

THE POSITIVE ILLUSION OF QUALIA

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This summer I went trail running. After a couple of miles my toe snagged on a root and I fell, cutting and bruising both of my knees. It hurt. As I hobbled home, I encountered my friend, Heidi. She commiserated with me as I showed her my bloody, dirt-covered knees. I am grateful to have a friend like Heidi. Once home, I took a hot shower, basked in the warmth, and cleaned my knees. Pain, gratitude, warmth, and regret—these are terms which philosophers categorize as *qualia*. Qualia are qualitative, phenomenal properties of conscious experiences. They include things such as sensory data (*e.g.* feeling the hot water of a shower), bodily sensations (*e.g.* the pain of bruising one’s knees), emotions (*e.g.* the regret of running on that trail), and moods (*e.g.* gratitude for a friend) (Tye 1995, 4).

In “Quining Qualia,” Daniel Dennett challenges the assumptions regarding qualia. He believes, “that conscious experience [have] no properties that are special in any of the ways [that] qualia have been supposed to be,” and through the use of “intuition pumps,” which are case studies involving qualia, the reader is forced to question traditionally held views on qualia (1988, 43). For example, Dennett presents us with two Maxwell House taste testers, Chase and Sanborn. After six years of sampling coffee, Chase realizes that he no longer likes the coffee even though the taste of the coffee has not changed; in other words, his preference for the coffee has altered over time. Sanborn also realizes that he no longer

likes the coffee, but his reasoning is that the taste of *it* has changed rather than himself; it no longer tastes the same as it used to. In applying qualia to this situation, we find that Chase's perception (or quale) of the coffee has remained the same, but that his judgment about it has changed. In the case of Sanborn, his judgment has remained the same, but his quale has changed. Dennett's point is that it is impossible for us to know whether it is our qualia that have changed or whether it is our judgment about the experience; meaning, therefore, that we are not infallible when it comes to knowing our own experience. He states, "[t]he idea that people might be mistaken about their own qualia is at the heart of the ongoing confusion" (52). If we cannot verify either Chase's or Sanborn's claims, then perhaps their claims are empty, supporting what Dennett refers to as "theorists' fictions" (55).

In addition to our fallibility with regards to our experience, Dennett also attacks the definition of qualia. Instead of understanding qualia as ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly apprehensible in consciousness, Dennett argues that qualia are "relatively or practically ineffable public properties [that] we can refer to indirectly via reference to our private property detectors" (1988, 74). By showing that there is no consistent definition for qualia and that our views of our own qualia are not trustworthy, Dennett effectively dismantles the concept, writing, "'qualia' is a philosopher's term which fosters nothing but confusion, and refers in the end to no properties or features at all" (49). It is important to note that Dennett is not arguing against the reality of conscious experience, but against the existence of any properties of consciousness "that are special in any of the ways [that] qualia have been supposed to be special" (43).

For the purposes of this paper, the question of whether qualia are real phenomena will not be addressed; rather, I will assume that Dennett's claim that "there simply are no qualia at all" is correct (1988, 74). The next question then must be why certain philosophers claim that we have qualia? After all, the experience of falling on the trail certainly felt to me like a private, ineffable, and intrinsic experience? How is it that we intuitively believe that we experience something that Dennett claims does not exist? It must be that qualia are illusions (Dennett's "theoretical fictions"), and in this paper, I contend that such illusions are not only useful, but also necessary.

Before proceeding, I would like to clarify that by the idea of illusion I do not mean something that does not exist. Clearly, the pain that I experienced when I fell was real. An illusion in the context of this paper is something that exists, but that is not what it appears to be; it is a misinterpretation on our part (Blackmore 2002, 17). For example, I may think that my experience of pain was private, ineffable, and intrinsic to me, but Dennett would argue that there is nothing special or unique about my experiences, and that I simply "want[ed] to reaffirm [my] sense of proprietorship over [my] own conscious states" (Dennett 1988, 49). In this way, the quale of pain (or of gratitude or of regret) does not really exist.

