

# The Problem of Qualia and Knowledge in Plato and Aristotle

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This paper sparks the debate of qualia and knowledge in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The debate on the relevance and logical chronology of qualia and knowledge has been an implicit tension in the works of Plato and Aristotle. However, we seldom find scholars exploring these aspects of Plato-Aristotle philosophy and connecting it to the contemporary debate of qualia. It is on this account that this paper re-examines Plato and Aristotle's debate on the relevance of qualia to knowledge and how this debate has influenced theories relating to sense data. The core objective of this paper is to resurrect the debate of qualia and knowledge in the works of the legends as a way of contributing to the contemporary problem of qualia as suggested by Clarence I. Lewis and others in mid-20th century.

*Keywords:* Plato, Aristotle, qualia, relevance, knowledge, sense data

## Introduction

The term “qualia” is broadly construed as a private-qualitative or raw-feel, relevant for knowledge acquisition. Foundationalists believe that our knowledge rests upon “acquaintance”. In other words, the foundation of our knowledge is through acquaintance. However, we cannot know by acquaintances due to the possibility of dreaming, illusion, hallucination, etc. Nonetheless, this qualitative or sensory experience cannot be consistently doubted by anyone who is experiencing them. Thus, qualia appears to be the content of our knowledge or proposition. Hence making, sense data relevant to knowledge acquisition (this is known as the R-debate). Historically, there seems to be a tension between philosophers who argue that qualia or experiences of sense data is essential or non-essential to the process of knowledge acquisition. Another tension has to do with the logical order of qualia and knowledge (this is known as the L-debate). The relevance and logical order debate of qualia can be found in Plato and Aristotle's respective theories of knowledge; the world of Forms and the world of Particulars. This paper therefore seeks to investigate whether or not qualia is relevant for knowledge and to examine the logical sequence of knowledge and qualia in the works of Plato and Aristotle, hence their contributions to contemporary epistemology.

## Methodology

The study employs exegetical and analytical approaches. The exegetical approach was deployed for the purpose of interpretation of various notions of qualia and their nuances as propounded by Plato and Aristotle. The analytical approach, on the other hand, helps to do a critical analysis of the problem of qualia in Plato and Aristotle and its influences on contemporary epistemology. Nonetheless, since Plato and Aristotle's

epistemology cannot be completely divorced from their metaphysics, references shall be made to the latter in this regard for the sake of explanation and clarity. The study basically relied on primary data which include *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus* (Socratic dialogues in which Plato expounds his philosophy); *Aristotle's Metaphysics*—the works of Plato and Aristotle among others.

### Qualia and Knowledge

This section provides a brief but detailed exposition of qualia in relation to knowledge acquisition. Following the works of Russell, it emerged that qualia plays a fundamental role in acquisition of knowledge.

According to Lewis (1929), qualia is an introspective and seemingly monadic property of a sense data (p. 34). For instance, the qualia of a visual sense data of rose flower will include the experienced red-ness, and the qualia of an olfactory sense data of a rose flower also include the sweet-ness of the scent. Qualia is therefore a property of sense data that are directly available to introspection.

In contemporary usage, qualia has been broadened to refer more generally to properties of experience. Paradigm examples of qualia are perceptual experiences like non-veridical perceptual experiences, such as hallucinations, bodily sensations (example: pain, hunger, itching etc...), emotions (like anger, envy, or fear etc.), and moods (such as: euphoria, ennui, or anxiety etc...) (Fiesser & Dowden, 2004). Each of this perceptual experience has its qualitative dimension. However, for all intent and purposes for this study, qualia shall be restricted to mean visual or perceptual experiences and bodily sensations due to the epistemological nature of the study.

In epistemology, knowledge and propositions are broadly expressed through statements. These statements are generally informed or underpinned by the use of the sense data, usually couched in “I-belief-that”—declarative statements or propositions, for example, “Accra is the capital of Ghana”, “Rose flowers are beautiful”, etc. Russell (1910; 1912) further proposed two types of knowledge, namely, knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. He further uses the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and description to articulate a foundationalist epistemology, where he postulates that knowledge by acquaintance is the most basic kind of knowledge and knowledge by description is inferential (Ch. 5).

According to Fiesser and Dowden (2004), knowledge by acquaintance is a unique form of knowledge where the subject has direct, unmediated, and non-inferential access to what is known whereas knowledge by description, on the other hand, is a type of knowledge that is indirect, mediated, and inferential. According to Russell (1912), all our knowledge rests upon acquaintance for its foundation. The test Russell deploys for determining what someone knows by acquaintance is based on dubitability. For this reason, Russell maintained that, a person cannot know by acquaintance that physical objects, like an iPod, exist; after all, even when someone is seeing an iPod, it is possible to doubt whether the iPod exists (due to the possibilities of dreaming, illusion, hallucination, and so forth). The sense data, or sensory experiences, of an iPod, however, cannot consistently be doubted by a person who is experiencing them. The implication is that, sense data or qualitative experiences can be known by acquaintance, whereas physical objects cannot.

