

THE PARAPHENOMENAL HYPOTHESIS

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

8 *Abe:* Sure. Imagine you've got a very, very big dog. It's so big, it can stand in
9 Manhattan with its head in Brooklyn and its tail in the Bronx.

10 *Sam:* Uh huh.

11 *Abe:* So, when you talk to the head in Brooklyn, the tail wags in the Bronx.

12 *Sam:* Ah, okay; I see now. Very nice. But what about radio? Can you explain to me how
13 that works?

14 *Abe:* Simple. It's the same thing, only you don't have the dog.
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19 In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle accused Descartes of advancing what he called the
20 "paramechanical hypothesis," according to which the structure and operations of the mind can be
21 understood on the model of the structure and operations of a physical system. The body is a
22 complex machine – "a bit of clockwork" – that operates according to laws governing the
23 mechanical interactions of material things. The mind, on the other hand, according to Descartes
24 (according to Ryle), is an immaterial machine that operates according to formally analogous laws
25 governing the paramechanical interactions of immaterial things – "a bit of not-clockwork." In
26 other words, mental processes are the same as physical processes, only you don't have the matter.
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38 I don't know whether Descartes actually thought this. But, surely, if he did, he was
39 making some kind of logical or conceptual error. Mental processes *can't* be *the same as* physical
40 processes, minus the matter, since the matter matters. The properties of physical systems have
41 physical explanations, which are explanations in terms of physical properties and physical laws.
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48 But it's *absurd* – a category mistake – to suppose that mechanical explanations could apply to
49 immaterial things with no physical properties, subject to no physical laws. (If matters of mind
50 weren't so serious, the paramechanical hypothesis might even be funny.)
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55 Now, whether or not Descartes made this mistake, I think contemporary reductive
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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

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5 we're aware of in experience. If you've modified your consciousness in order to be in the state
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8 John Lennon was in when he wrote (or about which he wrote) "Tomorrow Never Knows," you
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10 might well have an experience that's just like the one you'd have if you were looking through a
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12 kaleidoscope (or surrendering to the void), in the absence of any such thing within sensory range.
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15 But how could this be, if the qualitative properties characterizing experience are properties of
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17 things perceived?
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20 According to Place, what's common to veridical and non-veridical experience is the brain
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22 process underlying each, regardless of the presence or absence of the objects or properties you
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24 seem to be seeing. When you have veridical experiences, your brain processes represent external
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26 objects and their properties, which latter you mention when characterizing how it is with you,
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28 experientially. And when you have non-veridical experiences, you undergo the same brain
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30 processes, but in the absence of the external objects and their properties. Hallucinating a clear
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32 blue sky at noon is (internally) the same thing as perceiving it, only you don't have the sky.
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37 But where is the *blue* in such a case? On this view, it's not in the brain (it *never* was);
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39 and it's not in the world. But it's still in your *experience*, in the sense that you're still
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41 consciously aware of blueness. You would (*pace* Fish 2008) describe your experience in exactly
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43 the same way as you would if you weren't hallucinating: what it's like to see the sky at noon and
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45 what it's like to hallucinate the sky at noon are *subjectively indistinguishable*. And, one may
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47 suppose, they're subjectively indistinguishable because they're *phenomenally identical*.¹ But
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53 ¹ In some discussions of non-veridical experience, much is made of the fact that
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55 subjective indiscriminability isn't sufficient for phenomenal identity, given the soritical
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57 possibility of experience A being indiscriminable from B, and B from C, where A is
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59 discriminable from C. But all this shows is that arguments from hallucination ought to appeal to
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61 the metaphysical premise of phenomenal identity instead of the epistemological premise of

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5 now there's no place to put the property you'd mention in describing what your experience is
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7 like. It *can't* be the same thing, only without the sky, since the sky was where the qualitative
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9 feature you experienced was supposed to be located. This *paraphenomenal* hypothesis is no
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11 more plausible than the paramechanical one. (And it's not funny, either.)
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15 Some reductive representationalists, in particular Fred Dretske (Dretske 1995, 1996,
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17 1999), Bill Lycan (Lycan 1987, 1996, 2008) and Michael Tye (Tye 2000, 2015), propose that in
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19 cases of non-veridical experiences there *is* something that exists contemporaneously with your
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21 experience, and which is represented by it – though it's not the same as what's represented in
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23 subjectively indistinguishable veridical perceptions. For Dretske and Tye, non-veridical
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25 experiences represent *uninstantiated universals*; whereas for Lycan they represent *properties*
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27 *instantiated by non-actual objects in non-actual possible worlds*. The non-veridical experiential
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29 states are intrinsically just like the veridical ones, and represent the same objects and properties;
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31 it's just that the objects don't actually exist and the properties aren't instantiated (at least not
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33 *locally*).
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39 Intuitively, it may seem unproblematic to speak of non-veridical experience in this way.
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41 If you hallucinate a baboon in the living room wearing a pink party hat, it seems perfectly natural
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43 to say that your experience represents an object that might have been, but isn't, in the living
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45 room, and a color that might have been, but isn't, locally instantiated. But interpreting this to
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47 mean that your experience represents an object that is located in the (or a) living room in some
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49 *other* possible world, or an *uninstantiated* color, is not consistent with the reductive
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51 representationalist's claim that the qualitative features of experience are features of the objects of
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indiscriminability.

