

Phenomenal Consciousness, Sense Impressions, and the Logic of ‘What It’s Like’

(For *Consciousness and Emotion*)

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1. What It’s Like: the Vulgar and the Philosophical

Many philosophical puzzles about phenomenal consciousness are raised in terms of “what it’s like” to have certain experiences: to see red or taste a pomegranate, to be in love or to be afraid, to wake up with a hangover, maybe even to be a bat. To the extent that such discourse is dismissed as unintelligible, one fails to have a satisfying theory of phenomenal consciousness. Yet such discourse notoriously resists analysis in purely physiological or functional terms. The so-called “hard problem” of consciousness arises because statements involving the qualitative character of experience – or “qualia” – bear no evident logical connections to descriptions couched in physical, physiological, functional, or even intentional terms. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t abandon all hope for unraveling the mystery of phenomenal consciousness. Just as so-called *semantic* accounts of truth aim to make sense of proper applications of the truth predicate, a semantic account of phenomenal consciousness would attempt to regiment talk about “what it’s like” to have certain experiences. The task of providing a *logic* for such talk hasn’t been seriously pursued, and too quickly dismissed. This paper attempts to address that lacuna. In it, I argue that the appearance of an explanatory gap arises because talk about “what it’s like” performs an important, yet perfectly unmysterious, epistemic function that cannot be played by ordinary physical vocabulary. Once this function is understood, we can readily account for many of the puzzling things we are tempted to *say* about phenomenal consciousness, including those statements taken as evidence for the hard problem – namely, attributions of knowledge of what it’s like to have various

experiences as well as inter- and intra-personal comparisons of the qualitative character of experience.

Before we begin, however, we need to distinguish the philosophical conception of what it's like from more ordinary notions. For while the former, sophisticated idea is presumably an extension of less sophisticated counterparts, everyday talk about what it's like differs from rarefied philosophical parlance. When *the vulgar* (or those not trafficking in the consciousness industry) ask one another to describe "what it's like" to have a certain experience, they're generally interested in the experience's effect upon the subject's psychological and emotional makeup. Inter- and intra- personal comparisons of what it's like are thus relatively unproblematic. Your reactions to skydiving might be similar to my reactions to snowboarding. And your first taste of Arrogant Bastard Ale (the bottle says you'll probably not like it) might be very different from a subsequent taste, if and when you grow to appreciate an exquisitely hopped beer.

However, the experiences that form the stock and trade of philosophical discussions of phenomenal consciousness (e.g., seeing red, smelling creosote, or hearing a buzzing sound) are often too thin to elicit distinctive reactive attitudes. Furthermore, we are tempted to say of those very reactive or emotional attitudes (anxiety, excitement, and the like), that there is something it is like to have them. So when those in the consciousness biz talk about what it's like to have a certain experience, they're apparently after something else: the qualitative character of an experience, or its so-called "qualia." Such a conception is meant to answer to widely-held intuitions that the "subjective feeling" of experiencing a particular property might have been other than what it actually is, and that how it feels for one to have a certain experience could differ from how that same experience feels to another. Rather than ridiculing this sophisticated conception as sophistical philosophical nonsense, in the hopes that it will eventually just go away (an attitude copped, for instance, by Dennett, 1988), the aim of this paper is to clarify many of the funny things we in the biz are tempted to *say* about this qualitative dimension of phenomenal experience. That is, I think an account of qualia (or 'what it's

like’) can be constructed, which respects these intuitions, or at least renders them intelligible.

2. Sellarsian Sense Impressions

Let’s begin with an almost embarrassingly mundane observation. Competent speakers of natural languages must learn how to apply observation vocabulary in experience.

We all need to be trained to make even the most basic observation reports. Our ability to classify things *as red*, or even *as looking red* is not innate. While we have biologically innate predilections for certain classification schemes, other speakers of our language must teach us how to make observation reports that accord with the specific classificatory dispositions of our fellows. Subjects thus face the task of coordinating or calibrating states of themselves with the application of observable concepts in experience. Simply put, speakers must learn to report the presence of a certain property (e.g., red) whenever they are struck in certain fashions – that is, whenever they are in certain internal discriminatory states. And they must further learn when to *restrain* their acquired dispositions to report such a presence when circumstances are such that the subject’s being in a particular state is *not* a reliable indicator of something’s actually exhibiting that property. In those circumstances, subjects learn to say that it only “looks” or “seems” as if that property is present. They learn to report merely that they are stimulated in a way that, under normal circumstances, *would* reliably indicate that property’s presence.

