

PHENOMENAL EXPERIENCE: A CARTESIAN THEATER REVIVAL

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I'm looking at the snowy woods behind my house through the window. I see the (still) white snow on the ground, the grayish/brownish trunks of the trees, and the dark green needles. The sky is bright and blue. I have had my two morning cups of coffee, so I'm as awake as I ever am. I am having a conscious visual experience, and the conditions are as propitious for veridical perception as they can be. Though a skeptic could engender doubts if I let her, I am morally certain that I am indeed consciously seeing snow, trees, and sky. No doubt about it.

Let "E" be the conscious visual experience I just described, which I am having as I write these words. It is natural to think of E as a state I'm in, a mental state - an occurrent mental state. Another natural thing to say, though it now has a technical ring to it, is that "there is something it's like for me to occupy state E". The point is, I occupy many states right now, and for most of them there is nothing it is like to occupy them. Some of these states there is nothing it is like for me to occupy are even occurrent mental states. For instance, I occupy the state of having certain visual receptors fire, or of certain language center modules assigning thematic roles to the constituents of the sentences I am now formulating. Unaware of these processes and states as I am, there is nothing it is like for me to occupy them. But when it comes to the conscious visual experience, clearly there is something it's like for me. *What* it's like for me to have this conscious visual experience it's now common to call its "phenomenal character". We can thus think of phenomenal character as the answer to the question, "what is it like for you to see what you see now?"

Now, in general, if someone asks what X is like—whether it be an object, event, or state—the answer, that it is like P, seems to involve predicating a property of X. "What is your dog like? She's very friendly." I'm claiming that

the dog instantiates the property of being friendly. “What was the play like?” “It was long and boring.” Again, it is natural to say that I am attributing the properties of being long and boring to the play. So it doesn’t seem much of a stretch to say that when someone asks of E, what is it like?, the answer, characterizing its phenomenal character, say Pe, is a matter of claiming that E instantiates Pe. On this way of looking at it, phenomenal characters are just properties of conscious states. The hard part is then to say what kind of property: Intrinsic or relational? Physical, functional, or irreducibly mental? We all know partisans of each of these alternatives.

While a lot of literature concerns the nature of phenomenal properties themselves, and rightly so, I want to focus right now on what it is to have a phenomenal property; that is, on the nature of the relation the conscious subject bears to the phenomenal character of her mental states. For it seems to me that while straightforward instantiation¹ is what you get when you answer what-is-it-like questions for most objects, events, and states, it doesn’t seem adequate to the case of conscious mental states. That is, I want to say that when looking out at the snowy woods right now, as I write these words, I’m not (or my visual state is not) just *instantiating* a phenomenal character, Pe; rather, I’m *experiencing* it. And a large part of the puzzle of consciousness is just this: what more is involved in *experiencing* something than merely instantiating it?

One popular way to analyze experience is to understand it in terms of representation: experiencing X is a matter of representing X. This is behind two important positions on conscious experience, higher order theory (HO) and representationalism. (The two are sometimes held together.)² I will ultimately reject the idea that experience can be explained in terms of representation, but for now I want to explore how far we can get with this idea.

According to HO, what distinguishes an experience from the mere instantiation of a property is the fact that the experience involves a state of awareness together with the state that is the object of the awareness. I merely instantiate the phenomenal character Pe, as I instantiate all sorts of properties, until I occupy a state of representing myself (in the right way, of course) as instantiating Pe; that’s when it becomes the full-fledged experience E. Phenomenal consciousness is a matter of being conscious of phenomenal characters, which is a matter of occupying higher-order representational states with the phenomenal character instantiations as their contents.

Representationalism approaches the question from the other side. The idea is that (at least part of) what distinguishes the experiencing of phenomenal character from other cases of property instantiation is the kind of property instantiated. Utilizing the so-called “transparency” argument, representationalists maintain that experiencing is a way of representing the world; this is what makes it peculiarly mental in fact, and therefore what distinguishes instantiating phenomenal character from instantiating weight

or height—what distinguishes, say, perceptual experience from digestive processes.

