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Meta-Illusionism and Qualia Quietism

Abstract: *Many so-called problems in contemporary philosophy of mind depend for their expression on a collection of inter-defined technical terms, a few of which are qualia, phenomenal property, and what-it's-like-ness. I express my scepticism about Keith Frankish's illusionism, the view that people are generally subject to a systematic illusion that any properties are phenomenal, and scout the relative merits of two alternatives to Frankish's illusionism. The first is phenomenal meta-illusionism, the view that illusionists such as Frankish, in holding their view, are themselves thereby under an illusion. The second is qualia quietism, the view that nothing worth saying is said by employing any of the aforementioned inter-defined technical terms.*

I am strongly sympathetic with Frankish's illusionism, and if he were right to suggest that the only real options regarding so-called phenomenal consciousness were radical realism about phenomenal properties and his illusionism, I would readily ally with the latter. However, I don't view those two as the only appealing choices, and I don't think the other views Frankish mentions prior to narrowing the field — e.g. conservative realism, eliminativism — adequately describe my own favoured approach to the topic.

Taking inspiration from Rey's (2007) meta-atheism, which, instead of the view that God does not exist, is the view that no one actually believes that God exists (despite their claims to the contrary), I am tempted to label my reaction to Frankish's illusionism, *meta-illusionism*. The gist of meta-illusionism is that it rejects phenomenal realism while also insisting that no one is actually under the illusion

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that there are so-called phenomenal properties. One line of thought that leads me to meta-illusionism is that there's no content to the claim that any properties seem 'phenomenal' to anybody. And here my worries are almost entirely about the word 'phenomenal' and its ilk. Another line of thought that leads me to meta-illusionism hinges on the word 'illusion' and the worry that, while there may be some people to whom it seems that there are phenomenal properties, this appearance, which I do not grant as reflecting reality, is insufficiently widespread to be worth considering an *illusion* (as opposed to, say, a weird belief that certain philosophically educated individuals claim to hold). Given my worries about what counts as an illusion properly so-called, I am a little reluctant to embrace the label 'meta-illusionism' since I don't want to say that the illusionists are deceived in a sufficiently systematic way to attribute to them an illusion. If I needed a better label for my view, I might go with 'qualia quietism', and I'll close the current article with remarks about what that amounts to.

1. On 'phenomenal'

One thing Frankish and I have in common is that neither of us wants to assert that there are any properties instantiated that are referred to or picked out by the phrase 'phenomenal properties'. One place where Frankish and I part ways is over whether that phrase is sufficiently meaningful for there to be a worthwhile research programme investigating how it comes to seem to people that their experiences instantiate any such properties. Like Frankish, I'm happy with terms like 'experience', 'consciousness', and 'conscious experience' and join Frankish in using what he calls 'weak' and functional construals of such terms. But, unlike Frankish, I see no use at all, not even an illusionist one, for the term 'phenomenal' and its ilk.

The term 'phenomenal', as used in contemporary philosophy of mind, is a technical term. I am aware of no non-technical English word or phrase that is accepted as its direct analogue. Unlike technical terms in maths and physics, which are introduced with explicit definitions, 'phenomenal' has no such definition. What we find instead of an explicit definition are other technical terms treated as interchangeable synonyms. Frankish follows common practice in philosophy of mind when he treats 'phenomenal' as interchangeable with, for instance, 'qualitative' or, in scare-quotes, "feely".

As used in the relevant philosophy-of-mind contexts, 'qualitative' doesn't mean simply 'relating to qualities', since properties and

qualities are one and the same, and the technical term is supposed to pick out some special kind of property, a property distinctive of conscious experiences. The technical term ‘qualitative’ also does not seem to mean ‘characterizing in ways other than quantity’, which, if it did, would at least have the virtue of relating it to a non-technical use, but would lose its claim to pick out something specific to conscious experience.

Trouble arises for “feely”, which, as the scare quotes seem to warn, is not to be equated with non-technical uses of ‘feel’ and its cognates, which pertain to feeling temperatures and textures, but decidedly not to, for example, what differentiates seeing blue from seeing green. These three terms — ‘phenomenal’, ‘qualitative’, and ““feely”” — form a tight circle conveying little to no information to the meta-illusionist demanding to know what it is that the illusionist thinks people are under the illusion of.

