

# Mental Qualities without Consciousness

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## I. Conscious and Subliminal Perceiving

- Virtually all discussion of the qualitative character of perceiving (and of bodily sensations like pain) focuses on the *conscious cases* of such states.
- We have subjectively unmediated access to the conscious cases—access that seems *privileged*, and may even seem to some to be *essential* to qualitative states generally. And it's those conscious cases of mental qualities that result in the explanatory gap (Levine) and the hard problem (Chalmers), and in intuitions about quality inversion.



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➤ Only with conscious qualitative states does there seem to be an issue about why some brain states should—or even could—be associated with a particular mental quality, as opposed to another or none at all.

➤ Also, undetectable inversion can seem possible—even conceivable—only if first-person access trumps third-person access. Otherwise inversion would be detectable. And first-person access could trump only for qualitative states that are conscious.

➤ But there's reason to think that perceiving is not always conscious, and that the qualitative character that's distinctive of conscious perceiving occurs even when perceiving is not conscious.

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➤ Subjects guess with > 80% accuracy about masked visual stimuli, as blindsight patients do with stimuli in their blind field—even about qualitative properties such as color.

➤ They also report that they don't see the stimuli they accurately guess about. That's nonconscious perceiving—relying on qualitative character that isn't conscious.

➤ Many would reply: How could the mental qualities that are present to consciousness occur without being conscious?

Isn't it obvious that anything that occurs without being conscious couldn't be the same kind of property?

And then perhaps what occurs subliminally simply isn't genuine perceiving at all.

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- Thus Kripke: “For a sensation to be felt as pain is for it to be pain” (“IN,” n. 18), and conversely, “for [something] to exist without being felt as pain is for it to exist without there being any pain” (NN, 151).
- All this rests on *intuitions*—which Kripke urges give us “more conclusive evidence ... about anything, ultimately speaking” than any other consideration could (NN, 42). They’re dispositive—the last word.
- One might take this as just *stipulative*—defining ‘qualitative character’ to apply only to conscious states. That would leave the real question open: *Do the properties we call mental qualities in conscious states also occur in nonconscious perceiving?*

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- But the intuitions aren’t simply stipulative. They encapsulate a substantive claim: that qualitative character is exhaustively revealed by first-person access.

On this view, there’s nothing to qualitative character except what it’s like for one to be in the relevant state. So mental qualities couldn’t occur without being conscious.



- Hence Nagel’s claim that, for conscious experience, “[t]he idea of moving from appearance to reality seems to make no sense” (“Bat,” 444). Mental appearance and mental reality coincide—and they must.
- On this view, *what it’s like is all you get*; when it comes to mental qualities, there simply is nothing more.

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➤ But this is a *substantive claim* about mental qualities. So intuitions that reflect that view aren't theory neutral after all. Rather, they *encapsulate a covert theory*—that all there is to the reality of qualitative character is its mental appearance.

➤ This defeats any *privileged* status those intuitions are alleged to have: Since the intuitions rest on a tacit theory, we must evaluate them against *competing theoretical claims*. I'll return to this point.

➤ And if the intuitions *didn't* rest on such a theory, it'd be unclear how they'd avoid the charge that they're simply stipulative—especially since it's notorious that *not everybody finds the intuitions compelling*.

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➤ These points hold for intuitions generally: They're put forth as pretheoretic platitudes, and as such immune to challenge. But they typically rest on covert theoretical views, in effect, flying under the radar.

➤ The theoretical picture the intuitions rest on here is that what it's like exhausts the nature of mental qualities. But there's reason to doubt that the nature of mental qualities is so *thin*—that their *conscious aspect* is all there is to them.

➤ We have first-person access to our own conscious qualitative states. But often we also have *reasonably reliable third-person access* to others' qualitative states—and *ascribe* such states to others.

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- Thus we often can tell when others are in pain and what perceptual experiences they have. And the mental appearance that's accessible from the first person—what it's like for one to be in those states—plainly doesn't figure in our ability to do that.
- One might insist that the causal ties that enable third-person access are no part of the nature of mental qualities—that they're just contingent to the qualitative states.
- Perhaps then our access to the experiences of others is not to mental qualities, but just to behavior contingently tied to them. That's the picture on which mental qualities are undetectably invertible—we can't know *at all* which mental qualities others have.

