THE PARAPHENOMENAL HYPOTHESIS

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Sam: Say, Abe; can you explain to me how the telephone works? I don’t get it.
Abe: Sure. Look, imagine you’ve got this gigantic dog. It’s so big, it can stand in Manhattan with its head in Brooklyn and its tail in the Bronx.
Sam: Uh huh.
Abe: So, when you talk to the head in Brooklyn, the tail wags in the Bronx.
Sam: Ah, okay; I see now. Very nice. Now, what about radio? Can you explain to me how that works?
Abe: Simple. It’s the same thing, only you don’t have the dog.

Gilbert Ryle accused Descartes of advancing what he called the “paramechanical hypothesis,” according to which the structure and operations of the mind can be understood on the model of the structure and operations of a physical system. The body is a complex machine – “a bit of clockwork” – that operates according to laws governing the mechanical interactions of material things. The mind, on the other hand, according to Descartes (according to Ryle), is an immaterial machine that operates according to formally analogous laws governing the paramechanical interactions of immaterial things – “a bit of not-clockwork.” In other words, mental processes are the same as physical processes, only you don’t have the matter.

I don’t know whether Descartes actually thought this. But, surely, if he did, he was making some kind of logical or conceptual error. Mental processes can’t be the same as physical processes, minus the matter, since the matter matters. The properties of physical systems have physical explanations, which are explanations in terms of physical properties and physical laws. But it is absurd – a category mistake – to suppose that mechanical explanations could apply to immaterial things with no physical properties, subject to no physical laws. (If matters of mind
weren’t so serious, the paramechanical hypothesis might even be funny.)

Now, whether or not Descartes made this mistake, I think contemporary reductive representationalists make a precisely analogous one in their account of non-veridical perception. These theorists hold that the phenomenality of experience can be reduced to a kind of non-phenomenal intentionality, which in turn can be explained in naturalistic causal-informational-teleological terms. The qualitative features associated with an experience are properties, not of the experience, but of the worldly and bodily things it represents. The blue that characterizes what it’s like to see a clear sky at noon, for example, is a property, not of one’s experience of the sky, but of the sky. Its relevance to the characterization of the experience of a clear sky at noon is due to the fact that one’s experience represents it, not that one’s experience instantiates it.

To suppose that the latter is true is to commit what Place termed the “phenomenological fallacy” – that is, to conclude that properties of experienced objects are properties of experiences of them (because experience is required for awareness of them) – and to court all of the mysteries and explanatory dead ends of ontological dualism. Sound scientific philosophy requires that we give materialistic explanations of all phenomena, including mental ones. The mind is (or arises from, or supervenes on, or whatever) the brain; mental processes are brain processes; mental states are brain states; etc. Your brain doesn’t turn blue when you look at a clear sky at noon; it doesn’t taste like chocolate when you’re eating mousse; and it doesn’t sound like The Beatles when you’re listening to Revolver. All of those properties are out in the world, though they are represented by what’s in the head. One’s perceptual representation of the sky is no more blue than one’s conceptual representation of snow is white.

However, a prima facie problem for views like this is the existence of illusions, dreams,
and hallucinations – cases where there isn’t anything out there that is the bearer of the properties we’re aware of in experience. If you’ve modified your consciousness in order to be in the state John Lennon was in when he wrote (or about which he wrote) “Tomorrow Never Knows,” you might well have an experience that’s just like the one you’d have if you were looking through a kaleidoscope (or surrendering to the void), in the absence of any such thing within sensory range. But how could this be, if the qualitative properties characterizing experience are properties of things perceived?

According to Place, what’s common to veridical and non-veridical experience is the brain process underlying each, regardless of the presence or absence of the objects or properties you seem to be seeing. When you have veridical experiences, your brain processes represent external objects and their properties, which latter you mention when characterizing how it is with you, experientially. And when you have non-veridical experiences, you undergo the same brain processes, but in the absence of the external objects and their properties. Hallucinating a clear blue sky at noon is (internally) the same thing as perceiving it, only you don’t have the sky.

But where is the blue in such a case? On this view, it’s not in the brain (it never was); and it’s not in the world. But it’s still in your experience, in the sense that you’re still consciously aware of blueness. You would (pace Bill Fish) describe your experience in exactly the same way as you would if you weren’t hallucinating: what it’s like to see the sky at noon and what it’s like to hallucinate the sky at noon are subjectively indistinguishable. But now there’s no place to put the property you’d mention in describing what your experience is like. It can’t be the same thing, only without the sky, since the sky was where the qualitative feature you experienced was supposed to be located. This paraphenomenal hypothesis is no more plausible
than the paramechanical one. (And it’s not funny either.)