BACKGROUND ILLUSION

The concept of illusion is not a new one in philosophy. In “Free Will, Fundamental Dualism, and the Centrality of Illusion,” Saul Smilansky introduces the idea of “Illusionism, which claims that illusion on free will is morally necessary” (2011, 425). Smilansky maintains that libertarian free will (having perfect control over determining all aspects of one’s actions) does not exist, but yet, we are still under the illusion that we do have control over our actions. For example, I believe that my choice to run on the trail was fully within my control to make. But even if I am incorrect in my belief, and it was not my choice to run on the trail, Smilansky states that “illusory beliefs are [nonetheless kept] in place and [...] the role they play is largely positive” (433). One example of this might be the idea of personal responsibility, which Smilansky explains:

Psychologically, the attribution of responsibility to people so that they may be said to justly deserve gain or loss for the actions requires (even after the act) the absence of the notion that the act is an unavoidable outcome of the way things were [...] Morality has a crucial interest in confronting what can be called the “Present Danger of the Future Retrospective Excuse,” and in restricting the influence of the ultimate hard determinist level (436)

In other words, without the belief that we are in charge of our behavior we would not take personal responsibility for our actions. The potential negative impact on society without responsible behavior is obvious. Smilansky tells us, “[h]umanity is *fortunately deceived* on the free will issue, and this seems to be a condition of civilized morality and personal value” (436). In this case, free will as an illusion is useful and plays a positive role.

Psychologist Shelley E. Taylor has spent many years studying positive illusions, and explains that we have overly optimistic perceptions about ourselves, our futures, and our ability to impact the world (1989, 7). These perceptions (also referred to as “adaptive fictions”) actually promote a mentally healthy outlook (46). Because of these illusions, we believe that we have control over our circumstances, which improves our happiness and self-esteem, motivates us to accomplish tasks, and encourages optimistic attitudes (59-62). If someone had told me that there was a chance that I would fall while running on the trail that morning, I still would have gone; after all, almost everything has an associated risk. “I’m sure it won’t happen to me,” my (optimistic) thinking might contend. Taylor explains that because these illusions are seen to be particularly strong in childhood, they are intrinsic to humans and have always been a part of our evolutionary history (44). One might respond that it seems strange that illusions would play such a remarkable role without our noticing them, but Taylor argues that such illusions go largely unnoticed because they are so effective at supporting mental health (229). Smilansky and Taylor both believe that illusions play a positive role. Illusions are adaptive behaviors that have evolved with us because they provide

distinct advantages. But what about qualia? As illusions, do they also provide us with distinct benefits? I will address a number of areas where I believe the benefits of qualia are evident.

QUALIA AS NECESSARY EVOLUTIONARY DRIVERS

Interpersonal Relationships

When I encountered Heidi after my disastrous trail run, why was I glad to see her? Why did I consider her to be a friend? Heidi and I have been neighbors for many years, and as such, we have a number of things in common: children, home improvement projects, and hobbies. But it is not this commonality that builds friendships; rather, it is the sharing of these experiences over time which builds a feeling of mutual understanding. Heidi and I both have a history of qualia referential to one another. Over time, these referential qualia often include compassion, empathy, trust, admiration, and respect. The cumulative effect of these referential qualia is loyalty. Because we believe our qualia are private and subjective, referential qualia play an important role in sustaining relationships. Does anyone feel the same way about Heidi as I do? She, obviously, has other friends, but I am led to believe that no one feels *precisely* about Heidi the way that I do. The subjective nature of qualia leads me to believe this and to give special value to that relationship.

What about familial relationships? Commonly people marry after falling in love. Over time, the range of qualia experienced with one's partner widens (we live, eat, and sleep together; we age together; we experience the vicissitudes of life together) and we build, once again, a history of referential qualia. This common history results in strong attachments and lasting commitment. Similarly, the experience that a mother has when carrying a child within her for nine months creates a range of referential qualia that develop into a bond with the child. The months and years of care following the birth of the child deepens that bond even further. When difficulties arise in familial relationships, we fall back on this history of qualia to reinforce the reasons for continued loyalty. All of these examples beg the inevitable question: how could any relationship possibly be sustained without the assistance of qualia?

