

What “What it’s Like” is All About

I. Night of the Living Dead: Zombies and the problem of intentionality for phenomenal discourse

An enduring problem in our understanding of phenomenality is roughly that of explaining how the so-called phenomenal or qualitative features of our conscious experience fit into the rest of nature. I think that the best way to shed light on this problem is by recasting it as an issue surrounding the reference or meanings of the phenomenal concepts we deploy to describe the qualitative dimensions of our conscious experience. After all, if we are to regard the problem as genuinely problematic, then the issue must be raised in some terms or other. The so-called “hard problem” of consciousness arises, because statements involving the qualitative character of experience bear no evident logical connections to, and even seem incommensurable with, descriptions couched in physical, physiological, functional, or even intentional terms. And so we’ve got what I like to think of as *the problem of intentionality for phenomenal discourse*. Philosophers have typically attempted to conceptualize the phenomenal realm in terms of “what it’s like” to have certain conscious experiences. So the problem of phenomenal consciousness ultimately boils down to what “what it’s like” is all about.

Curiously, it strikes me that this question about the aboutness of “what it’s like” would be most pressing for the zombie of recent philosophical legend, a creature defined by some as a being that is physically, functionally, intentionally, and otherwise materially equivalent to ordinary human beings like us, but who altogether lacks the “benefits” of, or any acquaintance with, consciousness. As the very embodiments of the ballyhooed explanatory gap (indeed, as it’s illustration *par excellence*), zombie attacks are unleashed upon those seeking some sort of materialistic unpacking of consciousness. Those who invoke zombies suppose that if such beings are indeed conceivable, then it would appear that the distribution of physical, functional, intentional, or otherwise mundane material properties in a world just couldn’t dictate or settle that world’s phenomenal character. Phenomenal properties, if they exist at all, would have to occupy an additional stratum of reality above and beyond the mundane material, as ordinarily understood. We may aptly dub such folk “super-materialists,” for the moniker nicely captures an ambivalence in how the position may be understood. To their materialist opponents, supermaterialism advocates us to accept the existence of spooky, *supernatural*, *non-material* features of the world, while supermaterialists themselves think they are simply urging us to acknowledge an underlying, intrinsic facet of our material existence, which has heretofore eluded systematic scientific investigation.

In response, most materialists have felt compelled to reject the zombie menace altogether. Taking great pains to expose how incoherent or unimaginably preposterous zombies would have to be, the zombie hypothesis, they claim, is ultimately inconceivable.¹ Either all this supermaterialistic talk about phenomenal consciousness, qualia, and “what it’s like” will turn out to be reducible to mundane material notions after all, or it will need to

¹ See, for instance, Robert Kirk’s *Zombies and Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

be eliminated (or “quined,” as Dennett might say). In the end, all those supermaterialistic intuitions behind explanatory gap arguments will need to be explained away. However, these same zombic hunches have a notorious, yet fitting, tendency to come back to life. So reductive materialists and eliminativists find themselves again and again in the awkward position of denying the apparent. As a result, the debate between conventional materialists and supermaterialists have often appeared to trade on the dull and stultifying thud of clashing intuitions.

More recently, a more accommodating materialist position has emerged, which grants the conceivability of zombies and their zombie worlds, yet denies their ultimate possibility. Noted zombeist David Chalmers calls these attempts to accommodate zombic hunches “type B materialism.” But while he expresses sympathy with their aims, he argues that such positions are bound to be unstable. To make a very long and technical story short, the problem, as Chalmers sees it, is that our discourse about consciousness (our phenomenal concepts, including talk about “what it’s like” to have conscious experience) is so rigid that any apparent conceptual gap between phenomenal and material concepts is bound to escalate into an actual ontological gap between the phenomenal and material realms.²

In what follows, I’ll wind up rejecting Chalmers’ line of reasoning; our talk about the phenomenal character of experience is not nearly as rigid as he suggests. But rather than take on this objection directly, my approach will be a tad more oblique. For missing in the long, dreary exchange between supermaterialists and their conventional materialist opponents is what I take to be the correct materialist response. That is to grant the explanatory gap, and yet to deny that our consciousness is somehow supermaterial (though some consciousness could be). In effect, that is to claim that *we* are the zombies that the super materialists have taken such pains to conceive and that conventional materialists have taken such pains to eradicate. As such, we have learned how to embrace explanatory gap intuitions, yet without the “benefits” of full-blooded supermaterial conscious experience.³

