

A Brief Study on Qualia Epiphenomenalism

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Abstract:

This work constitutes a discussion related to *qualia epiphenomenalism*, which is the view that qualia do not affect anything, but that they can be affected. After presenting contemporary debates on the issue, it is argued that qualia epiphenomenalism is untenable as a result of some epistemic problems, and a version of an epistemic argument that can be referred to as *the intentionality-based epistemic argument* is represented and defended.

Keywords: *Qualia*, epiphenomenalism, intentionality, epistemic argument.

Qualia Epifenomenalizm Üzerine Kısa Bir Çalışma

Özet

Bu çalışma, *qualianın* hiçbir şeyi etkileyemeyeceğini fakat kendisinin etkilenebilir olduğunu savunan *qualia epifenomenalizmi* üzerine tartışmaları içermektedir. Bu konudaki güncel tartışmalar sunulduktan sonra, birtakım epistemik sorunlar nedeniyle *qualia epifenomenalizminin* savunulabilir olmadığı belirtilmektedir. Bu yapılırken *hakkındalığa dayanan epistemik argüman* olarak adlandırılabilir bir çeşit epistemik argüman aktarılmakta ve savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Qualia*, epifenomenalizm, hakkındalık, epistemik argüman

Introduction:

In this paper, I present the so-called epiphenomenalism of qualia and examine the intentional epistemic argument that refutes it. In the first section, I introduce the concepts of epiphenomenalism and qualia, followed in the second section by an examination of Jackson's thoughts on qualia epiphenomenalism, as an appropriate and provocative starting point. The third section addresses some of contemporary debates related to qualia epiphenomenalism, while the fourth section brings up the intentional epistemic argument, which can be taken as the strongest argument against qualia epiphenomenalism.

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1. Epiphenomenalism and Qualia:

This section begins with some general definitions as a starting point.¹ The first concept to be defined is 'epiphenomenalism,' according to which “physical states cause mental states but mental states do not cause anything” (Audi ed., 1995, p.598.).

Based on my intention to address the subject of epiphenomenal qualia, it is first necessary to provide the general definition of the meaning of the term qualia (singularly, quale). Qualia are:

[t]hose properties of mental states or events, in particular of sensations and perceptual states, which determine “what it is like” to have them. Sometimes 'phenomenal properties' and 'qualitative features' are used with the same meaning. The felt difference between pains and itches is said to reside in differences in their “qualitative character,” i.e., the qualia (*ibid.*, p.666.).

Accordingly, epiphenomenal qualia can on whole be defined as qualia that have no causal efficacy.

2. Frank Jackson on Qualia:

Jackson identifies himself as a “qualia freak” (Jackson, 1982, p.127) but before articulating further on his not-so-rare rarity, he provides an example that summarizes his perspective:

Tell me everything physical there is to tell about what is going on in a living brain, the kind of states, their functional role, their relation to what goes on other times and in other brains...you won't have told me about the hurtfulness of pains, the itchiness of itches, pangs of jealousy, or about the characteristic experience of tasting a lemon, smelling a rose, hearing a loud noise or seeing the sky (*ibid.*).

¹ This form of opening may be thought of as misleading, however these definitions will help the reader form an easier understanding of the core of the problem. That said, it may still be argued that these definitions are modified or distorted by the arguments presented in this paper, although this is one side effect that I am willing to accept, as it may be that most philosophical papers suffer from this same side effect.

Jackson admits that this view may not be intuitive for some thinkers, and accepting that further clarification may be needed, puts forward three arguments: (i) “The knowledge argument,” (ii) “The modal argument,” and (iii) the “‘What is it like to be’ argument” (*ibid.*, pp.128-132).² After raising these arguments, he says that he would try to propose that “the view that qualia are epiphenomenal is a perfectly possible one” (*ibid.*, p.128.).

2.1. The Epiphenomenal Qualia:

In the fourth section of his article, Jackson says that qualia are not causally related to the physical world, at least in some senses (*ibid.*, p.133). He states that he has almost nothing to say about two particular understandings: (i) that “mental states” do not affect the physical world, claiming that he is only interested in the fact that the existence or non-existence of some qualia changes nothing in the physical world; and (ii) that “mental states” do not affect anything i.e., they are efficient neither in mental nor in physical events. Referring to this issue, he says that some qualia may affect other mental events, but not physical events (*ibid.*). Jackson goes on to address other discussions and objections that counter his view, which is that physicalism cannot fully explain the phenomena and the qualia are epiphenomenal. He replies to some possible objections, and in doing so, positions himself as an epiphenomenalist about qualia.

