

A diet, but not the qualia plan: Reply to Amy Kind *

Keith Frankish

In my paper ‘Quining Diet Qualia’ (Frankish, 2012), I argue against adopting a weak ‘diet’ notion of qualia to characterize the explanandum for theories of consciousness. I argue that this notion, which is obtained by stripping the stronger (‘classic’) notion of qualia of its commitments to intrinsicality, ineffability, and subjectivity, has no distinctive content, and that in practice diet qualia are conflated either with classic qualia or with what I call *zero qualia*—properties that dispose us to judge that experiences have classic qualia.

In her comment ‘Sticking to One’s Diet’ (Kind, 2012), Amy Kind argues that I set the standards for a theory-neutral notion of qualia too high. If my arguments against the notion of diet qualia were sound, she argues, parallel ones would apply to theory-neutral notions in other areas, with the consequence that we could never identify an explanandum neutrally. Kind uses moral rightness as an example. We have an intuitive grasp of a notion of moral rightness which is neutral between different theories of the nature of moral rightness. Yet, Kind argues, this notion is no easier to flesh out than that of diet qualia. We cannot explain what we mean by moral rightness, or even demonstrate instances of it, without invoking some theory of the nature of moral rightness.

As Kind notes, I address this objection in the paper. My response is that although theory-neutral notions are by necessity thin, they must have *some* distinctive content, whereas the notion of diet qualia has none. Kind remains unconvinced. She is also unimpressed by my argument that the notion of diet qualia cannot identify a theory-neutral explanandum since there are those, such as Dennett, who deny the existence of diet qualia. She points out that the notion is the starting point only for those who take consciousness seriously, and it is no objection that it would not be acceptable to those who deny the reality of consciousness.

The main point I want to make in reply is that the analogy with moral rightness does not work in the way Kind supposes. This will also enable me to outline a positive account of what the explanandum for a theory of consciousness should be.

As Kind concedes, a theory-neutral notion must have some distinctive content. We must have some way of getting a grip on what it is we are talking about. So, if my arguments for the vacuity of the notion of diet qualia really did apply equally to the notion of moral rightness, then this would be a problem for that notion, too. In fact,

* NOTICE: this is the author’s version of a work that was accepted for publication in *Consciousness and Cognition*. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as peer review, editing, corrections, structural formatting, and other quality control mechanisms may not be reflected in this document. Changes may have been made to this work since it was submitted for publication. A definitive version was published in *Consciousness and Cognition* 21(2): 679-80 (June 2012) and can be downloaded from the journal’s website at this address: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/10538100/21/2>.

they do not apply to it. For we can get a grip on the notion of moral rightness by identifying typical examples of morally right actions and contrasting them with samples of actions that are morally wrong or neutral. What needs explaining, we can say, is simply whatever it is that distinguishes the actions in the former group from those in the latter. This is a genuinely neutral approach, which leaves it open whether the distinguishing feature is a property of the actions themselves, their consequences, their agents' characters, or something else.

But could we not do the same with consciousness? We could identify some typical examples of conscious experiences, contrast them with examples of non-conscious experiences, and say that our target is the feature or features that distinguish experiences in the former group from those in the latter. (We might go on to argue that the distinguishing features include conceptually distinct phenomenal and functional components, but that is not assumed at the outset.) Now, I agree that this would identify a theory-neutral explanandum for theories of conscious experience. In fact, I think it is exactly the notion we need for this purpose. However, *it is not the notion of diet qualia*. For it does not carry the implication that there is something to be explained beyond functions and dispositions. (Neither does it carry the implication that there is not, of course.) We might argue that the distinguishing feature of conscious experiences is simply that they possess zero qualia (as well, perhaps, as other functional features, such as accessibility). The notion of diet qualia, by contrast, does carry that implication, since it is introduced by way of contrast with functional and dispositional notions, such as that of zero qualia. Put another way, the neutral notion of consciousness just described (*diet consciousness*, we might call it) does not involve a commitment to *taking consciousness seriously* in David Chalmers's sense—that is, to holding that the distinguishing feature of conscious experiences is one that cannot be analysed functionally.

