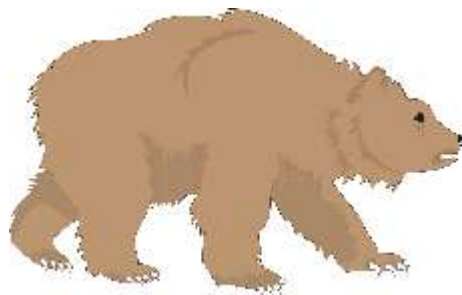


Ursus Philosophicus

Essays dedicated to Björn Haglund on his sixtieth birthday



A Dark Horse, Yon Cow

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Abstract

It is argued that phenomenal experience makes an important contribution to our cognitive resources: without it, the vital distinction between appearance and reality would be very much harder to maintain or form a notion of in the first place.

1. What is the point of conscious experience, phenomenal consciousness, qualia, and their ilk? What is it that we can do that zombies could not?

Here I would offer one, admittedly highly speculative, answer to this question. This is it: Perhaps they could not think.

2. Or, at least, perhaps conscious experience, phenomenal consciousness, and qualia make thinking much easier than it would have been.

I shall pursue this suggestion mainly from the direction of the distinction between appearance and reality. My contention will be that phenomenal qualities are very helpful indeed for anyone interested in distinguishing between appearance and reality; and I think, unless you are interested in this, I will simply presume, you will have trouble thinking rationally. At the very least, which I will try to argue, you will have trouble with drawing a distinction—even in principle—between misperception and veridical perception; that is not a distinction that a society of zombies is likely to come up with.

Right then, suppose that you had no conscious experience, no phenomenal consciousness, no qualia: where would that leave the distinction between appearance and reality?

3. The environmental state continually affects your neuro-mental state; the way things are out there leaves traces in the way things are inside your head: if you like, your neuro-mental state carries information about the environmental state, i.e. about what goes on around you (as well as within you).

Now, there is a problem here, because people like us are fallible creatures; what things appears to be is not always what they really are, and we know this to be so, or, at least, the distinction between appearance and reality is known to us: but where, in the above account, will fallibility find a place?

Suppose that you are out in the fields on a dark night, when all of a sudden, at some distance you see the blurry shape of a horse in the dark.

This dark horse leaves its traces in your mind, just as it leaves its tracks in the grass: and the relation between the state of affairs present and the state of mind informed by it is so tight it does not allow for any mistakes any more than does the relation between the grazing horse and its trails on the ground.

If your current mental state is really informed by your present surroundings, it is hard to see how you could ever err from it; which, as already the ancient Romans knew, is but human.

4. In these straits, qualia might be called to the rescue.

What qualia, phenomenal consciousness, and conscious experience do, on this proposal, is objectify your informational neuro-mental state.

Fact, the particular environmental state, under the circumstances, gives rise to a certain informational neuro-mental state of yours; this particular neuro-mental state in turn, again under the circumstances, gives rise to conscious experience, or phenomenal consciousness, or qualia.

This phenomenal conscious experience, too, carries information about the neuro-mental state that produced it, but alongside its informational content the conscious experience also has a phenomenal content; and the phenomenal content of the conscious experience is not simply a translation of the informational content of the neuro-mental state.

When you phenomenally experience a dark horse, the phenomenal content of your experience makes no reference to your neuro-mental state: when the phenomenal dark

horse is there, its message to you is not that you are currently in a neuro-mental state of experiencing darkly horsely (though you might, no doubt, infer as much); the message of the phenomenal dark horse is that there is a real dark horse out there, too.

5. Now, how do you access that phenomenal content? My proposal is that you access the phenomenal state just the way (which of course means 'in a way in relevant respects similar to the way in which') you access the environmental state: it affects your current neuro-mental state.

Your neuro-mental state now is informed both by the present environmental state and the current phenomenal state; and this, someone like me might wish to retain, serves to ground the distinction between appearance and reality: you do at once access the real environmental state and your own apparitional phenomenal interpretation of it; and phenomenal content is as though they were another set of (merely apparent) objects, alongside the real ones.

6. But could not zombies save appearances in much the same way, by making their neuro-mental states themselves symbolical or representational as well as informational: perhaps environment does not just affect the neural mind of zombies in a way it would not otherwise have been affected; it produces neuro-mental representations of this same environment. And these neuro-mental representations of things, of course, are but appearances that may betray the realities impinging on their senses.

However, on this representational theory of the mind, concerns about fallibility recur in the form of the so-called Disjunction Problem, which could be illustrated by the following little story.

7. Suppose that you are, once more, out in the fields on a dark night, when all of a sudden, you see the blurry shape of a horse in the dark.

What then happens to you, on the representational theory of mind, is that the blurry presence of the beast over there triggers a certain neuro-mental representation in your head (or mind or wherever), say “ζαεΩβέ”; this “ζαεΩβέ” means ‘horse’, and that is why and the sense in which, on seeing the horse, you see and think of it as a horse.

Now, here comes the twist: to the surprise of no-one even casually familiar with the literature on the subject of mental representation, the beast you actually saw was really no horse at all but a cow.

And that is what gives rise to the Disjunction Problem.

For, dark nights, both cows and horses trigger the same mental representation, “ζαΩβέ”, in you: and, given this, how come “ζαΩβέ” means ‘horse’ rather than ‘horse or cow-on-a-dark-night’?

And to this problem modern theories of mental representation have all sorts of ingenious solutions, none of which has won general acclaim, and most of which rely heavily on empirical assumptions that science cannot well be expected to confirm or refute for a good many years to come.