One objection asserts that when something hurts us, we try to avoid it, according to which the behavior, the physical event of avoiding pain, flows from the fact that the quale affects it (*ibid.*), however Jackson says that, “revers[ing] Hume, ... anything can fail to cause anything.” This means that something may exist in the brain coefficient related to both the quale —the hurting— and the avoidance of the thing that hurts —the physical event (*ibid.*).

Another objection states the question and its answer as a counterargument: “How do we know that other people have qualia?” “We know since it can be inferred from their reactions to qualia.” This is a false inference, according to Jackson (*ibid.*), as the true inference would be from the behaviors in reply to the brain processes that cause qualia. He provides the following example: Reading *The Times*, he is informed that Spurs won

² I will not explicitly articulate on these arguments in this paper.

the game; then he reads *The Telegraph* and sees the same news. He does not infer that *The Telegraph* has taken the news from *The Times*, as the correct inference would be to the reporters, who were sent to the game to report back to the paper (*ibid.*, pp.134,135). This example shows that two distinct events—the news—can come from the same cause—referring to the brain processes—but one may not, or rather does not, affect the other in any way.³⁻⁴

3. Debates on Qualia Epiphenomenalism:

Hans Muller argues against epiphenomenal qualia (Muller, 2008, pp.85-90), restating two points raised by Jackson, that (i) qualia's existence or non-existence does not affect the physical realm, and that (ii) qualia may affect other mental states, but not physical ones. Muller then argues that Jackson himself contradicts these two theses when arguing that he has the experience of qualia (*ibid.*, p.85), suggesting the following:

[t]he introspective (mental) act of noticing the reality of the experience of quale is in fact the cause of the behaviour of asserting 'I just experienced a quale' or, more generally, 'Qualia exists' (*ibid.*, pp.85,86).

Muller continues by revisiting of Jackson's arguments against non-epiphenomenal qualia, and suggests that none of the arguments falsify his claim.

Jackson says that the quale of pain and a person's actions aimed at avoiding that pain are caused by the same brain process, rather than the quale of pain *causing* the behavior (*ibid.*, p.86). Muller responds by stating that he was convinced by this argument and was so for years, but claims that it is not intuitive, and is also seemingly false. If we consider a counterfactual example, he says, this would be apparent. Let us say, for example, that a certain brain state that causes both the pain quale and the avoidace behaviour affected only the behavior, and not the emergence of quale. In such a case, the person affected by the stimulus avoids the cause and may, for example, shout “ouch.” However, he does not have the quale of this, so when we ask him if he had felt pain, he would say “no,” he had not. From

³ The common physical cause reply will be considered in detail in section four.

⁴ I declined from including the objection from evolution, in that it has little to do with the current discussion

this, Muller concludes that the quale affects something that is—at minimum—the “verbal report of the subjective experience of pain or 'ouchiness;” namely, the verbal report of the existence of the particular quale (*ibid.*). That said, it may be stated that one possible scenario is that “the causal pathway from the brain state to the quale is somehow disrupted, but not the pathway to the behavior (*whether verbal or not*).” The oddness is still something to be coped with, since when the supposed agent thinks about the reason for his avoidance of the stimulus, he would not find one, meaning that the avoidance would be no more than a reflexive act, and would lack any meaningful content, which seems quite ridiculous.⁵

Another objection asks the question of how can we be sure that other minds have qualia unless we believe that qualia have effects that we can observe and trace back to the cause? Jackson's answer to this is that every mental-including theory faces the same problem, and so it is not only a problem of how one can be sure about the existence of other minds. Muller tries to take this as relevant to his own objection to Jackson and paraphrases Jackson's example of news and newspapers. He states, the behavior of the person may be traced back to their brain states, concluding that if they have such a brain state, then they also have qualia, the cause of which is that brain state (*ibid.*, p.87). Muller says that this seems to be related to his objection that a verbal report on qualia is caused by the existence of qualia. He insists that saying “I have qualia and they are causally inert” means “falsifying that very claim via the act of asserting it” (*ibid.*, p.88).