Now it will certainly be objected that my being a zombie is to be ruled out by definitional fiat. We cannot be zombies, doncha know, because by definition zombies are just like us, *except* that they lack our conscious experience. Fine; so be it. If zombies are defined as non-human (or not having *our* consciousness), then I’m perfectly content to give up the

² Chalmers’ case against type B materialism occupies sections 5 and 6 of “Consciousness and its Place in Nature, Chapter 27 of *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, edited by D. Chalmers (Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ To be sure, this option has occasionally been entertained, only to be discarded almost as soon as proffered. Witness Dennett’s playful comment on p. 406 of *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown, 1991) that perhaps the most satisfying response to the zombie argument is to conclude that zombies are “not just possible. They’re actual. We’re all zombies.” However, Dennett declines to treat this option seriously and warns us in a footnote that “it would be an act of desperate intellectual dishonesty to quote this assertion out of context!” Instead, his reasoned response to the zombie menace is thoroughly conventional (and in direct opposition to the one explored here); zombies must be stamped out as “unimaginably preposterous.” See also “The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies: Commentary of Moody Flanagan, and Polger,” Chapter 10 of *Brainchildren* (MIT, 1998)

term. But notice how this definition threatens to beg the question in favor of supermaterialism. Insofar as it defines zombies as different from us *and* as lacking any acquaintance with supermaterial qualia, it presupposes that our conscious experience must be something above and beyond the mundane material. However, if they must be so different from us, why shouldn't we just turn this reasoning on its head? Why not instead think of the zombies more like angelic beings, possessing an acquaintance with a supermaterial realm that we turn out to lack? In sum, we must be careful not to allow the supermaterialist to presuppose from the very outset that we have the acquaintance with supermaterial qualia that this materialist response brings into question. The issue of interest is not whether we differ from zombies, but whether our consciousness is of an angelic or a zombic sort.

In short, then, the position I am trying to stake out *as actual* is the one that is envisioned and granted to be *possible* by zombieists: that an explanatory gap between the phenomenal and the material exists and nevertheless there could be creatures who talk about consciousness much like we do yet turn out to lack "genuine" consciousness *as supermaterialists understand it*. My claim, then, is that whatever it is like to be me is equivalent to whatever it is like to be one of those things Chalmers and his ilk are envisioning and call a "zombie." Call them what you like; I'm one of *them*. Indeed, it should strike one that it's more than a tad awkward for a super-materialist to turn around and close off this admittedly possible scenario as somehow impossible after all, for that would just seem to play into the hands of their materialist opponents who've suspected all along that there is something deeply wrong with the very idea of a zombie.

To be sure, there is a long-recognized oddity about zombies. By supermaterialist's lights, there is nothing anyone can do to convince them that they are zombies, or that they lack the consciousness of "regular" folk. And there is nothing one can say in defense of the claim that we are *not* zombies that zombies themselves would not find convincing. They harbor the same zombic hunches that we do, and the hard problem of consciousness is every bit as hard for them as it is for us. The bare compellingness of zombie arguments does not separate us from them. Stranger still, it would even seem possible for non-zombies to learn how to master phenomenal concepts and come to talk effectively about their conscious experience *from zombies*. Whether or not one is a zombie turns out to be a matter of being *acquainted* with supermaterial qualia, and there are no *reasons* to be given to show that one is or is not so acquainted. So either zombies are horribly mistaken about the nature of their own conscious experience, or their phenomenal concepts turn out, unbeknownst to them, to mean something very different from what supermaterialists take our phenomenal concepts to mean.⁴

Indeed, I suspect that this little bit of weirdness is what has led so many to insist on the absurdity of the zombie hypothesis. But rather than rejecting the hypothesis as somehow self-refuting, I think that the oddity shows that we should ultimately embrace it as describing the conditions of our actual world. So in this admittedly perverse little paper, I'd like to raise the problem of the intentionality for phenomenality *from the zombie's*

⁴ See, for instance, Todd Moody, "Conversations with Zombies," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 1:2 (1994), pp. 196-200.

perspective. Indeed, I will suggest in all seriousness, that I am just such a creature, and that the intentionality of my own phenomenal discourse is very different from what supermaterialists take it to be. So though it might seem fitting for folk like Chalmers to embrace an actual zombie (a zombie Dave, no less!), I'm afraid my presence would give them cold comfort. Indeed, I suspect it should frighten the bejeezus out of them. For as we all know, where there is one zombie there are bound to be more – many more. And while I have no untoward designs upon your *brain*, I am as hell-bent as any of the living dead on infecting your *mind* with the idea (or would it be better to say “meme”?) that you too are a zombie yourself.