From an evolutionary perspective, the benefit of a child's bond to its mother is self-evident. Similarly, the bonding amongst groups of people is beneficial for creating a social structure that offers its members the advantages of shared resources and mutual protection. Since all humans live in social structures, this trait of loyalty must have evolved with us over many generations. Evolutionary biologists studying group selection have developed an equation, *the coefficient of relationship*, which quantifies the strength of one's loyalty to another (Harman 2010, 79). But when a parent sees that his or her child is in danger, do they first calculate the coefficient of relationship? Of course not. It is qualia that drive a parent to protect the child. Qualia are necessary to help us form, sustain, and value relationships.

VALUE AND MEANING

Because we believe qualia are private, subjective, and ineffable, they reinforce in us a belief in our uniqueness. The pain that I experienced when I fell on the trail was uniquely mine. The regret I felt afterwards about running on that trail was also uniquely mine. In addition, the experience of actually taking that fall was somewhat indescribable. I have a slow-motion picture of the experience in my mind (feeling my toe snag, feeling the position of my body as it is thrown forward, *etc.*), but the experience as a whole is difficult to describe. In this way my experiences are special. These two qualities of qualia—uniqueness and ineffability—reinforce in me the idea that there is no one like me, and that I have intrinsic worth because of this. This understanding not only affects the way that I perceive myself in the world, but also how I perceive others; they, too, have intrinsic value because they also have qualia. This understanding creates respect and civility among people.

It could be argued that individual value is not intrinsic, but that it is related to one's positive contributions to the world—behaving charitably or contributing to pursuits that benefit humanity. It is true that these types of activities can give one's life value, but what about those whose capacities are limited (*i.e.* infants or handicapped persons) and are unable to contribute in conventionally-meaningful ways? Certainly, the parent sees value in the infant. If non-contributing individuals have value, then we must look to factors other than their ability to contribute. We must look to intrinsic qualities; specifically, the qualities that make them unique.

In addition to value, qualia also provide us with a source for finding meaning. When beliefs are felt strongly, they evolve into guiding beliefs, which then in turn evolve into actions. If one feels strongly that racial justice is important, they will be moved to take action against it because of their guiding belief that “racial discrimination” is unjust. Likewise, if one feels strongly that being a parent is important, then one will act in such a way that makes parenthood a priority. These guiding beliefs direct our actions and will provide us with lives that are meaningful. It is the strength of the qualia that provide the impetus for forming a belief system that provides a person with meaning.

One might claim that meaning does not require the use of qualia; rather, one can simply rely on reason to adopt a belief (or set of beliefs). I might believe that $1 + 1 = 2$, but that particular belief does not give my life meaning. While meaningful beliefs can be based on reason, I believe that they demand more. Meaningful beliefs incorporate ideas of purpose and direction, which force us to introspect and evaluate their application in our lives. Can one imagine a vegan whose beliefs are completely void of qualia? How about a Christian? Or a Libertarian? These types of beliefs, I would argue, have a foundation in qualia. It is interesting to note that our language actually supports this idea. We say, “I *feel* strongly about...” when referring to a belief, and I would further contend that the relative strength of the qualia impacts the strength of the devotion to the belief.