There are two ways to understand a representationalist treatment of phenomenal character, and, I will argue, only one of them really addresses how experiencing differs from merely instantiating. On the first way, phenomenal character is attributed not to experience itself, but to the external objects of experience. So, for instance, the phenomenal character of my visual experience of the snowy woods outside my window is the complex of color and shape properties instantiated in the snow and trees. Perhaps the way to put it is this. One experiences, as opposed to merely instantiates, a phenomenal character in the sense that one is representing something else as instantiating it.³

This form of representationalism—call it “relational” representationalism (RR)—shares with HO the idea that what is distinctive of experience is that it is a specific kind of relation, a cognitive relation between a subject (or one of her states) and what is being experienced. Where HO puts the experiential relation inside the head, the relational representationalist puts it between the head and the outside world. But the basic idea is shared, that experiencing something is a matter of representing it.

Now most representationalists do not literally attribute phenomenal properties to the objects of perceptual experience, as on the relational version. Rather, on their view, what I’ll call “internalist” representationalism (IR), phenomenal properties are instantiated in us, not the outside world. However, a phenomenal property is itself a representation, and phenomenal properties are typed by their representational contents. The phenomenal character of my visual experience of the snowy woods then is not literally the colors and shapes of the snow and the trees, but the property instantiated in me of representing those colors and shapes.⁴

Now, as I said above, it seems to me that only one of these versions of representationalism—it’s RR—has an account of what distinguishes experiencing from mere instantiating. True, on IR, the kinds of properties instantiated, being representational, are significantly different from most other properties. However, the having of the property, what it is to *experience* it, is not itself characterized in terms of representation. What’s had is representational, but it isn’t itself represented. Let me elaborate a bit.

As I look at that snowy ground, the whitish character of my visual experience is an element of its phenomenal character. What’s it like to see the snow on the ground? “Whitish” is part of the answer. So two questions immediately arise: First, what is the whitishness instantiated in? Second, what is it to *experience* the whitishness, as opposed to merely instantiate it? Of course these two questions are connected. Now, if being whitish is something that the snow outside is, then experiencing it can be plausibly identified with a state of me that represents it. We then have the property instantiated in one thing, the snow on the ground outside, and the experience

instantiated in me by virtue of my representing the snow on the ground as white. This would be RR, and it straightforwardly treats experiencing *x*'s being *F* as representing *x*'s being *F*.

But now consider IR. On this view, the whitish character is a property of my experience itself. Which property? It's the property of representing the snow on the ground outside as white. So is the phenomenal character itself experienced by being represented on this view? No it isn't. The phenomenal character is instantiated in the experience, but it isn't itself represented by me, so therefore experiencing the phenomenal character is not, on this view, a matter of representing it.⁵

I want now to argue that a combination of HO and IR—call it HOIR—has a better chance of adequately explaining what is distinctive about experiencing than either HO by itself or RR. First, consider RR. Phenomenologically, it sure seems to capture something right about the nature of (at least visual) experience. When I look at those snowy woods, the colors and shapes that seem to constitute the phenomenal character of my experience—what answers “what's it like?”—are presented as features of the scene of which I'm aware. I visually experience the snowy woods themselves it seems. This is of course the force of the much-discussed “transparency” argument.

However, there is a major stumbling block for RR here: the possibility of hallucination.⁶ Since it's possible that I could be having a visual experience as of snowy woods even though I'm a brain in a vat, and since there would still be something it's like for me to have such an experience—it would have phenomenal character—the phenomenal character cannot be a matter of features of the outside world. Though I'm not inclined in that direction anyway, notice it doesn't help to adopt “disjunctivism” here.⁷ Disjunctivists can perhaps claim that veridical perceptual experience should be understood relationally, and that hallucinations, despite their being subjectively indiscriminable from veridical perceptions, have a fundamentally different nature. I don't buy that, but it doesn't matter for our purposes. For while that move may help with the epistemological program to which many disjunctivists are wedded, it doesn't help with our project. Since hallucinations, whatever else they are, are experiences, we still need an account of what it is to experience the phenomenal character present in hallucinations. The advocate of RR has very little to say about this.