Furthermore, Muller says that in spite of his objection, there may still be an escape point for epiphenomenalists by saying that the counterfactual example is impossible (*ibid.*), although this does not change anything. It can be said that when the corresponding brain state receives stimulus, it automatically causes quale. Here he quotes the comment of a referee:

To suggest otherwise is to deny that such a quale supervenes on the brain state, i.e. to hold that there could be a mental difference without a corresponding neurological difference, and that seems implausible (*ibid.*).

⁵ Thanks to Dr. David Pitt, for his criticisms of the issue of the verbal report. You can always interchange the verbal report with the thinking of the agent so that this small problem does not arise in this sense.

He states that the answer is quite a smart one, but that it does nothing to “help the epiphenomenalist case.” The epiphenomenalists are already “committed to the purportedly implausible state of affairs” (*ibid.*). At this point he turns to the second thesis defended by Jackson, which suggests that a quale can affect “*other mental states*,” but not physical ones. It would seem to be apparent to Muller that *other mental states* may be brain processes, and can, therefore, be physical (*ibid.*, p.89).⁶ Furthermore, Muller restates that verbal reports and other behaviors, such as reflecting upon a certain quale as real, and thinking that one must write something about it (and also to write it), are behaviours that are caused by that certain quale. None of Jackson's replies can be considered as counterarguments for Muller, as he thought (*ibid.*, pp.89,90). He concludes as such:

It is the epiphenomenalist who must meet burden...of making sense of a world in which qualia have the following four qualities: (1) they are real, (2) they have the capacity to cause other mental states, (3) they are potential objects of introspection, but (4) they do not have the capacity to contribute to causing behavior.... The whole point of my argument is that once we grant the properties 1-3 to qualia, it is not possible to deny them the capacity to cause behavior, especially verbal behavior.... Either qualia, *qua* the content of subjective experience, are potential objects of introspection or they are not. If they are, then they will make a difference to behaviour and hence to the physical world (*ibid.*, p.90).

3.1. Cavedon-Taylor Reply:

Cavedon-Taylor suggests that Muller lacks any understanding of Jackson's theory on epiphenomenal qualia, reasserting Jackson's argument and defending it against Muller's criticism (Cavedon-Taylor, 2009, pp.105-107). Cavedon-Taylor states that it is not the qualia itself that caused Jackson to write about it, but the *belief* in qualia, and that a verbal report can only be considered as proof of someone having a *belief* in the reported issue. In this regard, it would seem that for Cavedon-Taylor, qualia cause *belief*—which is a mental state (*ibid.*, pp.105,106). Cavedon-Taylor claims further that the argument put forward by Muller in the name of Jackson does not prove that taking the first and the third step leads to the fourth one, since according to Jackson, qualia do not do not have a direct effect on the physical but only the mental which can be a *belief* (*ibid.*, p.106.). On this issue, Cavedon-Taylor says the following:

⁶ Thanks to Dr. David Pitt, who suggested that this may be a problem for Jackson, since following his analysis in this method raises the apparent question of, “Why is there anything mental at all?”

Since Jackson's view is not that qualia are inefficacious *full stop*, he is free to hold that it is the mental effects of qualia (possibly a higher-order belief state, say) which are the direct cause of any [verbal] assertion of qualia's existence (*ibid.*, p.107).

He further stresses that there may be some objections to this from a non-epiphenomenalist perspective. In the response given by Cavedon-Taylor, qualia are seen to “contribute” to a causal chain, although Jackson does not say the opposite, but implies rather that qualia do not have a *direct* effect. It can be that qualia are “direct cause[s] of other mental states,” but not a physical state, such as behavior (*ibid.*).

3.2. Muller vs. Cavedon-Taylor:

Muller, in various replies to Cavedon-Taylor's objection (Muller, 2009, pp.109-112), says that his view indicates that if something is causally inert, in terms of it not being the cause any physical thing, if we destroy it, nothing physical changes. That said, it would seem that if qualia causes some beliefs, and those beliefs cause physical things, then removing qualia would bring about change to a physical phenomenon (*ibid.*, p.110).

