Accounts of WIL-talk are available which are neither standard nor technical. For example, perhaps the talk involves idioms (Sprigge, 1998, seems to think this), or perhaps the context of use determines

whether WIL-talk is phenomenal or not (Hellie, 2004, claims this — although he later recants (2007) — as do Snowdon, 2010, and Stoljar, forthcoming), or perhaps WIL-sentences are ambiguous. But none of these accounts has been described in detail and subjected to a sustained examination — mainly because discussions of WIL-talk, when they occur at all, tend to only occur in passing. There is, as yet, no consensus about how to understand WIL-talk. More work on this topic is needed.[19]

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