'What it is like' talk is not technical talk

1. Introduction

Philosophers commonly talk about phenomenal consciousness by engaging in *'what it is like' talk* ('WIL-talk' for short): they use sentences ('WIL-sentences') involving phrases such as 'what is it like' and 'something it is like'. But it is not obvious *what* we mean when we engage in WIL-talk, or *how* we mean whatever it is we mean: how, by putting *these* words in *this* order do we come to talk about consciousness?[1] Indeed some have argued that when philosophers engage in WIL-talk they are talking nonsense (Hacker 2002), or saying something false or trivial (Snowdon 2010). One popular account of WIL-talk is that it involves *technical terms*—special terms which, although they look and sound like everyday words, in fact have a distinct meaning. David Lewis holds such an account: "'What it's like' [is] ordinary enough—but when used as [a term] for qualia, [it is] used in a special technical sense." (Lewis 1995, 140)[2] And so does Alex Byrne:

[1] Henceforth I will drop the 'phenomenal' qualifier: all references to consciousness are to phenomenal consciousness. For a characterisation of phenomenal consciousness, see the quoted examples of uses of WIL-talk in this section.

[2] We might interpret Lewis as claiming here that it is only when we use the phrase 'what it's like' as an alternative to—i.e., as something like a *synonym* of—'qualia' that the former is technical. But I don't think we should understand him in this way. Directly after the sentence quoted, Lewis says: "You can say what it's like to taste New Zealand beer by saying what experience you have when you do, namely a sweet taste. But you can't say what it's like to have a sweet taste in the parallel way, namely by saying that when you do, you have a sweet taste!" This seems to be offered

it is doubtful that 'There is something it's like for so-and-so to φ' has some

'special use to describe subjectivity' (dialects of analytic philosophy aside).

(2004, 215)

The meaning of these technical terms, according to the technical account, is such that we

can use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness. Thus (as Janzen (2011) argues)

philosophers can sidestep the arguments of Hacker and Snowdon—which concern non-

technical, everyday language—and continue to use WIL-talk as they currently do. In this

paper, I will show that the technical account of WIL-talk is false: WIL-talk does not

involve technical terms.

We should care what the correct account of WIL-talk is because of the widespread use of

this talk in discussions of consciousness. We are interested in consciousness for many

reasons: it plays a central, significant, and immediate role in our lives, is a (perhaps the)

significant mark of the mental, and is often taken to be the main obstacle to attempts to

naturalise the mind. WIL-talk is used to define consciousness: 'phenomenal

consciousness is the property mental states, events, and processes have when, and only

when, there is something it is like for their subject to undergo them, or be in them.'

(Kriegel 2006, 58). It is used to make statements about consciousness: 'We all know what

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as support for the claim that 'what it's like' is a technical term. It's unclear what the argument is here, but, in the

passage just quoted 'what it's like' is not being used as a synonym for 'qualia' (replacing 'what it's like' in the passage

with 'qualia' doesn't result in grammatical sentences, let alone synonymous ones). Instead it is being used in the way

we are interested in. This suggests that Lewis holds the technical account.

it is like to undergo the visual experience of bright purple, the feeling of fear, or the sensation of being tickled' (Tye 2009, 137), 'There's nothing it is like to be a zombie.' (Chalmers 1996, 95). And it is used to ask questions about consciousness: 'What is it like to be a bat?' (Nagel 1974), 'what is it like to think that *p*?' (Pitt 2004).[3] Simply put, it is rare for philosophers to talk about consciousness without engaging in WIL-talk.

But if we're not clear what we communicate by engaging in WIL-talk, then definitions, claims and discussions will not be clear, and we will have no response to critics such as Hacker and Snowdon. Given the ubiquity of WIL-talk in philosophy of mind, then, it is imperative that we have a good grasp of what we mean when we engage in it. Further, if we can get clearer about the meaning of WIL-talk, this may allow us to get clearer about the phenomena that we talk about when we use it: consciousness.