Now even though these internal discriminatory states are presumably physiological states (and states of the nervous system in particular), subjects are typically not able to identify them in physiological terms. Even our most accomplished neuroscientists have trouble identifying the neural correlates of the simplest sensations. The point here is that ordinary observation vocabulary – including ‘looks’-talk – is conceptually prior to a developed neuroscience. In speaking about the task facing speakers as they learn to apply observation concepts in experience, we should remain theoretically non-committal regarding the underlying physiological substrate.

In the final episode of his “Myth of Jones,” Wilfrid Sellars (2001, Part XVI) showed us how the philosophical notion of a *sense impression* could be introduced as a theoretically silent way to refer to such discriminatory states of subjects. Roughly, Sellars regarded a sense impression of some particular perceptible property as the imprint that is characteristically left upon us by the presence of that property under normal circumstances, which can then be used by that subject to elicit non-inferential judgements of its presence.¹ And so the task described above is that of subjects learning how to coordinate sense impressions with the application of appropriate observation concepts. To borrow a term from Dretske (1988), one might say that subjects must face the task of “recruiting” appropriate internal states of theirs to play the role of indicators of particular observable features of the world.

One of Sellars’ chief accomplishments was showing how once sense impressions have been introduced into our vocabulary, it turns out to be a trivial trick for subjects to come to “observe” when they’re having certain sense impressions. Following Lycan (1996), one might say that subjects acquire a sort of “higher-order perception.” To report the presence of a red sense impression, subjects merely need to detect when they are disposed to report when something is or looks red to them. Thus subjects have a readily explicable authority over reports about their own sense impressions that they lack in the case of reports about external qualities and the sense impressions of others. Moreover, since subjects can be trained to make observation reports of their own sense impressions, one might be tempted to say that those impressions leave their own “higher-order” impressions. Curiously enough, since the conditions in which one is disposed to report the presence of a red sense impression are precisely those in which something is or looks red to that subject, the sense impression of red turns out to be equivalent to the impression of that impression. It pleasantly follows that reports *about* sense impressions are, what you might say, “phenomenally transparent.”

The overall Sellarsian strategy is to work from the outside in, rather than the inside out. Our ideas of inner sense impressions derive from our concepts of the

properties they are impressions of. To believe otherwise – to think that our taxonomies of sense impressions are conceptually prior to external properties – is, like classical empiricism, to subscribe to the “myth of the given.” Though Sellars doesn’t do so in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, this account of sense impressions extends nicely to the self attribution of other psychological states said to have phenomenal content. I’m thinking here of inner sensory states like pain, brute cravings or urges, moods, and of course, emotional states like anger, fear or exhilaration. When acquiring the concepts of such states, we learn that they have behavioral and expressive cores; their originary application is to subjects reacting or expressing themselves in certain ways to specific types of situations. As Darwin famously advanced, there appear to be characteristic responses and facial expressions associated with, and indicative of, each of the basic emotions. Put much too crudely, fearful creatures typically react to situations they find threatening by cowering or fleeing, while angry creatures typically bare their teeth and show aggression. By the same token, there are characteristic reactions to bodily harm that we associate with creatures in pain. We then discover that just as in the case of sensing external qualities, we can in our own case associate such inner sensory, emotional, and psychological states with particular Sellarsian sense impressions. They each have their distinctive “feels” for us, such as the characteristic flush of anger or the trembling and quickening of the heart and respiratory rates associated with fear. Using these sense impressions, we can effortlessly and reliably report the applicability of such concepts to our own person without having to observe our own outward behavior, and can even begin to apply them in our own case to those non-standard situations in which such feelings fail to produce the standard responses (i.e., fear that doesn’t result in flight). And we can begin to understand similar self-reports in others. Consequently, we can readily account for the *privileged access* we appear to have with respect to many of our own psychological and emotional states that we don’t have when we consider those states in others, and in our own case, we begin to apply these concepts in experience, and so make non-inferential “observations” of our own states of mind.²

