

# A catalog of conscious experiences

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1 Conscious experience can be fascinating to attend to. Experience comes in an enormous number of varieties, each with its own character. A far-from-complete catalog of the aspects of conscious experience is given in the following pretheoretical, impressionistic list. Nothing here should be taken too seriously as philosophy, but it should help focus attention on the subject matter at hand.

2 *Visual experiences.* Among the many varieties of visual experience, color sensations stand out as the paradigm examples of conscious experience, due to their pure, seemingly ineffable qualitative nature. Some color experiences can seem particularly striking, and so can be particularly good at focusing our attention on the mystery of consciousness. In my environment now, there is a particularly rich shade of deep purple from a book on my shelf; an almost surreal shade of green in a photograph of ferns on my wall; and a sparkling array of bright red, green, orange, and blue lights on a Christmas tree that I can see through my window. But any color can be awe-provoking if we attend to it, and reflect upon its nature. Why should it feel like *that*? Why should it feel like anything at all? How could I possibly convey the nature of this color experience to someone who has not had such an experience?

3 Other aspects of visual experience include the experience of shape, of size, of brightness, and of darkness. A particularly subtle aspect is the experience of depth. As a child, one of my eyes had excellent vision, but the other was very poor. Because of my one good eye, the world looked crisp and sharp, and it certainly seemed three-dimensional. One day, I was fitted with glasses, and the change was remarkable. The world was not much sharper than before, but it suddenly looked *more* three-dimensional: things that had depth

before somehow got deeper, and the world seemed a richer place. If you cover one eye and then uncover it, you can get an idea of the change. In my previous state, I would have said that there was no way for the depth of my vision to improve; the world already seemed as three-dimensional as it could be. The change was subtle, almost ineffable, but extremely striking. Certainly there is an intellectual story one can tell about how binocular vision allows information from each eye to be consolidated into information about distances, thus enabling more sophisticated control of action, but somehow this causal story does not reveal the way the experience *felt*. Why that change in processing should be accompanied by such a remaking of my experience was mysterious to me as a ten-year-old, and is still a source of wonder today.

4 *Auditory experiences.* In some ways, sounds are even stranger than visual images. The structure of images usually corresponds to the structure of the world in a straightforward way, but sounds can seem quite independent. My telephone receives an incoming call, an internal device vibrates, a complex wave is set up in the air and eventually reaches my eardrum, and somehow, almost magically, I hear a *ring*. Nothing about the quality of the ring seems to correspond directly to any structure in the world, although I certainly know that it originated with the speaker, and that it is determined by a waveform. But why should that waveform, or even these neural firings, have given rise to a sound quality like *that*?

5 Musical experience is perhaps the richest aspect of auditory experience, although the experience of speech must be close. Music is capable of washing over and completely absorbing us, surrounding us in a way that a visual field can surround us but in which auditory experiences usually do not. One can analyze aspects of musical experience by breaking the sounds we perceive into notes and tones with complex interrelationships, but the experience of music somehow goes beyond this. A unified qualitative experience arises from a chord, but not from randomly selected notes. An old piano and a far-off oboe can combine to produce an unexpectedly haunting experience. As always, when we reflect, we ask the question: why should *that* feel like *this*?

6 *Tactile experiences.* Textures provide another of the richest quality spaces that we experience: think of the feel of velvet, and contrast it to the texture of cold metal, or a clammy hand, or a stubbly chin. All of these have their own unique quality. The tactile experiences of water, of cotton candy, or of another person's lips are different again.

7 *Olfactory experiences.* Think of the musty smell of an old wardrobe, the stench of rotting garbage, the whiff of newly mown grass, the warm aroma of freshly baked bread. Smell is in some ways the most mysterious of all the senses, due to the rich, intangible, indescribable nature of smell sensations. Ackermann (1990) calls it ‘the mute sense; the one without words’. While there is something ineffable about any sensation, the other senses have properties that facilitate some description. Visual and auditory experiences have a complex combinatorial structure that can be described. Tactile and taste experiences generally arise from direct contact with some object, and a rich descriptive vocabulary has been built up by reference to these objects. Smell has little in the way of apparent structure, and often floats free of any apparent object, remaining a primitive presence in our sensory manifold. (Perhaps animals might do better [Figure 1].) The primitiveness is perhaps partly due to the slot-and-key process by which our olfactory receptors are sensitive to various kinds of molecules. It seems arbitrary that a given sort of molecule should give rise to *this* sort of sensation, but give rise it does.



**Figure 1** Effability and ineffability in olfactory experience. (Calvin and Hobbes © Watterson. Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.)

