CHANGING APPROACHES TO BLINDSIGHT: RELEVANT, BUT NOT DECISIVE: REPLY TO ROBERT FOLEY

Ema Sullivan-Bissett – University of York

In his paper 'Blindsight, Self-attribution and Qualia', Robert Foley argues that recent work carried out with blindsight subject GY puts pressure on the traditional notion of qualia, as characterised thus:

> C1: Qualia are first-person properties that are introspectively accessible, and are entirely constituted as such.
>
> C2: Qualia are constitutive of conscious experience.

The results from the experiment with GY are at odds with this notion of qualia for the following reason: GY reports that he does not have qualia in his blind field, even when having conscious visual experiences. The problem then is this: GY has visual consciousness in his blind field, and as such, according to the notion of qualia at play here, from C2, those experiences have qualia. However, GY claims that these experiences lack qualia. And we learn from C1 that GY can not be wrong about this[1]. Given this result the traditional notion of qualia is undermined, and the proponent of which must reject C1 or C2.

My response to Foley will not take issue with his outline of the traditional notion of qualia, that is, I accept that both C1 and C2 are appropriate in characterising the position of the qualia proponent. Nor will I suggest that Foley's argument is not valid; indeed, Foley is right to suggest that the qualia proponent is in trouble if it really is the case that GY:

[1] I will briefly suggest towards the end of my response that contra Foley, C1 does not entail that GY can not be wrong his experiences and the associated qualia.

1. has conscious experiences in his blind field, *and*
2. those experiences do not have qualia.

However, I would like to suggest that neither 1 nor 2 have been firmly established by the scientific community, indeed, studies on GY in particular have not resolved either of these issues. As such I will claim that the results from the particular study which Foley cites are not sufficient for the qualia proponent to be undermined. I will further suggest that even if the results which I cite can be resolved in Foley's favour, the qualia proponent can, contra Foley, appeal to the second objection he outlines; namely, that GY makes a mistake when he claims that he lacks qualia.

The results of the experiment with GY to which Foley refer appear in Persaud and Lau's report 'Direct Assessment of Qualia in a Blindsight Participant', published in the seventeenth volume of *Consciousness and Cognition*. Also in that volume is a report by Persaud and Cowey entitled 'Blindsight is Unlike Normal Conscious Vision: Evidence from an Exclusion Task'. This reports on another experiment with a blindsight subject, the same one in fact, GY. In this experiment GY, whilst fixating on a central cross, was tasked with reporting the location of where a horizontal square grating *did not appear* (exclusion instructions), or where it *did appear* (inclusion instructions), he could report upper or lower quadrant. Two thirds of the gratings were presented in the blind field with the remaining third presented in the normal field (Persaud and Cowey 2008, p. 1051). Persaud and Cowey define the 'match rate' as 'the percentage of trials on which the response matched the location in which the grating was presented' (Persaud and Cowey 2008, p. 1052). As such, when GY gave a match in the exclusion condition, he had made an error, whilst a match in the inclusion condition was correct.

The results from this experiment are remarkable, and bear directly on Foley's conclusions. Let us look for example at the results from the 'high contrast'[2] trials: starting with the results from GY's normal field, where the visual experience is assuredly conscious, the match rate in the inclusion condition was very high, (95%), but remarkably low in the

[2] Due to considerations of space I refer to one set of results from the study. However the reader can be assured that '[t]he overall pattern of results was the same at low and medium contrasts' (Persaud and Cowey 2008, p. 1052).

exclusion condition, (8%; as this would require the subject to make an error). The results from GY's blind field tell a different story; the match rates in the inclusion and exclusion condition were notably similar, 64% and 62% respectively (Persaud and Cowey 2008, p. 1053). So whereas in the inclusion condition GY was 'correct' 64% of the time, in the exclusion condition he was 'incorrect' in 62% of his reports. Why would these numbers be similar? Persaud and Cowey suggest that it is because the stimuli presented in GY's blind field were not processed consciously, indeed '[i]f they had been processed consciously GY would have made correct exclusion responses as he did when gratings appeared in his normal field' (Persaud and Cowey 2008, p. 1052).

This study shows then that GY's experiences in his blind field are not conscious ones, but subconscious ones (Persaud and Cowey 2008, p. 1054). Foley wants to claim that the results from Persaud and Lau's study show that the traditional notion of qualia is in trouble; they report on conscious visual experience which lacks qualia. However, in Persaud's and Cowey's study we learn that these experiences which (according to the participant in the Persaud and Lau study) lack qualia, are not conscious experiences. And what this means of course is that the qualia proponent need not be worried by this case of blindsight, as he is concerned with conscious experience – *no conscious experience, no qualia, no problem*.

