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Mini Review

The Archeology of Qualia

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Abstract

Researching into our past, scientists use different methods, from looking at the night sky to digging traces of our past and analyzing DNA. I propose here another method, that can have the potential of shedding more light into our history and the type of entities that we are. Working under philosophical idealism, I propose that evolution is in the first place the evolution of consciousness, and thus the traces of evolution are mostly not to be found in our physical bodies, but in our consciousnesses. I argue that qualia are selected by evolution in order to solve evolutionary problems, and thus, looking into our qualia we can learn about our evolutionary history.

Keywords: Qualia; Archeology; Evolution

Introduction

I start by stating the framework under which I will propose the new ideas of researching our past. That framework is philosophical idealism, namely the fact that consciousness is all there is. Therefore, consciousness being all there is, there is no physical world. There is no universe which might have started at Big Bang, there is no planet Earth on which fossils and human remainings are to be found, there are no biological beings whose DNA can be researched or whose bodies can be analyzed. Being left without these standard means of looking into our past, how are we to rethink our history and make sense of our place in the world? There is also another problem that idealism brings, and that is the lack of time itself as an external frame. Time itself is just a quale in consciousness, a form of manifestation of consciousness. All that exists is the eternal present moment. Whatever we think we did 5 seconds ago, exists just as a memory in the Now. Therefore, even though I will argue that qualia appeared through an evolutionary process, it must be made clear that evolution is not to be understood in the standard temporal manner, but in a rather atemporal way. Given our language that is fundamentally temporal, a fact that derives from our consciousness itself that is temporal, it is hard for us to imagine what atemporal evolution might mean. Nevertheless, acknowledging this difficulty, I will nevertheless show how qualia appeared through evolution, and that our evolutionary history is encoded within the qualia that we have. I will leave the phenomenon of atemporal evolution as a mystery to be solved by future generations. The analysis of qualia that I will do will still be valid. The elucidation of atemporal evolution in the next centuries will only bring more clarity and understanding to the analysis of qualia that I am doing in this paper. Evolution itself will have to turn out as a side effect of the workings of meaning inside consciousness.

Qualia as meaning

The first step in looking into our qualia is to reduce them to something tractable. Because otherwise, if we take them in their pure form, colors, sounds, tastes, etc., they look so diverse that it is hard to see what to make of them. Instead, if we reduce them to something else, something that preferably can be accounted for as answers to questions, then we will have a much simpler problem of asking clear questions and receiving clear answers. I will argue here that qualia are a form of meaning. As meanings, then there will be easy to account for their existence and their qualities, by simply seeing them as answers to questions of type "What is meant by X?". The first example that I will use to give the reader an intuition for why qualia are meaning is to take a standard example of a meaning. Meaning is usually something that languages have. If I say, "I'm walking on the street.", this sentence can be regarded as answering to the question: "What is meant by walking on the street?". What is meant by walking on the street is simply that I'm walking on the street. So, in language, we have an intuitive feel for what meaning is. But language itself is a phenomenon happening in consciousness. So, the sentence "I'm walking on the street." is itself a quale in consciousness. So, as we can see, linguistic qualia are by excellence meanings.

If such types of qualia that are meanings exist, then why not all qualia be meanings? Color red for example, or the taste of chocolate? In order to gain further intuition that all qualia are meanings, let's take the duck-rabbit image. Is it a duck or a rabbit?

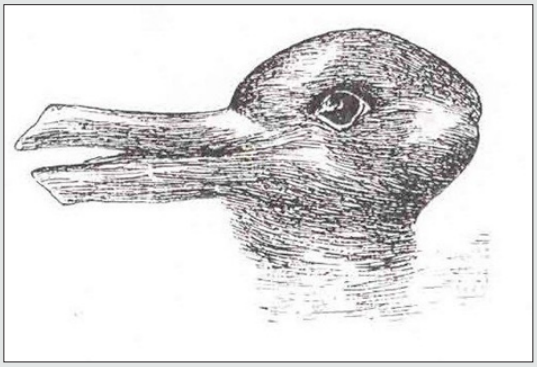

Figure 1:

The answer is that it is whatever we make it to be. What is of value here for our discussion is the way in which the choice is being made. And that is by giving meaning. In order to see the image as a duck, we must attribute the meaning of "duck" to it. The moment we do this, the visual quale becomes one of a duck. Similarly, in order to experience the visual quale of rabbit, we need to attribute to it the meaning of "rabbit". We thus see that visual qualia themselves are forms of meaning. From auditory domain, we can take recent internet examples like yanny and laurel. Though in that case we don't necessarily have free will input, not being able to select what to hear, the fact that the same sounds are heard by some people as "yanny" and by others as "laurel", shows how the auditory qualia take their forms also by being meanings. Thus, having built our intuition that qualia are meanings, another question arises regarding if the meanings that we have are random or they serve well justified functions. For examples, the colors that we see are just a random selection from an infinite pool of potential colors, or are they selected to serve meaningful functions? Before getting to colors, I will give an example to show how qualia are selected for meaningful evolutionary reasons. Let's look at the image below.

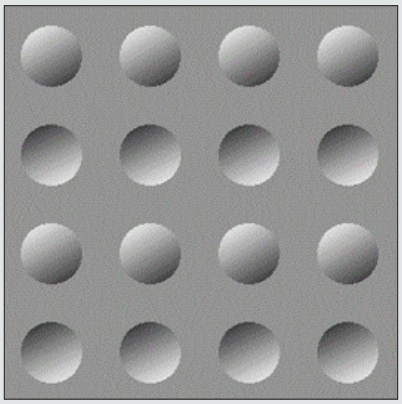

Figure 2:

Why is it that some disks are bumps and some are dimples? The explanation is an evolutionary one. The only source of light in our evolutionary history was the Sun, and the Sun was shining from above. Thus, if we were to look at a bump on a wall of stone, the light pattern would have been the one in rows 1 and 3. Similarly, if we were to look at a dimple in a wall of stone, the light pattern would have been the one on rows 2 and 4. Therefore, analyzing the light pattern, consciousness created the qualia of bumps and dimples. And nowadays is enough only to see the same light pattern displayed on a computer screen for consciousness to bring to our experience the qualia of bumps and dimples. So, we can see that the qualia that we experience are not random, but they serve evolutionary purposes. Therefore, we can be assured that by looking at our qualia we can learn about our past. Of course, the task is not necessarily simple. Actually, because of our long history, the most likely result is that meanings are buried within deep layers of meanings and more often than not they have become impossible to be dug out. I will give now 2 examples of meanings that can still be dug out, but after that I will give some few examples of meanings that we might have no chance anymore of revealing them and show how they got into our consciousness.

Getting to colors and having now an understanding that they are meanings and that they are here for evolutionary reasons, we can take a step forward from just taking them for granted, to actually exposing their origin. The colors that I will analyze are the pairs red-green and yellow-blue. As meanings selected for evolutionary reasons, we need to search for their origin in the functions that they serve for us in nature. The pair red-green appears in nature mostly in the case of fruits in trees, fruits being red and leaves being green. The fact that the colors red and green are complementary colors in colors theory, and the fact that they also appear as pair in nature must be a question begging correlation. And the explanation comes from evolutionary reasoning. Since our ancestors needed to eat, they also needed a way to identify what food means. They needed something to draw their attention immediately such that they don't waste much energy and starve to death. A solution that evolution brought was to bring into existence color red. Color red signifies importance and draws the attention immediately. Thus, our ancestors could spot immediately the food that they needed. Also, in order to maximize the identification of food, consciousness brought into existence color green for the surrounding, in order to maximally contrast with red. Thus, fruits were colored red and leaves were colored green. The meanings that we can identify for this pair of colors is that red means "importance" and green means something like "the opposite of red" or "enhancing the identification of red". Thus, the colors red and green in our consciousness are not random. They serve precisely identified evolutionary purposes. Any other colors would have failed the identification of food. Red is red precisely because of the evolutionary purpose that it serves. Similarly for green. The second pair of colors, yellow and blue, serve a similar role, this time regarding the identification of Sun in the sky. Similarly, the fact that yellow and blue are complementary colors in colors theory and the fact that they also appear as a pair in nature in the case of the yellow Sun in the blue sky, is a correlation that begs the question. And the explanation is similar. The Sun, as the only source of light in nature, had to be identified by a color. And that color was yellow. Also, in order for yellow to be maximally contrasted from the surrounding, the color blue was brought into existence for the sky. One might wonder why yellow and not some other color. And I will ask the reader to look at all the colors and see which one is intuitively "the brightest". And that is yellow. Yellow is a bright color in the way that red or green or blue or other colors are not. And it is not a coincidence that it has this quality of brightness. The reason is that it had to signify a source of light, and thus it came to look the way it does. One might still wonder why not white directly, since white is the brightest color possible.