For our purposes, several features of this broadly Sellarsian account of sense impressions warrant further comment:

(1) To begin with, sense impressions are *functionally* specified, understood as internal discriminatory states that dispose subjects to make certain observation reports. As such, they are not identified in physical or physiological terms and could be realized in myriad ways. Different sense impressions of the same perceptual quality might have vastly different intrinsic constitutions. A sense impression of red for a typical human might be realized in a wholly different manner in a bug-eyed alien ... or a bat (if indeed, bats have such impressions at all). Sense impressions do not have to be similar even between members of the same species. To take a striking example, persons with synaesthesia appear to have recruited sense impressions governing their application of various observational concepts, which are less discriminatory than normal folk, and which are subject to an unusual range of non-standard conditions. Conditions in which they are inclined to say something “looks red” to them (such as the presence of particular numbers or letters) can be quite different, and slightly more extensive, than the conditions in which I’m apt to say something looks red to me. Since they are functionally specified, sense impressions are not to be *identified* with states of the central nervous system, although they might be *realized* by such states. The precise manner in which different sense impressions are realized in creatures like us is a matter of empirical investigation and discovery. Though it might seem a bit weird, there is nothing in the bare notion of a sense impression that would prohibit non-material realizations of sense impressions. The bare notion of a sense impression is thus neutral between materialism and dualism.

(2) Sense impressions do not have to possess the qualities that they are impressions of. A sense impression of red is most likely not itself red.³ Nevertheless, sense impressions stand (or are supposed to stand) in containment and exclusion relationships to one another in much the same way that the features that they are impressions of stand in relation to one another. This thought is all we need to capture the truth behind the idea that sense impressions are (or at least should be) *images* of the external world. Just as an instance of some determinate shade of red, such as scarlet or crimson, is at the same time an instance of the determinable red, the particular internal

state that realizes (or plays the role of) a sense impression of scarlet at the same time realizes a sense impression of red. That is, the class of red sense impressions includes that of scarlet sense impressions. Similarly, red and green sense impressions are supposed to exclude one another just like properties of redness and greenness presumably exclude one another in the external world.⁴

(3) The richness of our sensory manifold far outstrips the observable discriminations we are able to draw in natural language. Our sense impressions are variegated in ways that we cannot express through our concepts. And it is evident we could recruit our sense impressions to indicate features of ourselves and the world other than those that we actually do recruit them to indicate. Subjects can thus have sense impressions of particular perceptible and emotive qualities without yet having acquired the concepts of those qualities. Even non-linguistic creatures could be understood (by us) to have sense impressions. They just don't recognize them as such. Insofar as there is some characteristic way in which red things in normal circumstances strike a dog, allowing them to discriminate red things, we can regard dogs as having sense impressions of red (they might of course turn out to be color-blind). But dogs are not conscious of their sense impressions; they aren't aware of them as such and certainly don't report their presence. So while we might credit them with the sentience possessed by any creature in sensory contact with its environment, we need not credit them with the full-blown sapience enjoyed by concept-mongering creatures. And insofar as dogs do not endeavor to coordinate their own sensory states with the (verbal) application of observation concepts, we need not conclude that they have any idea of what it's like for them to see *red* (though there might be something that it's like for us to view red things through doggy eyes). If you happen to think that dogs do apply observation concepts, then I kindly ask you to slide further on down the great chain of being.

(4) Finally, although *we* classify sense impressions in terms of particular sense contents, we do not have to regard these contents as part of their intrinsic natures. There is no need to assign sense impressions any "non-conceptual intentional content" (Tye, 2000), or meaning that isn't parasitic upon conceptual meaning. As mentioned above,

though some non-linguistic creatures might have red sense impressions, there is no need to think that there is any sense in which these impressions are red *to them*. More significantly, the physiological states that turn out to realize my sense impressions of red might not have done so. Had the world been other than the way it is (or had I been outfitted with those color-inverting lenses of philosophical legend), then that state might instead have been recruited as an indicator of green. In fact, the physiological state that serves now as my sense impression of red might not serve that function in the future. We must continue to recalibrate our dispositions to report when things are or seem red to us (a monitoring capacity that would seem to be unavailable to so-called “blindsighted” individuals). As my perceptual equipment ages, it might undergo a “red shift.” The physiological state that once was recruited to be my sense impression of red might no longer be a reliable indicator of redness in my environs, in which case I would be obliged to recruit a different state (should one still be available, and I not have become color-blind).

