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On the Persistence of Phenomenology

Anyone working in the philosophy of mind today has heard about the trouble with qualia — the supposed raw feels, phenomenal properties, immediate felt qualities of conscious experiences. According to tradition, qualia are (among other things) homogeneous intrinsic properties immediately presented to us in introspection; indeed, they are essentially subjective properties accessible only from an introspective or first-person 'point of view' (e.g. Nagel 1974; Jackson 1982). Thus it is claimed that introspection delivers knowledge, or at least awareness, of essentially subjective facts about one's conscious experiences: one is aware that they have this or that determinate qualitative character.

Qualia pose an obvious problem for materialist theories of mind: physical matter is paradigmatically objective stuff, so how could a material brain have subjective properties? Not surprisingly, the literature is rife with eliminative (or anyway highly revisionary) approaches. Indeed the past five or so years have seen the emergence of what deserves to be called a received view among materialists. The shared insight is that there are no subjective facts; rather, there are simply different ways of knowing ordinary physical or functional facts about the mind-brain. On this view, introspection is a distinctive first-person way of knowing objective physical facts — the only kind of facts there are — about one's own mind-brain. Thus traditional qualia theorists have mistaken a more epistemic difference between ways of knowing (ways of thinking, modes of presentation, perspectives, con-

My title is a play on the title of Daniel Dennett's chapter essay 'On the Absence of Phenomenology' (1979). The present paper is based on an invited talk delivered at the APA Eastern Division meetings in December 1994. My commentator on that occasion was Michael Tye, to whom I am indebted throughout and, especially, in section IV below.

I shall call these last 'physical facts', following Frank Jackson's (1982) sensibly liberal usage of the term.
cepts, representations, mental states, etc.) for a metaphysical difference between types of facts. Call this received materialist view the materialist line.

I shall not here take sides in the ongoing debate over the existence and nature of qualia. Instead I shall argue that, though there may be no subjective facts, the materialist line per se is untenable. Or, at least, its most prevalent variants are untenable. Specifically, the materialist line is so implausible on empirical grounds that it fails to license any conclusion about qualia one way or the other. Thus my principal claim will be negative: subjective facts cannot be eliminated in the manner envisioned by the materialist line. I do not pretend that my story dissolves or even bypasses the intuitive gridlock characteristic of discussions about qualia. (By now we are all familiar with that schoolyard dialectic: 'You've left something out!' 'No I haven't.' 'Yes you have.' 'No I haven't.' 'Yes you have.' etc., etc.) My hope, though, is that a consideration of certain empirical factors — specifically certain limitations on perceptual memory — will serve to relocate the intuitive impasse, or at least to approach it by a different route, and thereby shed some new light on the problem.

Since my case against the materialist line will proceed from empirical psychological considerations, I had better begin by saying what those are.

I. The Memory Constraint

It is a truism of perceptual psychology and psychophysics that, with rare exceptions, discrimination along perceptual dimensions surpasses identification. In other words, our ability to judge whether two or more stimuli are the same or different in some perceptual respect (pitch or colour, say) far surpasses our ability to type-identify them. As Burns and Ward explain, '[s]ubjects can typically discriminate many more stimuli than they can categorize on an absolute basis, and the discrimination functions are smooth and monotonic' (Burns & Ward 1977: 457). For instance, whereas normal listeners can discriminate about 1400 steps of pitch difference across the audible frequency range (Seashore 1967: 60), they can type-identify or recognize pitches as instances of only about eighty pitch categories (structured from a basic set of twelve). In the visual domain, Leo Hurvich observes that 'there are many fewer absolutely identifiable [hues] than there are discriminable ones. Only a dozen or so hues can be used in practical situations where absolute identification is required' (Hurvich 1981: 2). Hurvich cites Halsey & Chapin's in this regard:

...the number of spectral hues which can be easily identified is very small indeed compared to the number that can be discriminated 50 per cent of the time under ideal laboratory conditions. In the range from 430 to 650 [nm], Wright estimates that there are upwards of 150 discriminable wavelengths. Our experiments show that less than one-tenth this number of hues can be distinguished when observers are required to identify the hues singly and with nearly perfect accuracy (Halsey & Chapin 1951: 1058).

