Is There Anything it is Like to be a Bat?

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1. Consciousness and qualia

The concept of consciousness has been the source of much philosophical, cognitive scientific and neurological discussion for the past two decades. Many scientists, as well as philosophers, argue that at the moment we are almost completely in the dark about the nature of consciousness. Stuart Sutherland, in a much quoted remark, wrote that 'Consciousness is a fascinating but elusive phenomenon; it is impossible to specify what it is, what it does, or why it evolved.'[1] Cognitive scientists, such as Phillip Johnson-Laird, aver that 'no one knows what consciousness is, or whether it serves any purpose'.[2] Leading neuroscientists have gone so far as to suggest that 'Perhaps the greatest unresolved problem … in all of biology, resides in the analysis of consciousness.'[3] And David Chalmers proclaims that our ignorance may be 'the largest outstanding obstacle [to] a scientific understanding of the universe'.[4]

There are, no doubt, many problems concerning consciousness. Some are empirical problems amenable to scientific investigation. Others are conceptual problems, which can be tackled only by means of conceptual analysis. Distinguishing the two kinds of problem is important, for when a conceptual problem is confused or conflated with an empirical one, it is bound to appear singularly intractable—as indeed it is, for it is intractable to empirical methods of investigation. Equally, when an empirical problem is investigated without adequate conceptual clarity, misconceived questions are

[1] Stuart Sutherland, *International Dictionary of Psychology*.

[2] P. N. Johnson-Laird, *The Computer and the Mind* (London: Fontana Press, 1988). p. 353

[3] T. D. Albright, T. M. Jessel, E. R. Kandel and M. I. Posner, 'Neural Science: A Century of Progress and the Mysteries that Remain', *Cell* vol. 100 and *Neuron* vol. 25 *Review Supplement* S40.

[4] D. J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. xi.

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bound to be asked, and misguided research is likely to ensue. For to the extent that the concepts are unclear, to that extent the questions themselves will be unclear. Clarification of concepts, and disentangling the knots we tie in our grasp of problematic concepts is one of the tasks of philosophy.

In the ordinary use of the term 'consciousness', we distinguish intransitive from transitive consciousness, and refer to diverse mental states as 'states of consciousness'. Intransitive consciousness is a matter of being awake rather than asleep or otherwise unconscious. Transitive consciousness is a matter of being conscious *of* something or other, which may be something peripherally perceived that catches and holds one's attention, or an occurrent mental state of which one is aware, or some fact that occupies one's mind and weighs with one in one's deliberations. States of consciousness are mental states that occur while one is intransitively conscious, and that possess what Wittgenstein called 'genuine duration'. These common or garden, perfectly respectable, uses of the term 'consciousness' are not the focal point for recent reflection.

The concept of consciousness that has been so extensively discussed is much broader. It is what allegedly shows that functionalism in philosophy of psychology must be false to the facts—for a functionalist account of psychological predicates cannot account for what are deemed to be the phenomena of consciousness. It is allegedly what distinguishes us from mere zombies who, it is thought, might look and behave exactly as we do, yet are not conscious at all—have no—'inner life'. Consciousness, thus conceived. is extended to the whole domain of 'experience'—of 'Life' *subjectively understood*. Experiences, it is widely held, have a special qualitative character—intimately, directly, known to each subject of experience.

The term 'quale' was introduced to signify this alleged 'qualitative character of experience'. *Every* experience, it is claimed, has a distinctive qualitative character. And the key to understanding the concept of consciousness that is of concern to current 'consciousness studies' is grasp of the idea of qualia. The alleged 'mystery of consciousness' is conceived to be the mystery of qualia. I shall argue that the appearance of mystery is the product of mystification, and that qualia are figments of the philosophical imagination.

2. Qualia

Qualia, Ned Block holds, 'include the ways it feels to see, hear and smell, the way it feels to have a pain; more generally, what it's like

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to have mental states. Qualia are experiential properties of sensations, feelings, perceptions and ... thoughts and desires as well.'[5] Similarly Searle argues that 'Every conscious state has a certain qualitative feel to it, and you can see this if you consider examples. The experience of tasting beer is very different from hearing Beethoven's Ninth symphony, and both of those have a different qualitative character from smelling a rose or seeing a sunset. These examples illustrate the different qualitative features of conscious experiences.'[6] Like Block, Searle too holds that thinking has a special qualitative feel to it: 'There is something it is like to think that two plus two equals four. There is no way to describe it except by saying that it is the character of thinking consciously "two plus two equals four".'[7] The subject matter of an investigation of consciousness, Chalmers suggests, 'is best characterized as "the subjective quality of experience"'. A mental state is conscious, he claims, 'if it has a *qualitative feel*—an associated quality of experience. These qualitative feels are also known as phenomenal qualities, or *qualia* for short. The problem of explaining these phenomenal qualities is just the problem of explaining consciousness.'[8] He too takes the view that thinking is an experience with a qualitative content: 'When I think of a lion, for instance, there seems to be a whiff of leonine quality to my phenomenology: what it is like to think of a lion is subtly different from what it is like to think of the Eiffel tower.'[9]

