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# Experiencing the Ineffable

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# Experiencing the Ineffable

## The Qualeic Sensations Associated with the Attempted Recall of Episodic Memory

I am standing on the patio outside the home of my childhood friend. The patio, laid with a cream-colored stone, is edged by dark grey stone. There are two or three semi-circular steps of the same grey stone leading up to the sliding glass door, which opens into the kitchen. The siding on the house is beige, but appears red-orange in the light of the setting sun. I am standing, facing my friend's mother who has short, blonde hair and gold wireframe glasses. She is seated on the second or third stair in front of the sliding door; next to her is a glass ash tray. She blows a puff of cigarette smoke out of her nose and says something to me I cannot recollect. Despite my repeated attempts to recall this detail of that memory, it seems forever lost to me.

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This project begins with the introduction of a number of key concepts and terms, the most important of these being *qualia* and the significance of *actively recalling an episodic memory*. After a basic understanding of terms and concepts is established, I will describe the particular sensation with which I am concerned, as well as a few difficulties that arise in any attempt to

communicate that sensation. Following that will be a brief discussion of the ability of art to evoke sensations. The final two sections are devoted to an analysis of the artwork I created for this project and the ability of that work to evoke the intended sensation in the viewer. The photographs I reference throughout this essay are reproduced at the end of the paper.

## I – Introduction

As human beings, we constantly engage in the process of creating and destroying memories. Every moment of the day we are forming mental impressions of the space around us, those who inhabit it, and the actions that take place in it. Simultaneously, we lose memories, though this often goes unnoticed as it is impossible to know what one is forgetting. In remembering what we thought we were forgetting, we would have proved it was not forgotten after all; merely a dormant memory, waiting to be recollected.

Recollecting some memories is easier than others. An easily recollected memory may be what one ate for breakfast this morning (I had coffee and a cinnamon roll). Conversely, there are other memories that we have definitely forgotten, such as the weather on the eighth of July 1996.<sup>1</sup> However, in between these two extremes of attempted recollection lie the most interesting

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is true in most cases. The only exceptions are where the weather conditions in question are remembered as part of a more important episodic memory (e.g. July 8 1996 was when we buried Aunt Janet, it was raining at the cemetery) or in cases of extraordinary individuals who possess truly photographic memory.

types of memories; those that we can only partially recollect. To continue with the breakfast example, I am only able to partially recollect what I had for breakfast a week ago. I had coffee with some baked good – a muffin, biscuit, or scone perhaps. In my mind, I can almost see the pastry sitting next to my coffee, but what exactly it was is just beyond the reach of my memory.

The particularly interesting aspect of these types of memories (which, for the sake of expedience, I will refer to as “partial memories”) is the sensation associated with our attempt to recall certain aspects of these memories that are just beyond the reach of our minds. With complete, easily recollected memories, we generally experience few sensations (if any at all) directly associated with our attempt to recall them; perhaps a feeling of self-satisfaction or contentedness due to our successful recall of the memory.<sup>2</sup> The same holds true for instances of memories that are totally lost to us. Though the sensations directly associated with lost or forgotten memories are generally more negative, such as frustration or futility, the sensations are equally banal. Partial memories are of special interest insofar as the attempt to recall lost aspects of them generates a singular sensation; a peculiar, ineffable sensation.

## II – Qualia

Sensations such as the one in question, as well as many more easily defined sensations,

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<sup>2</sup> The key word is *directly*. Many times we will experience sensations tied to the memory itself, such as joy with a fond memory or fear when we recall a dangerous situation we were in. These sensations, however, are tangential to the actual act of recollecting the memory.

fall into a category of epiphenomenal experiences called qualia (singularly quale). Qualia are a group of sensations that cannot be known through physical facts alone, that is to say, they must be experienced in order to be fully understood. I will not make an argument for the existence of qualia but rather will accept the phenomena as true. Many incredibly intelligent people have spent the better part of the last 50 years debating the existence of qualia, and to give even a summary of the arguments would be another essay in and of itself. Instead, I will pull from the work of those intelligent people to foster an understanding of qualia. One often referenced example is Mary, the color-blind scientist.<sup>3,4</sup>

Mary suffers from an extremely severe form of color blindness where she cannot distinguish any hue. She sees only luminosity. Her entire world is, and has always been, composed solely of gray tones. However, Mary is also the world's foremost color scientist. She has studied the physical properties of every color and knows much more about them than anyone else in her field. Mary can calculate what color emerges when two others are combined. She knows the wavelength of each color and has an intimate knowledge of how our eyes sense color and our brain interprets it. Although she is incredibly (even perfectly) knowledgeable about the physical facts of every color, she is still unable to know what it is like to see any of those colors. Mary does not know what it is *like* to see a color, nor does she know what it *is* to experience a color in the epiphenomenal sense. Moreover, she never will. Though Mary possesses perfect physical knowledge about every aspect of seeing colors, she lacks any personal experience in

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3        Conversations with Mark Criley

4        Frank Jackson, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*

this area. She lacks a common knowledge base.<sup>5</sup>

The distinction between knowing what it *is like* to experience something and knowing what it *is* to experience something is very subtle. That difference may be more easily distinguishable in a different example. Some animals are able to see ultraviolet light directly, without the aid of an intermediary device. We humans, however, lack this ability. The closest we can come to “seeing” ultraviolet light is by using an intermediary device, such as a special camera, or by observing its after-effects. (If I go to the beach and don't wear sun-screen, within a few hours of returning home my skin will be red and tender. I then know that earlier that day I was exposed to ultraviolet light.) We can observe ultraviolet light by proxy, and ostensibly, we know much more about the physical properties of it than the animals who observe it firsthand. However, we will never truly “see” or be able to experience ultraviolet light as a primary visual phenomena. Furthermore, we are unable to know what it is like to experience ultraviolet light as those animals do. We are in the role of Mary, the colorblind scientist, in relation to the animals that can see ultraviolet light directly. Despite all our physical knowledge, we lack the personal experience of actually seeing ultraviolet light and can, therefore, never gain the epiphenomenal knowledge of what it *is* to see that light. Knowing what something *is like* depends upon two things. First, a body of common experiences from which we can draw, and second, the realistic plausibility of the described experience. That is to say, whatever ephiphenomenal knowledge we use as a reference point must be shared between parties. If I try to tell you about the sensation of receiving a small electrical shock and use the sensation of striking our funny bone as a