Consequently, Descartes (in his *Meditations 1641*), who is regarded as the founder of modern philosophy, skeptically wrote; “That nothing in the world exists—no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies...So I am not likewise existent”<sup>1</sup>. For Descartes,

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, Meditation 1, in Descartes, Selections, Modern Student Library edition (New York: Scribner's, 1927, pp. 94-95).

If I doubt any of these things, then at least I the doubter must exist. I am conscious that I doubt therefore; ...I exist; that is certain. For how long? For as long as I am experiencing.... I know for certain that I am, and that the same time, it is possible to think that all this images, and in general everything of the nature of the body are mere dreams<sup>2</sup>.

Note that Descartes gave reason to doubt the existence of everything around him except the qualitative experience of his own existence. The implication is that qualia is relevant for knowledge in the sense that the latter can be implied as sense data. Thus, qualia or sense data appear to be the content of our knowledge or propositional beliefs.

### Re-visiting Qualia in the Works of Plato

This section implicates the problem of qualia in the works of Plato. But first, attempt was made to distinguish between qualia and knowledge and later proceeds to show the implicit work of qualia in Plato's Theory of Forms. Plato implicitly agrees that qualia or sense data is relevant to knowledge acquisition.

As hinted earlier the term qualia is delimited to a private-qualitative or raw-feel, relevant to knowledge acquisition but not knowledge in itself. We also pointed out the seeming tension between philosophers who argue that qualia or experiences of sense data is essential for the process of knowledge acquisition and those who think otherwise and the logical order of qualia and knowledge. Plato's argument on knowledge can be teased out from his Theory of Forms. According to Plato:

There is nothing which man does not know, prior to birth. For as all natures are kindred and akin, our soul must be akin to all natures. Accordingly, it knows them all: it knows all things<sup>3</sup>... In being born we forget; but we may recover our memory and our knowledge, though only partially: only if we see the truth again shall we recognise it. (*Meno*, 81b-d)

All knowledge, for Plato, is therefore re-cognition—recalling or remembering the essence or true nature of objects that we once knew<sup>4</sup>. On Plato's Theory of Knowledge, he argues that the object of knowledge should be eternal and unchanging. The Forms are the resemblances of the objects and vice-versa. Since the particulars in this world lack this feature, it follows that the object of knowledge are the Forms. Consequently, Plato makes the Forms the object of knowledge, and since the Forms are known through reasoning, Plato concludes that it is only through "recollection" that we come to know—making irrelevant the role sense data/qualia play in knowledge acquisition. Perceptual knowledge is rejected by Plato on two grounds. First, the senses are unreliable and incapable of transcending beyond mere appearance and reality; second, the objects of perceptual knowledge are temporal and mere reflections of the Forms.

For Plato, even if qualia is relevant for knowledge acquisition, it only plays a secondary role of igniting our memory for amnesia. Plato identifies two correlative and mutually necessary cognitive experiences, namely: a sensitive perception (*aísthesis*), which gives rise to anamnesis, and the soul's contact to the Forms, which is prior to birth. This is so because the individual can only have memory of what he knew beforehand.

In the Reminiscence Theory (*Phaedo*, 72d-73a), Plato argues that our senses are tools for acquisition of knowledge. He argues that our memory is awakened by the sense-experience (*aísthesis*). This argument presupposes that a previous contact with something remembered is necessary for memory. It is also mandatory that we have had in any previous moment the knowledge of the memory objects. This argument presents two

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For the relation between kinship and knowledge (cp. Russell's knowledge by acquaintance) see also *Phaedo*, 79d; *Republic*, 611d; and *Laws*, 899d.

<sup>4</sup> *Phaedo* 72eff.; 75e; 76a-b. Like all great epistemological theories, the theory of anamnesis has influenced religion and literature.

essential requirements:

1. An acquaintance previous to the actual acquaintance of the external world is necessary;
2. Our knowledge of the physical object in the external world must be related to metaphysical object in the world of becoming.

From the above requirements, we realize that it is by virtue of previous acquaintances that we possess memory. It must have been a previous experience that we have memory since mankind at birth has the potential of capturing and interpreting sense data.

According to Crombie (1971, p. 26)<sup>5</sup>, cognition is only possible with this condition, namely, the anteriority of intelligible experience in relation to the sensitive experience. In order to have this previous experience, it is also necessary to experience the Forms, because they enable and constrain the capability of interpreting sense data. In other words, “sensations”, “feelings”, or “consciousness” by themselves are not enough for knowledge. For Plato, the Forms are the resemblances of the objects and vice-versa. Our perceptual or sensual experiences/qualia trigger anamnesis which reminds us by bringing to effect the knowledge of the Forms.

### **Re-visiting Qualia in Aristotle**

This section examines the problem of qualia in Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato’s arguments of the Forms. In spite of Aristotle’s criticisms, he also seems to agree that the sense data/qualia is relevant for acquisition of knowledge.