Perhaps the greatest resistance to the idea that I'm truly what I claim to be comes from the fact that I'm perfectly self-reflective and I talk with such facility about “what it's like” to have conscious experiences. My strategy for waging “meme”-warfare will be to explain how zombies like me can learn to talk about the so-called qualitative dimension of our experiences in a way that respects the same intuitions that motivate arguments for supermaterialism, and which allows them to pass as so “normal.” If my account of how I came to talk about “what it's like” sounds plausible, or (better yet) familiar, then perhaps I will have succeeded in my mission of converting you to the unholy ranks of the living dead (or, if you prefer, the walking unconscious).

II. Dawn of the Dead: Sense Impressions and Comparing “What it's Like”

Even a zombie like me is disposed to talk about “what it's like” to have various conscious experiences. I specifically use such talk to draw intersubjective comparisons between such experiences.⁵ Much of the time these judgments appear grounded in straightforward similarities and differences in the perceptual constitutions of the compared subjects. For instance, due to differences in our perceptual equipment and relative discriminatory capacities, I'm inclined to say that “what it's like” for me to see red is likely different from “what it's like” for a bat, a bot, or a bug-eyed alien to see red, so much so that I

⁵ We need to distinguish at the outset the philosophical conception of ‘what it's like’ from unproblematic everyday notions. For while the former, sophisticated idea is presumably an extension of less sophisticated counterparts, quotidian 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 constitution. Inter- and intra- personal comparisons of what it's like are thus relatively unproblematic. Your reactions to going to the mall might be similar to my reactions to going to the pub. And your first taste of, say, brain might be very different from subsequent tastes, especially if you come to develop “a taste” for it. The experiences that form the stock and trade of philosophical discussions of phenomenal consciousness, however, (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 deep-seated 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.

might not be able to understand what it would be like to be any of them. Indeed, since I lack powers of echolocation, I'm confident that I have next to no idea what it would be like for a bat to navigate its environs. And while what it's like for me to see red is presumably pretty much what it's like for most everyone else (other zombies, of course!), it is entirely within the realm of possibility for there to be folk whose non-standard physiologies dictate that their "qualia" are altered from my own.

That would seem to support a broadly physiological unpacking of the phenomenal. However, there are problems with such a straightforward reduction. On the one hand, it seems that physiological states and phenomenal characters could doubly disassociate. Intuitively, the same physiological state could have been associated with a different phenomenal character, and any given particular phenomenal character might have been associated with a different physiological state. The evidence here arises most clearly when we consider *intra-personal comparisons* of what our experience is actually like with how it might or could have been. Why are our sensations of pain or experiences of red just like *that*? It seems perfectly possible they could have been otherwise.

More troubling complications with reducing the phenomenal to the physiological crop up because there are certain intrinsic features of the phenomenal realm that don't so readily map onto our physiological states. Conscious states are, as it were, *transparent* or *diaphanous* in ways that physiological states aren't. And I mean this in two distinct (though linked) senses.⁶ First, they are transparent in the sense that they are clear to us. We have a privileged access or epistemic authority with respect to the qualitative character of our conscious experiences. Second, they are diaphanous in the sense that when we try to attend to them, we seem to "see through them" to features of the outside world. That is, conscious experiences evidently exhibit an intrinsic intentionality, an inherent *directedness* or *openness* to the wider world around them. Physiological states exhibit neither of these features, or if they do, they do so in rather contrived senses. It's not at all clear how we could ever have any sort of privileged access or epistemic authority over our specific physiological makeups. Nor are physiological states so patently intentional. Though we might regard them as having an intentionality of sorts, it wouldn't seem to be of the same intrinsic or original sort as that of our conscious experience. As a result, one can justifiably suspect that physiological reductions of conscious experience are bound to leave out precisely that which is so special about conscious experience.

So can we tell a story that incorporates some of these more puzzling features of conscious experience mentioned above, namely its intrinsic intentionality and its openness and transparency to our minds? And what is going on with these more nuanced comparisons of the qualitative character of conscious experience so suggestive of an unbridgeable explanatory gap? Can they be brought in line with the relatively straightforward interpersonal comparisons mentioned above? I believe we can provide adequate, materialistic answers to all of these questions, but in order to tell this story, I'll need to give a brief account of how a zombie like me has learned to talk *about* my experiences,

⁶ The first sense, by the way, motivates intentional accounts of consciousness, while the second sparks higher order accounts.

especially of how things ‘look’ or ‘appear’ to me. My overall strategy (perhaps the only one available to a zombie) has been to work from the outside in, rather than the inside out. My ideas of inner experience derive from my concepts of the external properties they are impressions of.