But what we communicate by engaging in WIL-talk is unclear. Consider, for example, the WIL-sentence: 'There is nothing it is like to be a zombie,' (Chalmers 1996, 95). If we take the standard meanings of the words used, and combine them according to the apparent syntax of the sentence, Chalmers is saying that there is nothing that is similar to being a zombie. But this is not what he means. The whole point of zombies is that they are very similar to us indeed: in all ways but one—the phenomenal—they are just as we are. More

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[3] As the quotations just given suggest, paradigm examples of phenomenally conscious states include perceptions, bodily sensations and emotions; whether there is cognitive phenomenology is a matter of debate. Phenomenally conscious creatures include humans and (probably) bats, but not zombies.

generally, it is clear that WIL-talk is not concerned with similarity.[4] When faced with any kind of talk, the default hypothesis is that it works in the standard way: what it means is given by the meanings of the words used and the syntactic relations between them. As we've just seen, the standard account of WIL-talk is false. This shows that we need a non-standard account of WIL-talk if we are to be confident about what we mean when we engage in WIL-talk, and if we are to have a response to critics such as Hacker and Snowdon. Perhaps the most popular account of WIL-talk amongst philosophers of mind is the *technical account*: WIL-talk involves technical terms, and it is because of the presence of these terms that we can use it to talk about consciousness. In the rest of this paper, I will argue that this account is false.

2. The technical account

The technical account of WIL-talk can be given as the conjunction of three statements:

> TECHNICAL: WIL-sentences involve technical terms.
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> INTRODUCTION: These terms were introduced by philosophers.
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> MEANING: It is because of the special meaning that these terms have that we can use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness.

[4] This is widely recognised. See, for example, (Nagel 1974, n6 440), (Hacker 2002, 166), (Lewis 2002, 282), (Hellie 2004, 352–56), (Lormand 2004, 318–22), and (Snowdon 2010, 17).

By a 'technical term' I mean a word or phrase whose meaning is peculiar to—or closely connected with—a particular trade, discipline, or area of thought. Some technical terms—such as 'hadron' and 'epiphenomenal'—have no counterpart in everyday language. Others sound and look like ordinary words or phrases, but have a different meaning. For example, the technical meaning of 'work' in physics—which is concerned with energy transference—is distinct from that of 'work' in everyday English—which is concerned with employment or effort. If WIL-talk involves technical terms, most plausibly they are of the second kind: as we saw above, on an everyday reading of WIL-sentences they are concerned with similarity.

Most writers who employ WIL-talk are not explicit about how they understand it, but there is evidence that many philosophers adopt the technical account. We've already seen that Byrne and Lewis accept this view. Here are some more examples. David Braddon-Mitchell and Frank Jackson say that,

> Recent interest in [the knowledge argument] arises particularly from Thomas Nagel, 'What is It Like to be a Bat?' (the title tells you where the phrase comes from), … (2007, 152)

William Fish says that,

> Perceptual experiences are paradigmatically *conscious* experiences: they have a *phenomenology* or there is, in Thomas Nagel's influential terminology (1979), *something it is like to perceive.* (2010, 2)

P. M. S. Hacker (a critic of WIL-talk) says that,

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the mesmerizing turn of phrase 'there is something which it is like', derive[s]

from Thomas Nagel's paper 'What is it like to be a bat?'. (2002, 160)

And Jaegwon Kim says, 'The use of the expression "what it is like" in connection with

consciousness is due to Nagel.' (1998, 181)[5]

Despite its popularity, we should reject the technical account. This is because we have

good reasons to doubt the truth of both TECHNICAL and INTRODUCTION. I will consider

these reasons in reverse order.

3. Not INTRODUCTION

We can see that INTRODUCTION is false by examining early uses of WIL-talk by

philosophers. Most familiarly, Nagel uses WIL-talk in his (1974):

> the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that
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> there is something it is like to *be* that organism. ... fundamentally an organism
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> has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be*
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> that organism—something it is like *for* the organism. (436)

T. L. S. Sprigge also engages in WIL-talk in his (1971): 'One is wondering about the

consciousness which an object possesses whenever one wonders what it must be like

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[5] William Lycan (1996) holds that WIL-talk is ambiguous. He does not hold a technical account, however, since he does not appeal to the presence of technical terms to explain how we can use WIL-talk to talk about consciousness (i.e., he rejects MEANING).

being that object.' (167) And B. A. Farrell uses WIL-sentences to talk about consciousness even earlier: 'When, for example, we look at a red patch, we all just *know* what it is like to have the corresponding experience,' (1950, 181) A slightly earlier example—from 1946–7—comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein: '… I know what it's like to see red, green, blue, yellow, I know what it's like to feel sorrow, hope, fear, joy, affection …' (1980, 19)[6] The earliest example of a philosopher engaging in WIL-talk to talk about consciousness that I've found is in Bertrand Russell's entry on 'Philosophical Consequences of Relativity' in the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1926:

> In the four-dimensional space-time frame there are events everywhere ... The abstract mathematical relations of these events proceed according to the laws of physics, but the intrinsic nature of the events is wholly and inevitably unknown except when they occur in a region where there is the sort of structure we call a brain. Then they become the familiar sights and sounds and so on of our daily life. We know what it is like to see a star, but we do not know the nature of the events which constitute the ray of light that travels from the star to our eye.[7] (1926)

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[6] Nagasawa and Stoljar note that this work was written in 1946–7 and that although the quoted fragment is in English the passage in which it is embedded is in German (2004, n5 25).

[7] As some of the quotations given in §2 show, it is commonly claimed that the relevant technical terms were introduced by Nagel. While it is clear that Nagel's paper is responsible for popularising the use of WIL-talk by philosophers, it is just as clear that he was not the first philosopher to engage in this talk.

The way that Russell, Wittgenstein, Farrell, Sprigge and Nagel use WIL-talk lacks three features that we would expect to see were they introducing technical terms. First, none of these philosophers tell us *which* terms are the technical ones.[8] Technical terms are words or phrases that have a particular meaning within some discourse. It would be surprising if someone introduced a technical term without indicating which of the many words they use is the technical one. This would be especially surprising if the technical term had an everyday look- and sound-alike counterpart. But, as we saw above, the alleged technical terms in WIL-sentences are of this kind: unlike, say, 'hadron', we can't tell that the alleged terms are technical simply because they are not found in everyday language.

Second, none of these philosophers tells us *what* the alleged technical terms mean.[9] What it is to be a technical term is to have a particular meaning: one that is distinct from that of the term's ordinary counterpart (if there is one). It would be odd (and not very helpful) if these philosophers had introduced new jargon into philosophy without indicating how this jargon was to be understood.

Might the meaning be given non-explicitly—by ostension, for example? The third feature of these early uses suggests not. None of the philosophers even indicate *that* they're using WIL-talk in a new, non-everyday, technical way. Instead they simply *use* WIL-sentences in a non-self-conscious manner, without drawing attention to the language they use.

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[8] Nor, as a rule, do proponents of the technical account. Lewis (1995, 140) is an exception.

[9] The same is true of most adherents of the technical account. Janzen (2011, 281)is an exception.

To emphasis these points, contrast what these philosophers say when they engage in WIL-talk with what Nagel says when he *does* introduce a technical term—'subjective character'. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Nagel says, 'We may call this the subjective character of experience.' Here Nagel indicates *that* he is introducing a technical term, tells us *which* term is technical, and—by using WIL-talk—tells us *what* it means.

Given the way that Russell and others use WIL-sentences, it is not plausible that they are introducing technical terms. Thus we should reject INTRODUCTION, and so the technical account of WIL-talk.

4. Not TECHNICAL

Another reason for rejecting the technical account is that TECHNICAL is false: WIL-talk does not involve technical terms. We can see this when we acknowledge that there are many examples of WIL-talk being used to talk about consciousness that come from outside philosophy, some of which precede philosophical uses. Further, there are no differences in meaning between philosophical and non-philosophical uses. So the alleged technical terms used by philosophers have the same meaning as the non-technical terms used by non-philosophers: they are not technical terms at all.

Before giving some examples, it's worth distinguishing my argument against TECHNICAL from three others that might be offered. First, we might describe and defend a positive account of WIL-talk and show that it entails the falsity of TECHNICAL. (Stoljar does this in his (forthcoming).) But such an approach will only persuade those who accept the

proffered account of WIL-talk. My argument shows that, even without committing to any particular account of WIL-talk, we should reject TECHNICAL.

Less demandingly, we might aim to show that—regardless of the details—the correct account of WIL-talk is (as Lycan (1996), Lormand (2004), and Hellie (2004) and (2007) have argued) a *compositional* one: i.e., one according to which the meaning of WIL-sentences is composed out of the meaning and arrangement of their parts.[10] (Such accounts will tend to be non-standard because they hold that the syntax of or words involved in WIL-sentences, is not as it first seems to be.) But the correct account's being compositional is compatible with WIL-talk being technical talk. After all, the correct account of the meaning of 'There are six types of quark' is a compositional one. But, because 'quark' is a technical term, this (and all other 'quark'-talk) is technical talk.

