

Three Questions About Consciousness

Review of *Consciousness And Experience* by William G. Lycan

Frank Jackson

Australian National University
Philosophy Program
ACT 0200
AUSTRALIA

frank.jackson@anu.edu.au

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PSYCHE, 3(5), October 1997

<http://psyche.cs.monashe.edu.au/v3/psyche-3-05-jackson.html>

KEYWORDS: consciousness, qualia, functionalism, experience.

REVIEW OF: William G. Lycan (1996) *Consciousness and Experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Hbk US\$35. xviii+210pp. ISBN: 0-262-12197-2.

Much of the contemporary literature on conscious experience revolves around three questions. Does the nature of conscious experience pose special problems for physicalism? Is the nature of conscious experience exhausted by functional role? Is the nature of conscious experience exhausted by the intentional contents or representational nature of the relevant kinds of mental states? Bill Lycan has made important contributions to these questions, and to the philosophy of mind and consciousness in general, in a number of publications, and especially in Lycan (1987). The book under review is a 'further thoughts and replies to objections' book. He states his earlier views, makes some modifications, and considers in some detail various objections put to him and some of the writings on consciousness that have appeared since the 1987 book. The general line of argument sometimes gets a bit lost in the to-ing and fro-ing, but consciousness specialists will certainly want to buy this book.

Lycan answers the three questions as follows: no, yes, and yes, maybe. I will comment briefly on his treatment of each question.

Lycan argues that there is no special problem for physicalism raised by conscious experience. He rightly distinguishes two questions here. Does consciousness per se raise a problem? And: Do qualia pose a special problem? His answer to the first question is to defend an inner sense account of consciousness; he holds that "consciousness is the

functioning of internal attention mechanisms directed at lower-order psychological states and events" (p. 14). This view goes back to, e.g., Locke and Kant, and is perhaps best known today through David Armstrong's defence of it. Lycan's contribution is to show how it can meet various objections recently brought against it.

His treatment of the second question about qualia is, it seems to me, less satisfactory. The issue of qualia is the issue raised by states like pain, feeling hungry, and seeing red; states for which there is something it is like to be in them (though Lycan does not approve of this phrase and its brethren); states with, as it is often put, a phenomenal nature. This issue is separate from the question of consciousness. One can see red and be in pain without being conscious of doing so, as may happen when your attention is elsewhere; and many are conscious of believing that two is the smallest prime without it being the case that there is anything it is like to be so conscious (attending to what one believes is not at all like feeling hungry). The most forceful way of raising the problem posed by qualia for physicalism is in terms of the knowledge argument, and I think that Lycan's way with this argument is far too quick (I say this as someone who no longer accepts the argument).

The key claim in the knowledge argument is that someone can know all the physical facts without knowing all the facts, in particular without knowing what it is like to see red or feel pain. Ergo, there is more to know than all the physical facts, and physicalism is false. Lycan's reply is that the argument simply overlooks the fact that a "person can know the fact that p without knowing the fact that q even when the fact that p and the fact that q are one and the same (lightning and electrical discharge, water and H₂O)" p. 49. This is too quick. If you know enough about H₂O, you know that it is water. When we discovered that water is H₂O, we simply discovered enough about H₂O -- that it filled the oceans, was clear and potable, was the stuff we baptised 'water', etc. We did not need to discover anything more. Indeed, all the cases that illustrate the famous opacity of knowledge are cases involving ignorance: it is those ignorant of the fact that the first 'star' seen in the evening is the last to disappear at night who know facts about Hesperus without knowing facts about Phosphorus, and who fail to know that 'they' are one and the same; it is those ignorant of ancient history who know that Cicero denounced Catiline without knowing that Tully did; and so on. But the key claim of the knowledge argument is that if physicalism is true, one who knows all the physical facts does not suffer from ignorance. I grant (obviously) that there is much more to say about the knowledge argument, but any reply to it needs to do a lot more than appeal to the opacity of epistemic contexts.