The HO theorist, on the other hand, has no problem with hallucinations. Hallucinations are phenomenal states, and one is just as capable of representing that one is having a certain phenomenal state when that state is hallucinatory as when it isn't. The object of the experience, the phenomenal state, is there either way. So capturing experience as a representational relation is not threatened by hallucinations (at least not standard ones—a point I'll come to below).

HO might then seem to fill the bill on its own, but there is still an issue about how to characterize the target state, the phenomenal state we experience when occupying the higher-order state. The problem is the “transparency” intuition. While phenomenal character must be internal, since hallucinations have it, phenomenal character also seems very much a way of presenting the world to us. What the representationalist, especially the relational one, seems to capture about experience is that it is a matter of things appearing to a subject. Now we saw that there is a problem with literally having the things out there as the relata we’re looking for, given the possibility of hallucination. But suppose we treat experiencing as a matter of an internal awareness of how we are representing the external world. Then we might have all the ingredients we need. Experience is a proper relation, and transparency is preserved. Hence, it appears, a promising position on what distinguishes experiencing from mere instantiating is the combination of HO with IR, or HOIR.

As I said above, I don’t think in the end that experiencing can be adequately reconstructed in terms of representing. Having presented what I think is the best version of that position, I will now make my case against it by posing three challenges to HOIR. The first two are relatively familiar and address fairly specific features of HOIR itself. The third challenge goes more to the heart of the claim that experience can be understood in terms of representation, and suggests the need for a radically different model. Unfortunately (see footnote 6) the suggested model suffers from a serious problem as well.

The first challenge concerns the IR portion of HOIR. The problem is that I don’t think phenomenal properties can plausibly be identified with representational properties. Suppose, as most representationalists do, that the representational states in question are typed widely, or externalistically (see footnote 1). So, for instance, the whitish phenomenal character of my visual experience of the snow is identical to my visual state’s representing a certain surface spectral reflectance. A major problem for this position—more easily seen with chromatic experiences—is the possibility of phenomenal inversion. Assuming it’s possible for me to have an experience while looking at something red in good light that is phenomenally just like the experience my inverted twin would have looking at something green in good light, it can’t be that the phenomenal character is identical to the property of representing a particular (or set of) surface spectral reflectance(s). Of course there are moves to make here. One can either deny the possibility of phenomenal inversion, or insist that when this happens one of the members of the inverted pair is misrepresenting. But I don’t think either move is successful in the end.⁸

There are those who type the representational states narrowly, and thus can avoid the objection from phenomenal inversion (or, at least the one described above—there are ways to press an inversion objection against the narrow version too, but I’m not going to do that here). The narrow

representational position can be understood in two ways. First, the narrow type is a functional type. Representational states are also functional states—that is, states that play a certain causal role—and one can distinguish their functional roles from features of distal objects that they represent. On this view, phenomenal character is determined by functional role, not what is represented. However, if this is the idea, it's unclear why this counts as a representationalist position at all. Phenomenal character is now divorced from representational content.

Another way to take the narrow representationalist position is to treat phenomenal character as a kind of Fregean sense. So, for instance, with color experiences, the phenomenal character of the experience is the sense, while the surface spectral reflectance is the reference. By making phenomenal character a sense—a mode of presentation—and not merely a functional property, one legitimates the idea that something genuinely representational is going on here.⁹

However, how is the phenomenal character supposed to be a mode of presentation? How is it presenting the reference, the surface spectral reflectance? One idea would be to characterize the sense descriptively as “the distal property responsible for the reddish phenomenal quality of this experience”. One could then allow that two subjects, inverted twins, could occupy visual states with the same sense but, due to differences in their environments or their constitutions, those visual states had different references—they referred to different distal properties. The problem here, though, is that what's doing the mode of presentation work is the description, not the phenomenal character itself. Notice that the phenomenal character is mentioned in the description, and its role there is purely as a property instantiated by the visual state (or the subject). The only representational role it plays is satisfying the effect role in the descriptive condition that picks out the distal cause.

So far I've looked at a problem with treating phenomenal character as an IR state. But there are problems with the HO aspect of HOIR as well. On the view under consideration, to visually experience the white snowy woods is to occupy a representational state whose content is that one is now occupying another representational state concerning the snowy woods outside. Suppose for the moment that we ignore the problem with the characterization of the target state itself. Still, I maintain, the representational relation between the higher-order state and the target state does not adequately capture the awareness or experience relation that we're after. In several ways, there is just too much cognitive “distance” between the two states to capture what is distinctive of experience. This can be brought out through the second and third problems mentioned above.

