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Redder than Red

Illusionism or Phenomenal Surrealism?

Abstract: *Sensations represent our subjective ‘take’ on sensory stimulation — how we feel about red light falling on the retina, salt dissolving on the tongue, a thorn piercing the skin. They tell — in the language of phenomenal properties — what the experience is like for us. In so far as they represent the reality of this subjective relationship, they cannot be said to be illusory. The relationship, magical as it may seem, is not being misrepresented as something it is not. If anything, it is being represented as something ‘super-real’.*

An early draft of Keith Frankish’s important paper was called ‘The Magic Problem’. Later it became ‘The Illusion Problem’, before settling on the title it has now. I have to say I wish he had stuck with magic. It’s true that illusion and magic have overlapping meanings. But illusion is generally defined by what’s *wrong* with it. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* online¹ an illusion is: ‘An instance of a wrong or misinterpreted perception.’ ‘A deceptive appearance or impression’, ‘A false idea or belief’. Magic by contrast is defined by what’s *right* with it. Magic is: ‘a power that is apparently mysterious or supernatural’, ‘a trick performed for entertainment’, ‘a quality of being beautiful and delightful in a way that seems remote from daily life’. As a descriptor of consciousness, magic fits the bill much better than illusion.

I acknowledge this is revisionary on my part. As Frankish notes, I have in the past explicitly endorsed illusionism. I’ve argued that con-

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¹ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>

sciousness involves a creative misrepresentation of sensory stimulation at the body surface. And I have used the analogy of the ‘real impossible triangle’ to illustrate how this could work: how we could be deceived by a specially constructed brain state into believing we are in the presence of phenomena that do not actually exist. But — partly spurred by Frankish’s article — I’ve now come to think that this emphasis on the illusory content of sensations is unhelpful, and even conceptually muddled. It rests on a failure — by me as much as Frankish — to appreciate just what sensations are about and so what exactly it is that seems to have phenomenal qualities.

This is remiss of me, because the theoretical ground was well prepared. I’ve long maintained that sensations are representations of something *we do* (Humphrey, 1992; 2006; 2011). The story begins far back in time with creatures — our distant ancestors — making reflex motor responses to stimuli arriving at their bodies: *expressive responses*, ‘wiggles of acceptance or rejection’ as I’ve called them. These responses would have been tailored by natural selection to be biologically adaptive — taking account of the nature of the stimuli, where on the body they were arriving, and what importance they had for the creature’s well-being. Dennett has stipulated that ‘No afferent can be said to have a significance “A” until it is “taken” to have the significance “A” by the efferent side of the brain’ (Dennett, 1969, p. 74). But, from early on, this condition would have been satisfied: the responses were a ‘take’ on the meaning of the stimulation, what it was *about*. To start with, however, there would have been no one at home in the brain, no subject, capable of accessing this ‘aboutness’. The next step in the evolution of sensations would be for selection to find a way for the creature to extract the meaning from its own expressive behaviour. And, as it turned out, there was a neat solution available: this was to develop a special brain module whose job was to *read* the efferent activity at the level of motor command signals being sent downstream.

Fast forward to where we are today. The upshot is that we human beings are still discovering meaning in sensory stimulation in much the same way. When our specialized sense organs detect potentially significant stimuli — light falling on our retinae, sound reaching our eardrums, heat burning our skin, and so on — our brains still reflexly formulate evaluative responses. And it is by monitoring how our brains are responding that we come to have conscious sensations of light, sound, pain. True, the responses are no longer quite what they once were. In the course of history they have become internalized —

or as I like to say, ‘privatized’ — so that they no longer result in overt bodily behaviour. They are now as-if responses expressed by a virtual body. But they are still there. And the reason they are still there is precisely that they underwrite the reading that translates into conscious experience.

So, what bearing does this evolutionary history have on illusionism and Frankish’s paper? I’d say the lesson is that, when considering whether sensations are or are not ‘real’, we must never let go of the fact that sensations do indeed represent *our take* on stimuli impinging on the body. In doing so they represent some of the objective facts about what’s happening: the what, where, and when, for example. But, crucially, they also represent how we *evaluate* what’s happening, how we *feel* about it. And this is where phenomenal properties come into their own. Sensations represent how we relate to stimulation using, as it were, a paintbox of phenomenal concepts to depict what it’s like for us: what it’s like to have red light falling on the retina, salt dissolving on the tongue, a thorn piercing the skin, and so on.

Consider a prototypical experience of your own. Suppose a beetle is crawling across the skin of your back. Your brain reacts to signals from your skin with an ancient internalized response, which, when you read it, yields a sensation of being touched. On the objective side, the sensation represents the touch event as having certain spatial and temporal properties that tell of where on your skin it’s occurring, how long it lasts, the spatial pattern, and so on. Meanwhile, on the subjective side, it represents the event as having a range of phenomenal properties that tell of *what it’s like*: it is yours (and no one else’s), it has a distinctly tactile feel (as opposed to visual, say), it’s ticklish, you feel like slapping it... and, yes, it’s ‘simple, ineffable, intrinsic, private, immediately apprehended’ (not to mention ‘inaccessible to third-person science, and inexplicable in physical terms’ — Frankish, this issue, p. 2).