8. Now, I would suggest that even given an acceptable (or even a correct) theory of the way semantic relations supervene on natural ones, there remains a problem about the distinction between appearance and reality as we know it: and the trouble is we seem to know it.

That is, the trouble is we seem to know the distinction between appearance and reality; but a zombie, even if he has access to neuro-mental representations, seems to have small reason ever to doubt his perceptual representations: the representational theory of mind may support a notion of misperception (the neuro-mental symbol’s representing something else than what triggered it), but zombies would have more trouble than people in forming a notion of misperception.

9. Suppose, you take a closer look at the blurry presence of a beast out there in dark and, all of a sudden the former horse inexplicably assumes the shape and character of a cow.

Now, if you are a zombie, what should you say to yourself? »By jingo! I was wrong: that horse was really a cow» or »Oh botheration! What a pity that nice filly turned into a cow»?

What, on the representational theory of zombie-mind, happens to the zombie is just that his (non-phenomenal) neuro-mental representation of the environment has switched from »over there is a horse» to »over there is a cow».

So first he thinks »that is a horse»; then he thinks »that is a cow». Now, the zombie will be as used to blurry shapes in the dark transforming themselves first into horses and then into cows as we are to misperceptions and other changes in the appearance of things: for him to see this as a misperception on his part, rather than a transformation of a horse into a cow, he has to think »No! First I thought that it was a horse; now I think that it is a cow. The change really only lies in what I think, in how the thing appears to me.»

He has to go back on his representation of reality, give them an intensional reading rather than an extensional one. and postulate his own representational states.

10. Appearances themselves cannot be inconsistent, any more than can reality (since, of course, whether neuro-mental states or phenomenal qualities, they form part of reality); but they can support inconsistent interpretations of things, they can represent things in an inconsistent way.

So, distinguishing apparent change from real change, is really distinguishing change in appearances from change in the reality they represent. And to do this, you, no less than the zombie, have to set part of reality apart as appearance representing some (other) part of reality.

And doing this will be a much easier feat for non-zombies, endowed with phenomenal consciousness.

For what phenomenal consciousness does is present you with appearances: a phenomenally conscious creature like you and I need not, as must the zombie, have recourse to hypothetical mental representations (thoughts and the like) in order to form a notion of apparent change (i.e. change in appearances); we can observe the changes that take place in phenomenal qualities, i.e. in appearances.

11. The following is, so far as it goes, I think, a not wholly erroneous analysis of the what it takes phenomenally to *perceive* a cow as a horse and as a cow respectively.

- By having certain phenomenal qualities X, phenomenal appearance A(1) represents that a certain cow S is a horse.

- By having certain other phenomenal qualities Y, phenomenal appearance A(2) represents that S is a cow (and therefore not a horse).

I am not saying that X and Y inherently mean ‘horse’ and ‘cow’: on the contrary, I think we have to bring meaning to phenomenal qualities, that we endow them with semantic content much as we do with words, that qualia merely provide the syntax of phenomenal symbols not with their semantics—but, really, that is not my point right now.

Now, it will be objected that things do not stand differently with the representationally minded zombie.

- By having certain neuro-mental qualities W, mental representation R(1) represents that a certain cow S is a horse.

- By having certain other neuro-mental qualities Z, mental representation R(2) represents that S is a cow (and therefore not a horse).

So why should the zombie whose neuro-mental states incorporate representations like R(1) and R(2) have more trouble to with distinguishing real from apparent fact than people who have access to phenomenal appearances such as A(1) and A(2)?

12. What makes the distinction between appearance and reality *much* easier for us to grasp than for the zombies is just that we are (phenomenally) aware of the qualities X and Y on which representations of things as horses and cows supervene, whereas a zombie cannot trivially be presumed to be aware of the qualities W and Z on which horse and cow representations supervene.

So, any apparent change of objects from horses into cows will be accompanied by an awareness of real changes in phenomenal qualities from X to Y (or at least with an observable change in qualia from X to Y).

That is, phenomenal perception presents you not just with transcendent properties like ‘being a horse’ and ‘being a cow’, but also, besides, and on equal footing with these, with phenomenal complexes of properties like X and Y above (the looks, sounds, smells and other sensations characteristic of horses and cows); whereas zombie-perception presents zombies just with the ‘transcendent’ properties of horses and cows, and leaves it to the poor zombies to infer the presence of qualities inside their own minds on which the presentation of the above properties supervene.

13. This, then, is one thing that phenomenal consciousness, conscious experience, and qualia do for you: it assists you in forming the notion of appearance as opposed to real-

ity, by presenting you at once with both the apparent properties of objects perceived and the phenomenal properties of perceptual appearances.

Phenomenal properties (such as having certain visual, auditory, and olfactory phenomenal qualities) provide the ground for ascribing transcendent properties (such as 'being a horse') to realities; and phenomenal consciousness presents both, leaving it to you to determine whether a change in phenomenal qualities is mere change in perceptual appearances or else implies change in perceived objects.

14. (By the way, have I, by any chance, given the impression that my discussion so far in any way concerns the physicalist or other nature of qualia or the conceivability or the metaphysical or other possibility of zombies, I am sure that was perfectly unintentional; the sole aim of the above considerations is to suggest one way in which phenomenal consciousness, conscious experience, and qualia seem to me to make a difference: if the reader has interpreted my words otherwise, the blame is, of course, on me, but I would beseech him to have a second look at them; perhaps he will find them more agreeable, now that their purport is made more clear.)

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