The second problem with HOIR, then, is the issue of misrepresentation - not, as discussed before, with respect to the target state, but rather with respect to the higher-order state.¹⁰ Assuming that the higher-order state is a

standard representational state, it seems possible that it could misrepresent the target state. In fact, such misrepresentations could take the form of either illusions or hallucinations. That is, while occupying a perceptual state that is representing a white snowy forest ground outside, I could represent myself as occupying a perceptual state that represents a snowy dirty city street. Or, even more startling a possibility, I could represent myself as occupying a perceptual state that I am not occupying at all.

So what's the problem posed by these possibilities? Why shouldn't there be such misrepresentations possible? The issue isn't that acknowledging such possibilities violates strictures involving privileged access or incorrigibility. Let's allow (at least for the moment) that indeed introspection, or self-monitoring, can be mistaken. The problem is how, in such cases, to characterize the experience; in particular, the phenomenal character of the experience. There seem to be some obvious options, none of them plausible. If the character is determined by the representational content of the target state, then it's unclear what function the higher-order state plays; and if the character is determined by the representational content of the higher-order state, it's unclear what function the target state plays. This is particularly acute in the case where there is no target state at all.

Consider the "internal hallucination" case; that is, a case where one's higher-order state represents oneself as occupying a first-order perceptual state that is in fact not occurring. In fact, I'm not in a visual state as of a snowy forest, but, due to a malfunction in the internal monitoring system, I represent myself as in such a state. Is there anything it is like to be in this internal hallucinatory state? And if so, what? Suppose one says that there is nothing it is like, because the state that is supposed to have the relevant phenomenal character doesn't exist. If so, then I ought to be able to tell the difference, since I seem to be able to tell the difference between being in a state there is something it is like to occupy and not being in such a state. If I can tell, however, then it isn't really a perfect hallucination, which seems contrary to the original hypothesis. After all, why couldn't there be an internal hallucination that is indiscriminable from a veridical higher-order state in the same way that it's possible for there to be a normal, external hallucination indiscriminable from a veridical perceptual state?

So suppose it really is indiscriminable from its veridical corresponding state, and there is indeed something it's like, and it's like being aware of a visual experience of a snowy forest. But that means that the phenomenal character is not a feature of a state of which I'm aware, but of the state of awareness itself. The phenomenal character is not the target of a representation, but inheres in the very representing. We've now lost the specifically relational character of the theory, a feature essential to capturing what is distinctive about experiencing, as opposed to merely instantiating, a phenomenal property.¹¹

As I said above, the first two challenges for HOIR are familiar from the literature on consciousness. Also, while I think they do constitute genuine problems for the view, I don't think they quite get to the heart of the matter. The third challenge, also discussed some, but not quite in the terms I want to frame it, will lead directly to the alternative I (tentatively) favor.

To begin, note that on HO, since the two states in question are distinct—only causally, not constitutively, related—just as there is a possibility of having the higher-order state without its target state, so too there is a possibility of having the lower-order state without the corresponding higher-order state. Unlike the internal hallucination possibility, which for all we know doesn't actually ever happen, this situation seems likely to happen all the time. In fact, some HO theorists deem it a virtue of their account that they make room for just this possibility.¹² Armstrong's (1981) well-known example of the absent-minded driver is supposed to be a case where the subject occupies the first-order perceptual states involved in seeing the road, other cars, traffic lights, and whatever else must be perceived for successful driving to take place, but without awareness of having perceived these things. She arrives home realizing that she had no conscious experiences of her driving, but of course confident that she wasn't literally driving blind. The straightforward account of this lack of awareness is that she occupied all the relevant visual states, but none of the requisite higher-order states, and so did not have conscious visual experiences while driving.