One phrase that might seem to break us out of the circle of technical terms is the phrase ‘something it’s like’, for there are non-technical uses of ‘what it’s like’ (Farrell, 2016), and phenomenal properties are supposed to be those properties in virtue of which there is something it’s like to have experiences. However, to my knowledge, the syntactic transformation from ‘what it’s like’ to ‘there is something it’s like’ occurs only in technical philosophy-of-mind contexts. This makes me doubt that non-technical uses of ‘what it’s like’, which sometimes (but not always) are employed to pick out mental states, are employed to pick out a peculiar kind of property of mental states. When, for example, pop stars sing about knowing what it’s like to fall in love, they give little evidence of attributing so-called ‘phenomenal’ properties, as opposed to whatever other properties a meta-illusionist can readily grant are seemingly instantiated by love states. The hyphenated ‘what-it’s-like’ in Frankish’s ““what-it’s-like”” properties’ (Frankish, this issue, p. 15) is yet another technical term shedding no light on the term ‘phenomenal’.

We have then, in place of an explicit definition of ‘phenomenal properties’, a circular chain of interchangeable technical terms — a chain with very few links, and little to relate those links to non-technical terminology. The circle, then, is vicious. I’m sceptical that any properties seem ‘phenomenal’ to anyone because this vicious circle gives me very little idea what seeming ‘phenomenal’ would be.

One way out of the vicious circle that seems unavailable to Frankish is a kind of deferential ostension. Radical realists can, without pangs of conscience, attempt to convey what they’re talking about by

inviting an act of inner ostension: they invite us to look inward and appreciate that they are talking about properties like *that*. Since they think there are such properties, they aren't failing by their own lights to specify what they are talking about. They may nonetheless be failing, and their 'that' refers to nothing, but they would not be failing *by their own lights*. Illusionists, in contrast, are in a worse position, since by their own lights there are no such instantiated properties to inwardly point at. Since they hold instantiated phenomenal properties to be merely notional, they may attempt to gesture toward what they would be if there were any by some indirect route, perhaps via the description, 'whatever it is that radical realists are talking about'. However, the very real possibility arises that the radical realists *aren't* all talking about the same thing, given the lack of any explicit definition of 'phenomenal property' that they agree on. Echoing Wittgenstein (1953), each radical realist labels the private contents of their beetle-box 'a beetle', but, for all anyone knows, each box may contain something different from the others, or even nothing at all.

The problem I pose for Frankish is a problem of content, but it is not the problem of content that he himself addresses in Section 3.4 of the target article. There he considers the problem of what would fix the content of the introspective representations of phenomenal properties given that there aren't any phenomenal properties instantiated. He appreciates that the illusionist will not be able to employ any psycho-semantics that relies on positing relations, causal or other, between representations and actually instantiated properties accurately represented. The challenge I pose for Frankish is not the challenge of giving an account of *how* such representations get their content. The challenge I pose is instead to articulate *what* the content is. The contrast between the two challenges might be illustrated via the following analogy: the theory-of-content challenge is to explain *how* a representation of cows comes to be a representation of cows and not of horses and not of the disjunction cow-or-horse, and so on. My challenge — the articulation challenge — is to say *what* some target representation represents, to say that it represents cows, or instead represents horses, or some disjunction, and so on. I want to ask of the representations that Frankish alleges to be illusory: *what* are they representations of? The technical-term circle — phenomenal property, qualitative property, 'feely' property, 'what-it's-like' property, quale — does nothing to answer the question. Maybe a radical realist may feel confident that the terms in the circle are informative, picking out, as they allege, some inner ostended property — but how can one

sympathetic to either illusionism or meta-illusionism gain any satisfaction here?

2. Regarding illusions

So far, I have been focusing on a circle of technical synonyms for the technical term ‘phenomenal property’. To be fair, Frankish does give other characterizations of phenomenal properties, characterizations that might break us out of the circle described above. However, these other characterizations introduce other problems for Frankish’s illusionism.

Frankish sometimes characterizes phenomenal properties as anomalous (p. 13) and other times as magical (p. 28). There are other characterizations that come up as well in Frankish’s article (e.g. ‘simple’, ‘intrinsic’), but I will focus on just on ‘magical’ and ‘anomalous’ for simplicity’s sake. What these characterizations (including characterizations besides ‘magical’ and ‘anomalous’) have in common is that they (1) give some hope of, at least partially, breaking out of the circle of technical terms I complain about in the previous section, (2) they characterize properties in such a way that motivates illusionism along the lines spelled out in Section 2.3 of the target article, but (3) as I’ll argue below, problems arise for the claim that the false appearances in question are *illusions* properly so-called.