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- But that simply assumes what's at issue: that what it's like exhausts the nature of mental qualities. And there seems no *independent* reason to regard the causal ties that underlie third-person access as inessential to qualitative character.
- And inversion of mental qualities could be undetectable only if what it's like is *all there is to* what it is to be a mental quality—and that's again just what's at issue.
- I urged that intuitions that mental qualities can't occur without being conscious embody a *covert theoretical view* that what it's like exhausts the nature of those qualities. But one might contest whether this claim does have any serious theoretical status.

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➤ The claim is that what it's like exhausts the nature of mental qualities, so that first-person access trumps third person and mental qualities are always conscious.

➤ Those claims typically go with the view that there's *nothing informative* to say about the nature of mental qualities.

Thus Block's colorful appeal in saying what qualitative character is to Louis Armstrong's quip about jazz: "If you gotta ask, you ain't never gonna get to know" (1978, §1.3).

➤ And one might well doubt whether claims so thin and uninformative could constitute a theoretical view. If not, perhaps the relevant intuitions do, after all, simply reflect pretheoretic folk common sense.

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➤ But even if that were so, it would not itself confer privileged status; folk theories must be evaluated no less than explicit theories.

➤ What matters here is whether there is an *alternative* to the ostensibly folk view that qualitative states are always conscious—an alternative against which to assess that apparent folk view.

➤ And there is—an alternative that relies on the *role mental qualities play in perceiving*, including subliminal perceiving.

That role has *roots in folk views at least as robust* as the claim that mental qualities can't occur without being conscious.

So let's look at how that alternative stacks up against the view we've been discussing.

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## II. Perceptual Role vs. Subjectivity

- Perceiving involves the discriminating of perceptible properties—colors, shapes, sounds, odors, and so forth.  
Such discrimination occurs consciously, but also nonconsciously; we discriminate those properties in subliminal perceiving no less than in conscious perceiving.
- By manipulating stimuli, we can test for just-noticeable differences (JNDs)—differences between stimuli so small that were the stimuli any closer physically one would be unable to distinguish them at all.

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- We can then use JNDs among a range of stimuli to build a quality space (QS) that captures all the stimuli in that range that an individual can discriminate.

For color stimuli, the QS might be like this (for just hue and saturation):  
(CIE-Commission Internationale d'Éclairage, 1931).



- To discriminate two stimuli, one must be in states that differ in ways that reflect the way those stimuli differ to one.  
That's so independent of whether the discriminating is conscious.
- By itself, this doesn't of course show that those states are genuinely qualitative; they could just be subpersonal states—not qualitative, indeed not even mental.

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➤ But *conscious* perceptual discrimination plainly does work by differences in mental quality. We consciously distinguish stimuli by being in *conscious qualitative states* that differ in ways that correspond to perceptible differences between properties.

➤ So in the conscious case the QS of discriminable stimuli will also map the mental qualities relevant to discriminating those stimuli.

➤ That gives us a theory, for the *conscious* case, of what the mental qualities are: They are those properties of perceptual states, mapped by the QS of discriminable properties, in virtue of which an individual can make JND discriminations.



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➤ On this QS theory, mental qualities in the conscious case are fixed by *relative location* in a QS defined by discriminative ability.

➤ A theorist used to fixing mental qualities by what it's like will find this unintuitive. Aren't conscious mental qualities fixed *one by one*, independent of others?

➤ No. Conscious perceptual discrimination is a *relational* matter—distinguishing one perceptible property from another. And since mental qualities are the mental properties responsible for that, they must be fixed comparatively as well.

Indeed, being presented with more closely related perceptible properties yields *more fine-grained* conscious mental qualities.

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➤ Technical issues: JNDs aren't transitive and individuals vary in discriminative ability, even across times. But these are readily handled and don't affect the present issue.

➤ And our concern is just whether properties fixed in *conscious* perceiving by relative location in a QS are also responsible for *nonconscious perceptual discrimination*.