3. The Function of ‘What It’s Like’

With those remarks about Sellarsian sense impressions behind us, we can now proceed to the punch line. I submit that many of the curious things philosophers have said about phenomenal consciousness or the qualitative character of conscious experience can be understood as making perfectly straightforward assertions about sense impressions understood in this Sellarsian fashion. In particular, the expression ‘what it’s like’ (in its philosophical sense) functions as an elliptical and pre-theoretical means of picking out the particular manner in which a subject realizes a certain kind of sense impression. Such a proposal makes evident and intuitive sense of inter- and intra-personal comparisons of the qualitative dimension of experience. Due to differences in our perceptual constitutions and the structures of our perceptual modalities, what it’s like for us to see red might be completely different from what it’s like for a bat or bug-eyed alien to see red, so much so that we could not understand what it would be like to be either. And while what it’s like for me to see red is presumably pretty much what it’s like for most everyone else, this generalization can break down in the case of folk like synaesthetes, who have recruited non-standard sense impressions to indicate externally observable

properties. Furthermore, since my perceptual apparatus could change over time, even though this change is so gradual that I fail to realize it, what it's like for me to see red now might well *not* be what it's like for me to see red in the distant future or past. It would even seem to be possible (albeit highly improbable) for what it's like for me to see red eventually to shift all the way across the spectrum and become what it's like for me to see green. In effect, I would have been outfitted over time with those color-inverting lenses of philosophical legend.

One appealing aspect of this proposal is that it allows certain internalist intuitions or prejudices to take hold, while at the same time enabling us to be externalists about intentional or representational content. On this account, internally indistinguishable subjects (those "molecule-by-molecule" duplicates of philosophical fantasy) will have experiences with similar phenomenal characters, even though external considerations dictate that the representational contents of their experiences are radically different.⁵

On this account, it is the functional unspecificity of sense impressions that allows one to suspect that what it's like to have a particular kind of experience could have been other than what it actually is. This is precisely the kind of intuition that allows so-called "modal arguments" for the explanatory gap to get off the ground (Chalmers, 1996; Levine, 1983). And the present proposal nicely affords two distinct ways to cash it out. On the one hand, 'what it's like' can be taken to refer rigidly to the indicated sense content, allowing the internal discriminatory state to vary. Read in this fashion, the thought that what it's like to have a certain sort of experience could have been otherwise means that it is conceivable for one to have recruited some other internal discriminatory state to indicate that sense content. Alternately, 'what it's like' can be taken to rigidly pick out the internal discriminatory state, allowing the indicated sense content to vary. On this interpretation, the thought above asserts that that internal discriminatory state could have been recruited to indicate an entirely different sense content. Taken together, these separate thoughts generate the idea that 'what it's like' is determined neither by a subject's physiology nor by the contents of its intentional states. But now we can see that these intuitions in favor of an explanatory gap are motivated by different ways in which

one can pick out the referent of ‘what it’s like.’ In other words, the appearance of an explanatory gap trades on a readily explicable referential ambiguity.⁶

Perhaps more significantly, this story about sense impressions can help untangle the issues surrounding the so-called “knowledge argument.”⁷ Sellars himself famously thought that sense impressions play little role justifying empirical knowledge. He also had little truck with the skeptical worries generated by absent and inverted qualia scenarios. Nevertheless, it’s clear Mary (the color benighted cognitive scientist in Frank Jackson’s oft-discussed thought experiment) has not come to face the task that the language of sense-impressions has been introduced to describe – namely that of coordinating her own internal states with the application of particular observation concepts in experience. The knowledge argument gains its force, because it’s unclear how Mary’s assumed vast knowledge of physiological facts ever could help to overcome this task. Doing brain science by itself will not tell Mary when to report non-inferentially the internal occurrence of a red sense-impression.