The point is clear: we are much better at discriminating perceptual values (i.e. making same/different judgments) than we are at identifying or recognizing them. Consider for example two just noticeably different shades of red — red1 and red2, as we might call them. Ex hypothesi we can tell them apart in a context of pairwise comparison, but we cannot recognize them — cannot identify them as red1 and red2, respectively — when we see them. For present purposes I shall take colour (hue) perception as my case in point; but the line I'll be defending should apply equally to other perceptual dimensions.

Inevitably, there is disagreement over just how the relevant colour naming data should be interpreted, how many categories perceivers are employing, to what extent the categories in question are universal, and so on. We can ignore those controversies here, however. All my argument will require is this: even if it turns out that perceivers are able, or could learn, to type-identify colour stimuli more finely (i.e. as tokens of types more fine-grained than is commonly supposed), it remains overwhelmingly unlikely that they could learn to identify them as finely as they can discriminate them. The reason has to do with limitations on perceptual memory. Let me explain.

It seems safe to assume that you can recognize only what you can remember. For example, in order to recognize or type-identify an object as red, upon inspection, you must remember what red looks like. A 'classical' cognitivist model of perceptual memory is helpful here (though by no means requisite; see note 6 below). Roughly, on this sort of view, enduring psychological structures called schemas store perceptual information about how colours look, together with linguistic information about what they are called. When you see a red object, the RED perceptual node in your colour schema is activated, therein constituting your recognition of the object as red; activation then spreads to your 'red' word node, enabling you to call the object 'red' (e.g. Anderson 1980).

2 The exceptions are cases of so-called categorical perception; see Rapp 1984 and Harms 1987 for details.
3 Burns & Ward 1977; 1982; Siegel & Siegel 1972a, b, for example. Strictly speaking, only listeners with so-called perfect pitch can identify pitches per se; listeners (most of us) with relative pitch can learn to identify musical intervals if certain cues are provided. This complication touches nothing in the present story.

4 I shall use upper case letters throughout for names of psychological entities like concepts, mental states, schematic structures, network nodes, and so forth.
The obvious thought, then, is that the limited nature of our ability to identify shades of colour results from the limited nature of our colour schemas: the grain of our schemas is evidently a good deal coarser than the corresponding discrimination thresholds. Such a result is hardly surprising inasmuch as the point of schemas is to reduce information load, as Burns and Ward explain.

Numerous studies have indicated... that when faced with high information signals and/or high information rates, observers tend to encode the information into categories as a means of reducing the information load (Burns & Ward, 1982: 245).

In particular, schemas are thought to provide a way of reducing the information load imposed precisely by our fine-grained perceptual discriminations. It would be maladaptive, at the least, for us to remember and be able to recognize every type of stimulus we can discriminate. Hence we have evolved to ignore such fine-grained differences in the interest of simple and speedy responses.

The evolutionary pressures as they may, the coarse-grained character of perceptual memory explains why we can recognize ‘determinable’ colours like red and blue and even scarlet and indigo at such, but not ‘determinate’ shades of those determinables; we cannot recognize redy or indigoxyz in such. This asymmetry between our representations of red and redy, of determinables and their determinates, manifests itself in telling ways. In particular, we cannot recognize determinate shades as such, ostension is our only means of communicating our knowledge of them. If I want to convey to you the precise shade of an object I see, I must point to it, or perhaps paint you a picture of it; in other words, I must somehow present an instance of the shade in question. More importantly still, since our shade perceptions are individuated one-to-one with the shades we can discriminate, ostension is also our only means of communicating the contents of our perceptions of determinate shades. If I want to convey to you the content of my perception of a certain shade, I must present you with an instance of that shade. You must have the experience yourself.

1. Let there be any confusion: by ‘determinate shades’ or ‘determinate hues’ I shall mean the finest colours we can discriminate.

2. That is ‘re-presentations’ in its most innocent sense. In particular, the issue I address here should be solvable independently of any conflict between classical computational and PDP architectures. If dyed-in-the-wool Gestaltists or behaviourists disapprove of even this anemic sense of the term, they can transcribe my story in whatever terms they prefer; transcription is all that will be required.