Perhaps Frankish is not employing technical senses of either ‘anomalous’ or ‘magical’, so there’s hope here of breaking out of the vicious circle of technical synonyms, and to give an informative, though perhaps partial, answer to the question of what so-called phenomenal representations are representations of. On the partial account now being scouted, they would be, if actually instantiated, properties of experiences that are anomalous or magical. The worry I want to raise now is whether it seems to people in a sufficiently systematic way that their experiences have anomalous or magical properties. If it only seems this way to a few people, people versed in certain moves internal to the philosophy of mind, then this erroneous appearance seems ill-described as an *illusion*.

Illusions properly so-called occur in systematic ways for large numbers of the population. For example, it is very easy to find people prone to the visual illusion of Müller-Lyer. For many people, certain line pairs seem of unequal length when in reality they are equal. Switching examples: people exposed to the Monty Hall problem give

the wrong answer with such high frequency that it's worth, perhaps, calling it a cognitive illusion.¹

To be clear, I am not claiming that in order for something to be an illusion properly so-called, a large number of people have to actually have undergone the illusion. Suppose very few people have seen the Müller-Lyer figures or have been exposed to the Monty Hall problem. Nonetheless, in these cases, there is an easily conveyed stimulus or scenario that, when presented to people, readily elicits a false appearance in many of those so-presented. There's something systematic to these false appearances that makes them illusions as opposed to mere false appearances. Examples of false appearances that lack this requisite systematicity include many examples of run-of-the-mill false belief. Last Wednesday, George believed his keys were in his briefcase when in reality he had left them on his desk. In some sense of appear, it appeared to George that his keys were in his briefcase. But his false representation of the keys' whereabouts is not part of a larger pattern of eliciting conditions and responses that make it rise to the level of illusion. The example of George's false belief is one that involves only a single person. However, being held by many people is not a sufficient condition for a false representation to be an illusion. Many people have held, erroneously, that 1 is a prime number and that Christopher Columbus was the first European to arrive in the Americas. But these false representations aren't illusions either. There isn't, in these cases, an easily conveyed scenario or stimulus that reliably elicits a false appearance.

Let us temporarily leave aside the topic of whether conscious experiences seem to have anomalous or magical properties, and ask about apparent anomalousness or apparent magicalness more generally. Perhaps if we have a better handle on what such appearances are generally, we may find ourselves in a better position to

¹ The Monty Hall problem involves a game show scenario in which there are three closed doors, behind two of which are goats, and one of which is a car. The contestant makes an initial selection of a door, but before that door is opened, one of the other doors is opened by the game show host to reveal a goat. The contestant is now offered a choice: to stick with their initial selection, or to switch to the other unopened door. The central question of the Monty Hall problem is whether there's any advantage (assuming one prefers cars to goats!) to switching. The common, and wrong, answer is that there is no advantage, on the erroneous grounds that there's a 1-in-2 probability of the car being behind the initially selected door. The correct response, unintuitive to many people, is that accepting the offer to switch doors raises one's chances of getting the car from 1-in-3 to 2-in-3.

assess the claim that conscious experiences systematically appear to have anomalous or magical properties.

Consider some impressive display performed by a professional magician. Suppose a ball is presented on a table's surface, and then seemingly covered with an opaque cup. The cup is then lifted and the ball is no longer where it was last seen, and the cup appears empty. Audiences delight in such displays and it seems natural to describe them as *apparently* anomalous or magical, and such appearances arise even for audience members who don't believe that anything *actually* anomalous or magical occurred. Despite the belief that nothing out of the ordinary occurred, there is nonetheless a reliably generable *appearance* of something out of the ordinary: a ball visible in one location and then no longer being visible in that location without being seen to have been removed, and also without any visibly obvious means by which it may have been moved while unseen. The reliability with which magicians can elicit such responses from audience members, across wide varieties of audience member, makes it worth calling such inaccurate appearances illusions.