When Mary escapes her black and white environment (a place I like to think of as the Kansas depicted in *The Wizard of Oz*) and spies a ripe tomato, which she somehow already knows to be red, she exclaims, “Ah, so *this* is what it’s like to see red.” What has she learned, and what kind of thought does her exclamation express? It seems reasonable to suppose that her exclamation amounts to the claim that she is now having a red sense impression. If that is the case, then it would be true enough, and it would be a piece of knowledge unavailable to her till now, simply because she’s never had the opportunity to have such an impression. But there’s nothing in this that can’t be cashed out in materialist terms. So if that was the only kind of knowledge that Mary gains, then the so-called knowledge argument would lack the anti-materialist force its proponents take it to have. Instead, Mary is claimed to gain some *further* knowledge: namely “knowledge of what it’s like” to see red. What, then, does *that* amount to?

4. Knowing What It’s Like

I propose that attributions of knowledge of what it's like to have a certain kind of experience should be understood as claims that a subject has a justified ability to apply corresponding observation concepts in experience. While most speakers would qualify as capable enforcers of the norms governing color reports, it would be irresponsible to extend this authority to just anyone. A color-blind person would obviously be an incompetent teacher of color terms, even if he knows a great deal about the human visual system, as well as the inferential connections between colors and other empirical concepts. It would also be reasonable to withhold this authority from those, such as young children, who haven't been sufficiently indoctrinated into our reporting practices. Unlike the color blind, Mary (we suppose) has the *potential* to make accurate color discriminations. She also knows all the inferential connections color terms bear to the other terms in our language. However, until she *justifiably demonstrates* that she can apply color concepts in experience as reliably as competent speakers, we can reasonably deny that she truly *knows* what it's like to have perceptual experiences of color.⁸ She clearly lacks a justificatory status, which manifests itself in our reasonable reluctance to grant her authority enforcing the norms governing our observational vocabulary. And this would be so, even if she happens to possess an uncanny *ability* to make accurate color discriminations. As a result, we can say that knowing what it's like requires more than just having a perceptual or recognitional ability; one must be in a position to *justify* this discriminative capacity as well.⁹

Notice crucially that I haven't claimed that Mary is unable to entertain any specific *beliefs*. Even during her stint in Kansas, she might *suspect* that something looks red to her yet fail to *know* this, for she fails to have the appropriate experience to justify this suspicion. Thus we can hang onto Jackson's conclusion that pre-release Mary lacks propositional knowledge that we would normally express with observation reports. Rather than missing the *ability* to form certain beliefs, she lacks the history or experience required for her to entertain those beliefs *responsibly*. And it is her assumed epistemic responsibility, not simply her lack of experience, which really prevents her from ever having entertained beliefs that things look red to her.

Consider how this proposal applies to those ever-popular subjects of philosophical fantasy: our physical and functional duplicates spontaneously generated out of swampmuck. Such abominations might make all sorts of claims about how things look to them, and they might try to convince us that they have the requisite experience and know-how to enforce the norms governing our observation vocabulary. But the justifications they give for entitlement to this authority would fail, simply on the grounds that they would be *false*. So even though, by some remarkable coincidence, some such beings happen to have the discriminatory capacity and classificatory dispositions to be competent reporters, it still would be inappropriate for us to so treat them. For if it truly were a cosmic coincidence that they have this gift, then we would be in no position to responsibly believe this to be the case.¹⁰

Insofar as their perceptual apparatus differs from our own, we'd also be justifiably reluctant to grant perceptually exotic creatures – bats, bots, or bug-eyed aliens, for instance – the authority to govern the use of our color terms. Lacking the perceptual capacities to employ our observation concepts in experience, they might not ever attain the status of full-fledged (norm-enforcing) members of our linguistic community. In particular, their different physiology might well prevent such beasts from being able to tell when things are likely only to “look red” to a human observer. That is, their different perceptual equipment might prevent them from anticipating our justifiable perceptual errors. Likewise, we would be unable to master fully a bat's observation concepts. Moreover, their different *responsive* repertoires might preclude them from having anything more than a rudimentary grasp of what it's like to have our *emotional* attitudes (and vice-versa). Hence we can respect the intuition that we are unable to know what it's like to be a bat, without having to claim we can't so much as entertain the same beliefs or that there is some sort of special phenomenal content wholly unavailable to us. Some perceptually exotic creatures might even make the same color discriminations that we do (in their own terms, of course). The conditions of proper application for some of their observation concepts would *mirror* those of our own color concepts. Still, if we lack sufficient contact with these creatures to justifiably believe this extensional equivalency, we can reasonably deny them the authority to enforce the rules governing the use of *our*

color concepts. So while they would know what it's like *for them* to see red, they might not know what it's like *for us* to see red.