➤ There's good reason to think so. QS theory makes no appeal to consciousness in fixing the conscious mental qualities—only to the discriminative ability that JNDs reveal. And forced choice in perceiving that *isn't* conscious reveals JNDs—often more fine-grained than when conscious.<sup>1</sup> So the same mental properties will figure there.

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➤ Also, consciously discriminable stimuli can be degraded so they remain consciously *accessible* but no longer consciously *discriminable*—and forced-choice guessing still then discriminates well above chance.<sup>2</sup>

➤ This *continuity* between conscious and nonconscious shows that the same mental properties figure in discriminating both. They're mental qualities in the conscious case; so *also in the nonconscious case*.

➤ One could insist that in the degraded case the mental qualities are conscious—but not *in respect of* discriminable differences. But there are conscious qualities in these cases, which must, in discriminating, differ in respect of some *nonconscious aspect*.

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➤ Since mental qualities have a nonconscious aspect, they're not exhausted by what it's like. And that dispels any reason to think they're essentially or invariably conscious.

➤ So it's not at all theoretically innocent to stipulate that 'mental quality' applies only to conscious properties, withholding it from any properties that aren't.

➤ Discrimination occurs nonconsciously even among stimuli we perceive consciously. So there is a continuity between conscious perception and perceptual discrimination that isn't conscious.

Mental qualities ground discrimination that is conscious; so there's reason to hold they also do in wholly nonconscious perceiving.

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➤ A few challenges: Perhaps even when perceiving is conscious, discrimination relies not on conscious mental qualities, but only on some subpersonal mechanisms. The conscious mental qualities might be mere accompaniments, playing no active role in perceptual discrimination.

➤ We couldn't then go from conscious mental qualities' playing a discriminative role to mental qualities' also playing such a role in discrimination that isn't conscious.

➤ But there's no reason to hold this except a desire to uphold the view that mental qualities can only occur consciously. And though we haven't decisively ruled that out, we have no independent reason to hold it.

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➤ A related possibility: Mental qualities do play a discriminative role when perceiving is conscious, but play no role when it isn't. Nonconscious discrimination does not rely on mental qualities at all, but only on nonmental, neural states that occur earlier in the processing stream.

➤ This accommodates the commonsense idea that conscious mental qualities figure in conscious discrimination. But if nonmental, neural states do the job in nonconscious discrimination, why would mental qualities play a role when it's conscious?

➤ So this possibility has even less merit than simply denying a role to mental qualities in discrimination, whether conscious or not.

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➤ A third challenge is that the things I call mental qualities are, in the nonconscious case, simply subpersonal neural states, and that calling them mental qualities gives them a mental status they don't have. The claim that mental qualities needn't be conscious would then just be verbal.

➤ But the issue isn't how to apply terms, but whether there is *independent* reason to hold that being conscious is an *essential* property of mental qualities. And the argument is that there is no such reason.

➤ The issue is about the *nature* of the mental properties that, in the conscious case, we uncontroversially call mental qualities. It can't be settled stipulatively.

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- We have competing theoretical stances—fixing mental qualities by perceptual role and fixing them by what it's like. Both have grounding in common sense; so intuition favors neither over the other.
- And neither lacks theoretical content; so neither can evade theoretical evaluation. The perceptual-role view fits better with empirical findings, and also underwrites a rich theoretical elaboration in QS theory, with testable predictions and explanations.
- As always with theories, there's no final proof of which is right. But perceptual role has many theoretical advantages—including avoiding an explanatory gap, the hard problem, and undetectable inversion.

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- Fixing mental qualities independent of what it's like also has the benefit of divide and conquer: We explain subjective awareness and qualitative character each by appeal to the factors that are distinctive of each. Indeed as the explanatory gap suggests, there's likely no explanation at all if the two are inextricably connected.
- But then we must ask: If consciousness is not built into mental qualities, how can we explain why some are conscious? Why there sometimes is something it's like?
- The QS appeal to perceptual role explains qualitative character independent of subjective awareness. How, then, can we explain the conscious cases?

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### III. Conscious Awareness and Misrepresentation

- Perhaps the only indisputable thing in this area is that if one is in some mental state but *wholly* unaware of being in that state, that state is not conscious.