But why is it important to have meaning and value in one's life? Is there an evolutionary advantage to such traits? According to research, people who feel they have meaning in their lives are better able to cope with the challenges (and even the tragedies) of life; they are more resilient (Lyubomirsky 2007, 163). But it is not just mental health that benefits from having meaning in one's life. In addition to being resilient, "the benefit of finding meaning in a loss extends to physical health as well" (163). So from an evolutionary perspective, having a life with meaning makes one more fit for survival as compared to one whose life lacks meaning.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

When I saw that my knees were scraped and cut I realized that I needed to do what I could to help them heal. Once home, I cleaned them, put ointment on them, bandaged them, and kept ice packs on them. The reason that I care for my body is because I own it. But in addition to owning my body, I also own all of its experiences (again, the effects of qualia being private and subjective). Even in extreme cases, the principle of ownership is clear: a soldier suffers from post-traumatic stress because the devastating experiences of combat are owned by the soldier.

Because I own all of the experiences of my body, I am invested in taking care of it. I clean my wounds when I have an injury, I feed myself upon feeling hunger, and I put on more clothing when I am cold; I take ownership and act responsibly. This same idea can be drawn to many aspects of human life: we are responsible for the care of a child because of the experiences we have with that child, we are responsible employees because the *owned experience* of working at a job invests us in the work, and we are responsible students because the experience of getting an education is owned by us.

There, however, are a couple of objections that might be voiced to this idea. First, one could argue that a child who sustains an injury is not responsible for his or her care; rather, it is the child's caretaker who makes sure the child is safe. This sounds like a valid point, but then one must wonder how does the caretaker know when the child has been hurt? Whether it is a cry or a non-verbal indication, the child takes responsibility by alerting the caretaker to his or her distress; ultimately, the child is responsible because the child owns the experience. Second, one might argue that responsible behavior is simply the desire to see results (*e.g.*, working hard at a job to earn money). But in this case, there is still the quale of desire (desire for money, fame, prestige, *etc.*) that is driving the responsible behavior.

Ultimately, we must ask whether responsible behavior is possible without qualia. Would I go to work if I never felt the satisfaction of doing a good job or the happiness of receiving a paycheck? Would I clean my house if I never felt disgust with messy living conditions? Would I eat if I never felt hunger? Is it possible that all of these tasks *could* be accomplished without one experiencing qualia? But from a practical perspective, *why* would they be

accomplished? Humans are not robots; we need to have reasons for our behavior. I maintain that qualia are the driving factors behind such responsible behavior.

ENJOYMENT

I run because it makes me feel good—it provides me with positive qualia. There are many things that provide me with positive qualia, but there are, of course, qualia that are quite the opposite effect: falling on a trail, having to take a cold shower, or experiencing the death of a loved one. It is the full range of qualia that gives life its richness, and a life without any of them would be rather empty. And because I believe my qualia to be uniquely mine, I take the responsibility of pursuing experiences that give me positive qualia, such as enjoyment. It is interesting to contemplate just how much of our time is spent with the preoccupation of enjoyment (*e.g.* where we will go for dinner, what we will watch on Netflix, when we will get together with friends, *etc.*). But despite the amount of time we spend in such pursuits, it is not obvious that enjoyment provides us with an evolutionary advantage (*e.g.* how am I more fit because I can enjoy dark chocolate?) My claim is simple: a life that can be enjoyed is a life that is worth living—a life that has the drive to continue. A life void of these things would lack the motivation and tenacity to endure any significant challenges or obstacles, and thus, would fail to maintain a mentally healthy outlook.

Perhaps one would respond that only in the modern era and in the West can this argument be made, since many parts of the world do not enjoy such a high standard of living. But even in remote or less-developed nations, people still have events or activities that they enjoy; dancing, drinking alcohol, feasting, and festivals have existed for a very long time, and appear to be a part of every culture. This would suggest that these traditions have been with us from early on because they played an important role in our evolutionary history. One could claim that it is the anticipation of such enjoyable events that provides an effective strategy for enduring times of hardship; in other words, the quale of enjoyment is necessary not only for human flourishing, but also for evolutionary survival.

