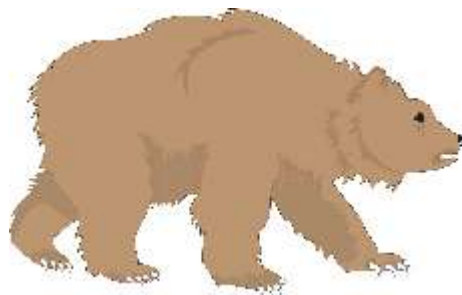


# **Ursus Philosophicus**

**Essays dedicated to Björn Haglund on his sixtieth birthday**





# Some remarks on experience and objects of experience

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## Abstract

It has often been argued that the theory of psycho-neural identity must be wrong because it contradicts Leibniz' law. Some philosophers, for example John Heil, has tried to deal with this problem by relying on a distinction between the experience of phenomenal objects and these objects themselves. The point with the distinction is that it might be less problematic to identify experiences with brain states than to identify phenomenal objects or states with brain states. The distinction can also be of interest from a functionalist point of view. In this paper I argue that it is questionable if such a distinction can be drawn, and if it is drawn, it is questionable if it really solves the problems that it is designed to solve.

## 1. Introduction

In his book *Philosophy of mind* John Heil employs a distinction between experience and object experienced that I find rather puzzling. It concerns the ontology of mind in general and Heil also argues that it has some importance in dealing with certain problems that the theory of psycho-neural identity gives rise to. And these two aspects of the distinction are closely interlaced. Some ontological commitments seem incompatible with the identity theory, other might perhaps be compatible with it.

One of the most salient problems with the identity theory is that it seems to contradict Leibniz' law, according to which identical objects must have all their properties in common:

- (LI) If two entities a and b are identical, then a must have all the properties of b, and b all the properties of a.

But brain states have a lot of properties that we do not ascribe to our mental states, and the latter have properties that we do not ascribe to brain states.

One could say that Leibniz' law makes it difficult to defend two kinds of naïve realism. One of them is the naïve interpretation of visual perception. If we are to identify a surface in our subjective visual fields that is red in the phenomenal sense, for example a ripe tomato (one of Heil's own examples), with the surface of a mind independent physical object, these surfaces must have all their properties in common. But from the point of view of physics it is nonsense to ascribe phenomenal redness to physical objects, and it would also be nonsense to claim that phenomenal redness has some elementary particle structure.

## **2. Psycho-neural identity and mind-body naïve realism**

One version of the theory of psycho-neural identity seems to lead to another kind of naïve realism, one regarding the relations between the qualities of mental states and brain states. Even if no one would actually defend such a standpoint, it seems to be implicit in the theory. If we are to identify such states it seems as if we have to ascribe the phenomenal properties of, for example, a pain to the brain, which is as naïve and problematic as ascribing phenomenal colour properties to physical objects. This makes the identity theory as absurd as naïve realism in the perceptual case.

But there are ways of trying to make the identity theory more plausible. One way, advocated by Heil, is to rely on a distinction between the experience of something, and that something itself. (Heil 1998, p. 81) The point is, in our case, that for example a visual experience might not have the complicating phenomenal properties that the visually experienced object has, and that it is the experience and not the object experienced which is to be identified with a brain state. Let us see how such a strategy might work.

## **3. Identity without naïve realism?**

We begin with a causal process starting from some mind independent physical object, P-object for short, described in physical terms (below I will use a lot of abbreviations such as P-object, S-object, E-red etc that are my own and not Heil's), a process that ends up in the brain's visual center. In our case the object would be Heil's ripe tomato,

and the physical events in the brain would give rise to a “red and roundish” speck in the subjective visual field. Let us call the physical tomatoe’s light reflection properties P-red and the phenomenal redness S-red. Objects in our visual fields we call S-objects.

None of these entities seem suitable to enter into a psycho-physical identity relation. The P-red is situated outside my brain and to identify S-red with a brain state, B-state for short, implies the kind of, as it seems, untenable naïve realism mentioned above. It would be as absurd to identify S-red with a B-state as to identify it with a P-state in the physical space outside my brain.

In order to reconcile the identity theory with Leibniz’ law, Heil introduces the experience of phenomenal redness, let us for short call such an experience E-red. The neurological correlate of S-red, or perhaps in this case E-red, we can call B-red, a brain state described in physical terms.

Now Heil suggests that the identity theory should be interpreted as implying an identity, expressed in our notation, not between S-red and B-red, but between E-red and B-red. He asks about the qualities of experience:

But what exactly are its qualities? Whatever they are, they are not to be confused with qualities of the object observed, in this case the bus [a red double-decker in London, my comment]....Similarly, *what it’s like* [my italics] to experience the bus, the qualities of your experiencing the bus, are not to be confused with the qualities of the bus. (Heil 1998, p. 80).