So there is no problem getting a grip on the notion of diet consciousness. The same does not go for the notion of diet qualia, however, for the reasons given in my original paper. There is no theory-neutral way of introspectively demonstrating the phenomenal properties of conscious experiences, and no other way of getting a grip on diet qualia that distinguishes them adequately from classic qualia on the one hand or zero qualia on the other.

The line of thought, then, suggests that the starting point for a theory of consciousness should be the notion of diet consciousness, not that of diet qualia. Further reflection on the moral rightness example confirms this. Morally right actions are a feature of our everyday, pre-theoretical conception of the world—the manifest image. So, too, are conscious experiences. But *qualia* are not part of this conception. The manifest image includes colours, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile feels, pains, and so on; but these are regarded as properties of external objects, not of mental states. The notion of qualia emerged from philosophical reflection *on* the manifest image—a process involving the distinction between primary and secondary qualities of objects, the treatment of secondary qualities (qualia) as properties of sense-data, and, more recently, the switch to thinking of qualia as properties of experiences themselves

(Crane, 2000). Thus, assuming we want to start with an intuitive, pre-theoretical notion of consciousness, comparable to that of moral rightness, we should prefer the notion of diet consciousness to that of diet qualia.

I shall add a few more comments, addressing the other points Kind makes. First, is the notion of diet qualia a theoretically loaded one, as I suggest in the paper? Kind argues that the fact that some theorists deny the existence of diet qualia does not show that the notion is theoretically loaded, any more than the existence of anti-realists about moral rightness shows that that notion is. But this misses the point. There are theorists, such as Dennett, who want to say that consciousness exists, while denying that diet qualia do. But if consciousness is defined in terms of diet qualia, then such a claim becomes incoherent. Of course, this is just a terminological matter, but it suggests that it is tendentious to adopt diet qualia as the starting point for a theory of consciousness, especially given the availability of the more neutral notion of diet consciousness.

Second, is it a problem that the notion of diet qualia serves as a starting point for those who want to *take consciousness seriously*? Kind argues not; a theory of something should take that thing seriously, in the sense of not denying its existence. But this equivocates on what we mean by ‘taking consciousness seriously’. My point was that the notion of diet qualia is the starting point for those who take consciousness seriously *in David Chalmers’s sense*—that is, who accept that consciousness cannot be functionally analysed (e.g. Chalmers, 1996). And this, I suggest, does make it problematic to adopt the notion as our starting point, since doing so begs the question against those who claim that consciousness *can* be functionally analysed. (In fact, it would be better to say that the notion of diet qualia is the starting point for those who *take qualia seriously*.)

Third, in claiming that the notion of diet qualia plays a specific theoretical role, I was not claiming merely that it involves a commitment to taking consciousness seriously, in the sense just discussed. Rather, the claim was that it serves to facilitate an approach which *combines* taking consciousness seriously with reductively explaining it. That is, the notion of diet qualia is supposed to have three features: (1) it identifies the explanandum for a theory of consciousness, (2) it is not functionally analysable, and (3) it does not carry any commitments incompatible with the reductive explanation of consciousness. The notion is, I suggest, a gerrymandered one, and the burden of my original paper is that it is vacuous. There is no substantive notion of qualia that does not carry at least an implicit commitment to features that are problematic for physicalism, particularly intrinsicity. (It may be that Kind would not disagree with this, given the comments in her final paragraph.)

To sum up, the considerations Kind mentions do not justify the reinstatement of the notion of diet qualia as the starting point for a theory of consciousness, but rather support its replacement with the notion of diet consciousness. By all means stick to a diet, but avoid the Qualia Plan!

References

- Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search of a fundamental theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crane, T. (2000). The origins of qualia. In T. Crane & S. A. Patterson (Eds.), *The history of the mind-body problem* (pp. 169-94). London: Routledge.
- Frankish, K. (2012). Quining diet qualia. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21(2): 667-76.
- Kind, A. (2012). Sticking to one's diet: Commentary on 'Quining diet qualia' by Keith Frankish. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21(2): 677-8.