Let us return now to the way our own conscious experiences seem to us. That a wide variety of people have conscious experiences (again, in the 'weak' and functional sense of conscious experience that the illusionist will grant) is not something I'm calling into question. Nor do I intend to raise any doubts about whether those conscious experiences appear to people in various ways. For example, when someone is in a position to answer the question of whether they saw, or instead felt, that a piece of metal is hot, I don't mind chalking this up to the way their experience of the metal seemed to them. It seemed to them, for example, that they had a tactile experience as opposed to a visual experience of the metal's hotness. But what I have doubts about is whether people unfamiliar with contemporary philosophy of mind introspect their conscious experiences and find them to seemingly have properties that are anomalous or magical. Suppose one is seeing some expanse of green and also seems to oneself to be seeing an expanse of green. What anomalous or magical properties are apparently revealed to introspection? In the senses of 'anomalous' and 'magical' that we would cash out in terms of *being out of the ordinary* or *being contrary to the laws of nature*, speaking for myself, my introspected experiences never appear that way. For example, when it seems to me that I'm having a visual experience of green, it doesn't also seem to me that my experience has properties that violate the laws of nature.

Perhaps the apparent anomalousness or magicalness isn't supposed by the illusionists to arise in ordinary episodes of introspection, but instead on occasions of reflection when one contemplates the sorts of topics connected to philosophical discussions of alleged explanatory gaps between conscious experiences and neuro-functional states. Perhaps the story is supposed to go like this: one attends to, say, a visual experience of a vivid electric blue, while also contemplating the brain processes that the experience is allegedly identical to or explainable in terms of, and it's *that* — the alleged fact of the one arising out of, being identical to, or explainable in terms of the other — that seems magical or anomalous. But what's the sense of 'magical' or 'anomalous' at play here? It's unlikely to be some construal in terms of *being out of the ordinary* or *contrary to the laws of nature*. What we have here is the ordinary and lawful way in which visual experiences of vivid blue arise: they arise, ordinarily, in connection with the activities of human brains and probably also the activities in many of the brains of non-human animals. Further, and more to the point, it is not part of our introspective contents that such experiences don't arise in this manner. Our experiences do not generally present themselves to introspection (as opposed to comparatively more complex episodes involving theoretically sophisticated reflection) as the sorts of things that do not or cannot arise in virtue of neural processes.

Of course, there are many in the philosophy of mind who have wondered *how* and *why* it is that experience so arises, and some philosophers have also been tempted towards the conclusion that no satisfying explanations of the how and the why can be given. But appreciating these philosophical questions and positions, and feeling any pull one way or another regarding them, seems to require far more philosophical sophistication than sits well with any apparent anomalousness or magicalness being illusions properly so-called.

Even if the problems I tried to pose in the present section turn out to not be genuine problems for Frankish's illusionism, the problems raised in the previous section may still loom large. This is because the characterizations of phenomenal properties as anomalous or magical seem partial at best. It is unlikely that anyone who thinks that there is content to the phrase 'phenomenal properties of experience' will accept that a property of experience is phenomenal if and only if it is anomalous or magical. (I take similar remarks to apply to other characterizations of the phenomenal that Frankish employs, such as 'intrinsic'.)

3. Qualia quietism

I have expressed doubts that anyone undergoes an illusion properly so-called that experiences instantiate phenomenal properties. Some of my doubts hinge on scepticism about any representations having ‘phenomenal’ content. Other of my doubts hinge on reservations about what properly counts as an illusion. Given the latter sort of doubt, I’m reluctant to attribute to Frankish a meta-illusion — the illusion that anyone is undergoing the illusion of phenomenal properties. I’m likewise reluctant to embrace the label of *meta-illusionism*. More appealing to me is to recommend *qualia quietism*, which we may characterize as the view that the terms ‘qualia’, ‘phenomenal properties’, etc. lack sufficient content for anything informative to be said in either affirming or denying their existence. Affirming the existence of what? Denying the existence of what? Maintaining as illusory a representation of what? No comment. No comment. No comment.

This is not to assert that the field of consciousness studies is pure folly. As Frankish stresses, there are plenty of clear uses of ‘conscious’, ‘experience’, and ‘conscious experience’, uses that can be explicated in ‘weak’ and functional ways. And there’s plenty of work already done and still being done on consciousness so-construed. But I see no future, illusionist or realist, for the term ‘qualia’ and its ilk.²

References

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