

A defence of phenomenal consciousness (Qualia)

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Abstract

Emotions and feelings include a diversity of mental states with distinct qualitative features known as “qualia”. These mental states' qualitative features consist of how these mental states are perceived or how things appear to us. For this reason, these features are often called phenomenal aspects or phenomenal consciousness. This is how mental states appear to us. This subjective phenomenal feature is commonly defined as follows: there is a thing such that it is the specific quality of the existence of a particular mental state. Some philosophers have gone too far to deny the existence of qualia. George Rey is among these philosophers. He argues that it is possible to design a machine that possesses all mental processes and capacities. Even though such a machine has all the mental capacities that human beings can have, Rey argues, it is dubious that it has qualia. If it is suspicious that this machine has qualia, then no mental capacities and processes are reasonable candidates for qualia. Rey concludes that it is equally reasonable to doubt if human beings possess qualia. The present study shall first formulate Rey's argument and then shows that it is inefficient. This research will explore the question if it is possible to design a machine that, analogous to human beings, possesses mental capacities.

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Extended Abstract

Emotions and feelings include a diversity of mental states with distinct qualitative features known as “qualia”. These mental states' qualitative features consist of how these mental states are perceived or how things appear to us. For this reason, these features are often called phe-

nominal aspects or phenomenal consciousness. This is how mental states appear to us. This subjective phenomenal feature is commonly defined as follows: there is a thing such that it is the specific quality of the existence of a particular mental state. Some philosophers have gone

too far to deny the existence of qualia. George Rey is among these philosophers. He argues that it is possible to design a machine that possesses all mental processes and capacities. Even though such a machine has all the mental capacities that human beings can have, Rey argues, that it is dubious about having qualia. If it is suspicious that this machine has qualia, then no mental capacities and processes are reasonable candidates for qualia. Rey concludes that it is equally reasonable to doubt if human beings possess qualia.

Rey's argument can be formulated as follows:

- (1) I think I have various capacities, including thinking, being self-conscious, using language to report my internal states, having short-term memory, and having perceptual and emotional experiences.
- (2) A machine can be programmed so that it has all mental capacities, including thinking, being self-conscious, using language to report my internal states, having short-term memory, and having perceptual and emotional experiences.
- (3) Even if (2) is true, it is doubtful if this machine is phenomenally conscious.
- (4) If it is doubtful that the machine, as it is described in (2), is phenomenally conscious, then none of the noted mental phenomena in (1) are reasonable candidates for playing the role of phenomenal consciousness.
- (5) If none of the noted mental phenomena in (1) are reasonable candidates for playing the role of phenomenal consciousness, then we have an excellent reason to be doubtful if we have phenomenal consciousness.
- (6) Therefore, there are reasons to be doubtful about having phenomenal consciousness.

The argument is valid, but it is not sound. The current study shall show that Rey's argument is unproductive. This research aims to explore the question if it is really possible to design a machine that, analogous to human beings, possesses mental capacities. Someone might

raise this objection to Rey's argument while it genuinely seems that we have phenomenal consciousness, the same is not the case for the machine. This strategy, however, is not interesting because to assert that "it seems to S that she is phenomenally conscious" is indeed saying that "S believes that she is phenomenally conscious". The problem with this is that someone might argue that to say "it seems to S that P" does not mean "S believes that P". However, what else might the former mean if it does not mean the latter? At least two meanings can be ascribed to "it seems to S": (1) S conceives that, and (2) S has some sort of immediate perception. If "it seems to S that P" means S conceives that P, then one may wonder whether it is possible for S to conceive that she has a property m, but she does not believe that she has a property m. One should be careful not to identify "conceiving" with "imagining". A person might imagine that she has a property m, while she does not actually have that property and does not even believe in having that property. Conceiving, nonetheless, is connected with the notion of possible worlds. If an individual conceives that she has the property m, it is logically possible that she has that specific property. There is a possible world where S has the property m, and S believes that she has that property. In this way, conceiving could be connected to believing. However, if one claims that seeming is some kind of immediate perception that leads to belief formation, then she looks to be holding that while human beings have this capacity, machines lack it. Nevertheless, why do human beings have the capacity of immediate perception, whereas machines do not have? It appears that one has already made the assumption that machines cannot have an immediate perception, and she is now trying to argue that it does not seem to machines that they have phenomenal consciousness. Evidently, the argument is a non-starter; one needs to argue, first, that seeming is a different phenomenon in human beings and machines and, then, rea-

sons that machines cannot have a perception of seeming. To sum up, the objection against Rey is not effective.

The best and more promising strategy against Rey seems to demonstrate that it is impossible to program the mental activities and processes mentioned in the argument formulated above. If this claim is true, Rey's argument turns out to be false. But is this a true claim? At the outset, it does not look to be true. One needs to establish that it is technologically impossible to program this machine. This, however, is not certain, and one cannot make sure that this is a technological impossibility. Even if it is presently technologically impossible, there is no reason to think that we will not be able to do it in a hundred years or so. The objection needs something more substantial: one is required to establish that it is in principle impossible to program this machine. Dreyfus has taken this path of argument.

Following Dreyfus, this study will argue for the impossibility of designing Rey's machine. Deryfus believes that data are related to each other, and to know how specific data are related to each other, one needs to have knowledge about the interaction between culture and society and the history of an individual. Intelligence, he thinks, is "situated" and cannot be made sense without considering the context of human beings' life. This consists of the effect of the human body on her cognition and the influence of cultural and historical factors on her life.

Given that the reason for the impossibility of Rey's machine is this: programming such a machine requires cultural and social interactions between the machine and some environment. This machine can have its own self-knowledge. The self obtains its significance in relation to others and the environment. Based on this, we will argue that if it is possible to design such a machine, Rey's

argument is ineffective because he thinks that qualia and phenomenal consciousness are some kinds of mental processing. The problem of Rey's argument lies in this false assumption. We need to distinguish two things: (1) a mental process x is qualia, and (2) a mental process x has a particular quality that is called "qualia". Rey does not seem to have appreciated this distinction in his argument. His argument appears to be against (1) and has nothing to do with (2). If the argument is built on (2), then it looks effective, but the problem is that it does not deny the existence of qualia! To challenge the possibility of qualia, Rey needs to argue against the very concept of qualia that is accepted by pro-qualia philosophers. Rey's argument is based on defining and then criticizing the concept of "qualia" in a way that diverges from the accepted definition among philosophers. This is hardly an argument against the existence of qualia.

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