Neuroscientists have gone along with the notion of qualia. Ian Glynn contends that 'Although qualia are most obviously associated with sensations and perceptions, they are also found in other mental states, such as beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears, during conscious episodes of these states.'[10] Damasio states that 'Qualia are the simple sensory qualities to be found in the blueness of the sky or the tone of a sound produced by a cello, and the fundamental components of the images [of which perception allegedly consists] are thus made up of qualia.'[11] Edelman and Tononi hold that 'each

[5] Ned Block. 'Qualia', in S. Guttenplan (ed.) *Blackwell Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 514.

[6] J. R. Searle, 'Consciousness', *Annual Review,* p. 560

[7] Searle, ibid., p. 561.

[8] Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind,* p. 4.

[9] Chalmers, ibid., p. 10.

[10] I. Glynn, *An Anatomy of Thought* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), p. 392.

[11] A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (London: Heineman, 1999), p. 9. Note that there is here an unargued assumption that colour and sound are not properties of objects but of sense-impressions.

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differentiable conscious experience represents a different quale, whether it is primarily a sensation, an image, a thought, or even a mood…'[12], and go on to claim that 'the problem of qualia' is 'perhaps the most daunting problem of consciousness'.

The subjective or qualitative feel of a conscious experience is in turn characterized in terms of there being *something it is like* for an organism to have the experience. What it is like *is* the subjective character of the experience. 'An experience or other mental entity is "phenomenally conscious"', the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* tells us, 'just in case there is something it is like for one to have it.'[13] 'Conscious states are qualitative', Searle explains, 'in the sense that for any conscious state … there is something that it qualitatively feels like to be in that state.'[14] The idea, and the mesmerizing turn of phrase 'there is something which it is like', derive from Thomas Nagel's paper 'What is it like to be a bat?'. Nagel argued that 'the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism. … fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism.'[15] This, i.e. what it is like for the organism, is the subjective character or quality of experience.

If we take for granted that we understand the phrase 'there is something which it is like' thus used, then it seems that Nagel's idea gives us a handle on the concept of a conscious creature and on the concept of a conscious experience:

(1) *A creature is conscious or has conscious experience if and only if there is something which it is like for the creature to be the creature it is.*

(2) *An experience is a conscious experience if and only if there is something which it is like for the subject of the experience to have it.*

So, there is something which it is like for a bat to be a bat (although, Nagel claims, we cannot imagine *what* it is like), and there is some-

[12] G. Edelman and G. Tononi, *Consciousness—How Matter Becomes Imagination* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 157.

[13] E. Lomand, 'Consciousness', in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. 2, p. 581.

[14] Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p. xiv.

[15] T. Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', repr. in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 166.

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thing which it is like for us to be human beings (and, he claims, we all know what it is like for us to be us).

It is important to note that the phrase 'there is something *which it is like* for a subject to have experience E' does *not* indicate *a comparison*. Nagel does not claim that to have a given conscious experience *resembles* something (e.g. some other experience), but rather that there is something which it is like *for the subject* to have it, i.e. 'what it is like' is intended to signify, 'how it is for the subject himself.'[16] It is, however, striking that Nagel never tells us, with regard to even one experience, what it is like for anyone to have it. He claims that the qualitative character of the experiences of other species may be beyond our ability to conceive. Indeed, the same may be true of the experiences of other human beings. 'The subjective character of the experience of a person deaf and blind from birth is not accessible to me, for example, nor is mine to him.' But we know what it is like to be us, 'and while we do not possess the vocabulary to describe it adequately, its subjective character is highly specific, and in some respects describable in terms that can be understood only by creatures like us.'[17]

Philosophers and neuroscientists have gone along with this idea. It seems to them to capture the essential nature of conscious beings and conscious experience. Thus Davies and Humphries contend that, 'while there is nothing that it is like to be a brick, or an ink-jet printer, there is, presumably, something it is like to be a bat, or a dolphin, and there is certainly something it is like to be a human being. A system—whether a creature or artefact—is conscious just in case there is something it is like to be that system.'[18] Daniel Dennett concurs: 'those things of which I am conscious, and the ways in which I am conscious of them, determine what it is like to be me.'[19] And Edelman and Tononi agree that 'We know what it is like to be us, but we would like to explain why we are conscious at all, why there is "something" it is like to be us—to explain how subjective experiential qualities are generated.'[20]

Qualia, then, are conceived to be the qualitative characteristics of 'mental states' or of 'experiences', the latter pair of categories being

[16] Nagel, ibid., p. 170n.