3. For present purposes I shall use the terms ‘perception’, ‘perceptual experience’, and ‘experience’ interchangeably.

The significance of this limitation on perceptual memory — call it the memory constraint — is often overlooked by philosophers writing about consciousness. In what follows, I shall argue that our inability to type-identify determinate perceptual values, and the resulting requirement that we ostend or present them in order to communicate our knowledge of them, pose a serious problem for the materialist line. First, though, we need to hear more about the latter view. It is advanced in many forms; at present I shall focus on two of these — what I call its predicative and demonstrative forms — but my suspicion is that the difficulty cited here attends the other forms as well.

II. The Materialist Line: Predicative Variants

As I said earlier, materialist lines claim that no subjective fact is known or otherwise grasped in introspection; rather, an ordinary physical property of a perceptual state — a perception of red tomatoes, for example — is represented or ‘thought of’ in an idiosyncratic but materialistically-unproblematic way. William Lycan writes: [Knowledge involves the mode under which the knower represents the fact known, and... this is no less true for mental facts than for ordinary physical ones... [Knowledge that one is having this sort of sensation differs from knowledge that one is in brain state so-and-so, even though one is having this sort of sensation just is one’s being in brain state so-and-so (Lycan 1990: 113, 120).]

Specifically, the relevant neural property causes the tokening of a first-person introspective concept. On Lycan’s account, this concept is a mental state predicates tokened as a result of the process of self-scanning: mentalese ‘RED-EXPERIENCE’, say, is tokened as a result of the ‘operation of one of [the subject’s] internal scanners’ upon the perceptual state in question. Stumpf for another predicative variant of the materialist line, Brian Loar argues that in introspection, some physical property of the brain triggers the tokening of a special phenomenal concept with a ‘distinctive cognitive content’ expressible as ‘this’ or ‘that’. This concept refers directly to the causative physical property in a judgment of the form (e.g.) ‘I AM NOW IN A STATE THAT FEELS LIKE THIS’, imbedded by any higher order reference-fixing property. Indeed, although Loar is more explicit than many of his colleagues on this score, presumably any version of the materialist line must require that the introspective concepts or ‘ways of knowing’ one’s first-order perceptual state refer directly. That is because the invocation of a higher order reference-fixing property would only

4. Lycan 1990: 86-7. Actually, Loar claims to be agnostic: he says that for all the qualia defenders have shown, consciousness could be as he describes it. I ignore this dialectical fine point here.
reintroduce the original problem and thereby threaten a regress. The higher order property would itself be a physical property, as required by the materialist line, and so in turn would be apprehended under a phenomenal concept: as Loar himself points out, 'introspection delivers up no physical-functional description'. (Loar 1990: 82.) But then, presumably, this higher order phenomenal concept would itself refer via a still higher order reference-fixing property; and so on, ad infinitum.

Although Loar typically characterizes his introspective concepts as demonstratives, they are in fact mentalese predicates — 'phenomenal recognition concepts', he calls them. These terms presumably enter introspection indexed, as for example 'FEELS LIKE THIS', 'FEELS LIKE THIS', and so forth, so as to reflect their differential contents. Evidently there will be such a recognition term for every distinct content of which we can be introspectively aware:

We have phenomenal recognition concepts of various degrees of generality. Some are of high determine qualities, and others are of phenomenal determinables: crimson, dark red, red, warm-colored, colored, visual. There is the recognition conception of a whole sensory modality. And there is the most general of all, the phenomenal concept of an experience, the highest ranking phenomenal determinable (Loar 1990: 89).

One can begin to see how these predicative views would eliminate the need for any presentation of phenomenal properties in introspection. Just what such presentation could consist in is notoriously difficult to say; but for present purposes an intuitive characterization will do. A presentational representation is one that does something more like showing than telling, more like exemplifying than merely standing for, more like instantiating than merely designating, its contents. Here is a presentational representation of (let us suppose) red: . On the traditional qualla view, a perception of ripe tomatoes is a presentation representation insofar as it represents the redness of the tomatoes by being itself, phenomenally, red — in other words, by 'showing' what the tomatoes look like. In introspection, then, one is presented with that intrinsic redness.