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<sup>5</sup> Again, “knowledge” is used in the epiphenomenal sense and will be used this way in similar contexts throughout the rest of this essay.

comparison, my description hinges on you having struck your funny bone. Without this shared experience, my descriptive effort to communicate the sensation associated with that small electrical shock is futile. Additionally, my account of the sensation must remain plausible when I tell you what that is like. If I were to describe the sensation of a small electrical shock being like a “dog licking the inside of your skin” or “applying novacane to your bones,” you would be no closer to knowing what it is like than if I had kept my mouth shut. What you may have, though, is a sense, a *sense of what it is like* to receive a small electrical shock.

I have found it useful to distinguish three separate categories, but this is by no means the only method of classification for these phenomena. However, it is the most well suited to the ends.<sup>6</sup> The primary category is the experience itself; what it *is* to experience something. Surely the best way for you to know about the sensation of receiving a small electrical shock is to receive that shock yourself.<sup>7</sup> One step removed from the experience itself is a competent description of what the experience *is like*. This description centers on denoting the sensation, creating a plausible description that draws from a base of common experiences. The last method by which we can attempt to communicate a qualeic sensation is that of connotation, the *sense of what it is like*. This is the method we most often see occur when the experience is a relatively common one, yet eludes any sort of competent denotative description. These connotative

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6 Furthermore, I acknowledge there are cases that seem to straddle the fence between the two latter categories. For the purposes of this project, this poses no problem as our focus will be on the primary category (as will become apparent in time).

7 Here I use the word “best” in reference to the completeness of one's knowledge. In no way am I suggesting it is “best” in every aspect for all experiences to be gained first hand. That would open the door to absolutely rash behavior.

descriptions are most often concerned with ephemeral experiences, those lacking any physical substance. Though the experience itself is cross-cultural, we often find different cultures have different phrases to connote it. For example, in Spanish, the phrase *tengo el alma en un hilo* literally translates as “to have my soul on a string.” Figuratively, though, the translation is akin to our phrase of “I have butterflies in my stomach.” Clearly, the literal meaning of both of these phrases is an absurd juxtaposition of relatively disparate elements. It would be incredibly difficult to experience either of these things in reality.<sup>8</sup> Both of these phrases are connotative descriptions of the same quale and would be understood as such by individuals from the respective cultures. Occasionally, we find instances in which a literally translated phrase retains its figurative meaning or at least a close approximation thereof. In Polish, *motyle w brzuchu* literally means “butterflies in my stomach,” making the figurative connotation of this phrase rather similar to the English phrase, though with a slightly more narrow scope of use. In Polish, the phrase explicitly refers to a specific type of nervousness that comes from situations involving some sort of romantic tension. The use of this phrase in that way would also make sense in English. However, there are other meanings associated with the English phrase, such as connoting stage fright, that do not apply to the Polish phrase.

This idea of knowing what it *is* to do/be/feel something is the basis of all epiphenomenal knowledge and, by turn, all qualia. Every quale is specific to the trigger which causes the experience; the taste of carrots is specific to carrots. When trying turnips for the first time, a friend may say they taste *like* carrots. But in all probability the friend means that both carrots and

<sup>8</sup> Additionally, we can surmise neither of these situations, were they to be experienced, would be anything like the feeling of nervousness they both refer to, nor would the sensations resemble each other at all.



turnips fall into the same class of taste qualia for them (call it “earthy root vegetables”). In actuality, carrots and turnips taste different. Though a carrot may taste *similar* to a turnip, you cannot know what it is *like* to taste a turnip, and you most certainly cannot know what it *is* to taste a turnip, simply by tasting only carrots. Qualia are specific sensations that cannot be manufactured through physical knowledge or known through approximation. No matter how similar carrots and turnips taste, no amount of physical or epiphenomenal knowledge about one can give you anything more than a proximal idea of what the other tastes like. To taste a carrot is to know, truly, what the taste of a carrot is, and to taste a turnip is to know the same for a turnip.

### III – Episodic Memory and Active Recollection

There are many theories about the nature of memory systems and the neurological factors that drive each system. As with the arguments for the existence of qualia, a survey of the theories about the nature of memory would be a full essay on its own. Fortunately, we need only a basic understanding of two types of memory to move forward and need not be terribly concerned with the underlying neurology.

The types of memory under consideration are semantic and episodic. The difference between these two types of memory is subtle, yet crucial. In fact, it is much more important to grasp the significance of episodic memory. However, as is true with many subjects when the distinction is so delicate, it is easier to understand each type by knowing, in part, what it is not.

If their simplest definitions, semantic memory as *knowing* memory and episodic memory is *remembering* memory.<sup>9</sup> Most of our daily interactions rely on semantic memory, and it is perhaps the easier one to describe. Semantic memory is essential for being able to think in non-situational terms. It is how we know what a car is without needing to think about the last time we saw one driving down the road. In his article “What is Episodic Memory,” cognitive neuroscientist Endel Tulving describes semantic memory very succinctly: “Semantic memory registers and stores knowledge about the world in the broadest sense and makes it available for retrieval.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, our ability to think in the abstract is completely dependent upon semantic memory.<sup>11</sup>

If semantic memory is what allows us to think in abstract, or non-situational terms, then episodic memory is responsible for every event we remember. Again, Tulving sums things up nicely: “Episodic memory enables a person to remember personally experienced events as such. That is, it makes it possible for a person to be consciously aware of an earlier experience in a certain situation at a certain time.” Episodic memories are our event-based memories. When we talk about remembering a situation or event we are recalling an episodic memory. Correspondingly, when we try to recall a fact, or an abstract idea, we are drawing on our semantic memory.

