

Thought and Qualia

DAVID COLE

Department of Philosophy, University of Minnesota, Duluth, MN 55812, U.S.A.

Abstract. I present a theory of the nature and basis of the conscious experience characteristic of occurrent propositional attitudes: thinking this or that. As a preliminary I offer an extended criticism of Paul Schweizer's treatment of such consciousness as unexplained secondary qualities of neural events. I also attempt to rebut arguments against the possibility of functionalist accounts of conscious experience and qualia.

Key words. Consciousness, qualia, intentionality, secondary properties, functionalism, physicalism, propositional attitudes.

1. Introduction

Is consciousness the stray magnetic flux on the Turing Tape of mental life? Is it the mere misleading appearance of an underlying neurophysiological reality? Is it a brute fact that neurons somehow make conscious experience? Is it an inexplicable fortuitous, accident that we are made out of stuff that produces consciousness? I don't think so. Since I have an alternative account of conscious experience that holds that it is essential to abstract thought, and not a mere artifact of our instantiation, I would like to show why I do not find Schweizer's theory and arguments persuasive, and then, at the end, to set out my alternative. I try to show why much thought involves conscious experience. My account is perforce speculative, but no more so than the theory it opposes. Those who wish to cut to that chase can skip to Section 5, "Why thinking is experienced."

In his paper "Intentionality, qualia, and mind/brain identity," Paul Schweizer is primarily concerned with subjectivity or, as I would prefer to call it, sentience, i.e., having feelings and sensations or "qualia". With regard to intentionality, Schweizer holds first that sentience is in fact a distinct phenomenon, but that in the case of human intentionality, there is an important component of sentience. This sentience is what is in fact revealed, by Searle's Chinese Room argument, as lacking in computational systems. He thinks that sentience, unlike non-intrinsic intentionality, cannot be accounted for by functionalist or computational theories of mind. The qualitative aspect of intentional states is to be analyzed on the model of secondary qualities. And he believes that humans do not have original or intrinsic intentionality, what they have is intentionality cum characteristic accompanying qualia.

Setting aside the exegetical difficulties with Schweizer's position, I think that much of the position is implausible. Schweizer and I are both very interested in the subjective conscious experience that is characteristic of some central forms of human thought: occurrently entertaining propositions. But we seem to have

completely different views of what to make of this phenomenon. Schweizer's view is epiphenomenal. But I think no form of epiphenomenalism can do justice to subjective experience. We agree that intentionality cannot be captured by computational processes, at least not on traditional, narrow, computational accounts. (It might, on a "wide" functionalist account, which includes causes and effects outside the organism). But I hold that conscious experience cannot be an inexplicable "brut" effect of the particular microstructure of the brain, one that cannot be captured by a functional account of the information processing involved in the brain. Conscious experience is not a secondary property of neural function. The conscious experience that accompanies thought has a great deal to do with intentionality. Humans and other physical systems do have original intentionality.

In turn, I will discuss the theses about intentionality, the utility of the primary/secondary property distinction in this context and in general, and I will offer an alternative account of the source of the experience of thinking. Then I will critically discuss arguments against functionalist approaches to sentience.

2. Intentionality

Let me address Schweizer's claims about intentionality first. I think it is pretty clear, contrary to what Schweizer says, that humans possess original intentionality. This merely means that some states of us do not require an additional interpreter to bestow intentionality upon them. Even if I were to become the last person on Earth, I could still have thoughts about myself and my surroundings and, doubtless, regrets about the past. Contrast written messages, which are about something solely in virtue of the intentions (and intentionality) of their authors, and the intentional capacities of their readers. Marks on paper that cannot trace their origins back to intentional systems fail to have intentionality: they aren't about anything, no matter how closely they may resemble meaningful messages. But intentional states of humans do not require distinct interpreters to bestow meaning upon them. I don't see anything in Schweizer's paper to support his surprising claim that humans lack original, non-derived, intentionality.

It might be useful to distinguish original from intrinsic intentionality. Original intentionality does not depend upon another interpreter; intrinsic intentionality would be intentionality that did not depend on anything other than the present state and organization of the system. The former, I have argued, should not be controversial. The latter is. On etiological theories of meaning, like Fred Dretske's, which requires a learning history, or Ruth Millikan's, which requires an evolutionary-selection history, there is no such thing as intrinsic intentionality thus understood. On Jerry Fodor's asymmetric dependence of counterfactuals view, there can be intrinsic intentionality. The intentionality accounted for by these theories is not confined to states accompanied by conscious experience; they