The materialist line rejects any presentation of phenomenal colour. Here the perception is just a 'physically acceptable' state of the brain to which first-person concepts are applied in introspection. Nothing is red — objectively, phenomenally, or otherwise. The brain isn't red, and the introspective concepts neither are, nor need otherwise introduce, phenomenal red. Just as tokens of the English predicate 'red' can represent objects as red without themselves being, or otherwise needing to present, red, tokens of the mentalese predicate 'RED' can represent red-perceptions as red-perceptions without themselves being, or otherwise needing to present, phenomenal red. Representations of this latter kind are nonpresentation representations; for lack of a better term I shall call them coded representational perceptions. They represent in a manner more like telling than showing; they merely designate, rather than present, their content.

I have been riding roughshod over many exegetical fine points (and some not so fine) in the literature discussed above; but on the face of it, predicative versions of the materialist line appear to offer a neat dismissal of the trouble with qualia. What then is the problem?

III. The Problem

As we have seen, both Lycan and Loar characterize the first-person concepts tokened in introspection as predicatives. And like any predicates, their application effects the type-identification or recognition of things as being of certain kinds. Loar writes:

a phenomenal concept involves the ability to re-identify a feeling of a certain type, for example, feeling like this . . . (Phenomenal concepts are recognition concepts, involving the ability to classify together certain states in the having of them') (Loar 1990: 97–8).

Lycan characterizes the introspective mentalese predicate as a mental 'word for the type of first-order state' being scanned (Lycan 1990: 121).

By now it must be obvious where my argument is going: the materialist line collides with the memory constraint. When it comes to our perception of a determinate shade like red, Lycan will need to say that introspection consists in the (appropriately caused) tokening of a mentalese predicate 'RED'; Loar that it consists in the tokening of a mentalese predicate 'THIS', 'FEELING', or (something to that effect), (or something thereabouts). The looming problem is that human psychological design precludes the acquisition of a recognition schema, so true to its recognition schema, for such a determinate value. One might put the point this way; contrary to the materialist line, we have no phenomenal concepts, no type-identifying mental terms, corresponding to our determinate perceptual contents. We have a phenomenal concept of red — namely our red schema — and therewith a phenomenal concept of a red-perception, but no phenomenal concept of red or red-perception. We have phenomenal representations of red — namely our perceptions of red, and nonphenomenal concepts of red and red-perceptions, but no phenomenal concepts of these fine-grained values. Thus it would appear psychologically impossible that introspection of our red-perceptions should consist in representing them to ourselves as, mentally 'referring' to them as, RED-PERCEPTIONS.

1. I've understood him correctly, Norren Nelken endorses a similar version of the materialist line. According to Nelken, a (phenomenologically) conscious mental state is an imagistic first-order state that is being introspected, and introspection is "second-order, direct, non-inferential accessing and awareness" (1989: 113) that is essential in nature.

2. By 'nonphenomenal concepts': I mean concepts that can be possessed by blind and sighted subjects alike. These representations have, as it were, no strictly perceptual content.
Three related points want immediate emphasis. First, I do not deny that perceptual and other mental contents could be rendered in predicative or other coded form at a 'sub-personal' level of processing. For all I have said, predicative modes of presentation may be the brain's standard currency. (What that would mean, of course, is that sub-personal parts of the brain are making sub-personal type-identifications.) My point is only that predicative modes of presentation cannot be the currency of personal-level introspection: they cannot be the way you represent your own mental states to yourself. Second, the difficulty I have isolated does not depend upon an identification of introspective concepts with terms in a language of thought. On the contrary, the problem will arise for any view on which introspection requires the type-identification of properties (be they physical, functional, phenomenal, or otherwise) of internal states. Third, I am not here merely reaffirming the claim, often voiced by materialist liners, that because of its peculiar functional role, the content of a first-person introspective concept is not expressible in any natural language (e.g. Rey 1993: 249-50). In other words, the problem is not that you can't report the determinate content of your introspection because that content is not expressible in natural language. Rather, it is that you can't report that content because you can't recognize it when you have it; you can't learn to say so much as, 'There it is again.' Consider that you also can't report the determinate shades you see, and there is no problem about the natural language expressibility of shades: we can call them 'reddy,' 'indigovy,' and so forth.

Think of it this way. The cornerstone of the materialists' line is a distinction among different ways of knowing or representing physical facts. One of these ways of knowing, namely the first-person introspective way, is supposed to capture how I myself represent my own first-order perceptual states. So, for example, the mental predicate 'REDDY' is supposed to express how I represent to myself my own reddy-experiences: I represent them as REDDY-EXPERIENCES. But that is just what the memory constraint precludes: I cannot represent my own experiences to myself, in introspection, as REDDY-EXPERIENCES.