So it's a mark of a state's being conscious that one is in some way aware of it. What is controversial is *how* one is aware of it.

- I've argued elsewhere that this awareness consists in having thoughts about those of our mental states that are conscious—thoughts one expresses when one reports being in the state in question.

- But all that matters for now is that a state is conscious if, but only if, one has some *higher-order awareness* (HOA) of the state.
- Block has urged a *deflationary* construal of this observation: We're aware of conscious states only in the way we smile a smile. There's *nothing substantive* to the HOA.
- But that fails to capture the observation. If one is in a mental state but is *in no way aware* of it—so that one sincerely denies being in it—that state is not conscious. No deflationary construal can do justice to this, which is reflected in folk views and in experimental practice. And without it, we have no *psychological* way to distinguish conscious from nonconscious mental states.

- The property of a state's being conscious might seem to be simple and unanalyzable, as Moore thought about yellow and good. There would then be nothing more to say about it—no theory to give.
- But the *pretheoretic* idea that no state is conscious unless one is aware of it doesn't sustain a picture of subjective awareness as a simple, unanalyzable property.
- First-person access might *seem* to cast a state's being conscious as an unanalyzable property. But first-person access also tells us we're subjectively aware only of states that are conscious. So the first-person point of view cannot reliably sustain the simple, unanalyzable picture.

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- A qualitative state is conscious just in case one is subjectively aware of it—i.e., has a HOA that represents oneself as being in it.
- We're subjectively aware of those states in respect of the differences among them that figure in discrimination. So the relevant HOAs will represent those states just as QS theory describes their mental qualities.
- The two theories fit nicely together. But each appeals to factors special to the mental phenomena it explains—*mental qualities* that figure in perceptual discrimination on the one hand, and *being subjectively aware of qualitative states* on the other. Divide and conquer is here, as often, explanatorily fruitful.

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➤ Some will still insist that being conscious is *intrinsic* to qualitative states, so that states simply couldn't have mental qualities without being conscious.

➤ But this just recycles that claim, providing no independent reason in support of it.

➤ More important, it *goes beyond the data*: What's clear is that any state of which one isn't at all aware is not conscious. So for a state to be conscious one must be aware of it—aware in a way that *seems subjectively* to be unmediated. But that awareness need not be *actually unmediated*—only *subjectively* so. So the awareness needn't be intrinsic to the state. Consciousness is not an intrinsic property.

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➤ Several issues arise if we treat qualitative character and subjective awareness as independent in this way.

➤ I noted earlier that we're aware of more fine-grained differences among conscious mental qualities when we're presented with closely related perceptible properties than when the perceptible properties available to us aren't all that close.

➤ And this sustains, I urged, a *comparative* account of mental qualities—along the lines of QS theory. But if mental qualities are independent of subjective awareness, the increased fineness of grain might be due not to the qualities themselves, but just to *how we're subjectively aware* of them.

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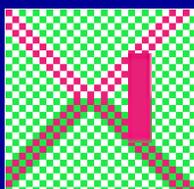
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➤ Some effects do result just from subjective awareness. We can often discriminate very similar mental color qualities occurring *simultaneously*, but not when they occur *in succession*:



➤ This is likely due to how we're aware of the mental qualities; the qualities themselves—apart from the way we're aware of them—presumably just *track the stimuli*.

➤ But we know that other comparative effects are due to *the mental qualities themselves*. Simultaneous-contrast, an early visual effect that's plainly *prior to consciousness*, shows that the mental qualities themselves are at least *partially comparative*:



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➤ The comparative way our HOAs represent the qualities of our conscious qualitative states reflects the comparative way that QS theory fixes the qualities themselves.

➤ Treating mental qualities independently of subjective awareness raises another issue, often pressed as an objection to higher-order theories of consciousness generally.

➤ Suppose, as Levine imagines, one has a mental quality of *red* but a HOA of a state with a *green* mental quality. Is what it's like for one the having of a conscious red sensation? A conscious green sensation? Levine urges that neither possibility allows subjective awareness to be *independent* of qualitative character, as I've argued it is.

I have a sensation of green.