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9 My use of *knowing* and *remembering* is influenced, in part, by Endel Tulving's article “What is Episodic Memory?”

10 Endel Tulving “What is Episodic Memory?”

11 Here I use “abstract” in the most literal sense, to include any situation in which we are not thinking of a specific experience we have had.

To draw a final distinction between semantic and episodic memories we must consider the intensely (and absolutely) personal nature of episodic memory. Each person is the only individual who possesses those episodic memories. When I remember sitting in the coffee shop having my coffee and cinnamon roll, I am recalling an episodic memory – my memory – something that *I* experienced. It would be an entirely different sort of recollection I would engage in if my friend Vikki told me about a time she was at the same coffee shop, drinking the same coffee, and eating the same cinnamon roll on an identical morning. In the case of Vikki relaying her experience to me, one of two things might happen. The first is that her description begins to awaken my episodic memory, and instead of imagining her at the coffee shop, I end up recalling my own episodic memory. The second possibility (and this is more likely if personal details that conflict with my episodic memory are present) is that I imagine what the experience was like for her. Perhaps she tells me she was sick that morning and was coughing a lot. In that case, I would most likely draw upon my episodic memory for the physical setting of the coffee shop and a mental image of Vikki and then draw on semantic memory to fill in details not present in my episodic memory, such as her illness. The problem with a constructed “memory” like this is that I am not remembering what it was like for Vikki to experience the coffee shop; I am constructing an idea *similar* to what it was like for Vikki.

Now, one might object and say my second possibility is clearly not an episodic memory but my first possibility is. I agree that it is! Doesn't recalling my episodic memory inform me of what Vikki's experience was like? Certainly. Recalling my episodic memory (which serves as our base of common experiences) and combining it with her description (which is plausible) would

let me know what the experience was *like* for Vikki, insofar as her denotative description is accurate. However, no amount of recollection or imagination can ever let me recall what it *was* Vikki experienced, because I can never be her or experience things as she does.

I hope the connection between qualia and episodic memory is becoming clear, especially their intensely personal nature and the extreme difficulty (perhaps impossibility) inherent in trying to communicate them to another person. The final term to define, and it is a relatively simple one, is active recollection. As with episodic memory, it is easier to look at active recollection in contrast to something similar – passive recollection. Passive recollection is a relatively difficult phenomenon to observe as attempting to observe a passive mental phenomenon results in that phenomenon coming to the front of the mind, thereby losing its passivity in the process. Also, it is nowhere near as common as active recollection. In short, passive recollection is the unintended recollection of a memory. A common example is memories triggered by one sense or another. Whenever I smell oatmeal-raisin cookies baking, I end up recalling an episodic memory of my grandmother's kitchen. I have just walked into the room, and my grandmother is removing a tray of cookies from the oven. When this memory arises without me having to seek it out, it is a passive recollection.

The easiest way to define active recollection is to say it is everything else. It is everything passive recollection is not. Active recollection is the “trying” part of trying to remember something, and it often goes unnoticed as we engage in active recollection thousands of times each day. A brief thought experiment may sum this up. In your mind, picture a firetruck. You have just experienced an active recollection. Actively recalled memories may be episodic

(remembering what you had for breakfast), semantic (the first president of the United States), or one of a number of other types (depending on what theory of memory system you subscribe to).

The remainder of this essay makes use of these terms and concepts to investigate exactly what it is like to attempt to recall an episodic memory and the associated difficulty in doing so. I explore the sensation generated by our inability to recall fully an episodic memory, the possibility of causing similar sensations in others through the use of a body of art, the body of work created to explore this possibility, and the relationship between this essay and the artwork.

#### IV – Specific Difficulty in Recalling Episodic Memory

There are a number of factors that contribute to the difficulty of recalling an episodic memory that is a perfect<sup>12</sup> replication of the actual event. In fact, many researchers have established that misremembering is more prevalent among healthy individuals than those with a neurological pathology (Schacter 1996). Our inability to recall perfectly an episodic memory is, in part, due to our inability to absorb and retain all of the details of an episodic experience. As a result of our imperfect retention, the healthy mind will sometimes fill in missing pieces with the most probable and sensible substitute. This entire process, which results in the recollection of imperfect memories, may actually be the ideal system as some current theories hold that

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12 I use 'perfect' to mean an exact mental replica as opposed to a perfectly healthy recollection which, as will be shown, may not in fact be 'perfect' in the same sense in which I use the word.

remembering experiences (specifically, episodic memory) is only a small part of what our memories are used for.

Studies of the prevalence of misremembering date back to the 1970s when cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus created the *misinformation paradigm* (De Brigard In Press). Loftus' study intended to show the malleability of episodic memory when participants were misled; specifically, eyewitness testimony. Though the study was successful, the more interesting statistic (for the purposes of this essay, at least) was the rate of misremembering among the control group (Loftus 1975).<sup>13</sup> Of the controls in Loftus' study, a full one-third of them failed to recall correctly a detail of the episodic memory. The implication of the control group's failure to recall a detail of an episodic memory is clear: imperfect recall of episodic memory is in no way out of the ordinary. Because this experiment focused on just one specific detail, it is well within reason to state that if each subject was pressed for additional details, another one would be found that each subject either could not recall or would recall incorrectly. Similarly, when we attempt to recall an episodic memory the chances are we are not recalling the memory perfectly; we are recalling it ideally if we fully recall it at all.<sup>14</sup> In a 1995 study, Hyman, Husband, and Billings showed that far beyond altering details of episodic memories in subjects' minds, it is actually possible to place foreign episodic memories in a their minds. Furthermore, the researchers were

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13 Loftus would show a film of a high-speed event to the study group and then administer a survey that asked questions about the film. The control group received an exam where all of the questions were direct and did not presuppose anything, while the other exams had one question that presupposed some aspect of the event that did not actually occur. With just a small amount of misinformation, the participants of the study chose the wrong answer more than 50% of the time in certain instances.