Like everyone else, I’ve had to learn from others how to apply observation vocabulary in experience. My dispositions to classify things *as red*, or even *as looking red* are not innate. While there might be biologically innate predilections for certain classification schemes, other speakers of our language (zombies and non-zombies alike) have had to teach us how to make observation reports that accord with the specific classificatory dispositions of our con-linguistics. In short, I’ve faced the task of coordinating or calibrating states of myself with the application of observation concepts in experience. Simply put, I’ve had to learn to report the presence of a certain property (e.g., red) whenever I’m struck in certain fashions – that is, whenever I’m in a certain internal discriminatory state. And I’ve further learned when to *restrain* my acquired dispositions to report such a presence when circumstances are such that my being in a particular discriminatory state is *not* a reliable indicator of something’s actually exhibiting that property.⁷ In those circumstances, I’ve learned to report that it only “looks” or “seems” as if that property is present, meaning that I’m being stimulated in a way that, under normal circumstances, *would* reliably indicate that property’s presence.

For me at least, these internal discriminatory states are presumably physiological states (and states of my nervous system in particular). But of course I’m not able to identify them in such high-falutin’ terms. Ordinary observation vocabulary – including ‘looks’-talk – is conceptually prior to a developed neuroscience. In speaking about the task facing all speakers as they learn to apply observation concepts in experience, we should remain theoretically non-committal regarding the underlying physiological substrate. My concept of a *sense impression* is my way of referring to these underlying discriminatory states in a theoretically neutral way. As I use the term, a sense impression of some particular perceptible property is the imprint that is characteristically left upon one by the presence of that property under normal circumstances, which can then be used by that subject to elicit observation reports of its presence.⁸ So the task described above is that of my learning how to coordinate sense impressions with the application of appropriate observation concepts. And when I say that something merely “looks red” to me, I’m reporting being in a discriminatory state that I’ve “recruited” (a term borrowed from

⁷ This marks a significant distinction between concept-mongering beings such as myself and mere discriminatory systems such as thermometers. It implicates self-monitoring, conceptual capacities that separates those with original intentionality from items whose intentionality is merely derived. For more discussion about original intentionality, along with a defense of the notion against those like Dennett who doubt that any such distinction can profitably be drawn, see my “Dennett’s Overlooked Originality” (*Minds & Machines*, Vol. 16:1 (2006), pp. 43-55).

⁸ This notion of sense impression closely resembles that of Wilfrid Sellars (whom I suspect to be one of the great zombies of our time). See *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Part XVI). 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.

Dretske) to indicate to me the presence of red things in my environment; that is, I'm reporting my red sense impression.

Now I beg you to notice a few things that should stand out about this notion of a sense impression. First, we have a readily explicable *authority* over sense impressions that we don't have with respect to external features of the world. To report the presence of a red sense impression, one needs merely to detect when they are disposed to report when something is or looks red to them. No gap opens up between having a sense impression of some property and having, if you will, an impression of that impression, for the discriminatory state that I am in when I have a red sense impression is precisely that - a red sense impression.⁹ Moreover, 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, it pleasantly follows that reports *about* sense impressions are, what you might say, "phenomenally transparent." So it should be evident that while I characterize my sense impressions in terms of the observable properties of external things, I do not need to imbue them with any mysterious, non-material phenomenal analogues to external properties. I don't need to "paint" my red sense impressions with phenomenally red paint. In short, sense impressions do not have to possess the qualities that they are impressions of.¹⁰

⁹ By the way, 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 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. As I'll explain later (footnote 11), however, this account of privileged access does not extend to certain *doxastic* mental states, which do not possess their own characteristic "feel" or phenomenology.

¹⁰ 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 I 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. By the way, it

Second, since sense impressions are understood as internal discriminatory states that dispose subjects to make certain observation reports, they are not identified in physical or physiological terms, but rather in terms of their causal or behavioral roles. As such, different sense impressions of the same perceptual quality might have vastly different intrinsic constitutions or realizations. A sense impression of red for a typical human might be realized in a wholly different manner in a bug-eyed alien. 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 discriminating 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 more extensive, than the conditions in which I’m apt to say something looks red to me. The precise manner in which different sense impressions are realized in creatures like us is of course 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. Perhaps that’s what non-zombies profess to have. The notion of a sense impression is thus neutral between materialism and dualism.