[17] Nagel. ibid., p. 170.

[18] M. Davies and G. W. Humphreys (ed.) *Consciousness* (Blackwell, Oxford 1993), p. 9.

[19] D. Dennett, 'Consciousness', in R. L. Gregory (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1987). p. 161.

[20] Edelman and Tononi, *Consciousness—How Matter becomes Imagination,* p. 11.

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construed to include not only perception, sensation and affection, but also desire, thought and belief. For every 'conscious experience' or 'conscious mental state', there is something which it is like for the subject to have it or to be in it. This something is a quale—a 'qualitative feel'. 'The problem of explaining these phenomenal qualities', Chalmers declares, 'is just the problem of explaining consciousness.'[21]

3. 'How it feels' to have an experience

So, this is how things stand: An experience is held to be a *conscious* experience just in case there is something which it is like for the subject of the experience to have it. Consciousness, thus conceived, is *defined* in terms of *the qualitative feel of experience*. This qualitative feel, unique to every distinguishable experience, is alleged to be *what it is like for the subject of the experience to have the experience*.

Our suspicions should be aroused by the odd phrases used to invoke something with which we are all supposed to be utterly familiar. I shall examine 'ways of feeling' first, and there being 'something which it is like' subsequently.

Is there really *a specific way* it feels to see, hear, smell? One might indeed ask a person who has had his sight, hearing or sense of smell restored 'How does it feel to see (hear, smell) again?' One might expect the person to reply 'It is wonderful', or perhaps 'It feels very strange'. The question concerns the person's attitude towards his exercise of his restored perceptual capacity—so, he finds it wonderful to be able to see again, or strange to hear again after so many years of deafness. In these cases, there is indeed a way it feels to see or hear again, namely wonderful or strange. But if we were to ask a normal person how it feels to see the table, chair, desk, carpet, etc., etc., he would wonder what we were after. There is nothing distinctive about seeing these mundane objects. Of course, seeing the table differs from seeing the chair, desk, carpet, etc., but the difference does not consist in the fact that seeing the desk, *feels different* from seeing the chair. Seeing an ordinary table or chair does not evoke *any* emotional or attitudinal reaction whatsoever in normal circumstances. The experiences differ in so far as their objects differ.

One may say, clumsily, that there is a way it feels to have a pain. That is just a convoluted way of saying that there is an answer to the (rather silly) question 'How does it feel to have a pain?', e.g. that it

[21] Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind,* p. 4.

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is very unpleasant, or, in some cases, dreadful. So, one may say that there is a way it feels to have an acute migraine, namely dreadful. That is innocuous, but lends no weight to the general claim that for every differentiable experience, there is a specific way it feels to have it. Pains are an exception, since they, by definition, have a negative hedonic tone. Pains are sensations which are intrinsically disagreeable. Perceiving, however, is not a matter of having sensations. And perceiving in its various modalities and with its indefinitely numerous possible objects can, but typically does not, have any associated affective or attitudinal quality at all, let alone a different one for each object in each perceptual modality. And for a vast range of things that can be called 'experiences', there isn't 'a way it feels' to have them, i.e. there is no answer to the question 'How does it feel to …?'

One cannot but agree with Searle that the experience of tasting beer is very different from hearing Beethoven's Ninth, and that both are different from smelling a rose or seeing a sunset, for perceptual experiences are essentially identified or specified by their modality, i.e. sight, hearing, taste, smell and tactile perception, and by their objects, i.e. by what they are experiences of. But to claim that the several experiences have a unique, distinctive *feel* is a different and altogether more questionable claim. It is more questionable in so far as it is obscure what is *meant*. Of course, all four experiences Searle cites are, for many people, normally enjoyable. And it is perfectly correct that the identity of the pleasure or enjoyment is dependent upon the object of the pleasure. One cannot derive the pleasure of drinking beer from listening to Beethoven's Ninth, or the pleasure of seeing a sunset from smelling a rose. That is a logical, not an empirical, truth, i.e. it is not that, as a matter of fact, the qualitative 'feel' distinctive of seeing a sunset differs from the 'feel' distinctive of smelling a rose, but rather, as a matter of logic, the pleasure of seeing a sunset differs from the pleasure of smelling a rose. Pleasures are individuated by their objects. It does not follow that every experience has a different *qualitative character*, i.e. that there is a specific 'feel' to each and every experience. For, first, most experiences have, in this sense, no qualitative character at all—they are neither agreeable nor disagreeable, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, etc. Walking down the street, we may see dozens of different objects. Seeing object A (a lamp post) is a different experience from seeing object B (a postbox)—did it have a different 'feel' to it'? No; and it didn't have the same 'feel' to it either, for seeing the two objects evoked no response—no 'qualitative feeling' whatsoever was associated with seeing either of them. Secondly, different experiences which do have a qualitative 'feel', i.e. which can, for example,

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be hedonically characterized, may have the very same 'feel'. What differentiates them is not the way they feel, in as much as the question, 'What did it feel like to V?' (where 'V' specifies some appropriate experience) may have exactly the same answer—for the different experiences may be equally enjoyable or disagreeable, interesting or boring.