A third argument against TECHNICAL is offered by Hellie (2004). He notes that non-philosophers can understand WIL-talk and have used WIL-sentences since the mid-60's. This is correct, but it doesn't go far enough: these facts are compatible with a technical account according to which technical terms were introduced some time before the mid-60's and then spread outside of philosophy. My argument shows that such an account should be rejected.

Here, then, are some examples of WIL-talk being used in the way we are familiar with which come from outside of philosophy. The first is from 1891: 'Neither does he know what it is like to be scorched by lightning, but he has experienced the shrivelling effects

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[10] I'm indebted to *** for suggesting this argument.

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of unrequited longing.' (Unknown 1891, 541) A comparison is made here between what it is like to be scorched by lightning and the experience of undergoing unrequited longing. The latter is concerned with the subject's conscious states, so presumably that is also what is of interest in the lightning case too.

A second example comes from a translation into English (made in 1912) of Anton Chekhov's *The Sea-gull*:

> Nina: And I should like to change places with you.
>
> Trigorin: Why?
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> Nina: To find out how a famous genius feels. What is it like to be famous? What sensations does it give you? (1912)

Nina asks for the same information in three different ways, one of which involves a WIL-sentence. The other two ways ask about Trigorin's *feelings* and *sensations*, so we know that it is Trigorin's conscious states that Nina is interested in.

These examples give us further reason to reject INTRODUCTION: both were published at least seventy-five years before Nagel's paper and at least twenty-five years before Russell's encyclopaedia entry.[11] This means that the use of WIL-talk to talk about consciousness was not an innovation of philosophers.

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[11] It has been suggested to me (by ***) that these examples are somehow anomalous since they are "literary" English. I haven't found more prosaic examples of non-philosophical WIL-talk from this early period, but I suspect that this is because the sources that linguistic corpora of these periods rely upon tend towards the literary and the

The next example is from a newspaper description of a blind man: 'His great regret is that his normal sight at birth was too early to allow him to remember what it is like to see.' (1938, 7). The fourth example is from 1969: 'Drug-inspired psychedelic art tried to portray what it's like to 'see sounds' and 'taste colors' while on an LSD trip.' (Cain 1969, F17) Again, this is clearly concerned with (altered, synaesthetic) conscious states.

A book review from 1987 shows WIL-talk once again being used to talk about the experiences of the blind: 'His description of what it is like to 'see' as a blind man is fascinating and inspiring' (Kirsch 1987) Coming up to the present, in the last example, the writer tells us about his emotional state: he feels afraid (at the time, Gaza was the target of Israeli airstrikes). He then uses a WIL-sentence to ask how children in Gaza feel:

> When I think of the future, I feel fear. I feel fear and I am a 34 year old man. What is it like for the children who live here in Gaza? What is it like for their parents? (Damo 2012)

We've seen six examples of WIL-talk being used to talk about consciousness that come from outside of philosophy. Some of these examples pre-date philosophical uses, while others are contemporary with them. Judicious use of linguistic corpora or internet search engines will allow the reader to find many more examples. These non-philosophers use WIL-sentences to talk about the conscious states associated with bodily sensations, perceptions and emotions just as philosophers do. There is no difference in meaning—in

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formal since these are the sources that have survived. But even if all early uses of WIL-talk were literary, that wouldn't show that they are technical, philosophical uses. And that is what matters here.

precision, in scope, or in nuance—between these non-philosophical examples, and the WIL-talk philosophers engage in. So whatever meaning the alleged technical terms employed in WIL-talk have, it is the *same* meaning that their everyday, non-technical, look- and sound-alike counterparts have. But an alleged technical term that means the same as its everyday counterpart is no technical term at all. Thus we should reject TECHNICAL.

Before concluding, I'll consider an objection someone might make to my argument against TECHNICAL which goes as follows.[12] It's true that philosophers and non-philosophers alike use sentences of the form 'What it is like to …' to talk about consciousness. But what is not true is that the ellipsis is filled in in the same way by philosophers and non-philosophers. My response is that, if we look at the examples I've given (and at others that can be easily found), it looks as if the ellipsis *is* filled in in the same way by philosophers and non-philosophers alike: both are concerned with what it's like to see, for example, or to undergo an emotion. But perhaps all the objector needs is that *some* ways philosophers fill in the ellipsis are *not* ways non-philosophers complete the sentence. To make the objection concrete, let's imagine that the claim is that philosophers sometimes talk about what *conscious states* (or *qualia*) are like, while non-philosophers only talk about what *the world* is like (cf. (Lycan 1996, 77)).