14 Here, ideally is used to differentiate between my prior use of perfect and what is the ideal recall for our memory system.

able to cause the subjects to believe that they had originally experienced those false memories. These studies, and many similar ones, show that whenever we delve into episodic memory we cannot be sure of the validity of any given memory, let alone the associated small details.

Our episodic memories are in a constant state of flux from the moment we create them. Many theories for why this happens point to the fact there are actual nascent imperfections in our episodic memories. These imperfections stem, in part, from our inability to attend actively to every aspect of an event (Chun & Turke-Brown 2007). Because our minds are only able to process so much data at any given moment, we naturally shut things out, with the least important details being the first to go.

If we return to the coffee shop example, it is easy for me to think of aspects of the memory that my mind never encoded simply because they were not pertinent. I cannot recall a single detail about the people who were sitting at the table beside mine, nor can I recall what the customer in line ahead of me ordered. I have no memory of what music was playing, I am unable to recall the headline of the newspaper or what color shirt the barista was wearing that day. As is probably evident, all those details are rather inconsequential. Because my attention was not (and need not have been) focused on these small details, I am unable to recall them.

In any given situation, the probability of us recalling a detail correctly corresponds to how important that aspect of the original event was to us. In Loftus' original experiment, the subjects' attention would have been focused mainly on the high-speed event the group saw (most famously, a car wreck). Therefore, the encoding of the action of one car colliding with another

would have had most of the mind's processing power dedicated to it.<sup>15</sup> When Loftus used a presupposing question phrased to alter a small detail (the type of traffic sign ignored) some of the subjects had only a small amount of their attention devoted to encoding the type of traffic sign, so they were susceptible to suggestion.

Even though our minds do not perfectly encode every aspect of a memory, many times we are able to recall much more of an episodic memory than it might seem we paid attention to at the time of the event. De Brigard suggests this is due to what he calls *optimal reconstruction*, a process by which our minds take the information we encoded about an episodic event and fill in the details based on probability and our past experiences. When we grasp for, and remember, an aspect of an episodic memory that our minds did not encode, we often believe we have recalled what actually happened. In reality, our minds may be supplying us with a false detail we perceive as true, because we are used to seeing that object or action in the same context we are attempting to recall.

If I attempt to recall what items are on the inside door of my refrigerator, I have some difficulty doing so. I believe there may be a bottle of mustard, a bottle of ketchup, a jar of pickles, and a bottle of balsamic vinegar. My belief in the veracity of this memory is relatively undetermined until I go and check. I do not spend much time studying the contents of my refrigerator, so my mind may fill in episodic details I lack with likely scenarios. I am accustomed to seeing ketchup, mustard, and similar items on the doors of refrigerators, so my mind fills in

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15 I surmise it would have been very difficult indeed to get any subject of the group to believe that, in the film they were shown, two cars did not collide, as this was the most important element of the film.



my episodic memory with small pieces of information that are acceptable to me. In the same way, many aspects of our episodic memories are likely the things that most probably occurred or were present.

In addition to probability, our minds must take into account our unique and varied individual experience. If someone else was to attempt the same recall exercise, their mind may supply them with an image of a bottle of lemonade on the door of their refrigerator. Surely their probable recall is no more or less likely to be true than mine is. However, it would be highly irregular for me to recall a bottle of lemonade in my refrigerator, as I do not enjoy lemonade and do not make a habit of purchasing foodstuffs I do not plan to consume. In this way we can see my mind drew not only on probability but also on my individual experience of disliking lemonade.

By reconciling the optimized details of an episodic memory with the most probable outcome and an individual's personal experience, our minds are able to fill in many gaps in a memory we do not actively encode during an event. This method of optimal reconstruction allows us to place proper attention on the most urgent aspects of an event, while still allowing us to recall whole episodic memories. These recollections are not perfect recalls; rather, they are idealized in order to allow the mind to attend to all of its responsibilities, of which the recall of episodic memories may only be a small part.

The 2007 study by Addis and Schacter was the first neurological study to use Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging to examine the activity of the brain during initial recall of episodic

memory as compared with initial *episodic hypothetical thinking*.<sup>16</sup> After initial recall, the study looked at the relative brain activity while the subjects were asked to elaborate upon the memories/hypothetical constructions (this would have involved attempting to recall specific details of episodic memories). The findings showed an incredibly strong connection between the active recall of episodic memories and episodic hypothetical thinking. Many of the same parts of the brain are used in initial recall and initial construction of episodic memory and episodic hypothetical thinking, respectively. The overlap was more pronounced during the “elaboration” phase of the study when subjects were asked to expand upon their memories and constructions.

The intense overlap of brain activity during the recall of episodic memories and the construction of episodic hypothetical thoughts supports two important points. One, brought up by De Brigard, is that the overlap in brain activity shows we can no longer hold the tenant that the sole duty of the parts of the brain engaged in memory recall is to be engaged in that action; instead, they are actually part of a network – the *core brain network* (cbn) – that is responsible for nearly all types of situational thought (past, future, and constructed). The second point is that the overlap between parts of the brain engaged in episodic recall and episodic hypothetical thought is intensified during the “elaboration” phase when there is an active attempt to recall (or in the case of hypothetical thought, generate) details. Based on these findings, it follows that part of the action our brains engage in when we grasp for details of episodic memories is not associated with actual recall but may be the construction of details that are so probable, and so

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16 'Episodic hypothetical thinking' is a term borrowed from De Brigard (In Press). De Brigard draws connections between the acts of recalling episodic memory, imagining what could have happened in place of an actual episodic memory (episodic counterfactual thinking) and imagining event-situations in the future, episodic hypothetical thinking.

attuned to our individual experience, we perceive them as actuality.

