Intrinsic changes in experience: Swift and enormous

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Abstract: Because, as Palmer shows, the only kinds of differences that can be detected are differences in relational structure, and relational structure is precisely what is preserved by isomorphism, his own arguments can be used to expose the incoherent motivation behind the traditional idea of “intrinsic qualities” of experience.

As a left-handed person, I can wonder whether I am a left-hemisphere-dominant speaker or a right-hemisphere-dominant speaker or something mixed, and the only way I can learn the truth is by submitting myself to objective, “third-person” testing. I do not “have access to” this intimate fact about how my own mind does its work. It escapes all my attempts at introspective detection, and might, for all I know, shunt back and forth every few seconds without my being any the wiser. In striking contrast to this is the traditional idea that there are “intrinsic qualities” of my subjective experience that I do have access to, but that are inaccessible to objective investigation. This idea has persisted for centuries, in spite of its incoherence, but perhaps its days are finally numbered.

Palmer presents the case in favor of the traditional view so clearly that his own arguments can be recast to expose the problems with it.

1. “The emerging picture is that the [intrinsic] nature of color experiences cannot be uniquely fixed by objective behavioral means, but their structural interrelations can be. This means that, logically speaking, any set of underlying experiences will do for color, provided the experiences relate to each other in the required way” (sect. 2.2, para. 6).

2. “[T]he only kinds of differences that can be detected behaviorally [my emphasis] are differences in relational structure, and relational structure is precisely what is preserved by isomorphism” (sect. 2.3, para. 4).

Behaviorally, as contrasted with what? Experientially, introspectively, first-personly. The idea is that what cannot be detected behaviorally might nevertheless be detected from the first-person-point-of-view, as one says:

3. “I alone have access to these experiences” (sect. 3.3, para. 4).

But (3) must be defended against the apparently unthinkable hypothesis that not even I “have access to” the intrinsic qualities of my very own experience. What on earth could this mean? It could mean that there were intrinsic qualities of my experience whose comings and goings were, like the spatial properties of my language-comprehension and production activities, beyond my direct ken. But this invites the obvious retort: then they would not be properties of my experience!

Now what could that mean?

Palmer shows us, by plotting the path from between-subjects to within-subject experiments. The real and imaginary within-subject experiments he discusses all require a “memory comparison” by the subject. That is the whole point of within-subject experiments here, and Palmer acknowledges the theoretical possibility that there might be intrinsic qualities that changed so gradually, over such a long time, that the intrasubjective memory comparison would fail to detect them. If a change were slow enough, he concedes, even a huge change could occur without being detected, and if a change were subtle enough, it could happen quickly, without the subject noticing. But never mind, he says; he is concerned only with within-subject changes in experiential quality that are “swift and enormous” (sect. 3.5 para. 3). How swift and how enormous? Just swift and enormous enough to be detected by the subject.

Palmer concludes: “Within-subject designs can examine changes in experience, but cannot reveal to or from what they changed” (sect. 4 para. 9) — not to outsiders and not, really, to subjects either! You do not “have access to” the intrinsic qualities of your experiences in any interesting sense, any more than outside
observers do, but only to the relations between them that you can
detect. The very detectability by the subject of “swift and enorm­
ous” changes guarantees that any such changes of properties are
“within the domain of functionalism.” This does not establish that
there are no “subisomorphic” intrinsic qualities of experience, but
only that if there are, they are of no importance to psychology (or
“phenomenology”), because their presence or absence makes no
difference to the subjective state of the subject. In the limiting
case, you could gradually become a “color zombie” and never
know it. For all you know, that is what you are now. This is not, as
some have claimed, an intended reductio ad absurdum of the very
idea of consciousness, but rather of the idea that consciousness has
intrinsic qualities that are problematic for functionalism.

Palmer notes that earlier arguments against intrinsic qualities
of subjective experience (e.g., Dennett 1991) were “complex, con­
voluted, and generally unconvincing” (sect. 3.5, para. 2). Perhaps
now that they are recast as implications of his own arguments, he
and others will find them more persuasive.