Whether the absent-minded driver case is best seen as a case of unconscious perception is controversial. Another plausible account is that the driver is consciously perceiving all the while, but, for lack of attention, is not storing the experiences in long term memory. But even if that's true of the absent-minded driver case, there's no reason to think unconscious perceptual states don't occur. For one thing, there are the blindsight cases, though of course the perceptual information afforded to the subject in these cases doesn't seem to be as rich as what we get in conscious perception. There are also plenty of cases of so-called subliminal perception, demonstrated by masking experiments. So let's just assume that perceptual states of which one is unaware are possible.¹³

While I see no problem in positing unconscious *perceptual* states, I do see a problem in positing unconscious *phenomenal* states. By the former I just mean states of the visual system that represent information concerning the three-dimensional scene in front of the observer, based on the light hitting the retina. We know from vision science that there are many stages of visual processing containing all sorts of information concerning the distal scene of which we are unaware. The idea that sometimes the end stages of this processing, of which we are usually aware, should occur unconsciously, does not seem at all out of the question. It's a straightforward empirical matter if that happens.

However, whether to count an unconscious perceptual state as a phenomenal state is another matter. One can of course choose to use the term “phenomenal” so it just means pretty much the same thing as “perceptual”, so any state of an input system with content counts as phenomenal. But notice then there would be no principled difference between the states of the perceptual system that are buried inaccessibly within them and those output states to which we have access. The only difference would be the question of access itself. Some might not find this consequence bothersome, but I do.

Before I explain why I think unconscious phenomenal states are problematic, I want to elaborate a bit on why HO is committed to them, and not merely to their corresponding unconscious perceptual states. So remember the structure of the theory. To experience phenomenal character is to occupy a state—distinct from the one that possesses the phenomenal character—that represents one’s having that phenomenal character. The phenomenal character is instantiated in the target state, and what turns mere instantiation into experience is the presence of the higher-order state. Hence the possibility of a phenomenal state—a state instantiating phenomenal character—of which we are totally unconscious falls directly out of this structure.

In fact, this is a point that HO advocates like Rosenthal and Lycan have insisted on for years. A common objection to HO has been this: how can occupying a higher-order state that represents a first-order perceptual state turn it from being unconscious, or non-phenomenal, into a conscious, phenomenal one? What kind of magic is that? How can mere representation accomplish this feat? Their answer—which seems perfectly apt to me—is that the question displays a serious misunderstanding of the theory. It’s not that consciousness is a feature of the perceptual state which it is caused to have when it gets represented. On the contrary. The presence of the higher-order state has no relevant effect on the intrinsic properties of the first-order perceptual state. It doesn’t come to take on some new feature of being conscious—or, being phenomenal, for that matter. Rather, its being conscious is purely a matter of our being conscious *of* it, which is then understood in terms of the presence of the higher-order state. But this means the presence of the higher-order state cannot be responsible for changing a mere perceptual, or informational state into a phenomenal one either. If awareness of phenomenal character is accomplished by the presence of the higher-order state, then the phenomenal character has to be a feature of the target state independently of the presence of the higher-order state.

Let’s assume then that HO is committed to the possibility of unconscious states with phenomenal character. So, what’s the problem? Remember, we are understanding phenomenal character as that which supplies the answer to the “what” in “what is it like to ___?” for any experience. The problem, then, in the idea that there can be unconscious instantiations of phenomenal character is that, if we seriously reflect on what phenomenal character is, it doesn’t seem that such a feature can be instantiated without being

experienced, and therefore it could not be instantiated in an unconscious state.

Let me emphasize again that it isn't merely the property of representing the features of distal objects—their spectral reflectances, shapes, and spatial orientations—that is at issue here. Of course there is no issue about such features being represented by states of the visual system without our being aware of these representations. But phenomenal character is more than the property of representing such-and-such features of objects in our environment. It's a matter of how objects *appear* to us: how they *look* and *feel*. Looking or feeling a certain way are not something objects can do unless they are being experienced.