Furthermore, Muller makes the claim that Cavedon-Taylor's reply puts at risk or even destroys Jackson's knowledge argument. If we say that there are beliefs about qualia in Jackson's head, Mary, who knows every physical phenomenon about neurophysiology and other sciences—and let us suppose her knowledge is extended enough to know Jackson's brain of 1982—would of course know of the existence of an article about qualia that attacks physicalism. Moving on from this, she would also know that a certain belief about a quale exists, and if traced back, one would achieve a quale as a source (*ibid.*, p.111).

Another thing that is apparent according to Muller is that a belief should be a brain process that is possibly physical, in that “there are many, many causal and relational facts about beliefs and since they have functional roles, it seems clear that beliefs must count as physical according to the qualia epiphenomenalist” (*ibid.*, p.110). It is more than clear, for Muller, that if a belief about a quale has its causal source as the quale itself, then it can be assumed that the quale caused a belief that might then be physical (*ibid.*, pp.111,112).

However, the discussion about beliefs and their level of connection to qualia is a problematic one. In the following section I will discuss *a version* of the epistemic argument related to qualia epiphenomenalism.

4. Intentionality-based Epistemic Argument:

Epistemic arguments in the present context are ones that threaten the epiphenomenal position related to qualia, and while these are few in number, I will follow Dwayne Moore in considering what can be referred to as the intentionality-based epistemic argument, which states that:

Since qualitative properties [(qualia)] are not causally efficacious they play no role in bringing about the instantiation of intentional properties in the subject, such as beliefs/memories about those qualitative properties. Therefore, beliefs/memories about epiphenomenal qualitative properties are unjustified and possibly false. Since beliefs/memories must be both true and justified in order to count as knowledge, these beliefs/memories about epiphenomenal qualitative properties cannot be counted as knowledge, and these epiphenomenal qualitative properties cannot be known" (Moore, 2012, p.401.).

However, it would be very odd to say that a pineapple is sweet without knowing that it is sweet (*ibid.*). If nothing can be known about qualia, how do we know that qualia exist? Proponents of the epiphenomenalism of qualia must account for this argument, and some responses some responses have been made to the intentionality-based epistemic argument. Of these, the two presented by Moore are possibly the most important.

The first (1) is referred to as 'the common underlying cause reply,' which states that "epiphenomenal qualitative properties supervene (with nomological or metaphysical force) on the physical" (*ibid.*). In this sense, qualia are related to the physical, but do not cause the physical. This relationship is derivable from the same common underlying physical cause and therefore there is no epistemic problem of any kind (*ibid.*, p.402). As a result, there are several versions of this approach of which Moore talks about three. Jackson (i) would articulate that pain and the behavioral response corresponding to the pain are caused by the same source, just as the images of a film are caused by the same source: the projector. The individual images do not affect one another; however there is a common underlying cause. Staudacher (ii) modifies this view, stating that there are 'direct' and

'indirect' causes. While a direct cause signifies an "immediate" or "chain" causality, an indirect cause signifies a common cause. In this regard, it can be said that an "indirect causal relationship" exists between qualia and beliefs (or memories) about the qualia, with the former being the indirect cause of the latter (*ibid.*). This leads to a counterfactual dependence in which there is no room for epistemic concern, such that "the belief would not have arisen if the fact hadn't obtained" (Robinson in *ibid.*). This provides us with justification for our belief that we are, let us say, in pain; although it must be stated, according to Gadenne, that (iii) if we are to talk about the role of qualia as an indirect cause of beliefs or memories about those qualia, then we must state that "there is a sufficiently stringent necessity relation from the physical cause to the qualitative properties" (*ibid.*). Gadenne states that when P_1 (physical cause) occurs, M_1 (particular quale) necessarily occurs (" $P_1 \rightarrow M_1$ ") (*ibid.*, p.403). Therefore "if Q [the qualitative property] had not occurred, P_2 [the effect] would not have occurred in the given situation.' (Gadenne in *ibid.*) is necessarily true" (*ibid.*).⁷ It is, thus, necessary that you experience pain only when you are in pain since the supervenience suggests a nomological dependence (*ibid.*).