This last point shows how we can deal with an objection that could be raised to approaches like the one advanced here, which tie knowing what it's like to have certain experiences with linguistic mastery or grasp of particular perceptual concepts. The objection has us suppose that Mary, while still in Kansas, has gained access to several unlabeled paint chips, at least one of which happens to be red. With that chip in view, Mary comes to have her first red visual sense impression, and so one might be tempted to say that at that point she comes to know what it's like to see red. Yet she fails to realize that it is a *red* sense impression that she has come to experience. So while she comes to know what it's like to see red, she nevertheless does not yet have a justified ability to apply *the concept red* in experience. It might seem, then, that our proposed analysis of knowing what it's like fails.

But this objection ignores the perspectival nature of knowledge attributions generally. While I grant that Mary has failed to demonstrate mastery over our concept of red, presumably she can still classify future visual experiences as being of roughly the same type as she has when she views the red paint chip. Thus we might still claim that she has acquired a justified ability to apply *an* observation concept which she could demonstratively identify as “the shade of *that* chip,” and which turns out to be more or less extensionally equivalent to our concept of red. And so, in a *de re* sense (or from our perspective), we might say *of the property red*, that Mary has learned what it's like to see *it*. But in a *de dicto* sense (or from the perspective of *her* concepts), we can reasonably deny that she knows what it's like to see red. Not until Mary comes to realize that her experience is one that *we* would classify as a seeing of red, would she characterize herself as knowing what it's like to see red. Once we register that attributions of knowledge of what it's like admit to the same *de dicto/de re* distinctions as attributions of knowledge more generally, we can see that the objection fails to provide a true counterexample to the proposed analysis. Indeed, I take this consistency with other types of knowledge attributions to be a great virtue of the present account.

In sum, the knowledge argument rests on the fact that one cannot discern whether subjects know what it's like to have an experience just by examining the causal transactions inside their heads as they have those experiences. But that merely shows that such a narrow focus abstracts away from the *epistemically* significant, historical facts required for them to have such knowledge. The proper moral isn't that facts about phenomenal consciousness must remain objectively ineffable, for these further social and historical features are by no means inaccessible from a third-person perspective. Moreover, we can finally see why subjects would find it important to possess knowledge of what it's like. For justifiably applying observation concepts in experience entitles subjects to do things forbidden to the inexperienced. Though "swampzombies" might be inclined to behave as I do, others would be disposed to treat them differently. Hence having knowledge of what it's like really can matter or make a difference to conscious subjects.¹¹

5. Conclusion

By making sense of the puzzling things philosophers are inclined to say about "what it's like" to have certain experiences, I think that I've begun to sketch a perfectly unmysterious account of phenomenal consciousness or "qualia."¹² Now some might object that such an approach is too deflationary to explain phenomenal consciousness (Chalmers, 1996, pp. 186-9). While it might explicate our *judgements* about the qualitative character of experience, it fails to address the puzzling features of phenomenal consciousness itself. It's no more committed to the genuine existence of qualia than explications of religious belief must be committed to the existence of deities. But this objection ignores a respect in which this account is not eliminativist. I haven't simply told a story about how we come to believe in phenomenal consciousness; I've also shown how free-standing claims about what it's like to have certain experiences can be *true*. Thus this account licenses beliefs in phenomenal consciousness itself, not just beliefs in those beliefs.¹³

Indeed, a semantic account of phenomenal consciousness such as the one advanced here, would seem tailor-made to bridge the explanatory gap. Those who subscribe to the gap occasionally bid us to imagine beings who are physiologically and psychologically similar to us, and who live in physically similar environments. They then claim that despite these similarities, it is conceivable for such beings to differ from us phenomenally. Since there could be phenomenal differences without any corresponding differences in the physical, physiological, and psychological circumstances, it is argued that physical or physiological explanations of consciousness are not in the offing.