My suggestion, then, is that when I talk about “what it’s like” to have certain conscious experiences, these claims are to be unpacked in terms of different subjects’ sense impressions. In particular, the expression “what it’s like” picks out the particular manner in which a subject realizes its sense impressions. Such a proposal makes eminently good sense of inter- and intra-personal comparisons of the qualitative dimension of experience. Due to our purported physiological differences, what it’s like for me to see red is different from what it’s like for a bat to see red, if indeed a bat can see red at all. Of course, there might not be anything it’s like for bats to see red, because they might lack the requisite discriminative capacities. Conversely, there’s *nothing* for me to echolocate an insect; I’m just not equipped for that line of work. And though we have broadly similar perceptual equipment, what it’s like for me to see red might be somewhat different from non-standard folk – synaesthetes, for instance, or the folk outfitted with those color-inverting lenses of philosophical legend, insofar as we have cottoned onto different physiological states to be our indicators of red. Furthermore, since the physical constitution of my very own perceptual apparatus might change over time, even though I might not 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 future or the past; it might undergo, if you will, a “red shift.” Indeed, this thought enables us to make sense of the highly fanciful notion of “spectrum inversion” by conceiving of cases in which what it’s like for one to see red eventually shifting all the way across the spectrum to become what it’s like for one to see green.

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.

One especially appealing aspect of my way of speaking is that it allows zombies like me to hold on to broadly internalist intuitions about “what it’s like,” while at the same to remain steadfast externalists about intentional or representational content. On my parlance, 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.

What is more important, however, is that this account can help itself to the authority and transparency that we saw is built into the notion of a sense impression. Just as I can know with authority when I’m having a red sense impression, I am able to tell when my conscious experience has that characteristic quality of being what it’s like to see red. Furthermore, my talk about “what it’s like” is intrinsically intentional and “reaches out” into the world. Like sense impressions themselves, “what it’s like for me to see red” is evidently indexed and distinguished from other possible conscious experiences on the basis of its intentional content. We must be careful, however, not to take this evident saturation of the phenomenal with the intentional too far. I should not be taken to mean that all possible phenomenal qualities must be intentional.¹¹ For the richness of our sensory manifold far outstrips the observable discriminations we are able to draw in natural language. And not only are our sense impressions variegated in ways that we cannot express through our concepts, there might be many potential discriminations that I could make in experience that just don’t happen to line up with anything “out there” in the world. They simply fail to indicate anything in particular, either about the world or even myself. Still, although I’d be very hard pressed to characterize exactly what that is, given that I cannot index them to any particular intentional content, there might nevertheless be something it’s like to have them.¹²

¹¹ Hence I find myself somewhat reluctant to embrace the “hypothesis of intentional phenomenality,” at least interpreted in a strong sense. See Terence Horgan and John Tienson, “The Intentionality of Phenomenality and the Phenomenality of Intentionality,” chapter 49 of *The Philosophy of Mind*, edited by D. Chalmers (Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹² And what about the other way around? Is the intentional saturated with the phenomenal? Do all mental states with intentional content have their own distinct phenomenal characters? Here again I’d like to side with the tradition that suspects not. As many have suggested, though much of our emotional and effective lives does indeed seem saturated with phenomenality, that is much less clear with respect to our *doxastic* lives. Some of our more rarefied, theoretical or abstract beliefs appear to have little phenomenological life of their own at all, and when they do, it doesn’t seem particularly distinctive. One might find the continuum hypothesis to be thrilling, while another find it utterly boring. And the belief, say, that there is a tiger in the cage could have quite different phenomenological feels (e.g., fear or joy, depending upon whether I’m in the cage as well!). Now I think there is good reason for these intuitions and hence, reason to doubt the “hypothesis of phenomenal intentionality” (once again, see Horgan and Tienson, loc. cit.). While we consult our feelings or sense impressions to judge (though perhaps not with complete authority) whether we are in many of our mental states (including sensations, emotions, and other affective attitudes), we *don’t* usually consult our feelings when asked what we *believe*. Rather, we consult *the evidence* that we have for that belief (which, to be sure, in the case of perceptual beliefs might include our occurrent sense experience). This, by the way, is the reason why there is the convergence of assertibility conditions for “p” and “I believe that p” that is responsible for the seemingly paradoxical nature of Moore-type sentences, and which is key for understanding the first-person authority we have specifically with respect to belief-claims. For more discussion about *doxastic* first-person authority, see my “Interpretation and First-Person