In spite of these articulations in response to the intentional epistemic argument, Moore believes that the argument still holds. Even the most modified version, as it is, is problematic. Moore reaffirms the gap that exists between the belief or memory of a quale and the occurrence of the quale itself, and refers to Dennett, according to whom, since epiphenomenal qualia have no efficacy there is no reason to deny that they "cease ... to appear ... or run ten years behind, while everything else ... remain[s] the same" (*ibid.*, p.404). In this sense, I may have a belief about my pain at a recent time, but it may have taken place years ago, which is quite odd. Against such thought experiments, one may consider that Gadenne's solution works, and it seems it does. Since there needs to be a supervenience relation between the physical cause and the corresponding quale, Dennett-type thought experiments can be solved due to the fact that the relation between the quale and the physical cause is strong, which ensures that whenever the effect takes place, so does the corresponding quale. However, the impact or strength of that supervenience relation raises a question, which, for Moore, is whether this necessary relation is nomologically necessary or metaphysically necessary. The answer should fall on the side of nomological necessity, since there are some thought experiments upon

⁷ Emphasis and brackets ([]) as they appear in the original.

which certain ideas are based, such as 'the zombie arguments,' or 'the inverted qualia arguments,' which refer to possible worlds in which the aforementioned supervenience does not hold. The supervenience relation in question must be nomologically necessary, although if this is the case, one can argue for the metaphysical possibility of philosophical zombies or of inverted qualitative properties, which is quite a dilemma (*ibid.*).

William Robinson seems to have come up with a mechanism to escape these kinds of counterarguments, stating that some “nomologically distinct” possible worlds may be feasible in which belief about a pain exists without there being any such corresponding quale. That said, in the actual world such a demarcation between qualia and corresponding beliefs does not exist, and so there being such a nomologically distinct possible world does not necessitate or suggest that the actual world stands in a likely position. In this regard, there is no epistemic problem in our world related to beliefs about qualia in the presence of a common underlying physical cause of a sort (*ibid.*, pp.404,405).

Moving on, Moore thinks that such a response to the intentional epistemic argument is flawed in two ways. First, (a) he claims that it does not account for epistemic luck, and suggests that the Robinson approach has “an unreliable epistemic mechanism” (*ibid.*, p.405). Consider a 'nomologically distinct' possible world in which the physical cause “ P_1 ” effects both the belief that I am in pain and the experience of itchiness (Mx). In these terms, also suppose that there exists a law that asserts that when the physical effect of the P_1 kind takes place, itchiness follows. In this regard, the following counterfactual statement should necessarily be true in that world: “Had itchiness not occurred the belief that I was in pain would not have occurred” (*ibid.*). Moore says this is analogous to the strategy that proponents of epiphenomenalism take in this world, and so, the fact that “the cause of the belief is the cause of the qualitative property” does not correspond to any knowledge in that world, which would suggest that the same would be true in this world (*ibid.*). Saying that there are numerous metaphysically possible worlds in which the belief of pain is accompanied by all sorts of distinct experiences or experiential facts (such as of itchiness, as above) is to say that in one possible world the belief of being in pain comes from the same physical source as of the experience of pain would be no more than epistemic luck. In this regard, In this regard, this unreliable

mechanism is just subject to epistemic luck objection, and the argument that we cannot know we are in pain if epiphenomenalism is true still holds (*ibid.*, pp.405,406).

The second (b) problem with Robinson's model is that, according to Robinson, for one to account for the belief about a pain, it must be followed by pain, which demands such a law as $P_1 \rightarrow M_1$. That said, in order for it to hold, there must be a real-time MRI machine (which we do not have right now). Yet, even if such a machine existed, one needs to remember the earlier instances of such things to make it into a law, and since memory lacks causal efficacy in epiphenomenalism, there is no way for such a law to be articulated (*ibid.*, p.406).⁸

The second response to the intentionality based epistemic argument (2) is related to 'physical-effect epiphenomenalism,' which states that qualia do not have the causal power to affect anything physical, but do have causal efficacy to affect the mental. From this perspective, a given quale can be the reason for there being a belief about it, and this ensures that there will be no epistemic problem, since the justification of beliefs is the corresponding qualia (*ibid.*, p.407). Here, according to Moore, the central decisive question is "whether these intentional properties are reducible to functional/physical properties or not" (*ibid.*). Some, like Chalmers, believe that beliefs about qualia are not reducible to functional/physical properties since they are partly composed of the qualitative properties. If they were to be irreducible, then certain problems would arise.

