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Illusionism and Givenness

Abstract: *There is no phenomenal consciousness; there is nothing 'that it is like' to be me. To believe in phenomenal consciousness or 'what-it's-like-ness' or 'for-me-ness' is to succumb to a pernicious form of the Myth of the Given. I argue that there are no good arguments for the existence of such a kind of consciousness and draw on arguments from Buddhist philosophy of mind to show that the sense that there is such a kind of consciousness is an instance of cognitive illusion.*

Frankish argues that phenomenal consciousness is an illusion. I think he is right. Here I adduce a few other considerations in support of the thesis that — in the sense relevant to those who believe that there are phenomenal properties or concepts, or who believe that there is 'something that it is like' to be conscious, or that there is immediate experience, or that there are qualia, or that there is a 'for-me-ness' of experience; in short for anyone who subscribes to any of the currently popular forms of the Myth of the Given — there is no phenomenal consciousness.

I will begin by querying the sense of the popular phrase introduced by Nagel (1974), 'what it is like', arguing that there is nothing that it is like to experience something, nothing that it is like to have qualitative experience. I will then ask whether the distinction between sentient beings and zombies demanded by those who believe in phenomenal properties makes any sense, arguing that if zombies are possible, we are all zombies. I will then argue that we can make no sense of any knowledge of qualitative properties. I will conclude by arguing that neither introspection nor transcendental argument can give us any reason to believe that there is anything answering to the demands of

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Journal of Consciousness Studies, **23**, No. 11–12, 2016, pp. 73–82

qualitative consciousness. The very idea that there is an inner world of qualitative states must be illusory.

1. That there is nothing that it is like to be me

Nagel has a lot to answer for. Generations of philosophers have grown up believing not only that there must be something that it is like to be a bat, but that there is something that it is like for each of us to be *us*, and that that *something* is our qualitative consciousness. It is but a short step to analysing that consciousness is the immediate apprehension of qualia or qualitative properties, and of course only a short step from there to a view of perceptual experience on which we experience the external world only in a mediate fashion, mediated by the immediate experience of an inner world. And from there, one more short step takes us to idealism. So, it is best to avoid the *proton pseudos.*

There is something that a yellow mango is like. It is yellow, oblate, sweet, etc… To say that it is like that is to ascribe to it perceptible properties. There is something that middle C played on an oboe is like. It is a tone of a particular timbre and frequency. Again, to say what something is like is to list its perceptible properties. We focus on the object, and we characterize it. In short, to the extent that that experience has a subject–object structure, when we say what something is like, we characterize the objective, not the subjective, pole of experience.[1] (A bit later in this essay, I will consider the more radical possibility that the very thematization of experience in terms of subject–object duality is itself a cognitive illusion.)

Bats — as Nagel correctly observes — use sonar to perceive the world. Their objects are thus perceived via a sensory modality that we lack, and so they perceive sensible properties that we do not. If bats could speak, or characterize the world they experience, they could say what e.g. a moth is like. And they would characterize it differently from the way we would, because they are sensitive to different perceptible properties. But what they would tell us is what *a moth is like*, not *what it is like to perceive a moth via sonar*, just as when I describe a moth to a talking bat, I would say what a moth *looks like*, not *what it is like to see a moth with eyes.*

[1] This is not to say that we are in no way aware of our interior lives. We use proprioception, nociception, and interoception to become aware of states of our bodies. But these are systems that give us access to states of our bodies, not to *qualia*.

Nagel's sleight of hand — the decisive move in the conjuring trick, as Wittgenstein put it (1953, §308) — is to convert *what the world is like for a bat* to *what it is like to be a bat*. That is to confuse the object with the subject, and to ask us to assign properties to our subjectivity, as opposed to the objects we experience. It is easy to accept that invitation, since it is almost irresistible to think of our experience as constituting an inner domain populated by inner particulars that constitute the immediate objects of our experience, and contrasting with an outer domain of objects we know only indirectly. But it is not so easy to preserve cogency once we succumb to this temptation. For when we reach for predicates to characterize our experience, the only ones we have are those that characterize the objects of our experience, not the subjects. When I have described the mango to you, I have said all I can ever say about my experience of it.

If you ask me what it is like to be me, *simpliciter*, you ask me to describe consciousness itself, apart from any object of consciousness. There is no such thing. Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, and when the object is subtracted, nothing remains to be characterized. Now, some might say that in talking of experience in this way I am reducing our consciousness to that of zombies — beings just like us, but who lack a phenomenal awareness. I agree, but, I will argue, this is not a *bad* thing.