Both having a pain (being in pain) and perceiving whatever one perceives can be called 'experiences'. So can being in a certain emotional state. And so, of course, can engaging in an indefinite variety of activities. Experiences, we may say, are possible subjects of attitudinal predicates, that is, they may be agreeable or disagreeable. interesting or boring, wonderful or dreadful. It is such attributes that might be termed 'the qualitative characters of experiences', not the experiences themselves. So one cannot intelligibly say that seeing red or seeing *Guernica,* hearing a sound or hearing *Tosca,* are 'qualia'. Consequently, when Damasio speaks of the blueness of the sky as being a quale, he is shifting the sense of the term 'quale'—since if the colour of an object is a quale, then qualia are not the qualitative characteristics of experiences at all, but the qualities of objects of experience (or, if one holds colours not to be qualities of objects, then constituents of the 'contents' of perceptual experiences). Similarly, when Edelman and Tononi claim that each differentiable conscious experience represents a different quale, whether it is a sensation, an image, a mood or a thought, they are shifting the sense of the term 'quale'. For it patently does not mean 'the qualitative character of an experience'.

It should be noted that to say that an experience is a subject of an attitudinal predicate is a potentially misleading *façon de parler.* For to say that an experience (e.g. seeing, watching, glimpsing, hearing, tasting this or that, but also walking, talking, dancing, playing games, mountain climbing, fighting battles, painting pictures) had a given qualitative feel to it (e.g. that it was agreeable, delightful, charming, disagreeable, revolting, disgusting) is just to say that the subject of experience, i.e. the person who saw, heard, tasted, walked, talked, danced, etc., found it agreeable, delightful, charming, etc. to do so. So, the qualitative character of an experience E, i.e. how it feels to have that experience, is the subject's affective attitude (what it was like for him) to experiencing E.

To avoid falling into confusion here, we must distinguish four points:

(1) Many experiences are essentially individuated, i.e. picked out, by specifying what they are experiences of.

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(2) Every experience is a *possible* subject of positive and negative attitudinal predicates, e.g. predicates of pleasure, interest, attraction. It does not follow, and it is false, that every experience is an actual subject of a positive or negative attitudinal predicate.

(3) Distinct experiences, each of which is the subject of an attitudinal attribute, may not be distinguishable by reference to how it feels for the person to have them. Roses have a different smell from lilac. Smelling roses is a different experience from smelling lilac. One cannot get the pleasure of smelling roses from smelling lilac. But the experiences may well be equally agreeable. So, if asked how it feels to smell roses and how it feels to smell lilac, the answer may well be the same, namely 'delightful'. If that answer specifies the way it felt, then it is obviously false that every distinct experience can be uniquely individuated by its distinctive qualitative character or quale. Of course, the smell of roses is qualitatively quite different from the smell of lilac, but smells are not qualities of experiences of smelling, but objects of such experiences.

(4) Even if we stretch the concept of experience to include thinking that something is so or thinking of something, what essentially differentiates thinking one thing rather than another is not how it feels or what it feels like to think whatever one thinks. Thinking that 2+2=4 differs from thinking that 25 x 25 = 625 and both differ from thinking that the Democrats will win the next election.[22] They differ in as much as they are essentially specified or individuated by their objects. One can think *that* something is thus-and-so or think *of* something or other without any accompanying affective attitude whatsoever—so there need be no 'way it feels' to think thus. A leonine whiff may accompany thinking of lions, of Richard Coeur de Lion, or of Lyons Corner House, but, contrary to Chalmers, to specify the associated whiff is not to characterize *how it feels* to think of such items, let alone uniquely to individuate the thinking. That one associates thinking of one of these with a leonine whiff is no answer to the (curious) question 'How does it feel to think of lions (Richard Coeur de Lion, Lyons Corner House)?' and certainly does not distinguish one's thinking of lions as opposed to thinking of Lyons's or Richard I.

[22] Cf Searle, *The Mysteries of Consciousness,* p. 201.