Keep in mind throughout that none of the relevant evidence supports the predicative view. What kind of evidence could support it? Only evidence of the ability to engage in 'type-identifying' behaviours: for example, to say 'reddy-experience' when and only when we have a reddy-experience, or to say 'There it is again' when and only when we have a reddy-experience, or to press a buzzer when and only when we have one. But we can do none of these things. We cannot even learn to do them. And apart from evidence of such behavioural dispositions, there is no reason to believe that we represent our reddy-experiences as such. I cannot exaggerate the importance of this point: absent any linguistic behavioural evidence, a hypothesis of predicative introspective representation is entirely ad hoc.

Before turning to the second strand of the materialist line, what I call its demonstrative form, let me pause here to address a pair of objections to what I've said so far.

IV. Objections and Replies

Perhaps the materialist liner will object that a mentalese 'REDDY' could enter introspection automatically at the requisite times (i.e. when triggered by the relevant physical property) but then be irretrievable by 'personal-level' memory. Michael Tye frames the proposal in this way:11

I am so built that I cannot store the concept, reddy. So, I can't learn to reidentify [reddy]. But the fact that I cannot re-recognize reddy, does not mean that I cannot recognize it when I see it. . . Perhaps even this intuition [my perceptual state] under a syntactically structured predicate like 'reddy.' . . . Perhaps what happens is that I manufacture this predicate on the spot and then mechanically chop off the subscript before placing what is left in memory. . . So, I recognize my state as a reddy, experience for as long as it lasts, but I don't remember what reddy looks like.

The idea seems to be that we can identify our reddy-experiences as such, but only while we are having them.

One is hard pressed to make sense of this proposal, for at least two reasons. First, how is it supposed to be that we are at once able to identify our reddy-experiences whenever we have them, yet unable to re-identify them? This seems to verge on a contradiction in terms: if we can identify something whenever we encounter it, then ipso facto we can re-identify it. Keep in mind that the problem isn't merely that we cannot report our reddy-experiences as such; the latter inability is only symptomatic of the true problem, namely our inability to identify or recognize the values in question. Second, as before, there is no evidential support for a claim of type-identification in the scenario Tye describes. All of the verbal and nonverbal behavioural evidence indicates that we are not making an identification. Thus the hypothesis that we are identifying our reddy-experiences as such, even while we are having them, is ad hoc.

On the other hand, perhaps the materialist liner will contend that I am mistaken about the degree to which the content of experience is determinate. Rather, he may insist, experience is only as fine-grained as what we can conceptualize and hence say — for instance, only as fine-grained as 'orangey vermillion' or 'brighter red than that other patch'. The idea is that experience is only 'determinable', not 'determinate'; so the grain of expe-

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11 What follows is excerpted from Tye's APA commentary (see note at the beginning of this chapter). Tye himself does not endorse such a view, in fact he favours a version of what I here call the 'demonstrative' materialist line. See Tye 1995.
rience does not outrun the grain of our concepts and the memory constraint poses no problem.11

This second proposal too is untenable, on empirical grounds. It turns out that a small number of determinate shades are memorable and hence re-identifiable across time: the four unique hues, for example.12 We have determinate phenomenal concepts of red, blue, green, and yellow, as we might call them.13 Furthermore, a quick look at the full spectrum of hues shows that our experiences of these unique hues are no different, in respect of their 'determinateness', from those of the non-unique hues: among other things, the unique hues do not appear to 'stand out' from among the other discriminable hues in the way one would expect if our experience of them were more determinate. On the contrary, the spectrum appears more or less continuous, and any discontinuities that do appear lie near category boundaries rather than central cases. In sum, since our experiences of unique and non-unique hues are introspectively similar in respect of their determinateness, yet conceptualized in radically different ways, introspection of these experiences cannot be explained (or explained exhaustively) in conceptual terms. In particular, it is not plausible to suppose that any discriminable hue, unique or otherwise, is experienced or introspected in a less than determinate fashion.