Given that these are only some of the contributing factors in play when we attempt to recall episodic memory, it is no wonder we occasionally are accosted by a unique qualeic sensation when attempting to recall certain aspects of episodic memories we can only recollect in part. Moreover, the implicit unreliability of episodic memory is compounded by our mind's ability to extrapolate the requested details based on a system of optimization as opposed to perfect recall. These same factors compound the difficulty in producing an accurate episodic recollection that contributes to the complexity of the specific qualeic sensation produced when trying to recall an episodic memory.

#### V – Evoking the Quale and the Associated Obstacles

The difficulty faced with recalling an episodic memory pales in comparison to the trouble we have when attempting to communicate the qualeic sensation generated by an attempt to recall specific details of an episodic memory that seems to be just out of reach. It appears nearly impossible to communicate accurately the sensation itself. However, it may be possible to evoke the quale in others using an intermediary object that causes the sensation in another person. We abandon any sort of denotative or connotative descriptions in favor of a quale-generating experience.

If we are to attempt to induce an epiphenomenal experience in another person, then we must consider the nature and complexity of the quale we want to evoke. If we are to attempt to communicate pain, for instance, then it seems we face the problem of describing what exactly it is to feel pain. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines pain as “Physical or bodily suffering; a continuous, strongly unpleasant or agonizing sensation in the body (usually in a particular part), such as arises from illness, injury, harmful physical contact, etc” (pain 3). This definition seems to lack something. Rather than communicating what it is to experience pain, it has only identified some conditions under which – and ways in which – pain may be experienced (“aris[ing] from illness, injury, harmful physical contact, etc.”) and given a general indication of which aspect of the described event would be pain (“continuous, strongly unpleasant or agonizing sensation.”)<sup>17</sup> While all of this is very useful in describing our concept of pain, attempting to communicate directly what it is to feel pain leaves us in the same position as Mary the colorblind scientist found herself in. Though we have a working definition for pain, neither this information, nor any additional physical information, allows us truly to understand what pain is without experiencing it.

After failing to communicate pain plainly, we may turn to linguistic devices such as similes, metaphors, etc., all of which are very common connotative descriptions of quale. However, as was briefly mentioned earlier, one major pitfall of such a method is these are culturally specific, and people from one region, area, or background may not understand an expression we take for granted to reference a quale. There is a French saying, *L'esprit de*

<sup>17</sup> When the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of pain uses the term 'sensation' it sidesteps the need to define the experience. The question then becomes “what is it to experience the qualeic sensation of 'agony'?”

*l'escalier*, which when translated, literally means “the spirit of the staircase.” Such a saying, even when translated, may seem like nonsense to someone who is unfamiliar with the phrase.

However, many people use phrases like this one as a proxy to communicate a certain quale. This phrase, in particular, alludes to the sensation generated when one remembers a witty retort from someone after the conversation is over, and they have left. It bears notice that even when this phrase is used between two people who understand the figurative allusions, the phrase is not truly communicating the experience of remembering a perfect response too late. Rather, the speaker causes listeners to remember their own experiences of that sensation. This method of connotative description relies on the listener having experienced that sensation before and being aware of the significance of the phrase the speaker uses to connote the sensation.<sup>18</sup>

Many people attempt to communicate qualeic sensations through denotative and connotative descriptions. If one day my friend Becky were to go to a doctor and say her stomach hurts, and she had just been hit in the stomach, the doctor might ask, “What pain are you experiencing?” Becky might respond with, “It's a constant, aching pain.” Becky is providing a denotative description for the doctor, which is fine and good. But Becky has only communicated what her pain is *like*, not what she is actually experiencing. Now, this is a peculiar doctor who, for one reason or another, is unable to process denotative descriptions. So he asks Becky to give him a connotative description, something to evoke a memory of an incredibly similar pain quale in him. He is asking for something to give him a sense of what Becky's experience is like. Becky thinks for a moment and responds that it feels like someone is squeezing her stomach into a little

<sup>18</sup> Phrases such as *L'esprit de l'escalier* are commonly tied to complex qualeic sensation for which we do not have single words like pain, joy, fatigue, etc.

ball. This is clearly a connotative description as it would be impossible to experience your stomach being squeezed into a little ball.<sup>19</sup> Since the doctor has never experienced the sort of stomach pain Becky is referring to, her connotative description of the quale is utterly lost on him. He asks her to try again. Becky is growing frustrated and decides the best thing to do is to hit the doctor in the stomach by way of explanation. And she does, telling him, “That is the pain I'm experiencing!” Becky has now successfully communicated the pain quale she is experiencing, and the doctor understands. He tells her she most likely has a bruised muscle, and gives her medicine.<sup>20</sup> By hitting the doctor in the stomach, Becky was able to evoke the pain quale associated with her injury, because she re-created a similar event. It was only through the doctor experiencing that similar event that he was able to come close to understanding what Becky was feeling, since he could not understand denotative descriptions.

While this interaction may seem rather absurd, it provides an understandable parallel to situations in which we reference qualia that defy denotative descriptions. When we attempt to

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19 Perhaps not quite impossible, but how exactly this could be experienced is a gruesome thought at best, and I believe we can all agree what Becky is feeling is not that.

20 Of course, the Doctor still does not quite know what it is Becky is experiencing as he is not Becky and will always be one step removed from her individual qualeic experience, call it the “difference of individuals” argument. Additionally, since Becky caused the sensation via a slightly dissimilar event (a mean left hook, as opposed to a hard right jab) one might pose the argument the qualeic experience of pain was fundamentally different for the doctor than for Becky. This objection seems to fall back on the difference-of-individuals argument as the alternative premise that a quale cannot originate from multiple sources can be refuted. The qualeic sensation of relief generated when a lost item is recovered can also be generated by catching a glass one knocks over (instances of a “minor crisis averted” quale). To say the difference between these experiences is substantial enough to justify being called different quale would be a tough argument to make without resorting to individual experience, which I acknowledge as a valid barrier to the communication of quale and will address later on.

communicate an ineffable quale, we are absolutely dependent on the other person having experienced the same qualia. If they have not experienced that quale, then we are in much the same position as Becky was with the doctor – left to devise a situation that will result in that person experiencing the ineffable.