Now there is a way of just turning the question of unconscious phenomenal states into a purely semantic one. That is, even if one thinks that, say, pains and tickles, to use especially intuitive examples, are essentially feelings, and therefore experienced, HO theorists can accommodate the intuition as follows. They do this by insisting that the controversy just trades on an equivocation on the term “pain”. When one is consciously feeling a pain, there are two states occupied by the subject of the experience: the “pain itself”, strictly speaking, and the state of being aware of it, the higher-order state that represents one as having that pain. Now, when we attribute pain to someone, it's possible to mean either the pain itself—that is, just the target, first-order state—or to mean the entire complex of the pain together with the awareness of it. Those who use the term one way, to refer to the target alone, the “pain itself”, will find no problem with the idea of an unconscious pain. Those who use it the other way will of course withhold attributing pain when it is unconscious. Looked at this way, there is no substantive controversy, no real disagreement.

But I think this is the wrong way to look at it. As I see it, this thing we're aware of, the pain itself, is itself something essentially felt. And I think the same goes for phenomenal colors and sounds. That is, phenomenal colors are essentially *ways of appearing*, and so one can't remove the experiential component and still have the phenomenal color. Indeed, when it comes to sounds, if we take the same line, which I advocate, it means we ought to take another look at that old saw about the tree in the forest. It turns out, I believe, there is no sound—at least no phenomenal sound—if there's no one to hear the tree fall.

Does this mean that there are no sounds and colors in a world without conscious subjects? No, though there may turn out not to be any pains, and *this* difference might be a purely semantic issue. What I mean is this. There is a perfectly good sense in which colors and sounds, as well as all the other secondary qualities, can be identified either with certain dispositional properties of distal objects or with the categorical grounds of those dispositions. So being red might be a matter of being disposed to cause certain phenomenal experiences (where this, again, is interpreted

as experiencing a phenomenal color that is itself essentially experienced), or having a certain surface spectral reflectance, which grounds the disposition. If we make the same move for sound—I assume the ground of the disposition to cause the relevant phenomenal state would be a property of an event, involving a certain propagation of air waves—then there would be a perfectly good sense in which that lonely tree that fell in the forest made a sound. But what I insist on is that these objective colors and sounds¹⁴ are distinct properties from the phenomenal colors and sounds that are essentially ways of appearing/feeling.

Now, when it comes to pains, the semantic issue is this. For some, “pain” might only refer to the phenomenal property, and therefore it is just contradictory to speak of unconscious pain. Others, however, might use the term also to refer to the relevant dispositions, or categorical grounds thereof, which presumably would include bodily damage, or perhaps certain neurological states. For them unconscious pains would be just like unseen colors and unheard sounds. On my view, there’s no reason to dispute the existence of such dispositions and their categorical grounds, so of course they are there to be referred to. The only question is whether there is an acceptable use of “pain” that does that. Indeed, a purely semantic, and not very interesting question.

In fact, I think the existence of this semantic question, concerning whether or not “pain” can refer to the relevant disposition or its ground, explains the plausibility of the move to treat the phenomenal case as a purely semantic question. The characterization of the two questions is nearly identical, except where the HO theorist thinks it applies to “pain” as it is used to ascribe the truly phenomenal character, I think it applies to “pain” as it is used to ascribe the disposition (or ground of the disposition) to cause the phenomenal character. But given the subtle difference between the two, it’s not hard to see how one might think one avoids the substantive question regarding the possibility of unconscious phenomenal character by treating it as a purely semantic issue. After all, there is a purely semantic question very close by.

So the third objection to HOIR, the one that strikes most deeply against the attempt to treat experiencing phenomenal character as representing it, is that it is essential to such a view that what is represented is ontologically independent of the representation of it. Yet, if what I’ve argued above is correct, it is not the case that the object of experience is ontologically independent of experience. Berkeley, in saying “*esse est percipi*”, was right about phenomenal character, even if wrong about physical objects.

It seems then, that we have a problem. On the one hand, consciousness, or awareness, appears to have a relational, act/object structure. There is the awareness, and there is what one is aware of. If we grant that to be phenomenally conscious, for there to be something it is like to see, hear, or feel pain, is to be aware of what it’s like, then it seems that what one is aware

of should be ontologically independent of the awareness of it. Experiencing, then, is different from mere instantiating, because in addition to whatever property it is one is instantiating, one is also aware of instantiating it. This is the line expressed in HOIR.