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➤ If what it's like for one is *green*, he argues, the HOA is doing all the work, and the mental quality plays no independent role. And if what it's like for one is *red*, the mental quality does all the work, and the HOA has no independent role.

➤ But this assumes that all the work pertains to what it's like for one, which isn't so. The HOA determines what it's like for one, but the mental quality *independently* determines priming results and other effects of nonconscious mental processing.

➤ So somebody with a mental quality of red but a HOA of a green qualitative state would sincerely report seeing green—but would nonetheless be *primed* for red.

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➤ This test has not to my knowledge been done, and it would be a challenge to get a subject to be in the two disparate states.

➤ But there's abundant evidence of priming, forced-choice guessing, and other tests revealing qualitative character independent of any subjective awareness of the relevant qualitative character. So there's no reason to doubt that such misrepresentation by a HOA would be revealed by suitable tests.

➤ No reason except the insistence that what it's like for one is all there is to qualitative character. But that begs the question at hand—whether qualitative character can occur nonconsciously, and so independent of subjective awareness.

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➤ Any denial that HOAs can misrepresent begs that question. If qualitative character can occur nonconsciously, it can occur without there being anything it's like for one to be in the relevant qualitative state.

➤ What it's like is not the qualitative character itself, but rather the *mental appearance* of such qualitative character. There being something it's like for one is *being aware of oneself as being in a state with the relevant qualitative character*.

➤ Assuming otherwise is simply insisting that mental qualities can't occur without being conscious. Without a reason for that which isn't question begging, we should reject that unsupported traditional theory.

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**Thank you for your attention**

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Zoltán Dienes and Anil Seth, "Gambling on the Unconscious: A Comparison of Wagering and Confidence Ratings as Measures of Awareness in an Artificial Grammar Task," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 19, 2 (June 2010): 674-681.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Jim Cheesman and Phillip M. Merikle, "Distinguishing Conscious from Unconscious Perceptual Processes," *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 40, 4 (December 1966): 343-367; and Andy David Meador and Zoltán Dienes, "Conscious and Unconscious Thought in Artificial Grammar Learning," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21, 2 (June 2012): 865-874.

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## Replies to Joseph Levine and John Morrison

- I'm extremely grateful to Joe and to John for their thoughtful, challenging comments. Their remarks go to the core of much of what I've argued, and raise important concerns that any view like mine must address.
- I'll do my best in my limited time to do justice to what they've said.

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- Joe distinguishes all-things-considered intuitions from others, on which "conscious experience itself is a source of evidence." (Kripke's about pain seem to be the second.)
- I agree that "the first-person perspective, as constituted by conscious experience, provides data"—but *about what?* It *can't* be about whether mental qualities can occur without being conscious.
- One reason: The first-person perspective gives *access only to what's conscious*; it's mute about what isn't, and so can't tell us that mental qualities can't occur that way.
- It's also mute about *essences*, which only a *theory* can tell us about. So it can't tell us mental qualities are essentially conscious.

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- First-person access does provide data about experience that *is* conscious, but can't show that it never fails to be.
- Nonconscious discrimination is mental, and so involves *mental properties*. And it's *perceptual*; so the best candidate for those properties are mental qualities.
- I noted that one might see the view that mental qualities are essentially conscious as a *folk* theory. Joe does, and so sees undetectable inversion as a folk datum. I see neither as part of our folk thinking.
- Undetectable inversion seems conceivable because of a philosophical theory—thus its striking total *absence from the literature prior to Locke* (save in Sextus Empiricus).

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- Joe also takes as a folk datum that a red-green color-blind person would have the same mental quality of blue as others. QS theory must deny that, since the color-blind QS differs is significantly diminished.
- But why think the mental quality of blue *would* be the same in both cases? In both cases there's a mental quality that responds to blue stimuli, but they differ in ways that matter to our folk views.
- In the color-blind case the mental quality doesn't allow discrimination of blue from red and green. So it can't reflect that blue is subjectively closer to green than to red. This counts against identifying the two from the point of view of folk theory.

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➤ Joe finds in himself the idea of “pure qualities ... that are neither structural nor functional,” and “can’t see where [he’d] derive this idea if not from experience.”