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4. Of there being *something which it is like ...*

I shall now turn to the thornier issue of *there being something which it is like* to have a given experience, something it is like *for the subject* of the experience. We can ask a person A 'What is it like (for you) to V?' where 'V' is a verb that specifies an experience. Here 'What is it like' is *not* a request for a comparison but for a characterization (i.e. we want to know not what Ving *resembles*, but what is its *felt character*). If A answers 'It is quite agreeable (disagreeable, pleasant, unpleasant, charming, repulsive, delightful, disgusting, fascinating, boring) to V', then we can say (rather clumsily):

'There is something which it *is* for A to V.'

For evidently Ving is quite agreeable, i.e. A finds it quite agreeable to V. What we *cannot* say is:

(1) 'There is something which it is like to V.'

let alone

(2) 'There is something it is like for A to V.'

(1) is apt only for cases of comparison. If to V is, in certain respects, like to W, then indeed there is something it is like to V, namely to W. (But it should be noted that the less cumbersome form would be: 'Ving is like Wing; so there is something which Ving is like, namely Wing.) (2), however, is a miscegenous crossing of the form of a judgment of similarity with the form of a request for an affective attitudinal characterization of an experience.[23] For when A answers the question 'What was it like for you to V?' by saying 'It was wonderful (awe-inspiring, exciting, fascinating)' one *cannot* go on to say. 'For A to V is like …', and then specify the qualitative character or subjective hedonic tone of A's Ving, for that would (a) be ungrammatical gibberish and (b) duly tidied up, would not specify that for A to V was like something but rather that it was something (namely, wonderful, etc.).

So, it is misconceived to suppose that one can circumscribe, let alone define, *conscious experience* in terms of there being something which it is like for a subject to have it. It does not matter whether

[23] The existential generalization of a judgment of similarity ('To V is like to W' or 'Ving is like Wing') retains the expression 'like' ('There is something it is like to V'). By contrast, the existential generalization of an answer to the question 'What was it like for you to V?' does not ('There was something that it *was* for me to V'). It is obvious why: the answer to that question is 'For me to V was …' and not 'For me to V was like...'.

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'conscious experience' is understood as 'experience had while conscious' or as 'experience of which one is conscious'. The very expression 'There is something it is like for a person to have it' is malconstructed. The question from which it is derived 'What is (or was) it like for you (or for A) to V?' is a perfectly licit request for specification of one's affective attitude at the time to the experience undergone, a specification of 'how it is (or was) for one'. If there is an answer, then there is something which it is (or was) for you (or A) to V—namely ... (and here comes a specification of the attitudinal attribute). But for a vast range of experiences, one has *no* affective attitude at all. And even for the limited range of being transitively conscious of something or other, it would be quite wrong to suppose that there is always or even usually an answer to the question 'What was it like for you to be conscious of ...?'

What is trivially true, and indeed the only truth to emerge from all this confusion, is that only conscious, sentient creatures are subjects of experience and can have affective attitudes to their experiences, can find them pleasant or unpleasant, interesting or boring, and so forth. But to find experience E to be F (pleasant, unpleasant, etc.) is not a mark of experiences as such, or of those experiences had while conscious, or of experiences of which one is conscious, let alone of transitive consciousness in general (which encompasses far more than experiences).

It is equally misconceived to suppose that one can characterize what it is to be a conscious creature by means of the formula 'there is something which it is like to be' that creature, something it is like *for* the organism. To be sure, we can ask 'What is it like to be an X', where the expression 'X' is a role-name (e.g. 'soldier', 'sailor , 'tinker', 'tailor'), or 'What is it like to be a Ver', where the expression 'Ver' is a nominal formed from a verb (e.g. 'winner', 'murderer', 'driver') or similar phrasal nominal (e.g. 'old-aged pensioner'). Such questions are answered by itemizing features of the role, of what one has to do and undergo, and of its pros and cons, or of the standard features of the experiences of a Ver. It is a striking and distinctive feature of such questions that they require a specification of the qualitative character, in particular of the pros and cons, of being an X. Indeed, it is precisely because of this that such forms of words have been chosen to explain the peculiar nature of consciousness.

Typically, there is no need to specify the subject class of the general question 'What is it like to be an X (or to be F)?'. For the context will normally make it evident. 'What is it like to be a doctor?' is restricted to adult human beings. 'What is it like to be pregnant?'

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is confined to women. But sometimes the question concerns a sub-class of the class of possible Xs, as in 'What is it *like for a woman* (as opposed to a man) to be a soldier?' or 'What is it like *for a teenager* (as opposed to an older person) to be the winner at Wimbledon?' And sometimes the question is personal, as in 'What was it like *for you* to be a soldier in the Second World War?' This question typically demands a statement of one's impressions, of the difficulties encountered, the nature of the experiences undergone, the satisfactions derived, etc. Where there is an appropriately framed answer, then one can go on to say 'There is something which it is to be an X (or, a Ver), namely (say) very exciting but dangerous'. 'There is something it is for a Y to be an X, namely …', and 'There was something it was for me to be a Ver, namely ...' As in the previously examined case of 'What is it like to V'?, so too here the 'like' drops out in the reply and hence too in the generalized form 'There is something which it is to be an X'.