8 *Taste experiences.* Psychophysical investigations tell us that there are only four independent dimensions of taste perception: sweet, sour, bitter, and salt. But this four-dimensional space combines with our sense of smell to produce a great variety of possible experiences: the taste of Turkish Delight, of curried black-eyed pea salad, of a peppermint Lifesaver, of a ripe peach.

9 *Experiences of hot and cold.* An oppressively hot, humid day and a frosty winter's day produce strikingly different qualitative experiences. Think also of the heat sensations on one's skin from being close to a fire, and the hot-cold sensation that one gets from touching ultracold ice.

10 *Pain.* Pain is a paradigm example of conscious experience, beloved by philosophers. Perhaps this is because pains form a very distinctive class of qualitative experiences, and are difficult to map directly onto any structure in the world or in the body, although they are usually associated with some part of the body. Because of this, pains can seem even more subjective than most sensory experiences. There are a great variety of pain experiences, from shooting pains and fierce burns through sharp pricks to dull aches.

11 *Other bodily sensations.* Pains are only the most salient kind of sensations associated with particular parts of the body. Others include headaches (which are perhaps a class of pain), hunger pangs, itches, tickles, and the experience associated with the need to urinate. Many bodily sensations have an entirely unique quality, different in kind from anything else in our experience: think of orgasms, or the feeling of hitting one's funny bone. There are also experiences associated with proprioception, the sense of where one's body is in space.

12 *Mental imagery.* Moving ever inward, toward experiences that are not associated with particular objects in the environment or the body but that are in some sense generated internally, we come to mental images. There is often a rich phenomenology associated with visual images conjured up in one's imagination, though not nearly as detailed as those derived from direct visual perception. There are also the interesting colored patterns that one gets when one closes one's eyes and squints, and the strong after-images that one gets after looking at something bright. One can have similar kinds of auditory 'images' conjured up by one's imagination, and even tactile, olfactory, and gustatory images, although these are harder to pin down and their associated qualitative feel is usually fainter.

13 *Conscious thought.* Some of the things we think and believe do not have any particular qualitative feel associated with them, but many do. This applies particularly to explicit, occurrent thoughts that one thinks to oneself, and to various thoughts that affect one's stream of consciousness. It is often hard to pin down just what the qualitative feel of an occurrent thought is, but it is certainly there. There is *something* it is like to be having such thoughts.

14 When I think of a lion, for instance, there seems to be a whiff of leonine quality to my phenomenology: what it is like to think of a lion is subtly different from what it is like to think of the Eiffel tower. More obviously, cognitive attitudes such as desire often have a strong phenomenal flavor. Desire seems to exert a phenomenological ‘tug’, and memory often has a qualitative component, as with the experience of nostalgia or regret.

15 *Emotions.* Emotions often have distinctive experiences associated with them. The sparkle of a happy mood, the weariness of a deep depression, the red-hot glow of a rush of anger, the melancholy of regret: all of these can affect conscious experience profoundly, although in a much less specific way than localized experiences such as sensations. These emotions pervade and color all of our conscious experiences while they last.

16 Other more transient feelings lie partway between emotions and the more obviously cognitive aspects of mind. Think of the rush of pleasure one feels when one gets a joke. Another example is the feeling of tension one gets when watching a suspense movie, or when waiting for an important event. The butterflies in one’s stomach that can accompany nervousness also fall into this class.

17 *The sense of self.* One sometimes feels that there is something to conscious experience that transcends all these specific elements: a kind of background hum, for instance, that is somehow fundamental to consciousness and that is there even when the other components are not. This phenomenology of self is so deep and intangible that it sometimes seems illusory, consisting in nothing over and above specific elements such as those listed above. Still, there seems to be *something* to the phenomenology of self, even if it is very hard to pin down.

18 This catalog covers a number of bases, but leaves out as much as it puts in. I have said nothing, for instance, about dreams, arousal and fatigue, intoxication, or the novel character of other drug-induced experiences. There are also rich experiences that derive their character from the combination of two or many of the components described above. I have mentioned the combined effects of smell and taste, but an equally salient example is the combined experience of music and emotion, which interact in a subtle, difficult-to-separate way. I have also left aside the unity of conscious experience – the way that all of these experiences seem to be tied together as the experience of a single experiencer. Like the sense of self, this unity

sometimes seems illusory – it is certainly harder to pin down than any specific experiences – but there is a strong intuition that unity is there.

## References

ACKERMAN, D. (1990) *A Natural History of the Senses*, New York, Random House.