So are there any unmysterious differences between us and the denizens of those imagined worlds, which might explain the appearance of an explanatory gap? I think so. Despite our similarities, we belong to distinct linguistic communities, defer to different experts, and thus speak distinct languages. Despite a hypothesized remarkable degree of intertranslatability between our languages, their concepts are not really our concepts, and like the bug-eyed aliens envisioned above, it would be irresponsible for us to grant them authority over our observation terms. Since they don't apply our particular observation concepts in experience, they wouldn't really know (in the *de dicto* sense) what it's like to see *red*. Indeed, we may say that seeing *red* is nothing to them, even though they might apply some extensionally equivalent concept. Hence it seems natural to try to trace the mystery of phenomenal consciousness to logical peculiarities of the discourse we use to describe it, much as I've attempted to do here.¹⁴

¹ As Brian Coates (2004) usefully explains, Sellars initially introduced the notion of a sense impression to distinguish sensations from thoughts. The sense impression is the non-conceptual "descriptive residue" that distinguishes a perceiving that something is the case from a mere thinking that it is the case.

² Curiously, I think the case of doxastic attitudes is somewhat different. Instead of associating particular beliefs with characteristic feels or sense impressions, we learn to ascribe to ourselves a particular belief by looking to the strength of the evidence that we have that that belief is *true*. For that reason, ascribing to oneself the belief that *p* is pragmatically equivalent to asserting *p*. For that reason as well, beliefs are not said to have much of a phenomenal component. For more discussion of doxastic first-person authority, see Beisecker (2003).

³ Note that this idea is not at all compelling when applied to the other phenomenal states we've been considering. An impression of anger or fear is not itself angry or fearful, just as an impression of pain

would seem to be the wrong sort of thing to be in pain. Instead, it makes more sense to ask whether we *react* to these impressions like we react to the objects of our emotions. Must an impression of pain itself be painful, or must we fear the impression of fear? Such questions strike me to be very much like asking whether a sense impression of red would have to *look red* to its subject. According to the account on offer here, it clearly would not. I suspect, then, that it would be a mistake to identify fear, pain, and the like with their impressions.

⁴ It will be obvious here (and throughout) that I appeal to a naïve realism about colors (and other perceptual properties), according to which such properties are primarily attributed to (or possessed by) everyday objects in the external world, and not sensations. I'm afraid that this paper is not the place to defend such a quotidian position.

⁵ These internalist intuitions pose one of the greatest challenges to intentionalist (or representationalist) theories of phenomenal content (another being that phenomenal qualities attend other psychological states, such as emotions, which aren't clearly representational). By most accounts, intentional (representational) content is externally determined. Consequently, it seems that one can dream up cases in which undetectable changes in a subject's environment can generate changes in intentional content without producing any corresponding phenomenal changes (see Block, 1990). Moreover, since most theories of intentional content are also *functional*, subjects with seemingly distinct phenomenal profiles could have equivalent intentional profiles. Thus intentional and phenomenal distinctions wouldn't seem to track one another, making it unlikely that phenomenal content could be reduced or understood in terms of intentional, representational content. In response, some representationalists (Tye, 2000) have sought to invent a distinct notion of "non-conceptual" or "perceptual" intentional content that cleaves more closely to these internalist intuitions. The account on offer here shows why such a maneuver is unnecessary.

⁶ This type of referential ambiguity is characteristic of definite descriptions in modal contexts. For instance, the statement, "My wife could have been in pictures." similarly admits of two distinct readings. It could either be about Monica (my actual, current wife) in particular, or it might be understood as making a claim about the range of my erstwhile marital prospects. Outside the philosophy of language, such referential ambiguity appears to generate little trouble, and even less excitement.

