

Sticking to One's Diet: Commentary on "Quining Diet Qualia" by Keith Frankish

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In "Quining Diet Qualia," Keith Frankish attempts to show that proponents on both sides of the qualia debate are mistaken in thinking that there is a theory-neutral notion – what he calls *diet qualia* – about whose existence they can agree. Since it is not built into the notion of diet qualia that they are intrinsic, ineffable, or subjective (in contrast to what Frankish calls *classic qualia*), their acceptance is supposed to allow one to be a realist about phenomenal consciousness without begging the question against physicalism. But according to Frankish, the notion of diet qualia is a vacuous one, devoid of any distinctive content. In attempting to flesh it out, we end up either inflating the notion so that it commits us to the classic qualia that physicalists want to reject or deflating the notion so that we can no longer be said to be taking consciousness seriously (in this latter case, diet qualia end up being nothing more than what he calls *zero qualia*, the properties that dispose to judge that experiences have classic qualia). Either way, we have failed to identify a coherent concept that can serve as a theory-neutral explanandum in the debate about phenomenal consciousness.

In these brief remarks, I'll suggest that that we can resist Frankish's attempt to quine diet qualia. In my view, he has an unreasonably high conception of what's required for this concept to have distinctive content. If what Frankish says about the notion of diet qualia is correct, then it looks like there will *never* be a way to specify an explanandum neutrally. And this claim strikes me as implausible.

We can see the problem with Frankish's argument by considering other contentious philosophical debates, such as the debate in the moral sphere between consequentialists and deontologists. Each of these two theories offers a theory of the moral rightness of actions. That is, moral rightness is the explanandum of these theories, and specifying the explanandum this way seems to be neutral between the two theories. But suppose we are now tasked with spelling out the notion of moral rightness so as to give it some distinctive content. Simply contrasting it with moral wrongness does not do enough to help. But it seems that anything else we say will either inflate the notion into something that presupposes deontology, or deflate the notion into something that presupposes consequentialism. For example, as soon as we start to say much of anything about actions, for example, we will have to take a stand on whether we are talking about the action considered in the light of its total consequences or considered just in terms of its "intrinsic" nature. It starts to look like the notion of moral rightness *per se* has no distinctive content of its own, independent of a theory about what it is. And this claim seems implausible to me. To my mind, it seems that we have an intuitive, pre-theoretical grasp on the notion of moral rightness, just as we have an intuitive, pre-theoretical grasp on the notion of subjective feel, i.e., of diet qualia.

But where does our grasp our moral rightness come from? Might it come from thought experiments which aim to fix our grip on it? It looks as if Frankish is going to have to say "no." Considering the parallel suggestion with respect to the notion of diet qualia, Frankish argues that our intuitions about the relevant thought experiments presuppose that we know what diet qualia are, and it

seems like a similar point will apply to any thought experiments about moral rightness. Might our grasp of moral rightness come from some kind of demonstrative identification? The concept of moral rightness might be dependent on various demonstrations; when confronted with a worldly action that has the relevant property, we might note that both deontologists and consequentialists are trying to explain *that*. But here it's hard to see how a demonstration could pick out the relevant feature of the action, and given their different theories, it looks like Frankish will be committed to saying that the deontologist and consequentialist may well be demonstrating properties of quite different types. Yet surely we do, somehow, have a grasp of the notion of moral rightness, and it is surely a notion shared by both deontologists and consequentialist. Likewise, we surely do have a grasp on the notion of diet qualia, and it is surely a notion shared by parties on both sides of the debate about consciousness.

In essence, my objection in these comments is the one that Frankish considers in Section 3 of his paper: He sets the bar too high for a satisfactory notion of diet qualia. Theory-neutral notions must be thin in order to do the work that they need to do. Yes, we must be able to say *something* about the notion in question. But to require us to say anything much would be to force us into taking a theoretical stand on the issue.

In responding to this objection, Frankish argues that the problem isn't just that we can't say *much* when we specify the distinctive content of the notion of diet qualia; rather, we can't say anything *at all*. And this, he claims, sets it apart from other diet notions; in his view, there is a special problem here about diet qualia, one that doesn't infect other diet notions. Ultimately, I'm not sure that I'm convinced. The fact, for example, that there may be some theorists (like Dennett) who would want to quine diet qualia as well as classic qualia does not establish the claim he wants to make. After all, there may be some antirealists about morality who would quine the notion of moral rightness as well as any particular theories about it. Moreover, the fact that the notion of diet qualia serves a particular role in the debate about consciousness – namely, that it “serves as a starting point for reductive theories that aim *to take consciousness seriously*” (Frankish, p. 23) – does not seem to show that there is a special problem here. We might say that the notion of moral rightness is a starting point for theorists who aim to take morality seriously, or to use an example of Frankish's, that the notion of star is a starting point for astronomers who want to take astronomical bodies seriously. In fact, putting the problem this way suggests that there is indeed a phenomenon here to take seriously, and though we might not be able to say much about what this phenomenon is, Frankish has in many ways highlighted the need for the very notion that he is trying to discard.

Frankish may be right that, tactically, it's a mistake for reductive physicalists to accept the existence of diet qualia. In my view, some of his arguments that aim to show that the notion of diet qualia has no distinctive content might instead be recast as arguments that diet qualia will prove as immune to reductive explanation as classic qualia are, that is, there may be no way to give an adequate account of diet qualia without understanding them in terms of classic qualia. But this fact (if it is a fact) does not itself show that the notion of diet qualia is a theory-laden one, nor does it show that the notion of diet qualia lacks distinctive content. We can thus resist Frankish's attempt to quine diet qualia.