Finally, what about those *intra*-personal comparisons of what it's like to have certain experiences that fuel those all-important explanatory gap intuitions, which allow those so-called "modal arguments" for the supermateriality of consciousness to get off the ground? What is one to say about the lingering sense that what it's like for me to see red or to be in pain could well have been very different from what it's actually like? I'm inclined to think that these intuitions are a natural product of the functional unspecificity built into our talk about sense impressions. Recall that the notion of a sense impression is that of a role that could be played by different physiological states. So on my zombic analysis of "what it's like," it turns out that there are two distinct ways to cash out the possibility that what it's like to have a certain experience could very well have been otherwise, corresponding to two distinct ways in which one can pick out the referent of "what it's like" in modal contexts. On the one hand, the referent of 'what it's like' can be fixed with respect to the indicated sense content, allowing the internal discriminatory state to vary across possible situations. 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 me to have recruited some other internal discriminatory state to indicate that sense content. Alternately, the referent of 'what it's like' can be taken to be fixed with respect to the underlying, internal discriminatory state, allowing the indicated sense content to vary. On this interpretation, the thought that 'what it's like' could have been otherwise asserts that I could have recruited that internal discriminatory state to indicate some altogether different sense content. If we run these two distinct conclusions together, as I suspect folk like Chalmers do, then these separate thoughts generate the idea that 'what it's like' can be determined neither by a subject's physiology nor by the contents of its intentional states.¹³

I suspect Chalmers' reasoning is driven by the sense that phenomenal concepts must be rigid designators, and so they must refer to precisely the same substance in all possible worlds. Moreover, given this presumed rigidity, Chalmers takes the transparency of phenomenal concepts to dictate that there could be no distinction between what he calls their primary and secondary intensions, between what their labels happen to pick out in this world, and what they might have picked out in any other possible world.¹⁴ However, unlike other rigid designators (e.g., terms for ordinary substances like "water"), there can be no difference between thinking about them actually and counterfactually. Thus any explanatory or epistemic gap between the phenomenal and the material must be elevated into an ontological one as well.

Authority: Davidson on Self-Knowledge," *Southwest Philosophy Review*, Volume 19:1 (January 2003), pp. 89-96.

¹³ By way of contrast, observe that the notion of a belief-that-p, although also a functional notion (at least on most prevailing accounts of propositional attitudes), is much more tightly tied to its intentional content. Thus it doesn't naturally lend itself to the second, physiological unpacking. This strikes me as a significant difference between our talk about intentionality (which tends to mask our possible physiological differences) and our talk of phenomenality (which tends to bring similarities and differences in our physiological constitutions more to the fore).

¹⁴ Here Chalmers draws upon some rather famous remarks about "sensations" that are to be found in Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*. Kripke, too, mistakenly presumes that the "sensation of X" (a "sense impression of X" in my terminology) really has the logic of a rigid designator, not a definite description.

From my zombic perspective, this all seems premised on a mistake. The problem is that of regarding an identity claim between sensations and physiological states on the model of an identity between two separate substance indicators (or rigidly referring expressions), rather than an identity between some substance indicator and a role that that substance happens to play. Observe that a similar referential ambiguity actually pervades *definite descriptions* in modal contexts, which even in the philosophy of language, appears to generate little trouble, and even less excitement. For instance, the statement, “My wife could have starred in a George Romero film.” similarly admits of two distinct readings, depending upon whether one wants to pick out who I’m talking about with reference to this world or to some envisioned counterfactual circumstances. 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. The point is that the expression “My wife” clearly designates *a certain role* that can be played by different individuals in different worlds. But it would be strange indeed to think that “my wife” actually refers (in this world) to anything above and beyond Monica. On the analysis suggested here, the “what it’s like” operator functions in a similar fashion; it refers, not to individuals or substances, but rather to roles that those substances or individuals may play (in this case, a role which readily explains their authority and transparency!). In short, then, we can see that the intuitions so suggestive of an ontological gap actually trade on different ways one can pick out the referent of ‘what it’s like.’ Zombies like me are free to believe that the modal arguments for the supermateriality of our experience and sensations can be explained away as a product of failing to recognize a readily explicable referential ambiguity in the notion of “what it’s like.”

III. Day of the Dead: Something that it’s like and knowing what it is

So is there something that it’s like to be me, or anything that it’s like for me to have my (so-called) conscious experiences? Despite the fact a hardcore supermaterialist would maintain that in reality there is *nothing* it is like to be me (on account that I lack the requisite acquaintance with “genuine” phenomenal properties), I’m obliged to dispute that claim. I am a zombie, after all, and thus bound to insist that my consciousness is every bit as genuine as yours. So what in the material world could I be talking about?