V. The Materialist Line: Demonstrative Variants

Perhaps the difficulties encountered by predicative variants of the materialist line can be avoided by replacing the predicates with demonstratives. In other words, maybe introspection should be thought of as the application to a first-order perceptual state, of a demonstrative representation rather than a predicative one. Then the first-order state would be thought of in a 'special first-person way'—but a way that doesn’t require its type-identification. Terence Horgan, for one, urges that the phenomenal colour property or quale one experiences in seeing ripe tomatoes is just a physical property of one’s brain apprehended from ‘the first-person ostensive perspective’ (Horgan 1984: 151). The content of this perspective is expressible in a judgment of the form (e.g.) ‘SEEING RIPE TOMATOES HAS THIS PROPERTY’, where ‘THIS PROPERTY’ refers to the relevant neural feature. As before, no subjective facts need enter in, consciously or otherwise. Making a similar move, David Papineau proposes that introspection is not the apprehension of subjective facts but rather the application of a demonstrative concept, the concept ‘THAT EXPERIENCE’, to some ‘physically acceptable characteristic’ of the brain.14

The chief difficulty with this initially appealing line is that it gives rise to what I’ll call the ‘differentialization problem’. In its crudest form, the demonstrative line has it that we introspectively think of all of our experiences as, simply, this (property or experience). In other words, it renders all experiences introspectively identical. But of course our experiences are not introspectively identical. They stand in myriad relations of similarity and difference along their respective perceptual dimensions (hue, shape, pitch, etc.); for example, a red1 experience is introspectively identical to other red2-experiences but introspectively different from red3-experiences. So perhaps a less crude formulation is intended — say, that the introspective judgment is something like ‘SEEING TOMATOES HAS THIS DETERMINATE DARK-ORANGEY-SCARLET PROPERTY’. Even augmenting the demonstrative with descriptive content in this way fails to solve the differentiation problem, however, for the latter beed-up representation will still be satisfied by tokens of different experience types (viz. experiences as of discriminably different shades of dark orangey scarlet). Indeed, for reasons now familiar, any such augmentation, however precise or informative, will fall short of a determinate type-identification, and hence will be satisfied by experiences as of discriminably different shades.

The materialist line might reply that the content of introspection is given by an ordered pair consisting of the mental demonstrative plus the first-order state to which the demonstrative refers on a given occasion. The neural state is the object, and the demonstrative the ‘mode of presentation’.

11 Papineau 1993, chapter 4. It may be that Papineau’s position shares more with the predicativist materialist line than I make it seem; for instance, he writes of Frank Jackson’s Mary that she ‘acquires a new introspective power to re-identify that [red] experience when she has it again’ (110). I don’t propose to worry over this entangled question, however. My principal concern is the plausibility of the demonstrative line, not whether any particular philosopher endorses it. So I employ Papineau’s elegant discussion, with apologies as needed, for my own purposes.

12 Tye has suggested this response (in conversation) on behalf of the materialist line.
of introspection. The differentiation problem is solved, he might insist, because our introspective ways of thinking are differentiated by the differences among their referents: our introspective states are differentiated by our introspected states.

This reply misses the mark, however. The differentiation problem just is the absence of differences in our ways of thinking of our first-order states. While differences among those states constitute differences among the objects of introspection, they precisely do not constitute or otherwise underwrite differences in our ways of thinking of those objects. Hence the inclusion of first-order states in the described ordered pairs does nothing to cure what ails us — that is, nothing to differentiate those states from the first-person ontensive perspective. When we use natural language demonstratives to refer to ordinary material objects, we have independent epistemic (e.g., perceptual) access to those objects, and so the differentiation problem does not arise. On the view presently under consideration, though, the mental demonstratives provide our only access to our first-order states. Intuitively speaking, introspection has no access to those states, except as so many of these.

Citing the fact that we ourselves instantiate the relevant first-order states, or even that we know we are using our mental demonstratives to refer to them, doesn’t solve the problem. Such a strategy is implicit in Horgan’s remarks about scientifically omniscient but chromatically challenged Mary (Jackson 1982):

Does (4) ‘[Seeing ripe tomatoes has this property]’ by itself convey the information which Mary expresses by using (4)? I think not. Rather, since (4) employs an indexical term essentially, it seems that in order to obtain the information which Mary expresses by (4), a member of Mary’s audience would have to experience phenomenal redness himself, and would have to know that Mary is using ‘this property’ to designate the same property that he experiences. Knowledge about what qualities are like cannot be obtained by descriptive means alone, but requires the experiencing of those qualities (Horgan 1984: 1516).

