

Quality Realism

C. George Boeree

Shippensburg University

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University of Arizona philosopher David Chalmers suggested that it would serve us well to differentiate the "easy" problems in the study of consciousness from the "hard" problem, viz. "Why should brain processes be accompanied by conscious experience?" Why, for example, are certain neural activities – or for that matter certain wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation – so blue? It is this hard problem that I would like to address.

Everyone blames Descartes for "creating" the mind-body problem, but I think the blame should go to Galileo: By differentiating primary from secondary qualities, and putting the first in the material world and the second in the mind, he bifurcated reality for the next four hundred years. Poor Descartes was only trying to put reality back together again – failing miserably, of course.

Quality Realism proposes that the world is composed of "stuff" that looks a bit like both matter and mind – or neither, if you prefer. I like to call this stuff quality, but it could have many other labels (including even matter or mind, if each were re-defined appropriately). Some might call it structure or information. I also like the word *form*, which goes all the way back to Aristotle. All this is to say that Quality Realism is, of course, a brand of Neutral Monism.

Qualities (such as blue) have characteristics of a perception not reducible to the material, that is, they are not reducible to the referents of the concepts of the natural sciences, especially physics. Much of traditional scientific description of qualities is actually a description of only the measurable aspects of qualities. Wavelength, for example, is one way of describing the quality of blue. But such a description should not be assumed to "exhaust" the nature of a quality.

On the other hand, qualities have a real existence beyond the perceiver. Unlike Bishop Berkeley's theory, Quality Realism does not require that a mind (even God's) be present. Neither does it require that there be representations of things "in" our minds or brains: There are no "blue" neural firings or "C major" neurotransmitters, and neither are there such mysterious entities as "qualia." Quality Realism is epistemologically a Direct Realism not unlike Thomas Reid's.

A better way to approach the idea of consciousness is to say that we are "open" to certain real qualities (and, of course, closed to many more). The interaction of a conscious creature and these qualities *is* conscious experience. Consciousness happens when an organism is "interested" in its environment (where there is *Sorge*, as Heidegger put it). This "interest" is based on an organism's neediness (desire, libido). We open ourselves to qualities in that we have evolved (and learned) to find certain qualities relevant (meaningful) to us as organisms which must constantly adapt in order to continue in existence.

Consciousness beyond simple sentience is a matter of perceiving both the world and the self simultaneously. One could say that an organism looks out at the world "through" itself (analogously to how the rods and cones receive light that has passed through layers of capillaries, bipolar neurons, supporting cells...) from the perspective of its needs. But there is no absolute "ego" behind consciousness: There is only need and the layers of sedimented life experience.

Consciousness is the interaction of perceiver and perceived and is not, of course, a thing or place. It is not substantive. Consciousness is a "verb," and an active and transitive one at that: We "touch" the world. So let's take touch as the archetypal sense, and shape as the archetypal quality. Then let's define form as a set of structural relationships extended over time and space – i.e. a Gestalt.

Feeling (and seeing) shapes is the most "primary" (in Galileo's sense) of experiences. Curvature, angularity, circularity, rectilinearly.... Why do we have no epistemological problems with these? Because they can be measured, recorded, and reconstructed... and then experienced by someone else. The Gestalt or form is maintained. It is communicable. (It is the Gestalt that gets transmitted, of course. The actual shape must be "deconstructed" and "reconstructed" to be communicated.) I am suggesting that "secondary" qualities, even flavors and colors, can be understood in the same fashion – they are just less communicable.

Look at taste and smell: These primitive senses allow us to experience the shapes of certain molecules. Could we say that sweet is round? Bitter jagged? Are pungent odors hairy? Florals soft? These are just similes, but they suggest a very useful way of conceiving of flavors and scents.

Or hearing: Hair cells "touch" the physical vibrations conducted through air, bone, membranes, and fluids, vibrations which maintain their forms the entire way. Rhythm is very "primary" – a form over time. Is a high C really that different? Is a C major chord? (I recall as a kid making rulers vibrate on the edge of my desk: I heard the rhythmical tapping of wood on wood and the "overtones" at various pitches!) We only need to remember that forms can be temporal as well as spatial.

And colors: The cones in our retinas "touch" the light waves. Try some "synesthetic" analogies on for size: The sound of blue as electromagnetic vibrations; The taste of blue, the light waves

experienced like the shapes of molecules are experienced in taste and smell; Or the shape of blue in analogy to the shapes of things we touch – blue's "roundness" or "angularity"....

Again, it is the communicability of shapes that leads us to view them as somehow more "primary" than tastes, scents, sounds, and colors. And, although some of these qualities remain difficult to communicate, we can indeed communicate a high C or a C major chord (deconstructing and reconstructing the Gestalts) quite easily, with our voices or our instruments.

Frank Jackson's famous color scientist Mary, if she knew everything there is to know about blue, could indeed recreate blue from the descriptions she has, assuming that she is "open" to blue (capable of seeing it) at all. But that means she will have actually experienced blue prior to anyone finally showing it to her! The thought experiment is actually a pretty poor one.