But such questions are not the same as the question of what it is like for a human being to be a human being (or for a bat to be a bat), or for me to be me. For the latter have the general form 'What is it like for an X to be an X?' not 'What is it like for a Y to be an X?' Is this a difference that makes a difference'? Reflecting upon the indisputably licit forms of the question, three features stand out. First, the subject term 'Y' differs from the object term 'X'. Second, where the subject class is specified by the phrase 'for a Y', then a principle of contrast is involved. We ask what it is like *for a Y* to be an X when there is a contrast between Ys being Xs and some other class being Xs. We want to know what it is like for a Y, *as opposed to a Z,* to be an X. So, one can ask what it is like for a woman to be a soldier. We might wish to find out what is distinctive about the career of a woman, as opposed to a man, in the army. Similarly, in the personalized version of the question, when we ask 'What is it like for you to be an X?', we are asking for *your* particular and perhaps idiosyncratic impressions of being an X, as opposed to the impressions of someone else. Third, the question 'What is it like for a Y to be an X?' involves a second principle of contrast, namely with regard to X. For we want to know what it is like, or what it is like for Y, to be an X as opposed to something else Y might be or have been.

The problematic cases with which we are concerned, the cases which supposedly shed light upon the nature of consciousness, are not like this. They reiterate the subject term in the object position. But the question 'What is it like for a soldier to be a soldier?' is surely awry. It is not akin to 'What is it like for a soldier to be a

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sailor?' or 'What is it like for a woman to be a doctor?', where there are obvious principles of contrast. One cannot ask 'What is it like for a doctor to be a doctor, *as opposed to* someone else who is not a doctor being a doctor?', for that makes no sense. (Someone who is *not* a doctor cannot also *be* a doctor, although he may *become* one.) The interpolated phrase 'for a doctor' is illicit here, and adds nothing to the question 'What is it like to be a doctor?' A question of this form, as we have seen, asks for a description of the role, the rights and duties, hardships and satisfactions, the typical episodes and experiences of a person who is an X. Of course, if the addressee is an X, then the question might reasonably be understood as a more personal one, converging on 'What is it like for *you* to be an X?', i.e. a request for personal impressions and attitude.

The question 'What is it like for a human being to be a human being?' (or, indeed, 'What is it like for a bat to be a bat?') falls foul of the same objection of illegitimate reiteration. The interpolated phrase 'for a human being' cannot play the role which a phrase in that position is meant to play. But there is perhaps another source of unease. Proteus, avatars and gods apart, a human being (unlike a soldier or sailor who can abandon his vocation) cannot cease to be a human being without ceasing to exist. Nor can anything other than a human being be a human being. So neither principle of contrast is satisfied. One cannot ask 'What is it like for a human being, as opposed to another creature, to be a human being'?, for mythology apart, nothing other than a human being can be a human being. Nor can one ask 'What is it like for a human being to be a human being, as opposed to being something else?', since there is no other creature a human being might be. (Similarly, there is nothing other than a bat which might be a bat, and there is no other creature a bat might be, other than a bat.) So, if any sense can be made of the question 'What is it like for a human being to be a human being?', it collapses into the question 'What is it like to be a human being?' This question is curious. One might take it to mean 'What is human life like?'. That is a nebulous question indeed. It might be variously answered: e.g. 'Nasty, brutish and short', or 'Full of hope and fear'. Similarly, 'What is it like to be a bat?', if it means anything, can be no more than a request to describe the life of a bat in comparable manner. There seems no difficulty of principle in doing that, but there is no reason to suppose that it sheds any light on the nature of consciousness. But it is true that the question can be asked only of conscious creatures who take pleasure in certain things, fear other things, find interest in things, and so forth.

Similar arguments apply to the claim that there is something

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which it is like for us to be us or for me to be me, and that we all know what it is like. It makes no sense to ask what it is like for me to be me, for no one else could be me and I could be no one other than myself. 'I am me' says nothing, so 'There is something which it is like for me to be me' likewise says nothing. Not only do I not know what it is like for me to be me, there is nothing to know. The claim that there is something it is like for me to be a human being is doubly questionable. For not only is the form of the existential generalization illicit, but also the question 'What is it like for you to be a human being?' presupposes that I might be or have been something other than a human being, something that might be contrasted with my being a human being—and there is no such thing.