2. I am a zombie

It is important to the picture of perceptual acquaintance with the world according to which it is mediated by phenomenal consciousness that to perceive the world *with* phenomenal consciousness is different from what it would be to perceive the world *without* phenomenal consciousness. Otherwise, to say that we are phenomenally conscious is just to say that we perceive, and the term would be idle. This is often put as the difference between zombie perception and sentient perception. Phenomenal realists often urge that sentient beings — those it is something for it to be like — differ from zombies — those whom it is nothing to be like — precisely because our perception is mediated by phenomenal consciousness and theirs is not. It is therefore essential to this picture that zombies are possible, or at least conceivable.

Zombies so described, however, as I argue in Garfield (1996 and 2016), are inconceivable. Or, to put it another way, if they are genuinely conceivable, we are zombies. Briefly, here is the point: zombies are, *ex hypothesi*, functionally identical to sentient human

beings, with all of the same beliefs as sentient human beings, *including perceptual beliefs and beliefs about their supposed phenomenal consciousness*. But these latter beliefs are false: they have no phenomenal consciousness, despite believing that they do.

The crucial point here is functional identity. The alleged possibility of zombies only gets us the reality of phenomenal consciousness over and above mere perceptual experience if zombies are functionally identical to us; the mere possibility of beings that are psychologically different from us tells us nothing at all. We already know that there are dogs and chimpanzees, after all. But if we are functionally identical to zombies, our beliefs have the same typical causes and effects, including our beliefs about our perceptual states and phenomenal consciousness. Since we, *ex hypothesi*, believe that we have qualitative states and phenomenal consciousness, so do zombies. Since we are functionally identical, those states have the same typical causes; so, either zombies, like us, have phenomenal consciousness, in which case they are not zombies, or we, like them, falsely believe that we do, in which case we are. Either way, there is no argument from the possibility or conceivability of zombies to the reality of phenomenal consciousness.

To sum up so far: the claim that we are phenomenally conscious is meant to distinguish us from beings who lack this attribute, but who are like us in other respects. It cannot do so, and so, for beings who are doxastically and epistemically like us, the very idea of phenomenal consciousness is empty of real content. Moreover, the idea that there is some such property draws its plausibility from the idea that our perceptual experience involves direct contact with qualitative states or properties that enable us to know external properties. There is no good reason to believe in such things. We now turn to positive reasons to believe that nothing could play the role in our epistemic lives they are meant to play.

3. If there were qualitative properties, we could never know them

I will now argue directly for the epistemic idleness of the entire idea of phenomenal consciousness, qualia, qualitative character, the what-it's-like-ness of subjectivity, or any other member of this cluster of pseudo-concepts. The phenomenal realist takes these to be the objects and properties we know most immediately, with the greatest certainty, those whose presence in our inner lives we cannot possibly doubt.

While our ostensible perception of external objects might be illusory, due to hallucination, non-ideal perceptual situations, etc., it is argued, the *experience* of perception is immune from such illusion. If there is such experience, there must be a class of objects of that experience, *viz.* phenomenal states and properties, and a mode of consciousness of those states and properties, *viz.* phenomenal consciousness.

There are at least two problems with this idea. First, as we just saw, to have knowledge of this kind would be to know that we are not zombies, and there is no way that we could ever know this. Since there is nothing that distinguishes us from zombies *epistemically*, and since if these properties or inner objects of experience were real they would be knowable, they are not knowable, and hence are not real phenomena at all. When we experience the blueness of the sky, the blueness of the sky is the only object of knowledge, not any inner blue phenomena, not inner blue phenomenal properties, let alone what it is like to experience blue, only the blueness.

Second, if we were to have *knowledge* of phenomenal experience, there would have to be some kind of account of how that knowledge could come about, and we immediately run afoul of the normative dimensions of knowledge itself. Our knowledge of the external world is enabled by the fact that the external world is public, and that the criteria for the application of terms and for the correctness of claims are public. This enables us to be corrected, and to use terms and sentences in ways determined by norms.