11 It may be suggested that the differentiation problem is solved by thinking of the mental demonstrative rather on the model of the first-person indexical ‘I’ in the natural language. The idea is that, just as in using the word ‘I’ we refer, and know what we refer to, about any ‘independent epistemic access’ to that referent (see e.g. Perry 1979), in using a mental demonstrative we refer, and know what we refer to, about any independent epistemic access to that referent. The analogy breaks down, however. A speaker’s use of ‘I’ refers to the same thing (in the sense of ‘same token’, namely the speaker himself) on each occasion; of course no differentiation problem can arise. An introspective subject’s use of mental ‘I’, on the other hand, refers to tokens of different experience types on different occasions. Consider that, absent independent epistemic access to the identities of the relevant speakers, we are equally unable to differentiate among referents of use of ‘I’ by different speakers. I thank Stephen White for extremely helpful discussion on this point.

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experience of five minutes ago. The idea is that, were we to have the two experiences simultaneously and compare them, we would represent them under different modes of presentation — say, the red1-experience under the mode 'the more red of the two red-experiences I am currently having', and the red2-experience under the mode 'the less red of the two red-experiences I am currently having'. Then the two experiences would be introspectively differentiated, but via purely comparative or discriminatory, rather than type-identifying, representations. So if the demonstratives that refer to the two experiences are 'placeholders' for those hypothetical comparative representations, they in fact introduce distinct modes of presentation and the differentiation problem dissolves. In this way the placeholder view threads a careful path between the predicative and straightforwardly demonstrative approaches, invoking representations neither so fine-grained as to violate the memory constraint nor so coarse-grained as to generate the differentiation problem. 16

Unfortunately it faces a panoply of problems of its own. Chief among these is the fact that since the comparative representations are not (typically) actually taken place, claiming that the demonstratives introduce distinct modes of presentation is so much empty posturing. What the placeholder view comes to, really, is the claim that experiences are introspectively different just in case we would represent them differently were we to have them simultaneously and compare them. And that won't do: according to the materialist line, introspective differences between experiences consist in their being represented differently, not in their being such that they would be represented differently under certain counterfactual circumstances. Red1- and red2-experiences actually are introspectively different; so on the materialist line, they must actually be represented under different modes of presentation. To its credit, the materialist line takes seriously the occurrence character of introspection: introspection is not a dispositional phenomenon.

Of course, there is in general no question of our actually tokening such distinguishing comparative representations, i.e. no question of our actually representing our current (red3) experience as being different from our (red2) experience of five minutes ago. Again, the reason is familiar: given the coarse grain of perceptual memory, we cannot remember, and so cannot now represent, our experience of five minutes ago with sufficient precision to permit a discrimination, in respect of determinate hue, between it and the slightly different one we are currently having. 19 To all intents and purposes, once an experience has ended, we cannot remember its determinate hue content and so cannot represent it either as similar to or as different from the other.

References


The exceptional case of the unique hues (determinate yet memorable) rules out binging the bull on this point. For example, in theory I can always judge whether the unique hue I am experiencing now is similar to or different from the hue I experienced earlier (provided only that I attended to whether the earlier hue was unique); and there is no reason to think that non-unique hues differ from unique ones in respect of their instantiation of introspective similarity and difference relations.

16 I thank Ivan Fox for bringing this point home to me. See Fox 1995 for a materialist dissociation of the quails problem that eschews a representational theory of mind.

17 I begin to develop such a challenge in another paper, "The long and short of perceptual memory: a new argument for qualia" (manuscript, 1995).

18 I am indebted to audiences at Dartmouth College, MIT, Northwestern University, and Ohio State University, and also to William Lycan, William Tait, Steven Heier, Ivan Fox, Simon Blackburn, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Nikola Goblot, Robert Kram, George Pappas, Ned Block, Alex Byrne, Jefferson White, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Meredith Williams, Joseph Salerno, Carl Ingling, Peter Lindegren, and especially Stephen White and Daniel Dennett, for helpful commentary.

19 Unless they are experiences of unique hues; see note 20 below.