Even if this claim is true, it doesn't show that philosophical and non-philosophical WIL-talk differs in meaning in a way relevant to my argument. It is no surprise that, when φ

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[12] Thanks to *** for suggesting this to me.

and ψ differ in meaning, so too do 'What it is like to φ' and 'What it is like to ψ'.[13] And that the meanings differ is no reason to think that one involves a technical term that the other does not. (It might be that one of φ or ψ is, or involves, a technical term, of course. But if so, this doesn't shed light on facts about meaning particular to *'what it is like'*-talk.) To make the point by way of an analogy: both scientists and non-scientists are interested in claims about causation. But while scientists might be interested in things like what causes radioactive atoms to decay, or viruses to mutate, non-scientists might be concerned with more mundane matters: what causes next-door's dog to bark at night, or what caused the car battery to go flat. But this doesn't show that 'cause' is being used to mean different things by the two groups and so it gives no support to the idea that scientific 'cause'-talk is technical while non-scientific 'cause'-talk is not.

5. Conclusion

To summarise the evidence against the technical account: when we look at early uses of WIL-sentences by philosophers, we do not find what we would expect to find if they were introducing—or even just making one of the first uses of—technical terms. These philosophers don't indicate that they're using technical language, don't tell us which terms are technical, and don't tell us what special meaning the technical terms have. Further, we find non-philosophers using WIL-talk to talk about consciousness before we find philosophers doing this. Thus we should reject INTRODUCTION. And what non-philosophers mean when they engage in WIL-talk is no different to what philosophers

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[13] Likewise for 'what α is like' and 'what β is like'.

mean when they engage in it. This shows that TECHNICAL is false. Since two of the three statements that make up the technical account of WIL-talk are false, we should reject it.

Why is the technical account so popular if, as I've argued, the evidence against it is so compelling? I think three facts are relevant here. First, the correct account of WIL-talk is not the standard account—what we mean when we utter WIL-sentences doesn't follow straightforwardly from the standard meanings of the words we use and the (apparent) syntax of the sentences. Second, the ubiquity of WIL-talk in philosophy of mind is due to the success of Nagel's 1974 paper: language that is commonly used in discussions of consciousness after this date was not so frequently used before this date. The technical account purports to explain both of these facts: the standard account fails because WIL-talk involves technical terms, and we don't find it much before 1974 because that is when the technical terms were introduced. The third fact is that there has not been much investigation of WIL-talk: of what it means or of how it means what it does. Thus the prima facie plausibility of the technical account has been unchallenged. It's not surprising that this account is popular even though, once we consider the issue more carefully, we can see that it is false.

The aim of this paper has been negative: to show that we should not accept the technical account of WIL-talk. But if successful, it shows the need for future, positive work. WIL-talk is important because of its widespread and central use in discussions of consciousness. But what we mean when we engage in WIL-talk is obscure, and some have argued that this talk should be abandoned. We cannot simply assume that by engaging in WIL-talk we are shedding light, rather than casting shadows, on the object of

our investigations: consciousness. Rather, we need an explanation both of what we communicate when we engage in WIL-talk, and of how we do this. Providing such an account will make it less likely that we talk past one another, lack clarity, or (if critics of WIL-talk turn out to be correct) utter falsehoods, trivialities or nonsense. But an account of WIL-talk also has the potential to provide positive benefits: it may allow us to be clearer both about the content of claims and arguments concerning consciousness, and about how we should respond to these claims and arguments.

There are accounts of WIL-talk that are neither standard nor technical. For example, perhaps the talk involves idioms (Sprigge (1998) seems to think this), or perhaps the context of use determines whether WIL-talk is phenomenal or not (Hellie (2004) claims this (although he later recants (2007)), as does Snowdon (2010) and Stoljar (forthcoming)), or perhaps WIL-sentences are ambiguous. But none of these accounts has been described in detail or been subjected to a sustained examination or defence— mainly because discussions of WIL-talk, when they occur at all, tend to only occur in passing. There is, as yet, no consensus about how to understand WIL-talk. More work on this topic is needed.[14]

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