However, things are not that easy for the qualia proponent; it seems that Foley has pre-empted this line as he offers reasons for thinking that GY's experiences in his blind field *are* conscious. These are: GY's claiming awareness of something in his blind field (Stoerig and Barth 2001), his ability to compare awareness of stimuli in his normal and blind fields (Stoerig and Barth 2001) and his ability to draw what he experiences in his blind field (Ffychte and Zeki 2001). Foley is correct; the results of these experiments do give reason to believe that GY's experiences in his blind field are conscious. However, what Foley does not tell us is that they also give us reason to believe that such experiences also have qualia. In Stoerig and Barth we find the claims that 'GY's residual vision […] must be at least minimally phenomenal' and that 'vision in the impaired field is enormously reduced in phenomenal content, although what qualia are present are visual' (Stoerig and Barth 2001, p. 584). And in Ffychte and Zeki we learn that '[i]t is only more recently that Patient G.Y. has used the term 'feeling' to qualify his visual experience (Zeki and Ffytche,

1998)' and that '[t]he experiences [the blindsight participants] had were visual in nature and amounted to what might be called 'visual qualia'' (Ffychte and Zeki 2001, p. 254).

I claimed at the start of this response that Foley's argument would hold if he could show that GY:

1. has conscious experiences in his blind field, *and*
2. those experiences do not have qualia.

Given what I have said so far, let us look to see how these claims stand up. Foley claimed that the traditional notion of qualia was undermined because blindsight participant GY has conscious experiences in his blind field without any accompanying qualia – he referred to Persaud and Lau's 2008 study to support this. This study got Foley claims 1 and 2. However, I pointed to Persaud and Cowey's study on the same blindsight subject, GY, which showed that the experiences in GY's blind field were not conscious, and as such, a lack of qualia would be fully expected by the qualia proponent. These results do not satisfy 1. However, given Foley's (albeit brief) case for thinking that blind field experiences *are* conscious, one might think that the results from Persaud and Cowey's study were fairly anomalous. Given this, I then pointed out that the studies Foley refers to in order to demonstrate that blind field experiences are conscious, also look to be claiming that such experiences have qualia. So whereas Foley may have recovered claim 1 by pointing to these studies, he does so at the expense of claim 2.

I would like to make one final claim; even if the results from the studies that I have cited can be explained or undermined in such a way that Foley can hold on to 1 and 2, there is still at least one avenue for the qualia proponent to explore. The qualia proponent can argue that GY is mistaken when he asserts that he does not have qualia in his blind field. Foley goes some way to pre-empt this line, claiming that should one wish to take it, one would have to give on on claim C1. This is because for GY to be mistaken in his report that he does not have qualia in his blind field would be to commit to there being some other way to define and attribute qualia.

For reasons of space I can make only the briefest of remarks here, suffice it to say, I take it that C1 does not entail that GY cannot be mistaken;

qualia can be introspectively accessible but that is not to say that one can not be wrong. Foley wants proponents of C1 to balk at defining and attributing qualia in a way which does not necessarily cohere with a subject's reports. But it is not clear that they should so balk, because this is something we both can and do in fact do. Consider for example subjects who have Anton's syndrome, they claim to have visual experiences, from which it is reasonable to claim that they take themselves to have visual qualia. However, presumably the consensus is that they do not; that they are under the illusion that they do.

Thus to sum up: I agree with Foley that the results from Persaud and Lau's study on blindsight participant GY are philosophically *relevant*. However, Foley goes a step further, claiming that the proponent of qualia must reject C1 or C2 and that as such 'qualia would seem to lose much of their significance for debates about consciousness in the philosophy of mind'. As I pointed out, for this claim Foley needs to show that GY has conscious experiences in his blind field *and* those experiences lack qualia. However, we have seen from looking at the scientific literature that neither of these claims are going to come easily. I further, albeit briefly suggested that the qualia proponent could claim that GY was mistaken in his reports and that attributing qualia in a way which does not necessarily cohere with a subject's reports should not worry the qualia proponent. I would like to conclude then that though the results from Persaud and Lau's study are philosophically *relevant*, they are not philosophically *decisive,* and as such the qualia proponent can, at least for now, hold on to both C1 and C2.

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Ema Sullivan-Bissett
Department of Philosophy
University of York
York, YO10 5DD
elsb500@york.ac.uk