Let me address a few potential objections:

It is sometimes difficult to shop for clothes in fluorescent light: They look different from the same items in sunlight. So color is "in the mind?" Not at all: A different quality of light is actually being perceived. The blue shirt that appears to be purple is in fact purple in the fluorescent light.

Judgements as to shape, color, etc. depend on the completeness of perception. Errors happen when information is incomplete. A quick glance at a round table from an angle provides us with only partial information, and we might see it as oval. A "full" experiencing of that table would involve movement, many different angles, even the participation of other senses. When the stick in a pond appears bent, it is only because we see it after other environmental effects have had their way with the light.

Someone who is color blind may be unable to correctly judge the color of a wall. But this is not a matter of having a different subjective relationship to color: He or she is simply not open to the full range of experiences that others are. Certain differences are not available to him, just as light is not available to a totally blind person or sound to a deaf person – or the true nature of the stick in the pond is not available to its casual observer.

Things taste different when you are sick. So is taste "in the mind?" Not at all: Some aspects of the flavor are temporarily blocked in a manner analogous to red-green color blindness. Your tongue is partially taste-blind when you are sick.

One person responds with disgust to sushi, another responds with delight. So is the taste and smell of sushi in the mind? No: People just have different responses to the same flavor. "Good" or "bad" in regards to the sushi is another perception, this time of the relationship of the perceiver to the perceived.

Pain is often presented as a subjective thing as well. But pain has two parts: the perception of the damage, which is a quality, and the perception of our response to the damage, which will differ from person to person. And yet the latter is nevertheless a perception of quality, in this case of the relationships between the person and the pain.

Hallucinations are often thought of as being totally subjective. But there are two parts to an hallucination: One is an anticipation (a readiness for perception), and the other is the non-specific stimulation of some sense. Hallucinations “fulfill” our anticipations by extracting what is needed from “white noise” and other ambivalent stimulation. In this way, we hear our names called while in the shower, or see a face in the shadows.

What about the images we form in our minds? Surely they prove that qualities are mental! I am a person with a good imagination. My dreams are in vivid technicolor! And yet, when I try to imagine something exceedingly simple (for example, one of those yellow "smiley face" buttons), I cannot find it! A fleeting sense of the smile or the eyes, the "feeling" of yellow – but never the full perception. In fact, I have come to believe that the only reason my dreams are so vivid is because I am in no position to compare them with reality!

The same argument holds for the famous studies involving electrical stimulation of sensory areas of the brain: You don't experience a flash of light, you experience a state of mind that is similar to the state you would be in if you had indeed experienced a flash of light.

Instead, a mental image is a blend of anticipation and a kind of scanning for the information that makes images more a matter of "drawing" the image than passively receiving it. The same thing with imagining a song: I feel the muscles in my throat loosening and tightening as if I were singing or humming the tune! I am not suggesting that the image is reducible to motor movements. Rather, the presence of motor movements suggests that images are anticipatory, not echoic or iconic.

Finally, how do we reconcile Quality Realism with the fact that the train whistle is higher pitched when the train approaches you, then becomes lower pitched after it passes you (and is in between to the engineer)? Even more dramatically, how do we deal with the astronomical red- and blue-shifts of stars moving away or toward us? Does the sound of the whistle or the light from the star somehow contain all possible pitches or colors?

It is actually a matter similar to that of taking different perspectives on the round table top: It is oval from one angle, round from another, perhaps even a thin rectangle from a third. In a very real sense it contains all these shapes, but the relationship of observer to observed selects out of the scene one aspect or another. It is sound plus relative speed, or light plus relative speed, that makes for the observer's specific experience. It is no more difficult than recognizing that white light contains all the colors of the spectrum.

This paper does not try to suggest that there is now, therefore, nothing more to do in regards to the hard problem. We still do not know what, for example, is the nature, the "shape," of light in general, and how it differs from the nature of sound and other qualities. One could ask, as a thought problem at least, why isn't blue experienced as an incredibly high pitched sound, rather than as a different *kind* of experience. Or why are the shapes of molecules experienced as tastes and smells, rather than as incredibly tiny bubbles? We are hardly out of the woods yet!

But Quality Realism does advance the agenda a bit, I believe: It acknowledges that our experiences are real, not totally dependent on mind, and yet not totally divorced from the qualities of material reality that we have become scientifically comfortable with. Quality Realism is in this way a continuation of the tradition of Naturalism that began with the ancient Greeks.

Quality Realism is based on my understanding of the works of the following philosophers and scientists:

George Berkeley
Franz From
James J. Gibson
Edmund Husserl
William James
Kurt Koffka
Wolfgang Köhler
Maurice Merleau-Ponty
Ulric Neisser
F. S. C. Northrup
Robert Pirsig
Thomas Reid
Edgar Rubin
Hans Vaihinger
Max Wertheimer