He also writes:

But, again, the qualities of the experience are not to be confused with the qualities of the object that gives rise to them. (ibid.)

There are (at least) two central thoughts here:

- (1) Experience has a character of “what it’s like” to perceive a certain object.
- (2) The qualities of our experience might be very different from those of that which we are experiencing. The latter qualities could also be to a large extent unknown to us.

Now the question is what kind of experience we are dealing with here. And a further question is if it is a concept of experience that could help to rescue the identity theory from naïve realism.

## **4. What is experience?**

### **4.1. Visual experience**

Let us continue with visual experience as an example. We then call an experience of red that is qualia laden, that contains some phenomenal “what it’s like”-qualities, E-red-s, and an experience under a purely physical description E-red-p. The latter may probably be identified with B-red without any fundamental difficulties.

Is the existence of phenomenal experience important from the point of view of psycho-neural identity and if so: why?

If there is no E-red-s, we have reduced the number of entities employed in our discussion from a quartet to a trio: the P-tomato (a physical object), the S-tomato (a phenomenal object) and the B-tomato (the brain state-correlate to the S-tomato). If the identity theorist still wants to identify something mental with a brain state, nothing is left for him but the S-object, in this example the S-tomato. And that would end up in mind-body naïve realism.

### **4.2 Introspection**

Do we have we any reason to postulate the existence of something like E-red-s, a qualia laden experience that is distinct from S-red itself? If it is in some way introspectively accessible that could be a reason. But if I look at a ripe tomato, the only thing with phenomenal qualities I find is the S-tomato itself. Any experience of S-red, distinct from the S-red, I cannot discover. If I try to introspect it I find a lot of thoughts, feelings, sensations, some of them perhaps caused by my perceiving the S-red, but nothing that I could reasonably call an experience of the S-red. The “what it’s like” seems to be the S-red itself and nothing else, and that means that we can identify the E-red-s with S-red. If you want to introspect your experience of a ripe tomato, you just have to inspect your subjective visual field. The “red and roundish” speck, the S-tomato, you see there is an experience, and I would call it an experience of P-red, the qualities of the physical tomato.

### 4.3 A connection bridge?

Do we have any other theoretical reasons for believing in the existence of E-red-s? One reason might be that it could make the existence of our subjective visual fields more comprehensible. We are puzzled by the old question: how is it possible that physical structures and events in the brain could give rise to these vast three-dimensional subjective worlds in which we live our lives? Worlds that self-evidently appear to be outside us, but that still, if they can be located in physical space at all, which is dubious, must be located inside our heads, if the latter are regarded as physical objects.

It would perhaps be tempting to postulate E-red-s as some kind of connecting bridge between B-red and S-red, a bridge that could make it possible to understand how the S-red comes into being. But it seems as if such a bridge would not work. If it is strange how B-red could give rise to S-red, it is equally strange how B-red could give rise to E-red-s, the latter having some mysterious power to create S-red that B-red itself has not. So we need another entity, let us call it E-red-s<sub>2</sub>, which has the role of being a connecting bridge between B-red and E-red-s and then we get an infinite regress by being forced to postulate a chain of E-red-s<sub>2</sub>...E-red-s<sub>3</sub> etc that, being endless, cannot in a satisfactory way solve our problem and make the origin of S-red more intelligible.

We found above that if there is no E-red-s, the identity theory would be difficult to defend. In such a case the only thing left to identify with a brain state would be the S-tomato itself, which would end up in mind-body naïve realism. If I see a ripe tomato some part of my brain would have to be literally speaking phenomenally red in a way it would not be if I were not perceiving the tomato.

But we may now ask if the existence of E-red-s really would have contributed to make psycho-neural identity more plausible. The introduction of E-red-s should bring the identity theory in agreement with Leibniz' law. But is it easier to identify E-red-s with a brain state than to identify the S-red itself with such a physical state? The qualities of qualia laden experiences might not be the qualities of the object experienced. But is there any reason to think that the perhaps hidden S-qualities of experience are less problematic from the point of view of psycho-neural identity than the manifest S-qualities of phenomenal objects? If experiences have "what it's like"-qualities they are as phenomenal as the phenomenal S-objects themselves. And

then it seems as questionable to identify E-red-s with B-red as to identify the latter with S-red.