⁷ See Jackson (1982). The knowledge argument continues to be one of the most vivid illustrations of the hard problem of consciousness. For the uninitiated, here's a little bit of background: Jackson's initial aim was to draw out an intuition that there is some sort of epistemic gap between phenomenal and non-phenomenal facts. To do so, he invited us to consider the celebrated case of Mary, a neuroscientist who is supposed to know everything there is to know about the mechanics of the human visual system, but for some fantastic reason (typically imprisonment in a wholly black-and-white environment), she has never had a red sense impression. Most are inclined to agree that despite her vast knowledge of neuromechanics, Mary nevertheless lacks "knowledge of what it's like" to see red. So the thought experiment suggests that phenomenal knowledge cannot be reduced to, or derived from, theoretical knowledge of physical, physiological, or even functional and representational facts. Originally, Jackson went on to elevate this epistemic gap into a metaphysical one. That is, he took the thought experiment to support the thesis that phenomenal facts are ontologically distinct from the mundanely physical, physiological or functional. Although fanciful and woefully underdescribed, it seems hard to resist the intuition that Mary learns *something* when she escapes her black and white environment. The challenge for materialistically inclined philosophers of mind is to explain (or explain away) her post-release enhanced epistemic standing without invoking mysterious, non-material "phenomenal" facts.

⁸ Observe that simply having an experience need not be sufficient for *knowing* what it would be like to have that kind of experience. One can see this most clearly in the case of the perceptually subtle qualities attributed, for instance to wine, beer, or chocolate. Utterly lacking a connoisseur's palate, a single passing acquaintance with an expensive wine will most likely not be enough for me to claim that I truly *know* what it's like to experience its finer characteristics.

⁹ For this reason, we need to distinguish this analysis of knowing what it's like from the various versions of the "ability hypothesis" advanced by Lewis (1990). Perhaps the most popular type of response to the knowledge argument, Lewis suggested that the knowledge Mary gains is not factual knowledge at all (or knowledge *that*), but rather some sort of ability (or knowledge *how*). Originally, Lewis proposed that upon having her first red visual impressions, Mary gains new imaginative capacities – e.g., the ability to conjure up a red impression in memory. More sophisticated versions of this strategy hold that Mary gains

recognition capacities or something like the ability to access physical facts in a new “quasi-indexical” fashion (see Loar, 1990, Carruthers, 2000, Perry, 2001, and Papineau, 2002). Without going into great detail, the trouble with these proposals is that it is hard to pinpoint exactly what the ability or abilities in question are, for it seems that one can pry them apart from the knowledge Mary gains upon her first red sense impression. For instance, one could reasonably suppose that Mary learns what it’s like to see red, even if she couldn’t later come to envisage it in imagination.

¹⁰ Moreover, if you’re of a frame of mind to believe that such beings don’t genuinely apply any observation concepts at all, on the grounds that they lack the requisite history to be true participants in a linguistic community, then you might conclude that there is *nothing* it is like for them to see red. For in that case the expression ‘what it’s like *for them* to see red’ fails to determine any referent. So in a certain sense, they’d be “zombies,” at least for a time, even though they’d try to convince us otherwise.

¹¹ I am aware that some critics will contend that such extrinsic, normative differences are, from a narrowly scientific perspective, explanatorily otiose. I think that such criticisms rest upon implausibly scientific (perhaps physicalistic) assumptions that systematically exclude the rational types of explanations, in which attributions of phenomenal consciousness (and other intentionally-freighted concepts) most naturally find their home. See my “Functionalism and Folk Psychology: How the Mental Earns its Keep” (forthcoming, 2004)

¹² To be sure, I cannot pretend to have offered a complete account of consciousness, for I have not addressed the issue of what would make a mental state conscious, as opposed to unconscious.

¹³ Notice as well that such attributions are *objective* or attribution-transcendent in that it can be *proper* to attribute to one knowledge of what it’s like to see red without anyone actually doing so, and that everyone’s attributing such knowledge to another (a “swampzombie,” perhaps) doesn’t make it the case that it would be *proper* to do so. So while knowledge of what it’s like makes sense only in the context of attributing such knowledge to others, it doesn’t follow that facts involving phenomenal consciousness are *merely attributed*.

¹⁴ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2001 *Tucson Conference on Consciousness*, the *XXIst World Congress of Philosophy* in Istanbul, and at a group session meeting of the *Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World* at the 2003 Eastern Division Meeting of the *American Philosophical Association*. Many thanks to the organizers, participants, and audiences of each of these sessions for their endurance and the help they provided at each stage along the way.

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