➤ Those features—not being structural or functional—sound *theoretical* to me. Philosophical theory likely gives us our idea of them—not first-person access, which also can’t rule about theoretical properties.

➤ I agree we can consistently add conscious essentialism to any theory. But *why*—save to sustain a British Empiricist philosophy? Folk thinking may well take states’ being conscious as a *pragmatic default*—but also readily accommodates unconscious mental states as those we’re wholly unaware of.

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➤ I also agree it’s bizarre that one might see something red but be aware of oneself as seeing something green. But *why*?

➤ It’s *subjectively* bizarre—because our only *subjective* access to what state we’re in is the states we’re subjectively aware of. But subjective bizarreness is *not the last word*—nor all that rare; change-blindness results are often subjectively bizarre. And mental states in any case occur in us independent of such access.

➤ Thoughts of qualitative states typically do not make one *subjectively aware* of those states. So if the HOA is a higher-order thought, as I argue elsewhere, why should it result in the quality’s being conscious?

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- Joe links that question to the issue about higher-order misrepresentation:  
If the right first-order state were present, it might help explain how a mere thought could lead to the quality's "lighting up."
- But the theory doesn't say that the state's being conscious is due to some real relation between the HOA and the first-order qualitative state. As with any thought, the thing that it's about needn't exist.
- Rather, the qualitative state is conscious because one has a HOA that represents oneself as being in that state.  
And that HOA *constitutes* a awareness of oneself as being in a qualitative state— independent of whether one actually is.

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- John sees my account as requiring that it be "definitive of mental qualities that we always use the same mental qualities to discriminate the same stimuli" (his emphasis).
- But as he notes, discrimination always involves noise. So we have to describe discrimination *statistically*; discrimination is never perfect or absolute.
- And since I appeal to discriminability of stimuli to type mental qualities, he urges that I'm "asking a particular statistical measure to do metaphysical work."  
But no statistical measure is uniquely correct. John concludes that I will, after all, need to invoke consciousness to succeed in typing mental qualities.

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➤ But QS theory does not require “that we always use the same mental qualities to discriminate the same stimuli.”

➤ It doesn’t even require that discrimination of stimuli be accurate. Rather, the way one discriminates stimuli simply reflects what mental qualities figure in those perceptual discriminations. Perceiving two stimuli as different indicates that the states with which one perceives those stimuli differ in qualitative character.

➤ Noise, as John argues, is ineliminable. But QS theory doesn’t require otherwise. Indeed, since the theory types mental qualities *comparatively*, it accommodates noise.

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➤ Why might one think that the theory does require eliminating noise? A hint may lie in the “metaphysical work” John takes me to want to do.

➤ Many think we must type mental qualities not by how they figure in discriminating stimuli, but by *first-person access*. I’ve urged that this is a mistake. Without some *interpersonal* handle on mental qualities, we have no grasp of even what it *could* be to ascribe them to others.

➤ But perhaps *first-person typing* of mental qualities is *absolute and noise-free*. And perhaps such typing is the metaphysical work John takes me to want to do.

But can first-person access really do that?

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➤ JNDs and matching are straightforward binary tests: Adjust stimuli closer till the subject says they're the same, or less close till the subject says they're different.

Noise is unavoidable, and some averaging is needed. There are no absolutes here.

➤ But why think there would be absolutes—noise-free typing of mental qualities— if we relied instead on conscious first-person access?

➤ Perhaps we have some kind of subjective certainty about each token mental quality. But certainty about tokens can't deliver noise-free comparisons between tokens. So it can't give us the noise-free taxonomy of types John seems to think possible.

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➤ And arguably there can be no noise-free typing of mental qualities. Suppose at an individual consciously distinguishes two JND stimuli. Such discriminating requires two distinct mental qualities.

➤ If the individual consciously distinguishes the same JND stimuli moments later, again distinct mental qualities figure. But why think the second pair of mental qualities is exactly the same as the first pair?

➤ Not because of perceptual role, since that requires only that distinct mental qualities occur in each case. Nor is there reason to think consciousness can individuate mental qualities accurately and in such fine grain.

➤ Typing of mental qualities is never absolute.

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