THE PARAPHENOMENAL HYPOTHESIS

Sam: Say, Abe; can you explain to me how the telephone works? I don’t get it.

Abe: Sure. Imagine you’ve got a very, very big 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. But 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.

In The Concept of Mind, 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’s 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 perceptual experience. These theorists hold that the phenomenality of perception (as well as the phenomenology of introspection and proprioception) 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 (1956) 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 chocolate; 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, or cold.

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 Fish 2008) 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. And, one may
suppose, they’re subjectively indistinguishable because they’re phenomenally identical.¹ But

¹ In some discussions of non-veridical experience, much is made of the fact that
subjective indiscriminability isn’t sufficient for phenomenal identity, given the soritical
possibility of experience A being indiscriminable from B, and B from C, where A is
discriminable from C. But all this shows is that arguments from hallucination ought to appeal to
the metaphysical premise of phenomenal identity instead of the epistemological premise of
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 (Dretske 1995, 1996, 1999), Bill Lycan (Lycan 1987, 1996, 2008) and Michael Tye (Tye 2000, 2015), 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 and Tye, non-veridical experiences represent *uninstantiated universals*; whereas for Lycan they represent *properties instantiated by non-actual 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 party hat, it seems perfectly natural to say that your experience represents an object that might have been, but isn’t, in the living room, and a color that might have been, but isn’t, 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 indiscriminability.
experience, and not experience itself. For, uninstantiated blue and pink are not blue or pink, and
neither otherworldly objects nor uninstantiated properties appear to us the way actual objects and
instantiated properties do. Indeed, they don’t appear at all: we don’t perceive them. 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. 2 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 actual dog, there’s no sense to saying it’s
the same thing.

Given that veridical and non-veridical experiences can be phenomenally identical, 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. 3 If what might have been veridically perceived, but isn’t, is
experientially identical to what is veridically perceived, then it can’t be that the properties in
virtue of which the experiences are identical are themselves experientially distinct. But
instantiated pink and uninstantiated pink are experientially distinguishable – both subjectively

2 This point is made in Thompson 2008. Thompson does not, however, recognize the absurdity of the reductive representationalist’s position.

3 See Chalmers 2004 for detailed explication of the distinction between reductive and non-reductive representationalism.
and objectively – 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 party hats 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, Tye’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 and non-actually-existing objects don’t appear, and don’t instantiate perceivable properties, 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. 4

Now, some disjunctivists hold that subjective indistinguishability of veridical and non-veridical experience amounts, “explanatorily and metaphysically,” to use Bill Brewer’s phrase (Brewer 2008), 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, Tye’s and Lycan’s to explain indiscriminability in terms of objects and properties represented are

4 The uninstantiated “clusters of properties” and “sensible profiles” of, respectively, McGinn 1999 and Johnston 2004 are as problematic as Dretske’s uninstantiated universals. They can’t explain the phenomenal sameness of veridically and non-veridically experienced scenarios.
quixotic, since there is in fact nothing *substantive* to explain.

This strikes me as a triumph of obfuscation. Veridical experience is (again to quote Brewer 2008) “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*. But, 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 indiscriminable in virtue of sharing the property *being-a-pencil-or-a-pork-chop*?

There are other disjunctivist strategies one might appeal to in seeking a way out of the problem of non-veridical experience. Many, if not most of them seem to me to depend fairly heavily on the epistemological version of the argument from hallucination. But I’ve suggested that this is not the best way to formulate the argument. On the metaphysical version, we suppose that it’s possible for veridical and non-veridical experiences to *be* identical (and, hence, indiscriminable; though of course the converse inference isn’t valid). A disjunctivist would, then, have to argue that this is in fact not possible. One way to do this is to individuate the contents of perceptual experiences objectually, so that veridical and non-veridical experiences are experiences of fundamentally different kinds – they have different contents. (Perhaps hallucinatory experiences have no contents at all.) But this neglects the problem of *phenomenal* identity. What reason is there to suppose that *distal* causes of experiences can effect their phenomenal character? Shall we suppose that veridical experiences of distinct but qualitatively identical objects differ phenomenally in the same way, because their externally determined
contents are different? This seems highly implausible.

It seems to me, then, that the only option open for a theorist who wants to deny the phenomenal premise of the argument from hallucination is to claim that veridical and hallucinatory experiences must differ in their intrinsic phenomenology. Then it could be denied that it’s possible for one to be having the very same experience one has of the external world while hallucinating.

But how is this claim to be made out? Either, I think, by maintaining that hallucinations have phenomenal character which is (perhaps detectably, perhaps not) relevantly different from that of veridical perceptions, or by maintaining that hallucinations have no phenomenal character at all. The main problem with the former strategy is that it won’t help the reductive representationalist at all, since, if an experience has a correct phenomenal characterization at all, it is in terms of the qualitative properties of the objects experienced. However, the phenomenal characterization of the experience will either mention properties that are instantiated by objects one perceives, or properties that are not so instantiated. In the former case, we no longer have a hallucination. In the latter case, we are left with the problems detailed above. As long as the hallucination appears to the hallucinator in some way – as long as, to put it tendentiously, it has phenomenal character – the problem of the *location* of the properties experienced will arise.

So it seems the only option for a disjunctivish solution for the reductive representationalist is to deny that there is any phenomenology of hallucinations (or dreams, or, to the relevant degree, illusions) at all. Once hallucinations are phenomenally characterized, the problem of the placement of the mentioned qualitative properties arises. And it appears the only way to avoid the problem is to deny that hallucinations have phenomenal characterizations.
There is, in short, nothing it’s like to undergo a hallucination.\(^5\) Surely this is a reductio of
disjunctivism – and, I would think, of reductive representationalism (and naive realism) as well.

\(^5\) Bill Fish once held this view (Fish 2008). I believe he no longer does.
REFERENCES