In most interactions, we are content to settle for a denotative or connotative description of the qualia we experience. This requires the person we are speaking with to draw on a similar experience they had or recall what that feeling is like. Generally, we need not evoke qualia in other people as we are able to communicate effectively without doing so. Occasionally, though, such as when examining a quale, it may be extremely helpful to do so. To varying degrees, people experience with qualeic sensations when communicating with others. We may say someone who is especially adept at experiencing qualeic sensations while acting as a listener is empathic or is an empath.<sup>21</sup>

Yet even the best empaths in the world can never really know what another individual experiences because the empath is not that person. I cede this is true. However, P. F. Strawson gives a logically sound account of the individual's experience being as absolutely unique and individual as the person itself. Strawson refutes the no-ownership view (and many similar views) of experience by stressing the sense of individual. And individual experience is the basis of his arguments. In refuting the no-ownership view of experience and solidifying the concept of

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21 Being called empathic is specific to the individual who is listening as it is not uncommon to re-experience emotions when one is recounting a memory. I would draw special attention to an individual who is empathic as someone who experiences qualeic sensations when they are the listener; an individual who experiences joy when they are told of a time the speaker was happy. This is something almost everyone experiences to different degrees.

individual as nascent and necessary, Strawson argues against the possibility of communicating an experience in such a way so that someone else can understand what it *is* and experience it *as we do*.

This view of an intensely individual nature of experience (including epiphenomenal experiences) appears to pose a few problems in my determination to evoke a specific quale in another person.<sup>22</sup> However, if we are to respond to these problems with a clarification of our intentions, then it may still be possible to evoke a specific quale (the sensation that is associated with attempting to recall an episodic partial memory). To do so, though, requires a basic understanding of type-token relationships.

Type-token relationships may also be thought of as group-individual or collective-specific relationships. These are relationships in which each individual (or token) is a similar, yet distinct, part of a larger type (or group). For instance, within the large group of houses, the house I live in is a token. There are many other houses, all of which share many physical properties. But there are also things specific to the token that is the house I live in. (Most obviously, I live there).

In the case of individuals, we are each unique tokens of the larger type comprised of every human. Similarly, each of my individual experiences is a token of the type of experience that it is. When I eat spaghetti, my experience is informed by my individuality and can be thought of as eating spaghetti<sub>1</sub>, which is a token of the larger class of eating spaghetti'. When

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22 Namely, how can I evoke a specific quale in another person if, for starters, I do not, and cannot know, what it is like for that person to experience that quale. Additionally, it is impossible for me to cause them to experience the quale *as I do* with even the most exact re-creation of the event.



another individual eats spaghetti, we can refer to it as “eating spaghetti<sub>2</sub>” and so on. All of the people who eat spaghetti are partaking in the same type of experience, eating spaghetti', and each of their individual instances of eating spaghetti (eating spaghetti<sub>n</sub>) is a token of that type.<sup>23</sup> It would, however, be impossible for another individual to experience eating spaghetti<sub>1</sub>, the experience of eating spaghetti *as I do*.

To return to our primary cause, I will need to clarify my intention as not causing another person to experience the qualeic sensation associated with the attempted recall of an episodic partial memory as sensation<sub>1</sub>, or *as I do*. Rather, our intention must be to evoke the sensation as sensation' in the audience and allow the other individuals to experience sensation<sub>2</sub>, sensation<sub>3</sub>, and so on. Doing so will allow this project to remain well within the realm of possibility. If we are able to evoke sensation', then immediately the intention has been filled, because any individual's experience of the type sensation' is, by default, a token of that sensation.

## VI – Photography and Memory

Photography is unique among art forms for its capacity to carry absolutely objective

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23 Eating spaghetti<sub>1</sub> denotes the individual experience I myself have when eating spaghetti, much in the same way that Eating spaghetti<sub>2</sub> indicates the experience any other individual has, and Eating spaghetti<sub>n</sub> is used to mean any individual's token experience of the larger eating spaghetti experience type – eating spaghetti'.

knowledge.<sup>24,25</sup> Much of the belief in the photograph's veracity stems from its hyperrealistic depiction of events. Although the photograph does depict the image it captures realistically, it cannot be considered a realistic depiction of the entire event. The photograph will always remain an abstraction of the event that took place, de-contextualizing the particular slice of history it captured. No single photograph is able to effectively convey a series of events, though we may make assumptions based on the actions occurring within the image; it lacks immediate temporality.<sup>26</sup>

Imagine a photograph of a cigarette butt in mid-air, and an open hand above it in the foreground. In the middle-ground we see a man on a street corner with a large sign warning us of the armageddon that will accompany the turn of the millennium, Y2K. The background is a city street with a car half way through an intersection. There are very few truths we can actually gain from this image. It is more likely to raise more questions than it answers. Assuming this image was not staged, and is unaltered, we can safely presume the photograph dates back to the late 90s. This assumption is based on the man holding the sign that refers to Y2K and the knowledge that the hysteria associated with this phenomena did not pre-date the turn of the millennium by many years and did not continue beyond it. We may also assume the cigarette in the photograph,

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24 Of course media closely tied to photography, (film, video, etc.) are burdened with the same assumption.

25 With the advent of image editing computer programs, the veracity of the photograph has been called into question, with many people losing trust in the photograph's accuracy. However, most people remain inclined to believe the "truth" the photograph asserts as a first reaction.