Even if Heil speaks about experience as having “what it’s like”-qualities, he also says that we know so little about the properties of our experiences that we have no reason to exclude the possibility that for example E-red might be a neurophysiological state, that it could very well be identified with B-red. But Heil seems to be inconsistent on this point. If experience is a purely neurophysiological state it has no phenomenal qualities. To defend psycho-neural identity one could perhaps take the E-red-p, experience under a purely physical description, as the relevant kind of entity to identify with B-red. And that may perhaps make the identity theory trivially true. But it is difficult to imagine experience not being qualia laden, since having “what it’s like”-qualities seems to be constitutive of the very essence of being an experience.

## **5. Pain, experience, and identity**

### **5.1 What is a pain state?**

In the case of visual perception it is perhaps hard to realize that the S-objects are experiences because we regard it as obvious that these objects have a character of “being outside” that experiences have not. When it comes to other mind states, for example pain states, it might seem more obvious that there is no tenable distinction between experience and object of experience to be made.

By pain state I mean a state that is felt in a phenomenal sense, S-pain, a counterpart to the S-red in the case of visual perception. There are of course a lot of causal and functional relations associated with S-pain. Let us call these relations F-pain. An example of F-pain could be the relation between extensive tissue damage, brain states and screaming, making certain sorts of movements etc. When I was severely hurt in an explosive accident during my military service I experienced S-pain, but I did certainly not in the same sense experience F-pain, for example my bloody leg and my crying and shouting and the relations between these observable events. Without S-pain I would probably just have observed what had happened, perhaps saying to myself: “Oh, I am hurt, perhaps I need to be repaired”. The reason for taking S-pain rather than F-pain as the most central component of pain is that it is S-pain that gives pain its meaning for sentient beings. S-pain is what pain really is about for us.

If we introduce the concept of experience again, we could try to make a distinction between S-pain and the experience of S-pain, that is E-pain. As in the case of visual experience we could also try to make a distinction between E-pain-s and E-pain-p, taking E-pain-s to be qualia laden, having phenomenal “what it’s like”- qualities, while E-pain-p has only physical qualities. If we take the experience of a pain state to be E-pain-p it might very well be possible to identify it with some brain correlate, B-pain. But I am not at all convinced that such a state as E-pain-b should be counted as an experience at all. And if by experience we mean E-pain-s the identity theorist is again forced to ascribe phenomenal qualities to the brain, which also in this case leads to mind-body naïve realism.

And we can ask: is there anything to support the belief in the existence of E-pain-s, a state distinct from S-pain, and with phenomenal qualities of its own? I think not. The arguments concerning the possible existence of E-red-s can be applied here too, with the same result. The pain state, S-pain, is identical with the experience of the pain state, E-pain-s. These are not two entities, but one and the same, they are both qualitatively and numerically identical. If you want to introspect your experience of pain there is nothing but the experienced pain to discover.

## **5.2 Qualities of what?**

Heil is rather sceptical about the qualities of entities like S-pain and E-pain. One of his examples is a “throbbing pain” in a toe. In discussing this example Heil questions if there really is anything throbbing at all.

What antifunctionalism describes as qualities of conscious experiences – qualia - are qualities of nothing at all. They are rather qualities we mistakenly represents objects and occurrences as having. (ibid. p. 126)

Heil also suggests that we should open the skull and see if there really is anything throbbing in the brain. And he predicts that we would not find anything throbbing there. But that depends on what we mean by “throbbing”. If it is taken to be some physical events, with frequencies and wavelengths that could be measured, it is not in principle impossible that we would in fact find something throbbing in the brain.

But if we by “throbbing” mean phenomenal throbbing, “what it’s like” to have such a pain in a toe, we certainly would not find anything like it when inspecting the brain. But that does not mean that there is nothing throbbing. The throbbing is a quality of the pain state, taking such a state to be S-pain. The phenomenal throbbing is not a quality of “nothing at all” or a quality that we “mistakenly represent objects and occurrences as having”. The throbbing is a very obviously existing quality of S-pain, S-pain being a real occurrence that can carry phenomenal qualities as well as the physical brain can carry physical qualities.

## **6. Conclusion**

It seems to me that we can drop the concept of experiences that are distinct from the phenomenal objects and that have their own phenomenal “what it’s like”-properties. We cannot show the existence of such qualia laden experiences by introspection and it appears as if they do not really have any function in our theoretical understanding of the mind.

Hence we cannot save the theory of psycho-neural identity by making a distinction between experience and object experienced. The crucial point is whether we regard experience as having only physical qualities or if we think that it has phenomenal “what it’s like”-qualities as well. In the former case the identity theory could be trivially true, in the former case it is as problematic as it has always been.

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## **Reference**

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