The reason is that black and white serve different purposes. They are even more ancient colors, that must have appeared with the first beings that saw light, like fish under ocean that only needed to differentiate between the water surface and the depth of the ocean. Thus, white has a more primitive meaning, something like "something" or "object", while black has the meaning of "nothing" or "lack of objects". Thus, when the beings got out of the ocean and needed a more precise identification for the Sun, white was already used for other purposes, and with the birth of the world of colors, a new quale was required in order to serve the function of identifying the Sun in the sky. And that color was yellow. Thus, yellow has the meaning of "source of light", while blue has the meaning of "the opposite of yellow" or "enhancing the identification of yellow". We thus see that the qualia that we have are a window into our evolutionary history, some more recent like red-green and yellow-blue, some more ancient like black and white. Nevertheless, while for some cases this history can be made clear, for others it is difficult if not impossible to uncover their origin and learn about our past. And for this, the qualia of smells and tastes are a striking example. Beside the pleasant/unpleasant component that these qualia have that are easily identified as safety measures for our health, in order to not eat something toxic, their other more specific components seem impossible to figure it out. Why does a pineapple taste the way it does? I have no idea. But it must be some reason, but probably it is buried so deep into our consciousness that it becomes extremely difficult if not impossible to specify it. It might even have visual meanings embedded in it. What I mean by this is that when our ancestors first discovered pineapples, they discovered it in certain trees that were displayed in their visual fields in certain ways. Also, they might have had some emotional experiences of seeing those trees. And this visual experience itself was embedded in the taste of pineapple after they first tasted it. If such interactions between qualia domains can take place, then unless we are there with our ancestors to know exactly how it was and what they felt, just by experiencing the taste of pineapples today we have no chance whatsoever to dug out the meanings buried deep in its particular taste. Of course, the purpose of this paper is not to make an exhaustive archeology of our consciousness and to shed the ultimate light upon our history and origin. The purpose is just to point to the reader how our present-day consciousness acquired its form through evolutionary processes and how we can use this knowledge to peer into our consciousness and dig out our past.

Language as Revealing Consciousness Structure

Another interesting aspect that is worth exploring in order to learn about our consciousness history and deep structure is the phenomenon of language. Language is a phenomenon happening in consciousness and it is expected to be a direct reflection of the properties of consciousness. We can see this trivially in the fact that nouns are a reflection of objects qualia and verbs are a reflection of the quale of time. Potentially, the study of language should reveal even more profound structures of consciousness embedded deep within. And I will give 2 such examples.

At a surface level, the verb tenses reflect the quale of time in consciousness. But in the same way that the qualia of objects are composed of qualia of colors and shapes and various other elements, or the qualia of music are composed of qualia of sounds and other elements, so is the quale of time composed of other sub-levels of qualia. So, at a deeper level, it can be expected that the verb tenses reflect even deeper structures in consciousness. I will take the past perfect and the future tense and show the structures of consciousness that are reflected in them.