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5 experience, and not experience itself. For, uninstantiated blue and pink *are not blue or pink*, and
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8 neither otherworldly objects nor uninstantiated properties *appear to us* the way actual objects and
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10 instantiated properties do. Indeed, they don't *appear* at all: we don't *perceive* them. Neither
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12 merely possible baboons nor uninstantiated colors *look like* anything. The reductive
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14 representationalist says that in veridical experience objects appear to us in certain ways, but that
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16 these ways are properties of experienced objects, not our experience of them. But if the things
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18 that have the properties that appear to us are removed – either by simply eliminating them *or* by
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20 replacing them with things that don't *have* appearance properties – then the basis for a reductive
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22 account of the phenomenality of experience goes with them.² Saying it's the same thing, only the
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24 dog is in another possible world, or doghood isn't instantiated, is just as bad as saying it's the
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26 same thing, only you don't have the dog. If there's no actual *dog*, there's no sense to saying it's
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28 the same thing, only you don't have the dog. If there's no actual *dog*, there's no sense to saying it's
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30 the same thing.
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35 Given that veridical and non-veridical experiences can be phenomenally identical, the
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37 claim that the latter represent what might have been is plausible only on a *non-reductive* version
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39 of representationalism, according to which experiences instantiate phenomenal properties which
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41 are themselves representational.³ If what might have been veridically perceived, but isn't, is
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43 experientially identical to what is veridically perceived, then it can't be that the properties in
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45 virtue of which the experiences are identical are themselves experientially distinct. But
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47 instantiated pink and uninstantiated pink *are* experientially distinguishable – both subjectively
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53 ² This point is made in Thompson 2008. Thompson does not, however, recognize the
54 *absurdity* of the reductive representationalist's position.
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57 ³ See Chalmers 2004 for detailed explication of the distinction between reductive and
58 non-reductive representationalism.
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5 and objectively – as are actual and merely possible baboons. We can't *see* counterfactual apes,
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8 and we can't *see* uninstantiated colors. We *can*, however, according to the *non-reductive*
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10 representationalist – and anyone else who holds that phenomenal properties are intrinsic
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12 properties of experience – have qualitative experiences *as of* baboons and pink party hats where
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14 and when there are none, since the properties that characterize what the experience is like *are*
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16 instantiated – just not in the external world.
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20 Dretske's, Tye's and Lycan's proposals can't account for the subjective indiscriminability
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22 of veridical and non-veridical experience. If subjective sameness of experience is understood in
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24 terms of the ways things appear, and uninstantiated properties and non-actually-existing objects
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26 don't appear, and don't instantiate perceivable properties, then dreaming or hallucinating and
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28 perceiving can't be the same, minus the external object, any more than a mental process can be
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30 the same as a physical process, minus the matter, or radio can be the same as telephone, minus
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32 the dog. They are guilty of advancing an absurd paraphenomenal hypothesis.⁴
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38 Now, some disjunctivists hold that subjective indistinguishability of veridical and non-
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40 veridical experience amounts, "explanatorily and metaphysically," to use Bill Brewer's phrase
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42 (Brewer 2008), only to this: they share the property of being *either* a veridical *or* a non-veridical
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44 experience – either a perception or a hallucination, as it might be. Nothing more can be said by
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46 way of *explaining* their subjective indiscriminability. In particular, it's not due to their
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48 instantiating or representing the same qualitative properties. Thus, attempts like Dretske's, Tye's
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50 and Lycan's to explain indiscriminability in terms of objects and properties represented are
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56 ⁴ The uninstantiated "clusters of properties" and "sensible profiles" of, respectively,
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58 McGinn 1999 and Johnston 2004 are as problematic as Dretske's uninstantiated universals. They
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60 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

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5 contents are different? This seems highly implausible.
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8 It seems to me, then, that the only option open for a theorist who wants to deny the
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10 phenomenal premise of the argument from hallucination is to claim that veridical and
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12 hallucinatory experiences must differ in their intrinsic phenomenology. Then it could be denied
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14 that it's possible for one to be having the very same experience one has of the external world
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16 while hallucinating.
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20 But how is this claim to be made out? Either, I think, by maintaining that hallucinations
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22 have phenomenal character which is (perhaps detectably, perhaps not) relevantly different from
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24 that of veridical perceptions, or by maintaining that hallucinations have no phenomenal character
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26 at all. The main problem with the former strategy is that it won't help the reductive
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28 representationalist at all, since, if an experience has a correct phenomenal characterization at all,
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30 it is in terms of the qualitative properties of the objects experienced. However, the phenomenal
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32 characterization of the experience will either mention properties that are instantiated by objects
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34 one perceives, or properties that are not so instantiated. In the former case, we no longer have a
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36 hallucination. In the latter case, we are left with the problems detailed above. As long as the
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38 hallucination appears to the hallucinator in some way – as long as, to put it tendentiously, it has
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40 phenomenal character – the problem of the *location* of the properties experienced will arise.
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46 So it seems the only option for a disjunctivish solution for the reductive
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48 representationalist is to deny that there is any phenomenology of hallucinations (or dreams, or, to
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50 the relevant degree, illusions) at all. Once hallucinations are phenomenally characterized, the
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52 problem of the placement of the mentioned qualitative properties arises. And it appears the only
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54 way to avoid the problem is to deny that hallucinations have phenomenal characterizations.
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5 There is, in short, nothing it's like to undergo a hallucination.⁵ Surely this is a reductio of
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8 disjunctivism – and, I would think, of reductive representationalism (and naive realism) as well.
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58 ⁵ Bill Fish once held this view (Fish 2008). I believe he no longer does.
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For Review Only

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