Then where could *illusion* come into this? What grounds could there possibly be for suggesting that the represented properties are actually not what they appear to be? *It depends on which aspect of the sensation we’re talking about.*

It’s certainly possible you might be getting a false idea about the objective facts. There is, for example, a tactile illusion called the ‘Cutaneous Rabbit’: ‘A rapid sequence of taps delivered first near the wrist and then near the elbow creates the sensation of sequential taps hopping up the arm from the wrist towards the elbow, although no physical stimulus was applied between the two actual stimulus

locations’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cutaneous_rabbit_illusion). So it is possible (even if unlikely in the case of the beetle) you might be misled about the spatial location of the stimuli.

However, in what circumstance, if any, could you be getting a false impression about what it feels like? How could you — as Frankish seems to suggest — be experiencing a feel that ‘doesn’t exist’? To be blunt, I think the very notion of this is absurd. When the sensation represents you as feeling a certain way about the stimulation, *that is all there is to it*. The phenomenal feel arises with the representation, and *thereby its existence becomes a fact*. When the sensation represents the feel as ticklish, so it does. When it represents it as intrinsic, ineffable, etc., so it does. When it represents it as being like something magical that no one can explain, again this is just what it does. Phenomenal properties leave behind no residue that could separately be assessed as a misrepresentation of the reality. Dennett has remarked that phenomenal qualia are like ‘a beautiful discussion of purple, just about a colour, without itself being coloured’ (Dennett, 1991, p. 371). But, discussions — and the opinions expressed in them — are what they are. There’s no way an opinion can be illusory.

I was wrong, then, in my earlier writing, to draw an analogy between phenomenal consciousness and the real impossible triangle, which is a clear case where we make a mistake about the facts. I ought instead to have chosen a very different kind of ‘magical’ entity: one where the magic lies not in what we perceive it to be as an independent object but in how we are affected by it subjectively. A flower, for example, that we find *beautiful*. An action that we find morally *good*. Or, to lower the bar, a joke that we find *funny*. None of these higher-order relational attributions are *illusory*. Take music. ‘Is it not strange that sheep’s guts could hale souls out of men’s bodies?’ (Shakespeare, 1623, 2.3.62). Yes, it is, wonderfully strange. But not a mistake.

Does this mean I now want to say that phenomenal properties really are *real*? Frankish says that when he talks of phenomenal properties ‘as not being real or not existing’, he means ‘that they are not *instantiated* in our world’ (p. 1). It’s far from clear what he thinks would or would not count as being ‘instantiated in our world’, especially when what we’re talking about is the property of a relationship. Maybe he’d take the line that only the properties of *things* can be real in this sense, and there’s no such *thing* as a relationship. But this would be setting the bar for realism implausibly high. It would mean denying that a relationship such as a marriage, for

example, can have real properties. Or, more to the point, it would mean denying that any of our own subjective attitudes to events, such as finding a joke funny, can do. And I don't think Frankish would want to go that way. Rather, I expect he would agree that a property such as 'being funny', which is essential to our take on the joke, must actually be an inherent feature of the brain activity that brings the representation about. This brain activity is the cause of everything at the level of language and behaviour that constitutes our finding the joke funny. That's not to say that 'being funny' is a property *of* the brain activity. But a third-person observer could in principle recognize what the physical brain activity means to the subject — and surely that makes funniness real enough.

Then I expect — at any rate I hope — Frankish would also agree that the phenomenal properties of sensations must likewise be an inherent feature of the brain activity that brings the representation about. I'd go further. If sensation is in fact a reading of our own internalized motor response to stimulation, then we might expect that phenomenal properties will be correlated with the *adverbial quality* of this response (Humphrey, 1992). We are responding redly, saltly, painily... magically. Now, when we monitor these responses from the inside, we are representing the adverbial quality as the *modality* of the phenomenal feel we attribute to the stimulation. One day in the future, when scientists monitor the same activity by means of a brain scan — and monitor us monitoring it — I'd predict these phenomenal properties will indeed show up 'for real' from the outside.

So, yes, I have become a realist of sorts about phenomenal properties. However, I hasten to say this does not make me a realist of the kind Frankish so skilfully skewers in his paper. In fact, I have a particular reason for wanting to distance myself from those other realists, and this is that they, just like illusionists, have the wrong target in their sights. According to a flyer for the Tucson Consciousness Conference 2016, realists — a.k.a. 'philosophical dualists, panpsychists, spiritualists, and proponents of quantum brain biology' — suggest that 'mental qualities or conscious precursors are somehow intrinsic features of the universe, that consciousness has, in some sense, been here all along' (Tucson, 2016). If this means anything at all, I assume it means that they think of consciousness as having an absolute objective reality. They clearly don't think of it as emerging in one small corner of the universe as a property of the *take* that evolved creatures have on stimulation of their bodies. Nagel, Chalmers,

Strawson, and others in the realist camp are realists about the wrong thing.

