

QUALE

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QUALE (Qualia)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy of Mind, Cognitive Science, Consciousness Studies

1. Core Definition

The term **quale** (plural **qualia**) originates from the Latin word meaning 'of what kind' or 'what sort.' In the philosophy of mind, it designates the subjective, intrinsic, and qualitative properties of experience. A quale is, essentially, the specific 'feel' or 'what it is like' aspect associated with having a particular mental state. This definition emphasizes the phenomenal character of experience--the way things seem from the first-person perspective of the conscious subject.

Qualia represent the irreducible, non-physical characteristics of sensory and perceptual phenomena. Examples frequently cited include the experience of the color red, the sensation of sharp pain, the smell of coffee, or the feeling of intense heat versus **cold**. Crucially, qualia are the mechanism by which one conscious experience is differentiated from another. For instance, the conscious state or feeling tied to an **emotion**, such as **sadness** or **happiness**, constitutes a quale of that affective state, distinguishing it fundamentally from a purely cognitive state, like calculating a sum.

The core difficulty in defining qualia is that they are inherently private and inaccessible to objective, third-person scientific scrutiny. They are not the physical properties of the stimulus (e.g., the wavelength of light), nor are they the functional role the mental state plays (e.g., the ability to discriminate colors); rather, they are the raw, phenomenal appearance of that state to the individual experiencing it.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the philosophical inquiry into subjective sensory experience is ancient, traceable to discussions of primary and secondary qualities found in thinkers like John Locke, the specific term **qualia** was formally introduced and popularized in analytic philosophy during the 20th century. Earlier thinkers often discussed these subjective properties using terms like "sense data" or "phenomenal properties."

The American philosopher Clarence Irving Lewis is widely credited with the introduction and formalization of the term in his 1929 work, *Mind and the World Order*. Lewis defined qualia as recognizable and repeatable properties of sensation, emphasizing their role as the immediate content of experience upon which all knowledge and judgment must be built. His usage focused on sensory regularity--the idea that the taste of sugar, for instance, is the same quality of experience every time it occurs.

The concept gained its critical importance later in the 20th century, specifically as a response to the rise of physicalist theories of mind, such as Identity Theory and Functionalism. As these theories sought to reduce all mental states to physical states (brain events) or functional roles (computational inputs/outputs), **qualia** became the essential feature cited by critics to demonstrate the incompleteness of physical reduction. The philosophical debate shifted, making the definition and status of qualia central to the question of whether consciousness could ever be fully explained by neuroscience alone.

3. Key Characteristics

Proponents of qualia typically ascribe four essential, non-negotiable characteristics to them. These features are often used to define the boundaries between subjective conscious experience and objective physical phenomena:

Intrinsic: Qualia are non-relational properties of the experience itself. The specific qualitative nature of a mental state (e.g., the redness of red, the painfulness of pain) is inherent to that state and does not depend on its external causes, its functional role, or its relation to other mental states.

Ineffable: It is argued that qualia cannot be fully captured, communicated, or described through public language. While one can describe the physical properties, neurological correlates, or behavioral effects of an experience, the subjective feel remains elusive to linguistic description. An individual must experience the quale directly to know it.

Private: Qualia are fundamentally first-person phenomena, accessible only to the experiencing subject. This radical privacy means that direct comparison of qualia between two different individuals is impossible, thus preventing objective, scientific verification of the exact qualitative state.

Directly Accessible: The subject knows their own qualia immediately and infallibly, without requiring inference or observation. They are self-presenting, forming the core data of immediate conscious experience. If one feels pain, there is no further question as to whether one is truly experiencing the quale of pain.

These four characteristics collectively pose what proponents argue is an insurmountable hurdle for reductive physicalism, suggesting that if these features are genuine, then consciousness must possess properties that are non-physical or non-functional.

4. Significance and Impact

The existence of **qualia** is the pivot point of the modern philosophical debate concerning the Mind-Body Problem. They constitute the primary empirical evidence cited by anti-physicalists--those who argue that the mind cannot be entirely reduced to the brain.

Their significance was dramatically heightened by philosopher David Chalmers, who coined the distinction between the "Easy Problems" and the **Hard Problem of Consciousness**. Easy problems relate to explaining functions (e.g., discrimination, memory, attention) and are generally believed to be solvable through standard neuroscience. The Hard Problem, however, is the challenge of explaining why and how physical processes give rise to subjective experience--that is, the qualia themselves. Why does the firing of specific neurons correlate with the subjective experience of "redness" rather than "greenness," or with any subjective experience at all?

Because qualia resist reduction to functional or structural descriptions, they are used to support various forms of non-reductive physicalism or property dualism. These positions accept that mental properties (qualia) emerge from, but are not identical to, physical properties. The explanatory gap--the perceived chasm between physical facts and subjective facts--is rooted entirely in the nature of qualia.

5. Debates and Criticisms

The concept of qualia is subject to intense criticism, primarily from philosophers committed to materialist or physicalist accounts of the mind. Critics often argue that the concept of qualia is flawed, incoherent, or simply an illusion created by language and cognitive mechanisms.

One major line of criticism, strongly advocated by functionalists and eliminative materialists, is that **qualia** are an unnecessary construct with no genuine explanatory value, echoing the source material. Philosophers like Daniel Dennett argue that the supposed properties of qualia (ineffability, privacy) are illusory or based on outdated, dualistic intuitions. Dennett contends that when we try to define what a quale is, the concept collapses, leaving only complex functional and informational processing systems. For instance, the experience of pain is simply a functional state designed to alert the organism to bodily damage, not an irreducible subjective spark.

A second powerful avenue of criticism is presented through conceptual thought experiments designed to undermine the physicalist position by appealing to qualia:

The Knowledge Argument (Mary the Neuroscientist): Proposed by Frank Jackson, this argument describes a brilliant neuroscientist, Mary, who knows every physical fact about color vision but has lived her entire life in a black-and-white room. When she leaves and experiences the color red for the first time, she learns something new--the quale of red. This suggests that physical facts (which she already knew) do not encompass phenomenal facts (qualia), thus proving the existence of non-physical properties.

The Philosophical Zombie Argument: This argument asks us to conceive of a "p-zombie"--a creature molecularly and functionally identical to a human being, but completely lacking conscious experience or qualia. If such a creature is conceivable (even if unlikely), it demonstrates that consciousness is conceptually separable from the physical brain state, reinforcing the non-physical

status of qualia.

The response from contemporary physicalists, often termed **Illusionism**, is to accept that qualia feel irreducible and intrinsic, but to claim this feeling itself is a systematic cognitive illusion--a misleading output of the brain's self-monitoring systems. This approach seeks to dissolve the Hard Problem by denying the actual existence of the qualitative properties while acknowledging the powerful subjective illusion of their existence.

Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Qualia](#)

[Wikipedia: Qualia](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Consciousness](#)

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