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QUALIA

Robert Merrihew Adams

David Lewis and I are continuing here a discussion about a paper of mine entitled "Flavors, Colors, and God,"¹ in which I argue that the prospects for an adequate explanation of the correlation of phenomenal qualia with physical properties are more promising on theistic than on naturalistic assumptions. This provides, not a conclusive proof, but a valuable contribution to a cumulative case, for theism. I will not rehearse the whole argument; we are concerned here with one objection to it, an objection that I anticipated and that I take Lewis to embrace. This objection is that on a sufficiently materialist view, there is no correlation to be explained, for the phenomenal qualia are not correlated, but identical, with physical properties of the central nervous system.

A sufficiently materialist view for this objection entails not merely the substantial identity of mind and central nervous system, but a thorough-going physicalism about all phenomena. Otherwise it will still be possible for me to begin my argument by raising the question *why* the states I am in when I am having certain experiences seem to me the way they do—why seeing red is (subjectively but consistently) *like this*, rather than seeming to me the way those states seem that in fact are experiences of seeing yellow. I argued that a materialism that would deny me this "would have to *eliminate* phenomenal qualia, or reduce them in a most extreme way to physical qualities."²

Lewis objects to my suggestion that this would have to be a "radical" or "desperate" eliminativism about qualia.³ He thinks a materialist—indeed, I take it, a physicalist who would escape my theistic argument—can in an important sense believe in qualia. In his paper he explains the extent to which this is possible. Lewis's account of what the physicalist *can* accept about qualia is predictably incisive and elegant; I have no quarrel with it. My disagreement concerns what the physicalist *cannot* accept. "See how little he eliminates," Lewis urges.⁴ Much too much, I reply.

The one aspect of qualia, as commonly understood, that Lewis admits to eliminating is what he calls the Identification Thesis, the thesis that "we *identify* the qualia of our experiences" as he puts it,⁵ or that phenomenal qualia are "qualities whose identity is completely determined by subjective experience," as I put it in "Flavors, Colors, and God."⁶ This appears to be an epistemological claim. Why should we balk at giving it up, Lewis may ask, when



he grants us several other ways of knowing what experiences we have, and even what qualia, in the physicalist's restricted sense, we have?

More than epistemology is at stake here. It is not just a matter of *how* we know, but also, and even more, of *what* we know. It is not easy to say what we know in our knowledge of phenomenal qualia. Lewis rightly remarks that philosophers "never say enough to introduce the concept [of phenomenal qualia] from scratch to someone who doesn't already have it."⁷ The difficulty here is similar to the notorious difficulty in explaining the character of particular qualia to people who have not experienced them. What is the visual appearance of red like? Can we say anything better than Locke's congenitally blind man who conjectured that it would be like the sound of a trumpet? Nonetheless those of us who are blessed with normal color vision do know something here that most of us are very glad to know, though we cannot explain it very well.

Enough can be said about it, I think, to make the point that qualia give us an important sort of knowledge that Lewis's physicalism cannot admit we have. Consider the following experience as an example. I recently saw for the first time a painting of which I had previously seen many reproductions, Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*. It is not much to my taste, though I recognize that it's brilliantly successful in a way and has been religiously meaningful to millions of people. Nonetheless, I wanted to see it. Why? I think my main motive was curiosity. I did enjoy seeing it, though I hadn't particularly expected to; the original is better than the reproductions. Still, I have plenty of opportunity to see paintings that afford me more aesthetic pleasure. I wanted mainly to see, and thereby to know, what it looked like.

What is it that I wanted to know, and did in fact know, in this way? Obviously I wanted to know something about the painting. But at the same time, and inseparably, I wanted to know something (something qualitative) about the experience of seeing the painting. It is the latter knowledge that concerns us here. It is knowledge that I can have, as I do have it, in almost complete ignorance of the physical qualities of the brain states that I have in having the experience.

What can this knowledge be, on Lewis's account? He can allow that I have "a rich cluster of descriptions" of the painting and of my experience. Similarly he allows that "I do know what relations of acquaintance I bear" to "the various qualia of my experience."⁸ But this leaves out the most important knowledge that I want and have in seeing the painting. I want to know what the qualities of my experience are *like*, not just how I am related to them. And this is a knowledge that is not exhausted by any set of descriptions I could give; it is something much richer and more comprehensive that precedes and grounds my ability to give the descriptions. Lewis also grants that I may have *de re* knowledge of the physical properties that constitute, according to the physicalist, my qualia.⁹ But such *de re* knowledge too is not the qualitative knowledge that I seek, and obtain, of what the experience is *like*.

So far as I can see, the qualitative knowledge of my experience that is most important to me in aesthetic matters, and in the satisfaction of plain ordinary sensory curiosity, is part of what Lewis's materialism does eliminate. How important we think that is may depend on how highly we value

the contemplative as distinct from the active side of life. Lewis has suggested elsewhere that "knowing what [a phenomenal quale is] like is the possession of abilities: abilities to recognize, abilities to imagine, abilities to predict one's behavior by means of imaginative experiments."¹⁰ No doubt I did acquire such abilities with regard to the qualities of the experience I was having when I saw Sallman's *Head of Christ*. But the acquisition of such abilities was surely not the main object of my curiosity about the experience I would have. What I chiefly wanted was something much less dispositional that I had *in* the visual experience itself. I grant that Lewis can account for just about anything I may want to *do* with my knowledge of my qualia. What fares less well under the physicalist regime is a knowledge I may enjoy, or suffer, *in* my experience, over and above any active ability or disposition I may derive from it. Such contemplative knowledge, I believe, includes a very large part of what makes life worth living.

Why do I believe that I have this knowledge that is so hard to articulate? I think that I observe it, introspectively, as directly and surely as I observe anything at all—at least as directly and surely as I observe the words in the page in front of me. Indeed I actually believe that I observe the former *more* directly and surely than the latter, but that is more than I need to maintain for present purposes.¹¹

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NOTES

1. Chapter 16 in Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith*, p. 259.

3. David Lewis, "Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?" in the present issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, p. 470, note 1. Cf. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith*, pp. 259-60.

4. Lewis, "Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?" p. 469.

5. Lewis, "Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?" p. 469. Lewis's rejection of the Identification Thesis (IT) lies deeper, I think, than most arguments will reach. I take IT not to be argued against in his published "Argument for the Identity Theory," but implicitly rejected in the first premise of that argument, that "the definitive characteristic of any (sort of) experience as such is its causal role" [David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 100]. Conversely, my embrace of IT is a rejection of Lewis's first premise. I try to argue for it in the present paper, but argument on this subject is difficult.

6. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith*, p. 262, n. 20.

7. Lewis, "Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?" p. 467.

8. Lewis, "Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?" p. 470.

9. Lewis, "Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?" p. 469.

10. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, p. 131.

11. I am indebted to David Lewis for his comments on a previous draft of this paper.