To sum up. Neither illusionism nor realism addresses what should be the central question for a theory of consciousness: namely, how we represent the meaningful relationship we have to sensory stimulation. What, then, should we call a theory that attempts to explain how the properties of this relationship come to be real, true, and magically deep? I have a suggestion: *phenomenal surrealism* — where ‘surreal’ has the meaning that Picasso originally gave it. ‘What I intended when I invented this word, [was] something more real than reality... Resemblance is what I am after — a resemblance deeper and more real than the real, that is what constitutes the sur-real’ (Picasso, 1933/2007). It was in this spirit that Picasso could say of his great sculpture of a goat, ‘She’s more like a goat than a real goat, don’t you think’.

My thought, then, is this: just as Picasso’s goat was goatier than a real goat, so phenomenal redness is redder than real red, phenomenal pain painier than real pain. In general phenomenal properties are represented in sensation as ‘more real’ than the actual physiological events that give rise to them. By adding in the relational dimension of how we feel about it, sensation has, as it were, put one over on the physical reality of stimulation. To invoke the definition of ‘magic’ I began with, what is being added is ‘a quality of being beautiful and delightful in a way that seems remote from daily life’: except of course that, for we creatures who are fortunate enough to have evolved phenomenal consciousness, *it is daily life*. I like to think the artist Samuel Palmer was making the same philosophical point when he wrote in his Journal, ‘Bits of nature are generally much improved by being received into the soul’ (Palmer, 1824). Palmer’s 1830 painting of the ‘Magic Apple Tree’ depicts a tree bending under the weight of fruit, and still more under *the weight of the fruit’s colour*.

Is this just about words? Does it matter whether we call our theory of consciousness illusionism, or surrealism? I wish I could say no. But I’m not so sanguine. I worry that illusionism — unbridled illusionism such as Frankish champions in his article — threatens to undermine the very cause to which we are all committed: namely, to provide a scientific materialist explanation of consciousness which is both true and persuasive.

I worry that illusionism, as a theoretical framework, gets the science of consciousness off on the wrong foot. If taken literally, it points us towards trying to explain the phenomenal properties of consciousness on the model of explaining *why a funny joke isn’t actually funny*. And

this, as we saw above, is not going anywhere. By contrast phenomenal surrealism, if we were to adopt it, would send us in a much more promising direction. It would suggest we try to explain phenomenal properties on the model of explaining *why a joke becomes funny for us*. I've taken this second approach in 'A Riddle Written on the Brain' (Humphrey, 2016).

And then I worry that, when it comes to winning the argument in the forum of public opinion, in-your-face illusionism is bad politics. Illusionism cannot but feed ordinary people's fears that we scientist/philosophers *want to take consciousness away from them*. How else should we expect people to react when we tell them — the words are Frankish's — 'if, by "conscious experiences", we mean experiences with phenomenal properties, then illusionists do indeed deny that such things exist' (p. 9). Whatever Frankish might want readers to understand by this — and of course his discussion is actually thoughtful and nuanced — it is an invitation to many people to stop listening. Anti-materialist philosopher Mary Midgley, for example, will write a book titled 'Am I an Illusion?', and think she can dispose of our arguments by pinching herself and saying in effect 'don't be daft'.

With phenomenal surrealism, on the other hand, the message would be just the opposite. Rather than taking something away from people, we would be adding to their estimate of who and what they are. We'd be reminding them that consciousness is their own creation. And, more than that, we'd be encouraging them to think of themselves as artists — creators of experiences that are 'more real than real'. In response to Midgley, we could say: 'Don't worry. You are an astonishing work of art' (Humphrey, 2015).²

² But is there not some part of our conscious experience that is genuinely illusory? In Section 1.4 of his article Frankish briefly discusses 'outward-looking illusionism' which he takes to be the mistake of *projecting* the phenomenal properties of sensation onto things in the external world. As he says, 'we both misrepresent features of experience as phenomenal and then re-represent these illusory properties as properties of the external world, mistaking complex physical properties of our sensory states for simple phenomenal properties of external objects'. For the reasons given, I cannot agree that the first level of representing is a misrepresentation. But the second level of re-representing is a very different matter. If and when we project subjective phenomenal properties onto external objects, this truly is a misrepresentation. We are mistaking facts about how we ourselves feel about sensory stimulation for facts about the objects that give rise to the stimulation. The result is we may indeed come under the illusion — and this really is an illusion — that things out there in the world are 'singing our song' (Humphrey, 2011, chapter 7).

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