NAVIGATING LIFE

Since my fall this summer, I have not returned to that trail. I can still remember the experience of falling, and it compels me to avoid the behavior that might recreate that experience. The evolutionary benefit for having such a trait is obvious. One might argue, however, that qualia have nothing to do with my decision—that I am using reason to perform a cost/benefit analysis and determining that the risks of running on the trail outweigh the benefits. But upon introspection, I do not think rational thought has anything to do with my decision to not run on the trail. I only have to think about the trail in order to immediately have a very visceral, almost stressful, response, and it is this response that informs my decision.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has done extensive research on how humans make

judgments, and while much of his research is specific to moral judgments, his principles can be applied more generally as well. Haidt tells us, “[t]he first principle of moral psychology is *intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second*” (2012, 82). People make judgments quickly and intuitively, and only then do they use *post hoc* reasoning to rationally justify the judgment that they have made (64). Haidt refers to this as the doctrine of “affective primacy”. He also states, “[a]ffect refers to small flashes of positive or negative feeling that prepare us to approach or [to] avoid something” (65). These affects mingle with our perceptions and influence our judgments and decisions. If Haidt is correct, then it is qualia that initially determine our judgments (the importance of which cannot be overstated). I am careful running, because, in the past, I have fallen. I read books because I love to learn. I eat chocolate because it tastes heavenly. In this way, qualia keep me safe, enhance my intellect, and contribute to life enjoyment. Qualia directs the entire decision-making process, beginning with the initial choice, and ending with the conveyance of feedback on whether or not the choice was good or bad.

CONCLUSION

The mind has constructed the illusion of qualia, which has, in turn, aided human development. But these illusions are not just useful—they are necessary. Qualia are the drivers for much of our behavior, and ultimately, drive evolution by providing us with traits that are advantageous in selection; as such, they are essential to us. But is there a downside to believing in illusions? Does this undermine our ability to understand the world (*i.e. losing my grip on reality*)? Perhaps by acknowledging the presence of illusions one is encouraging mental illness? After all, mental health consists in embracing reality, does it not? According to Taylor,

One reason why illusion is not generally recognized as a feature of normal human functioning is that our theories of mental health are, ironically enough, derived largely from studies of mental illness. Psychiatrists and psychologists have portrayed the mentally healthy person, at least in part, as one who avoids the distortions so obviously present among the disturbed (1989, 229).

So although we may believe that mental health entails believing in a fact-based reality, this is not actually the case. As previously discussed, Taylor’s research confirms that illusions are adaptive and produce states that are more, not less, conducive to mental health. But even if we decided that we should encourage belief in a fact-based reality, it is not clear that this is actually feasible. Adam Elga has also written about positive illusions, but he is interested in why we do not correct our perspectives once we are confronted with evidence of these illusions. Referring to test subjects, he states that “positive illusions persist even when they are told about the prevalence of such illusions” (2005, 118). He explains that we have two belief states: one that is reflective and takes into account our distorted perspectives, and a non-reflective state that does not. And although we have this reflective state, which gives us a more accurate representation of ourselves and the world, it is the non-

reflective state that we default to in our day-to-day interactions (120-21). We are not just disposed to believing these illusions, but these illusions are the normal state of experience.

There is one final issue that I must address: when we take a step back and survey the landscape, the necessity of illusions looks particularly troubling. If free will is an illusion, my self-image is an illusion, my perception of the world and the future is an illusion, and even my own qualia are all illusions, then where exactly does reality lie? Perhaps illusions alone define life, as we can understand it. From here we can only conclude that if everything is an illusion, then illusion is our reality.

In summary, illusion is a core tenet in a number of different areas: free will, self-concept, the world, and the future. And in this paper, I have argued that qualia are also illusions. But, I have shown that although they are illusions, qualia are also fundamental to living meaningful lives, lives that have interpersonal relationships, and lives with responsibility and enjoyment. Furthermore, qualia play a vital role in steering our decision-making processes. If qualia are illusions, then they are necessary illusions vital to human life. Dennett's argument that qualia do not exist is an interesting theoretical idea, but because these illusions are the only way to define our reality, we can use them to ensure that we continue to be careful running on trails, to be grateful for friends, and to enjoy hot showers.

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