26 With the use of motion-blur (motion-blur describes the blurred appearance elements of a photograph taken when they do not hold still enough for the duration of the exposure. This phenomena indicates the affected element was in motion during the event.), it is possible to achieve some sense of immediate temporality, but we will assume all elements of these photographs appear static.

apparently suspended in mid-air, was dropped by the open hand directly above it. This is the most likely assumption, but the cigarette could also have been flicked away by a person just out of the frame. The photographer might have actuated the shutter at just the right moment for it to *appear* the man before us dropped it. This is how the photograph lacks immediate temporality, not providing another image to show how the cigarette came to be where it is, either entering the frame from side or slipping out of the man's hand. Without that additional photograph, we cannot be sure how the cigarette is suspended in mid-air.<sup>27</sup> However, even a second photograph showing the man dropping the cigarette would lack immediate temporality. The reassurance in our belief that the man dropped the cigarette would not stem from either photograph; rather, it would come from the relationship of the two photographs and our belief they are in some way connected.<sup>28</sup>

In the background of this photograph, there was a car in an intersection. We can assume the car was in motion, despite the lack of any motion-blur, because cars generally do not make a habit of parking in the middle of busy city intersections. If we were asked what happened to the car after this photograph was taken, we would likely say it continued through the intersection. In answering such a question, we would be engaged in episodic hypothetical thinking, and our assumption that the car continued through the intersection would be based on the thousands – if not millions – of cars we have seen pass through intersections. Here again the dangers of a de-contextualized photograph present themselves. Unbeknownst to us, the abstracted viewers, just

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27 I acknowledge we may need more than one image to explain how the cigarette came to be where it is. Perhaps we would have to get nearly to the point of video to be truly convincing in our visual explanation.

28 Continuing down this path of thought we would eventually end up in front of what Hume dubbed “the problem of induction.” The problem of induction questions how logical our assumption of cause and effect is, and our absolute dependence on it.

out of frame is a large truck that will barrel through the intersection, hit the car, and send it spinning off in another direction.

These examples highlight the limited spectrum of truth a photograph can supply. We can hold only what is in the image to be true. The assumptions we make about the recorded events that fall outside of that temporal slice of the photograph are generated in a manner that parallels our mind's method of reconstructing memories by drawing on past experience and probability. However, these examples barely scratch the surface of the photograph-memory relationship.

Photographs and memories are bonded in a unique way, one that stems from their inherent bond with the past. In the same way we can never remember the future, only imagine it, photography is bound to being a relic of history the moment the shutter closes. There is a certain melancholy associated with the past, where things never happen but have already happened. Photographs are a constant reminder of what no longer is, be it a fond memory of a picnic or an image of a deceased relative. Every photograph and memory is, to some degree, a *momento mori* – a reminder of our mortality.

While both photographs and memories share a bond to the past, they do so in very different ways. Often our memories are an ideal recollection with absolute recall sacrificed for a more vivid description of the aspects of the event we deemed most important at the time along with some amount of immediate temporality. Photographs are charged with absolute recall of one view of one instant of an event. They do not give us as complete a recollection as our memories, but the aspects of the event they do record are recorded in perfect clarity. A photograph can never

depict the warmth of the sun, but it can recall which chair each family member sat in at dinner, and what they wore; small details that may easily be beyond our ability to recall. The theorist Roland Barthes devotes much of his book *Camera Lucida* to discussing the insufficiency of the photograph as a method of recollection because of its inability to capture a subject entirely. Barthes looks beyond the inability of the photograph to create a complete reproduction of the physicality of the recorded event or subject and instead focuses on the photograph's absolute inability to reproduce the sensations associated with the event, a complete lack of epiphenomenal information. In the introduction to the same text, Barthes describes looking at a photograph of Jerome Bonaparte and realizing he is looking into the eyes that themselves saw the emperor. What goes unsaid in Barthes text, but reinforces his point about photography's inability to directly communicate epiphenomenal knowledge, is that despite "looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor" Barthes is no more aware of what it was, or what it was like to actually look at the Emperor.<sup>29</sup>

The incompleteness of both photograph and memory serve to draw them closer together, as each recalls aspects of an event completely outside the purview of the other's abilities. Our memories have the ability to draw on epiphenomenal knowledge that a photograph could never directly access, while the photographs we take of an event recall absolute physical details that would be, in all probability, lost to us.

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29 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Page 3

## VII – Sensations through Art

Earlier we discussed the difficulties in evoking a certain quale in another individual. Specifically, we are interested in causing the other person to know what it *is* to experience the sensation associated with being able only partially to recall an episodic memory, imbuing the memory with that epiphenomenal knowledge. We drew the conclusion that without providing an event that generates the quale in question we would be unable to impart epiphenomenal knowledge to anyone. We are left with a need for an event to evoke the quale in question.

Inherent in art is an ability to generate sensations. Long ago there were illuminated manuscripts, which by their very intricacy and obvious dedication, evoked a reverence for what is written on the page. As time progressed, artists became more conscious of this ability and attempted to harness it. Many artists tried to duplicate naturally occurring scenes they found to be evocative. Perhaps one of the first artists to create work that truly considered the viewer was Caspar David Friedrich, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romanticist who employed an aesthetic device known as *ruckenfigur*.<sup>30</sup> With the use of *ruckenfigur* Friedrich encourages the viewer not only to contemplate the sublime aspects of nature, but he forces the viewer, by poxy of his figures, to consider the experience of viewing the events themselves.

The consideration of the viewer as an agent that functions beyond passive viewing was

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30 *Ruckenfigur* is a technique where a figure is placed in the foreground, facing away from the viewer, and “towards” the scene depicted in the background. Friedrich was by far the largest user of this technique, though it may be of interest to note some contemporary photographers have used the technique in nearly identical ways.

not widely accepted until the post-modernist movement, which brought with it post-structuralism. The aforementioned theorist, Roland Barthes, was one of the first post-structuralist theorists. He was responsible for one of the most important post-structuralist texts, *Death of The Author*, which seeks to destroy the belief in an omniscient Author, challenging the superiority of the Author's interpretation of his own work over the interpretation of others.<sup>31</sup>

Another post-structuralist, Susan Sontag, makes a stronger statement by rejecting the interpretation of an artwork by anyone; choosing to direct the viewer to experience the art as opposed to interpret it. Sontag believes “real art” has the ability to make us nervous and “By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames that work of art. Interpretation makes the art manageable, comfortable”.<sup>32</sup> What may be of most interest here is her line “reducing the work of art to its content.” By stating that the art has been reduced to its content, it seems the native state of art would be to exist beyond its content. What Sontag alludes to is a relatively common post-structuralist tenet that any given artwork exists beyond the confines of its media – that a painting of a flower is not just a painting of a flower, unless, as Sontag says, we interpret it, reducing it to its content alone.