So, let us take stock:

(i) The sentences 'There is something which it is like to be a human being', 'There is something which it is like to be a bat', and 'There is something which it is like to be me', as presented by the protagonists in this case, are one and all awry.
(ii) The question 'What is it like for an X to be an X?' is illicit because of the reiterated term, and, if 'X' is a substance-name (like 'human-being' or 'bat'), doubly at fault. The most that can be made of it is to interpret it as equivalent to 'What is it like to be an X?', and to interpret that question as an inquiry into the characteristic attitudinal features of the life of an X. Such questions can be answered, and one need not be an X or similar to an X in order to answer them. One merely has to be well informed about the lives of Xs.
(iii) The questions 'What is it like for me to be me?' and 'What is it like for me to be a human being?' are equally illicit.

If this is correct, then it is wrong for Nagel to suggest that 'we know what it is like [for us] to be us', that there is something 'precise that it is like [for us] to be us' and that 'while we do not possess the vocabulary to describe it adequately, its subjective character is highly specific.' It is mistaken of Edelman and Tononi to assert that we all 'know what it is like to be us', and confused of them to suppose that 'there is "something" it is like to be us'. And it is a confusion to think, as Searle does, that for any conscious state, 'there is something that it qualitatively feels like to be in that state'.

5. The qualitative character of experience

The attempt to capture the essential nature of consciousness or of what it is to be a conscious creature by means of the notion of there

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being something which it is like to experience this or that or to be the creature one is failed. Similarly, the notion that every conscious experience has a special 'feel', i.e. that there is a unique way it feels for a person to have any experience, likewise proved misguided. Nevertheless, it may well be thought that less than justice is being done to those who seek to characterize experience in terms of its qualitative character. I have argued that it is licit to ask how it feels to have a certain experience or what it is like to have such-and-such an experience, and that these are actually questions concerning the subject's current attitudinal response to the experience he is undergoing. But one may reply, this is *not* what was meant at all. So what was meant by the introduction of qualia? And is it coherent?

It will have been noted that the employment of the term of art 'quale' is unstable. The notion of a quale equivocates between signifying whatever it is like for a person to have experience E and experience E itself. In view of the argument thus far, we must set aside the misbegotten phrases 'there is something which it is like' and 'there is something which it feels'. If we wish to get to the bottom of the concern with qualia, we must concentrate on the idea that every experience has a unique and distinctive character. Seeing red is different from seeing blue, and seeing a colour differs from hearing a sound or tasting a taste. So too, feeling angry is different from feeling jealous, and both differ from feeling love or affection. We noted that some writers attempt to extend the idea of qualia to thinking thoughts, and hold (rightly) that thinking that 2 + 2 = 4 differs from thinking that 25 x 25 = 625. It is these differences that one has in mind when one misleadingly insists upon the unique qualitative character of conscious experience.

Taken one way, this is both correct and innocuous. *Of course,* seeing red differs from seeing blue and feeling love differs from feeling hatred. *Of course,* thinking that 2 + 2 = 4 differs from thinking that 25 x 25 = 625. Taken another way, it is confused. For the difference between seeing red and seeing blue does not lie in the way it feels or in what it is like for a person to see the two colours. Yet these experiences *do* differ, and a normal human being who has such an experience knows perfectly well that the experience of seeing red differs from the experience of seeing blue, and is not likely to confuse the two. And whether or not thinking is correctly conceived to be an experience. someone to whom the thought that 2 + 2 = 4 occurs is hardly likely to confuse it with the thought that that 25 x 25 = 625. So must not the difference between the experiences or between thinking the various thoughts reside in some quality of the experiences'? And whatever this qualitative characteristic may be, it must

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be something that is apprehended by the subject of the experience, for it is this subjective apprehension that explains how the subject can differentiate the experiences he has. Or so it seems.

6. *Thises* and *thuses*

We noted above that although many philosophers and neuroscientists are taken with the notion of qualia, and accordingly insist that every experience has a unique qualitative character, none of them actually tells us, with respect to even one experience, what its specific character is. But it is striking that it is natural to try to refer to the specific quality of a given experience by means of an indexical expression, such as 'this' or 'that'. So we find David Chalmers asking 'Why do conscious experiences have their specific character?', in particular, 'why is seeing red like *this,* rather than like *that*?'[24] And it seems evident that the 'like *this'* and the 'like *that'* are intended to be ways of referring to the specific qualities experiences are alleged to have.