Some reductive representationalists, in particular Fred Dretske and Bill Lycan, propose that in cases of non-veridical experiences there is something that exists contemporaneously with your experience, and which is represented by it – though it’s not the same as what’s represented in subjectively indistinguishable veridical perceptions. For Dretske, non-veridical experiences represent uninstantiated universals; whereas for Lycan they represent objects in non-actual possible worlds. The non-veridical experiential states are intrinsically just like the veridical ones, and represent the same objects and properties; it’s just that the objects don’t actually exist, and the properties aren’t instantiated (at least not locally).

Intuitively, it may seem unproblematic to speak of non-veridical experience in this way. If you hallucinate a baboon in the living room wearing a pink teddy, it seems perfectly natural to say that your experience represents an object that might have been in the living room, and a color that might have been locally instantiated. But interpreting this to mean that your experience represents an object that is located in the (or a) living room in some other possible world, or an uninstantiated color, is not consistent with the reductive representationalist’s claim that the qualitative features of experience are features of the objects of experience, and not experience itself. For, neither otherworldly objects nor uninstantiated properties appear to us the way actual objects and instantiated properties do. Indeed, they don’t appear at all. Neither merely possible baboons nor uninstantiated colors look like anything. The reductive representationalist says that in veridical experience objects appear to us in certain ways, but that these ways are properties of experienced objects, not our experience of them. But if the things that have the properties that appear to us are removed – either by simply eliminating them or by replacing them with things
that don’t have appearance properties – then the basis for a reductive account of the phenomenality of experience goes with them. Saying it’s the same thing, only the dog is in another possible world, or doghood isn’t instantiated, is just as bad as saying it’s the same thing, only you don’t have the dog. If there’s no dog, there’s no sense to saying it’s the same thing.

Given that veridical and non-veridical experiences can be subjectively indistinguishable, the claim that the latter represent what might have been is plausible only on a non-reductive version of representationalism, according to which experiences instantiate phenomenal properties which are themselves representational. If what might have been veridically perceived, but isn’t, is experientially indistinguishable from what is veridically perceived, then it can’t be that the properties in virtue of which the experiences are indistinguishable are themselves experientially distinguishable. But instantiated pink and uninstantiated pink are experientially distinguishable – as are actual and merely possible baboons. We can’t see counterfactual apes, and we can’t see uninstantiated colors. We can, however, according to the non-reductive representationalist – and anyone else who holds that phenomenal properties are intrinsic properties of experience – have qualitative experiences as of baboons and pink teddies where and when there are none, since the properties that characterize what the experience is like are instantiated – just not in the external world.

Dretske’s and Lycan’s proposals can’t account for the subjective indiscriminability of veridical and non-veridical experience. If subjective sameness of experience is understood in terms of the ways things appear, and uninstantiated properties don’t appear, then dreaming or hallucinating and perceiving can’t be the same, minus the external object, any more than a mental process can be the same as a physical process, minus the matter, or radio can be the same
as telephone, minus the dog. They are guilty of advancing an absurd paraphenomenal hypothesis. (And I’m not laughing.)

[Dramatic pause.]

But soft! Does one not hear the distant trumpet of Disjunctivism, heralding the imminent rescue of reductive representationalism?

More like a distant fog horn, if you ask me. Disjunctivists (as far as I have been able to understand them) hold that the subjective indistinguishability of a veridical and a non-veridical experience amounts, “explanatorily and metaphysically,” to use Bill Brewer’s phrase, only to this: they share the property of being either a veridical or a non-veridical experience – either a perception or a hallucination, as it might be. Nothing more can be said by way of explaining their subjective indiscriminability. In particular, it’s not due to their instantiating or representing the same qualitative properties. Thus, attempts like Dretske’s and Lycan’s to explain indiscriminability in terms of objects and properties represented are quixotic, since there is in fact nothing substantive to explain.

[Another dramatic pause. Speaker stares, incredulously.]

This strikes me as a triumph of obfuscation. Veridical experience is (again to quote Brewer) “a basic, unanalyzable metaphysical condition” of experientially apprehending facts about the external world. Non-veridical experience is subjectively the same, but metaphysically distinct since the relevant worldly facts are no longer involved. Their subjective indiscriminability consists in their sharing the disjunctive property veridical-or-non-veridical. Really? Since when are disjunctive properties explanatory? And if shared disjunctive properties are to constitute the basis for indiscriminability, shall we suppose that pencils and pork chops are
indistinguishable in virtue of sharing the property *being-a-pencil-or-a-pork-chop*? Refusing to explain something because you think explanation might tempt you to naturalistic *tref* does not constitute good reason for thinking that you’ve solved a problem.

*[Exeunt Disjunctivism.]*

And don’t go thinking Mark Johnston is your White Knight, either. His uninstantiated “sensible profiles” are as problematic as Dretske’s uninstantiated universals. They can’t explain the sameness of *appearance* of veridically and non-veridically experienced scenarios. So, unless someone’s got some other way to account for illusions, hallucinations and dreams consistently with the thesis that experiences don’t instantiate phenomenal properties, I suggest we all stop taking it seriously.

*Qualia rule!*