Drawing from the discussion of the last section, it seems evident that I have undergone a selection of internal indicators to indicate the presence of certain properties in my environs. In this manner, I have red sense impressions, with which I apply the concept RED non-inferentially in experience. My success in this selective endeavor indicates to me that there is indeed something that it is like for me to see red (though not to echolocate bugs), and hence something that it’s like to be me. Phenomenality thus requires the ability of conscious subjects to apply concepts in experience. So although I earlier urged us not to draw too tight a connection between the phenomenal and the intentional, there is indeed a deep interpenetration between our phenomenal being and

our intentional being. While neither can be *analyzed* in terms of the other, the presence of one *implicates* the presence of the other. They are “joined at the ontic-hip.”¹⁵

As we saw, the ability to learn to apply concepts in experience requires in turn subjects to implement higher-order monitoring processes on their general perceptual reliability and to calibrate their perceptual judgments with those of other concept-mongering creatures. Blind-sighted individuals, though they can be prompted to make accurate discriminations, might have lost these monitoring capacities, which explains the sense that their conscious experience is somehow attenuated. This further requirement strikes me as the kernel of truth behind higher-order theories of consciousness, which hold that consciousness is the product of a certain type of self-reflection. However, I’m a bit leery about over-intellectualizing this requirement, and thus careful not to demand that conscious states be those that are the objects of a subject’s *explicit* higher-order thoughts about thoughts or introspections. While it might well turn out that conscious states are those that are *potentially* the objects of such higher-order mental states, it’s much less clear to me that their being thought about or introspected is what *makes* them the conscious states that they are.¹⁶ For it seems evident that the higher-order monitoring of my own perceptual reliability required of me to effectively deploy perceptual concepts in experience need not require me also to have developed any sort of detailed theory of mind. The sort of self-monitoring and calibration for applying concepts in experience can happen implicitly and automatically, without the oversight of higher-order conceptual direction. In sum, then, my self-conception *as a conscious being* might well require me to develop concepts of sense experience, self, thought, and so on, but those concepts are relative late-comers in our conceptual repertoire, and they are cogently applied to creatures who, in effect, already are conscious beings, though perhaps not aware of the fact that that is what they are.¹⁷ Concepts of consciousness are required for conceptual self-awareness or self-consciousness, but not for consciousness itself.¹⁸

Now I think that this last bit shows us how to unravel many of the issues surrounding the so-called “knowledge argument” and that second great thought experiment sometimes taken to have supermaterialist implications. For it’s clear that Mary (the color benighted cognitive scientist whom Frank Jackson released from his imagination) has not come to face the task that the notion of sense-impressions has been introduced to describe –

¹⁵ I owe this phrase to Nicholas Georgalis, from a recent session of the *Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology*.

¹⁶ To say nothing of the lingering sense that some of our mental states might become objects of our thought or introspection yet remain nebulous or hidden from our awareness in a way that conscious states seemingly shouldn’t be. This objection seems to motivate the relatively recent idea that truly conscious mental states need to be somehow *self-representing* (see the essays in Kriegel and Williford, 2006). I’m sympathetic to this maneuver, insofar as it aligns the possession of consciousness with a special type of intentional capacity. However, I’m not as convinced that the key to unlocking the mystery is *self* representation so much as it is *original* representation (a notion which carries in its train requirements for *self correction*).

¹⁷ One again, the inspiration for these remarks come from Sellars’ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*.

¹⁸ To suppose otherwise strikes me as tantamount to committing the same sort of intellectualist fallacy that Davidson commits in his notorious remarks to the effect that belief itself requires a subject to have the concept of belief. For discussion see my “Some More Thought About Thought and Talk,” *Philosophy*, Vol. 77:299 (January 2002), pp. 115-124.

namely that of coordinating her own internal states with the application of particular observation concepts in experience.¹⁹ 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 practical task. Doing brain science by itself will not tell Mary when to report the internal occurrence of a red sense-impression.