Aristotle had come to the conclusion that Plato’s attempt to solve the problem of true knowledge by postulating a world of transcendent separate Forms as its objects was a mistaken one and that reality of which we can have certain knowledge must be looked for in the world which we find ourselves, the world reveal to our senses (Armstrong, 1947, p. 77). Thus, Aristotle moved away from this Platonic doctrine towards a denominating interest in the world of concrete individual things perceptible by the senses which our immediate senses reveal to us and from whence we acquire qualia. However, Aristotle continued to agree with Plato that our business as rational being is to know objective truth and the object of true knowledge are immaterial and unchanging. But it seems to him (Aristotle) that the Forms are so completely cut off, in the Platonic doctrine, from the material world that they cannot possibly be our object of immediate knowledge, immersed as we are in that world (Armstrong, 1947, p. 77). Furthermore, they are so completely cut off that they cannot be causes of the beings of the things of which we have experience, any more than our knowledge of them; and in any case, the things of which we have perceptual experience are individual concrete things from which we become acquainted with sense data or qualia.

Although, Aristotle critiques Plato’s theory, he credited him for his thoughts of states of flux in the world of particulars:

He thought that the particulars in sensible world were in state of flux and none of them was stable but that the universe was apart from this and something different...by reason of definition but did not separate the universe from the individual and was right in not separating them. (Believers and Ideas, M. 1086a, 37-65)

For Aristotle, “...we do not regard any of the senses as wisdom; yet surely these give the most

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Classical Greek Philosophy: A perception in Plato. Hugo Filgueiras de Abyraújo, Federal University of Ceará, Fortaleza-Brazil, 2013.

authoritative knowledge of particulars”<sup>6</sup>. In other words, the individual things which we perceive by our senses are primary realities. It is in this changeable world of things that we have to find somehow the unchanging objects of true knowledge which are necessary for science and philosophy. Plato, it seems to Aristotle evades the problem by asserting the existence of the world of unchanging eternal universal entities, transcending our world and utterly separated from it. Even if Forms existed, they have nothing to do with knowledge of our world.

The lesson we draw from Aristotle is that we do not have knowledge or concepts before birth. The knowledge we have is knowledge of the physical objects in the world of becoming. This knowledge we have is derived from sense data/qualia which is acquired from our encounter with the physical world (Barnes, 1965, p. 153). Thus, sense data or qualia is relevant to knowledge acquisition and is prior to the formation of concepts.

### Findings and Deductions

This section presents critical analyses of the implicit Logical Order of Qualia and Knowledge Debate (L-Debate) and the Relevance Order of Qualia to Knowledge Debate (R-Debate) in the works of Plato and Aristotle.

From the L-Debate we can tease out two salient arguments:

1. For Plato, propositions/concepts were wired in us before birth. These concepts are inborn traits acquired in the world of Forms. Qualia stimulates/prompts us to remember what we did encounter in the world of Forms. Since knowledge consists in apprehending the Forms, knowledge is prior to qualia.

2. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle argues that we do not have prior concepts of things in the physical world. Rather, we develop sense data through our physical encounter with objects in the world of becoming. These encounters generate qualia from which knowledge is inferred. For Aristotle, qualia/sense data precedes knowledge. For him, qualia do not trigger anamnesis as in Plato’s sense but are somehow a representation of objects in the world of becoming. Aristotle seems to suggest that knowledge/concepts/propositions are derived from phenomenal experiences of objects encountered in the physical world hence placing qualia before knowledge in its logical sequence.

Palpable instances of Relevance Order of Qualia to knowledge-Debate realized in Plato and Aristotle’s view are summarized below:

1. Following Plato’s conception of Forms, it emerged that qualia is not relevant for knowledge acquisition on the hypothesis that an intelligible reality exist. Qualia, in Plato’s sense, if relevant at all, only help us to recall propositions/concepts.

2. For Aristotle, qualia is relevant for knowledge on the grounds that we become aware of physical objects through their sensible qualities. Qualia/sense data in this sense does not play the triggering role but object from which inferences are drawn.

These R&L-Debates incontrovertibly influenced most of contemporary epistemology in the area of the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist debate<sup>7</sup>, the internalist and externalist debate<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Book 1, Part 1), Trans. W. D. Ross. 350 BC.

<sup>7</sup> Foundationalism (broadly speaking) is of the view that qualia/sense data are the foundation of our beliefs as it is an object from which inferences are made. Anti-foundationalists roughly speaking argue that there is no necessary connection between qualia/sensedata mediated by language and what they refer to.

<sup>8</sup> Internalism is the view that justification or knowledge is an internal state of a believer or knower. On the other hand, externalism is a position that justification or knowledge involves more than an internal state: it involves an external factor as well.

### Conclusion

This paper gives credit to Plato and Aristotle for their contributions to contemporary epistemology. It is now possible for modern-day epistemologists to deploy the views of these twin legends in the contemporary debate of qualia and knowledge.

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