In day-by-day life, we just use the language without giving it much thought, so if we want to talk about the past, we just use one of the past tenses because that's how we intuitively feel that we need to use. We don't give it much thought of why is the past perfect composed of the verb "to have" at the past + past participle. Is just the way it is. But why is it like this? Why the verb "to have" and not other verb? Have what? And why this intuitive association between having something and the past? Why not use it for the future? What I propose here is that the something that we have when we talk about the past is memory. When I say "I had eaten a chocolate.", what is happening in consciousness is to first bring forward the memory of eating a chocolate and then what it does is to express the fact that it has that specific memory. And this is a plausible way in which hominids could have developed language. When they were thinking about memories, they also had an intuitive sense that they have those memories. And then they were just expressing the fact that they have those particular memories. Later on, this continuous association of the verb "to have" and the memory that they had, transformed our intuitions from feeling that we are talking about memories to feeling that we are talking about a past. Actually, the quale of time itself might have developed concomitant with this development in language. The feeling of the passage of time was not there from the beginning. Memory is a more primordial quale. The quale of time is a more complex quale that contains within itself references to both memories and the present state. And this expressing of memories in the present moment that happened in language, might have fused together the qualia of memories with the quale of present moment and might have created the quale of time, together with the past tense as a reflection of the quale of past intuitively felt in the quale of time.

The other reflection of time in language is the future tense. Similarly, the future tense is formed using an auxiliary verb, and that is "to will". Again, why this verb? And why this verb when referring to future and not to past? What we see is that this verb is about the power of free will. Future was intuitively felt as something that I'm willing into existence. When I say, "I will go to a movie.", what I'm actually saying is that I'm employing my free will to bring about the movement of my body towards a cinema. So again, we see a direct reflection in language of a structure of consciousness. And this continuous association of the verb "to will" and the base infinitive of a verb, replaced the intuition of being about exercising free will with the intuition of a future. Also, combining future with past in the future perfect tense, in sentences like "I will have gone.", expresses the intuition that by employing my free will towards a certain action, I will create in my consciousness the memory of that action. Admittedly, I'm not a language expert, and the analysis that I presented here must be validated by experts in the field. But in my native language, Romanian, which is a Latin language, so it has a more distant relation to English, the same verbs are used for past and future as in English, so at least there is an entire group of languages that have embedded in themselves the same structures of consciousness. It would be actually quite interesting if my analysis here of tenses in English will inspire experts in the field to uncover other similar consciousness structures reflected across languages and see if there are correlations between the age of the language and the certain structures that appear at a certain age, thus by learning about languages revealing to us how consciousness itself evolved throughout history.

Conclusions

There is much more to be said about the various structures and qualia present in consciousness that can teach us about how our present-day consciousness was shaped by evolution and that can thus teach us about the history of consciousness in the universe. The purpose of this present paper is to give the reader a brief introduction and some initial intellectual tools of how such an archeology in consciousness can be done. The implications of doing such excavations in consciousness are beyond what we can imagine at this present moment. The history that they will teach us is not only how potentially we as humans evolved from apes but is a history of how the physical world itself appeared. Since all that exists is consciousness and there is no material universe, nevertheless the appearance of such a material universe must be explained. And such exploration of the structures of consciousness will not only tell us how our language or how our culture appeared, which are only the most recent developments that consciousness evolved within itself, but how the more primordial experiences of time and space themselves together with the objects that appear in time and space appeared. Also, the regularities that we see in the so-called "laws of physics" must also be explained as regularities that consciousness developed within itself, probably as individual consciousnesses interacted among themselves. These interactions between consciousnesses are not to be thought as mechanistic-like interactions, but rather interactions of meanings that happen in telepathic kind of ways. Thus, the problem goes much deeper. But these are problems to keep humanity busy for millennia to come. What is important for our present moment is to have an awareness that our consciousness is not a just-so given, but it was shaped by evolution, and as a product of such forces, it is to be expected to be full of relics of the past. Being aware of this fact, we can then employ the power of reason to excavate those relics and learn about our origins and reality.

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