

The Strong Ghost in the Weak Machine: A Reply to Wilcken

JAMES BROWN

I. Introduction

In “Bridging the qualia gap: Can a machine know what it is like to be a bat?” Matthew Wilcken attempts to outline a method by which we might come to know qualia other than our own: another person’s, or perhaps even a bat’s (1–10). If his method is viable, the “qualia gap” which consists of the inability to know qualia other than one’s own, would narrow, or perhaps disappear entirely. Below, I will argue that Wilcken’s attempt fails, and thus the qualia gap persists.

Wilcken encourages the reader to undertake two thought experiments. The first, I will argue, reduces to an absurdity that manifests incoherence in either Wilcken’s distinction between weak and strong qualia or in his conception of a neural link (section 2). The second thought experiment, I will argue, begs the question (section 3). It should be noted, however, that both of Wilcken’s thought experiments employ the same conceptual framework; so, although the presentation of my analysis seems to suggest otherwise, both are in fact guilty of the same logical missteps. After pointing

James Brown graduated in 2016 from Lancaster University with a degree in philosophy and mathematics. His philosophical interests include the philosophy of mind and perception. Starting in the fall he will begin an MPhil at the University of Warwick.

out the weaknesses of Wilcken's thought experiments, I will sketch an alternative picture of qualia, one which might make the qualia gap seem less daunting (section 4).

II. The First Thought Experiment

Wilcken distinguishes weak from strong qualia: weak qualia are objectively observable and tentatively expressible via language; whereas strong qualia, in being the subjective character of experience, are inexpressible (2–3). Thus it would be possible to program an android, or a synthetic brain of some sort, to have weak qualia, but not strong qualia. Weak qualia, then, must consist of physical properties—the sort of properties exemplified by a synthetic brain. Furthermore, Wilcken assumes that it is possible to know another person's weak, but not their strong qualia (6–7). And therein lies the “qualia gap.”

Wilcken's first thought experiment involves the experience of another person's perspective: their weak, but not their strong qualia (8). We can conclude, therefore, that if a perspective is experienced but strong qualia are not, a perspective must consist of weak qualia only. By the above, it follows immediately that a perspective consists of physical properties only. Thus, to experience a different perspective would require a change in physical properties: from those of the occurrent perspective, to those of the new perspective. Presumably, such a feat is somehow made (conceptually) possible by Wilcken's “neural link,” which perhaps modifies the physical properties of neurons, thus enabling the adoption of a different perspective.

Let us run with this idea, and see where it leads. Suppose that Matthew and James are the subjects of Wilcken's first thought experiment: via the neural link, they experience each other's perspectives. For the duration of the link, that is, Matthew experiences James' weak qualia, and James experiences Matthew's. Matthew must transition from his physical properties, those which constitute his perspective, to James' (and vice versa). But after leaving behind his weak qualia, what remains of ‘Matthew’ to do the experiencing of James' weak qualia? It must be his strong qualia, and these cannot consist of Matthew's physical properties, precisely because he has left them behind.

And here, we run into a problem. Recall that Wilcken describes how, after disconnecting the neural link, the subjects (Matthew and James, in my retelling) discuss, or “spend time joking about” (8), their perspective swap. But how precisely is Matthew to account for his experience of James’ perspective (and vice versa)? The problem is this: if a perspective consists of physical properties and there is a change of perspective, how is Matthew’s perspective preserved when experiencing James’ perspective? In short, can we really say that Matthew (i.e. the pre- and post-neural link Matthew) experiences James’ perspective? In order to really experience James’ perspective, the content of the experience, which (on this model) reduces to the physical properties of the individual, would need to be the same. But since the physical properties change, Matthew could not rightly claim “I have experienced James’ perspective,” precisely because the truth maker of the claim does not obtain. Matthew, therefore, could not express, let alone joke about his experience of James’ perspective.

Thus we have an absurdity: the subjects of the neural link, according to Wilcken, discuss their perspective swap, which is precisely something they should not be able to do, or so I have argued. The absurdity must be rooted either in Wilcken’s distinction between strong and weak qualia, or in his conception of a neural link. So should we revise the distinction or the link? Either way, the majority of Wilcken’s claims would be rendered moot.

III. The Second Thought Experiment

Under the impression that qualia might be shareable among people (e.g. Matthew and James), Wilcken proceeds to argue that it might be shareable among people and bats (8–9). Hence his second thought experiment, the construction of which makes lots of assumptions (or “allowances” to use Wilcken’s words). Here they are, listed in order of appearance:

1. “An artificially intelligent android possesses qualia in some sense.”
2. “We gave this android an echolocatory apparatus.”
3. “Stronger and weaker qualia exist.”

4. “Full control of electronic devices using only the mind.”

5. “Memories could be stored electronically.”

6. “The ones and zeros of the synthetic brain [android] could be rendered compatible with an organic brain through some form of real-time emulation via a neural link.”

7. “I could not know what it is like to be that other person in the stronger [qualia] sense but only in the weaker [qualia] sense.”

8. “The medium [android] we are using to connect our minds together is ultimately based on language.”