The sphere of knowledge can therefore only exist in the space of reasons; the space of reasons is constituted by publicly enforced norms of enquiry, assertion, and language use. And those norms require that the relevant objects of knowledge themselves be public. But the experience, posited by the phenomenal realist, is private. It is hence not even a candidate for knowledge; nor are its putative objects candidate objects of knowledge. But once again, if it is unknowable, it is entirely idle. If we have phenomenal consciousness, we could never know it; whatever it is we confuse with phenomenal consciousness, if it is something of which we have knowledge, it is not phenomenal consciousness. (These points, of course, have been made with great force by Wittgenstein, 1953, and Sellars, 1963.)

4. The poverty of introspection

But, the phenomenal realist asks, don't we know our own experience and the properties that characterize it in introspection? Surely we can

look inside and see what it is like to see blue, what it is like to be conscious? If we could not, we could never know anything external, since the external world is nothing for us if it is not given *for us* (Kriegel, 2007; 2009; Zahavi, 2005).

Once again, it is important to be clear about what phenomena we do know in perceptual experience. First and foremost, we know the objects around us and their perceptible properties — a mango and its yellowness and sweetness; middle C on the oboe and its timbre; sandalwood and its smell, etc. When we introspect to find the experiences that correspond to the awareness of the contents of perception, we can discover *that we are aware of a sweet, yellow mango, the sound of middle C, or the scent of sandalwood*, but nothing more is added; we discover not two objects of knowledge — the external and the internal medium that makes the external object known — but only the external object and the fact that we are aware of it. And to the extent that we are aware of the *fact* of our awareness, we do not have an additional inner phenomenal object, but only a higher-order attitude directed upon our current cognitive state (Garfield, 2015).

Whence the illusion that there is not only something that the world is like but also something that it is like to experience the way the world is? The source, at least at a first pass, is the failure to distinguish the subjective from the objective side of experience. The way this confusion occurs is nicely articulated by Sellars (1963) in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'. We seek a common core of experience shared by taking an object to *be blue* and *to look blue.* We then take that common core to be a *common subjective state*, and we posit (in the old days) sense-data or sense impressions or (these days) qualia or qualitative properties of experience as constituting that common core. Those data, impressions, qualia, or properties do not fall on the object side of the subject–object divide, and so we place them neatly on the subject side. Since they are particulars or properties of particulars, there must be something that they are like, and so there must be something that subjectivity is like. Phenomenal consciousness is born.

As Sellars (1963) argues, however, there is a fallacy in this tale of origins. *Looking blue* is not epistemically prior to *being blue*. We do not first learn to identify *appearances* and then learn to extrapolate from them to identify the properties that are their typical distal causes. We first learn to identify blue things, and only later, when we become aware of the possibility of perceptual error, do we learn to talk of things *looking* blue. We learn to say that something *looks blue* as a way of registering our temptation to say that it *is blue*, but also of

hesitancy regarding that attribution. To say that something *looks blue* is not a way of saying that we have an *experience of blueness*, but a way of attributing blueness to an external object, albeit with hesitation, or for reporting our *temptation* to attribute blueness, but our recusal from that attribution.

This is not, however, to deny that we have sensations — states of our sensory systems caused by the stimulation of our sense organs — or that sensory processes mediate our perceptual consciousness of the world. Sensations, on this picture, are *causes* for our perceptual experience of objects and qualities, not *direct objects* of these experiences. To say that we are phenomenally conscious of our sensations, as opposed to the objects those sensations make available to us, is, as the fourteenth–fifteenth-century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa (2006) puts it, to confuse the epistemic instrument with the epistemic object. When we see the moons of Jupiter through a telescope, we see the moons of Jupiter, not light refracted through lenses. When we focus on the light refracted through the lenses, we take a higher-order perspective on that perceptual process, but that objectifies the light; it does not create experience of subjectivity.

While it makes perfectly good sense to refer to *blue sensations*, that is only to say that those sensations are the kinds of events that mediate the perception of blueness, not that they are blue in the sense that blue objects are, let alone in some other mysterious, private sense. No sensation has any perceptible properties — when we attend carefully to our *experience*, we attend carefully to the *world we experience*, not to an inner life whose properties are known only to us, but whose qualities we magically learn to report.

5. Non-duality and the illusion of givenness

The Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (fourth–fifth century CE) put the same point in terms of his analysis of experience in terms of the doctrine of the three natures that constitutes the heart of Yogācāra phenomenology. Vasubandhu, in his 'Treatise on the Three Natures' (Garfield, 2009; 2015) argues that every object of experience has three distinct but interdependent natures (*svabhāva*): each has an imagined (*parikalpita*) nature — that we take it to have in virtue of a combination of our prejudices and innate cognitive reflexes; each has a dependent (*paratantra*) nature, representing its underlying causal structure; and each has a consummate (*parinispanna*) nature — the nature we see that it has when we empty the dependent of the

imagined. (See Garfield, 2009; 2015, pp. 186–9; Gold, 2006, for a detailed exposition.)