So, human beings with normal visual capacities can see red (green, blue, etc.) objects in their environment. Seeing a red object, we are told, has a particular 'subjective feel'. What is this 'subjective feel'? Well, seeing red is like *this,* seeing green is like *this,* seeing blue is like *this*—i.e. *this* is the way I see red, *this* is how I see green. It is interesting, and striking, that Wittgenstein anticipated this confusion more than fifty years ago. He wrote:

> The *content* of experience. One would like to say 'I see red *thus*', 'I hear the note that you strike *thus*', 'I feel sorrow *thus*', or even '*This* is what one feels when one is sad, *this* when one is glad', etc. One would like to people a world, analogous to the physical one, with these *thuses* and *thises*. But this makes sense only where there is a picture of *what is experienced,* to which one can point as one makes these statements.[25]

His point is simple: it makes no sense to say 'I see red like *this*' or 'I see red *thus*' unless one can go on to say *like what* or *how* I see red. We labour under an illusion that when we see a red apple, we can, as it were, attend to our seeing, and say to ourselves 'I see the red colour of the apple *like this*' and mean something intelligible, at least to ourselves, when we say this. But nothing meaningful is said,

[24] Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, p. 5.

[25] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), Vol. 1, §896.

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either to ourselves or to others, by saying 'like *this*' or '*thus*' unless there *is* a *this* or a *thus* to which we can point, i.e. unless there is a *this* or a *thus* in terms of which we can cash the sentence 'I see red *like this*' or 'I see red *thus*'. It makes perfectly good sense to say, 'I see the colour of the apple *thus* ☞ ■', pointing to a sample of red. Here the sample pointed at is what Wittgenstein, in the above passage, means by 'a picture'—i.e. something that can represent, both for oneself *and for others,* how one sees the colour of the apple. But it is an illusion that one can, as it were, point *inwardly* (and for oneself alone) to the experience one is currently enjoying, saying 'I see red *thus*', and thereby say anything meaningful—one might just as well say 'This is this'. It is 'as when travelling in a car and feeling in a hurry I instinctively press against something in front of me as though I could push the car from inside.'[26]

If one thinks of perceptual experiences as *thises* and *thuses,* it is tempting to go on to ask 'Why do conscious experiences have their specific character?', in particular, 'why is seeing red like *this,* rather than like *that*'? ... Why ... do we experience the reddish sensation that we do, rather than some entirely different kind of sensation, like the sound of a trumpet?'[27] But now it should be obvious that the question, 'Why is seeing red like seeing *this* ☞ ■ [pointing to *a red sample*]?' is misguided. First, seeing red does not *resemble* seeing *this* ☞ ■ colour, it *is* seeing this colour. Secondly, the only cogent answer to the confused question 'Why is seeing red like seeing *this*?' is that seeing *this* ☞ ■ colour *is* seeing red, since this colour is what we call 'red'.

Equally, the question 'Why, when one looks at red roses, does one not have the experience of seeing blue?' is a muddle. For the only possible answer (assuming normal vision and normal observation conditions) is trivial, namely 'Because they *are* red, not blue'. What else would a normally sighted person expect to see when he looks at red roses in normal light? The concept of a normal sighted person is defined in part in terms of the ability to discriminate coloured objects. The visual system of normal human beings gives a person the capacity to discriminate between different colours, and normal human beings can distinguish between red and blue objects. We can investigate what features of our brains endow us with this capacity and what neural deficiencies deprive the colour blind of it, and that is precisely what neuroscientists investigating colour vision do. There is no further question as to why when one looks at a red object in normal light one sees a red object.

[26] Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 71.

[27] Chalmers, ibid., p. 5.

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Even more misconceived is the question 'Why does one then have a reddish sensation rather than the sensation of the sound of a trumpet?'[28] The eye and the rest of the visual system evolved as a light-sensitive system endowing the animal with powers of *visual* discrimination. There is no such thing as *seeing* sounds with one's eyes. So there can be no puzzle as to why, when one looks at a red rose, one does not *see* the sound of a trumpet. Nor is it puzzling, that, when one looks at a red rose, one does not, at the same time, *hear* the sound of a trumpet—given that no one blew a trumpet and hence that there was no trumpet to hear.

So, what remains of the 'qualitative character of experience'? We must distinguish. With respect to any experience we can ask what it was. The answer will specify the individuating character of the experience, e.g. whether it was feeling a twinge or a tickle, seeing a red rose or hearing the sound of music, feeling angry with A or jealous of B, playing cricket or going to the opera. We can also ask with respect to an experience what it was like to undergo it, and the answer, if there is one, will specify whether one found it enjoyable or unpleasant, interesting or boring, frightening or exciting, etc. None of this is mysterious, surprising or baffling. Nor is it the key to unlocking the mysteries of consciousness. For there are no mysteries—only empirical ignorance and conceptual mystification. Disentangling one of the roots of the conceptual confusions that conjure qualia into being is a first step towards the demystification of consciousness.[29]

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[28] Note that Chalmers is here using the term 'sensation' to refer to perceptions rather than to sensations. Seeing red, strictly speaking, involves no sensations whatsoever.

[29] Further steps are taken in M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, *The Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (forthcoming).

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