Lycan's confidence that phenomenal nature is exhausted by functional role derives in part from his non-standard views about the distinction between functional roles and their occupiers. Many who insist that phenomenal nature outruns functional role are moved by the idea that the kind of states that occupy the relevant roles might matter for phenomenal feel. They find some of the spectrum reversal cases -- the familiar cases designed to show that subjects' colour experiences might be radically different while playing essentially the same functional roles -- convincing, and infer that the nature of a colour experience is settled by a combination of the functional role occupied and the nature -- the physiological nature, as it happens -- of the state that does the occupying. For instance,

the physiological states in question will stand in various similarity and difference relations, and the suggestion is often that these relations, in addition to the roles occupied by the states, influence phenomenal nature. Lycan, however, rejects the usual way of thinking about the distinction between role and occupant. For him, it is functional roles all the way down:

I deny the existence of any single distinction between the "the functional" and "the merely physiological", between "the software" and "the hardware it runs on".... The difference between physiological, functional and computational talk is just that, a difference of degree of abstraction and level of functional organization.... They [living things and computers] are all hierarchically organised at many levels, each level functional with respect to those beneath it but structural or concrete as it realizes those levels above it. (pp. 118-119)

This means that, for Lycan, it is very hard for functional nature to fail to exhaust phenomenal nature. Almost anything you might cite as escaping the functional net is, by his lights, functional after all. The interesting question then becomes which aspects of functional nature matter for which aspects of psychological nature, and, though he indicates sympathy for answers that give a central role to selectional history, he largely sets the question aside (for now).

Perceptions and bodily sensations represent things as being thus and so; they have intentional natures. The point is painfully obvious in the case of perceptions, but is also pretty obvious in the case of bodily sensations. As Lycan and others urge, bodily sensations represent how things are with parts of one's body. The live debate, therefore, is over whether there is more to their nature qua psychological states (we know there is more to their nature qua neurological states) than is given by their intentional natures. Can we, for example, capture the painfulness of pain in terms of how it represents things as being, together with the associated desire that this stop, or something along these general lines? Lycan's approach is to explain as much as possible of phenomenal nature in intentional terms while allowing that in some cases it may (may) be necessary to add a bit of functional role (a bit, that is, which does not come for free with intentional nature). In an interesting final chapter, Lycan replies to three cases presented by Christopher Peacocke in favour of, as Lycan calls them, 'Strange Qualia', or, as Peacocke calls them, 'non-representational sensational properties'. Here is one of Peacocke's cases, quoted by Lycan on pp. 143-144:

Suppose you are standing on a road which stretches from you to the horizon. There are two trees at the roadside, one a hundred yards from you, the other two hundred. Your experience represents these objects as being of the same physical height and other dimensions; that is, taking your experience at face value you would judge that the trees are roughly the same physical size. Yet there is also some sense in which the nearer tree occupies more of your visual field than the more distant tree. This is as much a feature of your experience itself as is representing the trees as

being of the same height. The experience can possess this feature without your having any concept of the feature or of the visual field: you simply enjoy an experience which has the feature. (Peacocke, 1983, p. 12)

It is clear and agreed by all that the nature of your experience is not exhausted by its representing that the trees are the same height: both your memory that they are the same height and your hearing someone say that they are do that, and yet they are very different experiences from the experience Peacocke describes. However, your perceptual experience represents a great deal more than that the trees are the same height: it represents where they are relative to where you are and relative to other objects; it represents, in a single package, facts about position, shape, colour, and size (it isn't like a passage of prose with different sentences devoted to position, shape, colour, and size); it represents that the objects are impacting on you in a way which delivers the putative information about position etc., and so on and so forth. The question of interest is, accordingly, whether we capture in full the perceptual experience if we include enough of these additional facts about the representational nature of your experience.

Lycan sees the issue in just this way and has his own suggestion (given on pp. 151-152) about the representational facts which make up a package sufficient to capture in full the perceptual experience. This amounts to what we might call a direct reply to Peacocke; it is an attempt to identify the package of representational facts that turns the trick. He might, though, have first offered an indirect reply; an argument that there must be such a package of representational or intentional facts that captures in full the perceptual experience. The possibility of this kind of existence proof derives from the considerable plausibility of the claim that a difference in perceptual experience implies a difference in representational content: for any and every change in your perceptual experience, there is some change or other in how things are being represented as being to you -- whether correctly or not is, of course, another matter. But then, contraposing, we get that sameness in representational content implies sameness in perceptual experience. This tells us that the nature of perceptual experience supervenes on representational content, and so that enough by way of representational content fixes in full the nature of perceptual experience. This kind of indirect argument does not tell us which package of representational facts secures any given perceptual experience, but does tell us, it seems to me, that there must be such a package for any given perceptual experience, so confirming Lycan's doubts about strange qualia.

References

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