9. “The link is passive.”

10. “Bat brains (and indeed most all mammalian brains) operate more or less like human brains.”
(5-8)

This is all quite confusing. In trying to clarify Wilcken’s reasoning, I present Fig. 1 below.

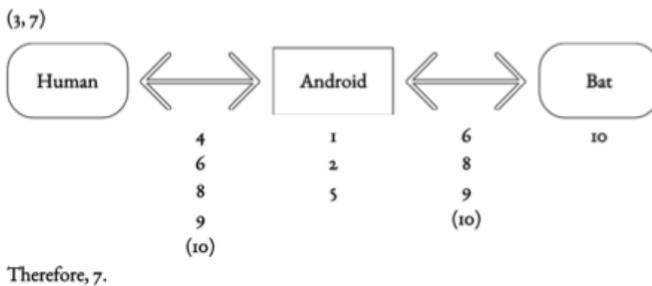


Fig. 1

Assumptions 3 and 7 appear bracketed above the diagram because they pertain to the entire thought experiment. From left to right, the human is neurally linked (denoted by a double-headed arrow) to the android, which in turn is neurally linked to the bat. Assumptions appear directly below the part of the interaction—human-android

link, android, android-bat link, or bat—to which they pertain. An assumption is bracketed if it is implicitly pertinent. Assumption 7 appears below the diagram because it is precisely Wilcken’s conclusion (9).

Observe how the thought experiment is spuriously complex. Although, perhaps this is intentional, as it certainly serves to distract the reader from abject question-begging: Wilcken both assumes and concludes that another person’s weak qualia are knowable, or shareable, but that their strong qualia are unknowable, or elusive (7 and 9, respectively).

The thought experiment, in all its detail, purportedly outlines a way in which we might come to know the weak qualia of a bat. Recall, however, that weak qualia are expressible via language. So instead of pondering artificial intelligence, androids, echolocation, electronic memory storage, and neural links, why not just ponder: “I wonder what a bat would say if it could talk?” If nothing else, it would save a lot of ink.

IV. An Alternative Picture of Qualia

Weak qualia, as I interpret Wilcken, are the qualities of the objects of experience, while strong qualia are the qualities of the experience itself. Take, for example, the experience of sitting and enjoying a hot cup of tea on a cold morning. The weak qualia of the experience are, in part, the hardness of the chair, the hotness of the cup, and the coldness of the morning. Thus, on hearing that the chair was hard, that the cup was hot, and that the morning was cold, an interlocutor can “glimpse” the weak qualia of the experience. They glimpse, in other words, the qualities of (some of) the objects of the experience: the chair, the cup and the morning.

What an interlocutor cannot glimpse, according to Wilcken, is the strong qualia of the experience: the *something that it is like*, over and above hardness and hotness and coldness, to have the experience of sitting and enjoying a hot cup of tea on a cold morning. Strong qualia, Wilcken claims, are inexpressible and only accessible subjectively via introspection (2–3 and 6–7).

Suppose, then, that George has the experience of sitting and enjoying a hot cup of tea on a cold morning, before deciding to

introspect in order to find the qualities of the experience itself. George, that is, sets out to find the strong qualia of his experience. First, he stumbles upon hardness. Hardness, however, is far from inexpressible, so George rules it out as a possible candidate for strong qualia. Similarly, he rules out hotness and coldness. Undeterred, George continues his search, reasoning that the quality of the experience itself (i.e. the strong qualia of his experience) will be that which remains after having stripped away all of the qualities of the objects of the experience (i.e. the weak qualia). Finally, George happens upon a quality that he struggles to put into words, and therefore concludes that this difficult quality must be the strong qualia of his experience.

But does it follow from a quality being hard to express that it is inexpressible? If so, George is committed to the unlikely claim that, given an experience, the amount of strong qualia is inversely proportional to his capacity for expression. If this is the case, what about babies? Surely, their experiences would be steeped in 'more' strong qualia than those of adults, precisely because an adult has a greater capacity for expression. Unwilling to endorse such a claim, George resumes his search for strong qualia. Alas, there is nothing left to search! There are simply no qualities of experience over and above the qualities of the objects of experience. If this is indeed the case, it would seem that the notorious qualia gap is merely a symptom of an imperfect capacity for expression.

V. Conclusion

Wilcken's first thought experiment reduces to absurdity. It must be conceded, therefore, that at least one of the following is incoherent: his distinction between weak and strong qualia, or his conception of a neural link. Either way, Wilcken is in trouble. The second thought experiment both assumes and concludes that another person's weak qualia can be known but their strong qualia cannot, and thus the underlying arguments are invalid.

In his conclusion, Wilcken acknowledges that much of his paper is highly speculative (9). A speculation, however, is an attempt to reveal features of structure from apparent chaos. Wilcken's attempt to demonstrate how the qualia gap might be bridged exemplifies no

such features; rather, it is a meandering of the mind that further obscures the chaos of experience.

I speculate that there are in fact only weak qualia and that qualia of the “stronger” variety, those responsible for the qualia gap, are simply the harder-to-express weak qualia.

Works Cited

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