It can be said that if qualia are to affect certain intentional properties (such as beliefs about certain qualia), and if those intentional properties are epiphenomenal in terms of their physical effects, then how can one account for certain behaviors, such as utterances related to beliefs about qualia? This raises a problem, in that it is odd to claim that a certain intentional property can be considered as knowledge, but that its corresponding utterance cannot. For Moore, this can even lead to solipsism of a kind (*ibid.* p.408). Even though it is strange, a proponent of epiphenomenalism can still argue for physical-effect epiphenomenalism and can still claim that the justification of an intentional property is to be in the corresponding quale. That said, this is not possible since, as declared earlier, to avoid certain problems a qualia epiphenomenalist would say that the intentional property

⁸ I consider this response to be the weaker one, since you do not need to be an epiphenomenalist about memory in order to be an epiphenomenalist about qualia.

supervenes on a physical event, “which, according to the causal exclusion principle accepted by the qualia epiphenomenalist, excludes the [quale] ... from being counted as a cause of [the corresponding intentional property] ...” (*ibid.*). But what if we reduce intentional properties to play physical/functional roles? On this occasion, one can say that intentional properties may play causal roles, but still the problem of what brings about those intentional properties is evident. If it is not the corresponding qualia, then one can say that such non-related intentional properties lack justification, since qualia do not count as one, and the intentional epistemic argument again arises (*ibid.* p.409). One may argue that “it is not necessary for one to *know* about the existence of a connection to the common cause for justification. There must be a common cause, and (maybe contingent) causal relations that are reliable,”⁹ although such argument may not work on some intentional properties/states about a certain quale since it is unique to oneself and has, as I believe, some distinct references as of its justification. Belief content can be said to be distinct from qualia content but that is not always the way things are. One can argue for the following: Let (a) be a belief about two qualia that is “the (i) greenness of the apple in front of me is *like* the (ii) greenness of the eyes of my girlfriend.” By its very nature, every quale is unique but if you take a quale like (i) and an intentional state like (a), the two, (a) and (i) are inevitably connected. When you perceive the green apple, you instantly (although the timing does not actually matter so much) refer to another quale (ii) and form a belief that is connected and is contingently (since that is not always the case for every single quale and belief about a corresponding quale) affecting the *content* of the quale (i), so that the quale (i) is more unique than you would expect under normal circumstances. In this case when you have a qualitative experience, you refer inevitably to an intentional state since the quale *implies* the intentional state. What is more, without (a), (i) cannot exist, because the greenness of the apple is like the greenness of the eyes of my girlfriend. It is not a regular greenness, so (i) actually refers to the greenness, which is like the greenness of the eyes of my girlfriend, of the apple. In this situation, there seems to be a strong connection between (i) and (a), in that

⁹ Thanks to Dr. David Pitt for his criticisms of my position suggesting that justification is possible (in this context) without reference to the thing (or entity) that is supposed to be known (in the sense posited above, again). He suggested that there may be other processes that co-exist and thus okay for justification.

one cannot be thought of without referring to the other. It can further be said that it is very natural to think of (i) as (a)'s justification.¹⁰ Accordingly, it would seem that there can be cases like this, and that such cases form a stable basis for the justification of intentional states¹¹ about qualia by qualia themselves, which supports the intentionality-based epistemic argument in a very matter-of-fact way.

Conclusion:

In this paper I have examined a number of positions for and against epiphenomenal qualia. Qualia epiphenomenalism has emerged as a very problematic route, in that its proponents cannot come up with a good to what might be called an intentional epistemic argument, which states that if qualia lack causal efficacy, then an intentional property, such as a belief about a certain quale, lacks justification. In this regard, it cannot be counted as knowledge, and if intentional properties cannot be counted as knowledge then it follows that we do not know anything about qualia, which is, being very positive, nonsense.

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¹⁰ Thanks to Dr. Erdinç Sayan and Ufuk Taşdan for their comments on this part.

¹¹ Some may argue that intentional states like beliefs about qualia in cases such as those presented here be wrong, although I would strongly disagree. They cannot be wrong, since they involve pure beliefs about phenomenal qualities, which, by their very nature, cannot be regarded as wrong due to their subjective character.