At first it may seem ridiculous that a painting of a flower is anything more than a painting of a flower. Yet many post-modern artists concern themselves with the space between the viewer and the work.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say the literal space, though that is an important element, but rather

31 In most post-structuralist theory, “Text” and “Author” do not explicitly refer to literary works. One could just as easily substitute “Artwork” and “Artist” in their respective places.

32 Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, page 17

33 At this point, I will comment only on art, as opposed to the broader post-structuralist context of an Author

intangible space where the viewer and work engage in something similar to a dialogue. The painting of the flower may have a certain blue wallpaper in the background, one that is nearly identical to that which is in your grandmother's kitchen. Naturally, you recall your grandmother's kitchen as you view this work. Recalling your grandmother's kitchen results in you recalling your grandmother, and the (hopefully) fond feelings you associate with her and her kitchen. In fact, you can nearly smell the cookies she always baked. This developing train of thought and sensation is one of the ways in which an artwork seems to exist beyond itself. Of particular note is the intensely personal nature of this recollection. It is undoubtedly a qualeic sensation, and it is a token of a type-token relationship with the same artwork evoking different sensations in other viewers. Another viewer may associate the flower in the painting with the flowers she saw at a funeral and recall a different set of memories and sensations. Still another viewer may not have any tangible connection to the painting, but he may find the painting evokes a certain sadness in him, not necessarily one associated with any memory. Rather, the painting has evoked a quale in him, too. It is in much the same way that we say a beautiful performance moves us to tears. We do not cry for the performance, but for the experience.

## VIII – Evoking the Ineffable

In pursuit of the same ends as this essay, I produced a body of artwork composed of 14

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and Text to avoid both confusion and overstepping the bounds of my own experience.



photographs, which are displayed in pairs in such a way that they cannot be viewed simultaneously. (The pairs of photographs themselves are reproduced at the end of this essay in the annex.) The photographs, combined with how they are displayed, create a situation that evokes the quale we have been discussing. There are two versions of the prints in each set; the unaltered, or “straight,” and the altered, or “degraded” print. The straight print provides all the information available based on the image that was made. The degraded print has been manipulated to the extent where it remains recognizable but the change is significant enough that the difference is noticeable. The prints are displayed in such a way that the viewer is unable to draw an immediate comparison between the two images. Under ideal conditions, all the straight prints would be seen by the viewer first, accumulating all of the physical knowledge about each photograph. When the viewer moves on to the degraded prints, he will attempt to recall the straight prints in an effort to resolve the degraded prints in front of him.

When the viewer attempts to recall the straight prints, he will actually be engaged in recollecting an episodic memory of the event he experienced moments prior. Additionally, the degraded images have had either minor details, or other non-essential elements, altered. The decision regarding which parts of the degraded images to alter was made with the intention that they be relatively easy to forget as very little time will elapse between viewing the straight print and the degraded print in the dual presentation.

In some photos, the viewer may actually find himself engaged in optimal episodic reconstruction, particularly with the images where multiple minor details have been altered, such as the case of the young man standing before the refrigerator. The refrigerator door is an example

we have discussed before, where our minds may easily supply details whose veracity is questionable as the element in question is so ubiquitous and ordinary.

All of the images were made with the intention of creating an aesthetic appeal that creates a desire to view them, while also remaining relatively banal so they are not too memorable – or at least not completely. They are images easily identified: a young woman watching television; a half-played chess match; and an unmade bed. The familiarity the viewer has with all of the images aids the viewer in distancing himself from any singular image and focusing instead on the final frontier of the post-structuralist movement – the space between viewer and artwork.

Pairing images, especially photographs, is not a new method of art making. The diptych has been employed for hundreds of years. However, in this case, where the intended experience relies on two images, the viewer, and a certain amount of elapsed time, the definition of the space between viewer and artwork need be slightly more malleable than in many other instances. Here we require that the viewer interact with the first image, the straight print, long enough to form some sort of episodic memory to access later. At this point, the viewer has not experienced the sensation we are attempting to generate. If he were to leave now, he would be none the more knowledgeable, epiphenomenally speaking, regarding the quale we have discussed than when he entered the gallery.

If the viewer does progress to the second image of any pair(s), he will likely find himself attempting to “fill in the blanks” and, in a process so subtle he will hardly notice it, he will be recalling his episodic memory of a few moments prior to fill in the missing details. It would be

very unlikely that he could recall all the details with any amount of certainty; he will probably find himself grasping at some detail that he feels he should know, those details of his memory of the first image. Despite his repeated attempts to recall this detail of the memory, it will seem forever lost to him.

### IX – Post-Experience

By combining the information contained in this article with a little hands-on, epiphenomenal research, I have established a starting point for further discussion concerning memory and the associated sensations. In no way is this project intended to be an exhaustive enquiry into the subjects it addresses. Rather, it is an attempt to de-mystify and illuminate experiences common to all of us. It would be foolish to assume everyone who engages with this project will walk away saying, “Ah-ha! Now I am infinitely more knowledgeable, epiphenomenally, regarding the attempted recall of episodic memories than I was an hour ago.” I have only discussed actively recalled episodic memory and have only spent time on one sensation it can generate. However, we have shown that just because something lacks a name and a form does not mean it is beyond comprehension and reason. It can still be discussed, and under the right circumstances, we are even able to evoke these *qualia* in others.

Engaging with this project will undoubtedly create a larger common knowledge-base to facilitate further discussion. However, it would be foolish to assume this project covers all

potentialities related to sensations associated with the attempted recall of episodic memory. I doubt a perfect understanding of that, or perhaps any experience at all, is a truly tangible goal. Rather, I hope only that to bring us to the point where we can all say, to some degree or another, that we understand, and have experienced, the ineffable.