When she escapes and emerges from her black and white bunker (an underground medical facility, perhaps?) and has her first red experience (maybe the product of a bite to her arm!), which she somehow already knows to come from a red source, Mary exclaims, "Ah, so *this* is what it's like to see red." She is assumed to acquire some sort of knowledge – namely knowledge of what it's like to see red. Supermaterialists typically suppose that at this point, she has acquired a new phenomenal concept with which she can entertain new thoughts with purely phenomenal contents. As a zombie, I'm of course obliged to disagree, for I'm duty-bound to claim having such knowledge as well, and I simply couldn't have acquired any purely phenomenal concepts (certainly not through acquaintance with anything like supermaterial qualia!). Accordingly, I propose that attributions of knowledge of what it's like to have a certain kind of experience shouldn't be grounded in terms of acquaintance with supermaterial aspects of experience, but rather understood as claims that a subject has a *justified ability* to apply corresponding observation concepts in experience.

Actually, my point should strike one as disappointingly banal (nearly as disappointing as the movie that lends this section its title). 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 happens to know 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 color reporting practices. Unlike the color blind, we suppose that Mary has the *potential* to make accurate color discriminations, and she knows the inferential connections color terms bear to the other terms in our language. But until she *justifiably demonstrates* that she

¹⁹ The knowledge argument continues to be one of the most vivid illustrations of the hard problem of consciousness. For the uninitiated (if any yet remain), 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 (though he subsequently retracted this move). That is, he originally 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, *supermaterial* "phenomenal" facts.

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.²⁰ She 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 innate *ability* to make accurate color discriminations. More than a mere ability to make accurate color discriminations, knowing what it's like requires one to have grounds to *justify* this discriminative capacity as well.²¹

Notice crucially that I haven't claimed that Mary is unable to entertain any specific *beliefs*. Even before her release, 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. In fact, if she uses the language of "what it's like" as I do (as a way to pick out the manner in which subjects realize their sense-impressions), then with her assumed knowledge of comparative brain anatomies she can justifiably believe that what it's like for her to see red *would* pretty much be what it's like for most other humans to see red. Rather than missing the conceptual repertoire 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.²²

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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 recognitional 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.

²² 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. 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. For a time at least, they'd be "zombies" (though not the kind I am), even though they'd try to convince us otherwise.

Insofar as their perceptual apparatus differs from our own, we'd also be justifiably reluctant to grant perceptually exotic creatures – those 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. Their different perceptual equipment might prevent them from anticipating our justifiable perceptual errors. 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 might *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 should deal with an objection one might raise to the idea that knowing what it's like amounts to a justified ability to apply a specific concept in experience. The objection has us suppose that Mary comes to have her first red sense impression without realizing that it's a red sense impression that she's having (say, by viewing one of several unlabeled paint chips). So while it's clear she still lacks the justified ability to apply the concept red, she nevertheless knows in some sense what it's like to see red. It might seem, then, that my proposed analysis of knowing what it's like fails to fully account for our intuitions about the Mary case.

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 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 *her* perspective), 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 my proposal.

IV. Land of the Dead: Zombies and Humanity

So there you have it. As you can now see, zombies can use a perfectly unmysterious, materialistic notion of sense impression to make sense of many of the curious things philosophers have been tempted to say about the qualitative character of our conscious experiences. Zombies have to learn how to talk like everyone else, but have had to do it without the benefit of “consciousness” as supermaterialists understand it, without, that is, any acquaintance with supermaterial qualia. In sum, I’ve shown how zombies have learned to pass as “normal,” even to the point of endorsing explanatory and epistemic gaps. But this of course raises the question as to whether there might be any *non-*zombies around (or left?). The upshot of the present inquiry is that as soon as supermaterialists unleashed zombies upon the philosophical world, their fate was sealed. It was inevitable that we’d discover we’ve all become the very beings they had conceived. So are we *really* in a land of the dead? Other than sputtering mysterious incantations about appeals to the myth of the given, I don’t know how to *convince* you that you lack an acquaintance with supermaterial qualia (alas, bashing your head in or eating your brain just doesn’t count as playing by the rules of this game!). If you think that immaterial qualia attends your conscious experience, then so be it. I haven’t taken it upon myself to demonstrate that the very notion of supermaterial qualia is unimaginably preposterous or otherwise self-refuting; nor do I deny the logical conceivability of non-zombies.²³ If on some other grounds, however – the causal closure of the physical, perhaps, or the peculiarly private nature of supermaterial qualia – you find the notion of a supermaterial realm unattractive, then I’ve provided you with a recipe for avoiding it. As we know from George Romero’s latest contribution to the genre, zombies just might have a shred of humanity in them. You, too can embrace your own inner zombie, and do so in perfectly good conscience.

²³ Recall that the bare notion of a sense impression doesn’t logically preclude their *immaterial* realization.