So far, we have been taking for granted a naïve bifurcation of experience into a subjective and an objective aspect. Vasubandhu calls that understanding of our experience into question, arguing that this duality is in fact illusory. He is not arguing for some kind of mystical dissolution into a formless void, but rather calling attention to the role of cognition in constructing our sense of who we are, and of the fact that that construction is often mistaken for a simple taking of what is given. He deploys the three nature theory to make this point.

The imagined nature is understood to involve the projection of subject–object duality and a distinction between an external world of objects and an inner world of experiences. Vasubandhu argues that we naïvely take the objects of our experience to exist externally to us in exactly the way we perceive them, taking perceived blue and perceived C# to look exactly as our eyes and ears deliver them, and to take our sensory systems as transparent windows onto a world existing with sensible properties independent of our mode of apprehension.

The other side of this is that we take our own subjectivity in this experience to consist in the inner direct experience of the qualities of these objects, and distinguish the immediately apprehended experience from the objects experienced, issuing in the dual-aspect structure of our representation of our experience. This construction of the structure of experience as involving an immediately apprehended subjective dimension and a corresponding mediated apprehension of an objective world to which it corresponds is the result of our innate response to perception.

The dependent nature, Vasubandhu argues, is just the fact that the objects of our experience are known to us through causal processes: our access to the external world is a causal interaction between distal objects, our sensory apparatus, and our cognitive mechanisms. Experience is not a separate entity that arises from this: it is this interaction, and the objects of our experience are constituted in that interaction; perceptual experience just is that interaction with the world around us.

The consummate nature of things, according to Vasubandhu, is, in his phrase, the fact that the dependent nature is empty of the imagined. That is, it is the fact that the set of causal processes in which perception consists is entirely empty of a division into subject and object or into inner and outer. There is just a causal stream constituting the causal interaction of an organism and the world. That stream is experienced as (imagined to be) the apprehension by a subject of a world,

delivered exactly as it is into an inner space. But that, Vasubandhu argues, is an illusion, the illusion that the conceptual response to sensory experience represented by the imagined nature is a transparent delivery of experience as it is.

The idea that patches of blue or sounds of oboes exist independently as they are experienced by us, and then are reproduced inside us in experience, is a fantasy that sounds crazy the moment we make it explicit. So, Vasubandhu concludes, both the idea that the objects we experience exist external to us, and the idea that we have appearances internal to us, are each products of imagination. Instead, we simply causally interact with a world around us, through sensory systems to whose outputs we respond conceptually, confusing that conceptual response with immediate awareness. That is what he means when he states that the imagined nature is the imagination of subject–object duality.

The important insight for present purposes is this: the phenomenal realist argues that there is no gap between appearance and reality when it comes to experience itself; that our inner life is given to it just as it is, with its own phenomenal properties distinct from those of external objects; that just as there is something that external objects are like, there is something that our inner experience is like. This requires a firm duality between the objective and the subjective, with a distinct set of inner phenomena that are like something. Vasubandhu calls that into question, arguing that it is an imaginary superimposition on a reality that has no such structure. On this view, the very bifurcation of experience into the subjective and the objective presupposed by the realist about phenomenal consciousness is illusory, and the entire framework in which we understand our inner experience is subject to massive illusion.

This Indian Yogācāra Buddhist analysis presents yet another perspective on why this kind of phenomenal realism represents yet another form of the Myth of the Given, and on why that myth is indeed a myth. The Myth of the Given is the myth that there is some level of our experience that is immediate, immune from error, given to us, as opposed to constructed, and that that level of experience constitutes the foundation or transcendental condition of the possibility of knowledge of anything else. Classical sense-data theory — Sellars' direct target — is but one form of that myth. The idea that there is an immediate level of phenomenal consciousness, a primitive sense of subjectivity, a way our inner life is, independent of how we might imagine it, is only the latest version of that myth. But the very idea

that anything in our conscious life is immune from illusion, that there is anything that it is like to be a subject, *per se*, that there are inner experiences that we just have and in virtue of just having them we know immediately, is itself but one more cognitive illusion.

Acknowledgments

I thank Keith Frankish and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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