On the other hand, phenomenal characters like those of color, sound, and pain don't seem to be the kind of properties that can merely be instantiated. They seem to be essentially tied to being experienced. I've argued that the kind of property pain involves a way of feeling, just as color is a way of appearing. But this seems to conflict with the relational act/object structure described above, since *how* something appears on that model is independent of its appearing any way at all. For instance, shape seems to fit this model quite well. "What shape does the block appear to have?" has answers like "square" and "round", where squareness and roundness are perfectly capable of being instantiated in a block without its appearing to any subject of experience at all. But though "red" is also a perfectly good answer to "What color does the block appear to be?", I'm arguing that it doesn't make sense (except in the extended, dispositional sense of color terms) to attribute redness to it without appearing to a subject of experience. How should we understand the structure of appearing then?

Here's one proposal. Let's call it the "appearance theory".¹⁵ Suppose we understand appearing, or awareness, as a relation holding between a mind, a subject of experience, and an object. Phenomenal character, then—a way of appearing—is understood as a determinate of the appearing relation. For instance, when I am visually experiencing the snowy ground outside, I stand in the awareness relation to the snowy ground, and the whitish phenomenal character is the determinate form of that relation.¹⁶

In contrast to HOIR, phenomenal character is not a feature of the object of awareness, but of the awareness relation itself. This gets around the paradox we confronted above. The problem was that on the one hand, awareness of phenomenal character seemed to involve phenomenal character being what one is aware of, but that seems to entail that phenomenal character is independent of one's being aware of it. On the other hand, it doesn't seem to be the kind of feature that can be possessed by an object when a subject is unaware of it. By making phenomenal character a feature of the awareness relation itself, the paradox is dissolved. Phenomenal character is essentially a way of appearing, a feature that is only instantiated when appearing is taking place. Of course it's not correct now to say that phenomenal character is what one is aware of, but that doesn't mean that it isn't correct to say that it still answers the question, "what is it like?". *What* a visual experience is like is a feature of how an object appears, the precise form of the appearing relation holding between the subject and the object.

Notice that this also respects the transparency intuition, the idea that phenomenal character essentially involves how things appear. It's just that *how* an object appears is not a matter of its appearing to have some property,

but rather of its standing in a certain kind of appearance relation to the subject. On this view, “looks red” is more basic than “red”. Something doesn’t *look* red because it appears *to be* red, but rather it is red because, under standard conditions, it looks red, where the latter is understood as a relation, and not an intrinsic property of the subject’s state.

Well, suppose we can make sense of the appearance theory as just described. The problem is that it has a fatal flaw, the same one we found with RR above. How does one deal with hallucination on this theory? If one is seeing pink elephants and there aren’t any, then to what is one standing in the awareness relation? What is appearing pinkishly (and elephantly-shaped) to the subject? HOIR has no problem with seeing pink elephants, since what one is aware of is one’s visual representation of pink elephants, and that exists. But the appearance theory doesn’t seem to have such a move available.

Note, though, that it’s only hallucination that causes a problem, not illusion. Suppose, for instance, that one is looking at a white block under non-standard light and it looks green. This is clearly no problem for a representationalist theory, since they can say that one is representing the block as green. But it is also no problem for the appearance theory, since they too can say that the block appears green. That is, the phenomenal character of the appearing relation between the subject and the block is greenish. The problem, then, is what to do when there’s no object appearing to one at all.

One obvious move is to appeal to sense data. Traditionally, sense data were posited in order to deal with hallucination; to provide objects of perception when the world fails on that score. After-images, pink elephants, and daggers suspended in the air all seem to be things we see, yet they don’t exist in the physical environment around us. So make seeing a relation to mental entities of some sort—sense data—and you have guaranteed objects of perception.

Notice that treating perception as a relation to sense data does not automatically entail adopting the appearance theory. As Alex Byrne (2001) makes clear in his defense of “intentionalism” (what I’m calling “representationalism”), sense data theory is a perfectly straightforward version of the doctrine. In particular, sense data provide the solution to the hallucination problem for RR. Phenomenal character is a quality of the object of perception—a quality of the sense datum—and to be aware of it is to represent it.¹⁷

So positing sense data is neutral between the appearance theory and RR. Still, just as sense data solve the hallucination problem for RR they can do the same for the appearance theory. The idea then is this. Awareness (or its inverse, appearing) is a relation between minds and sense data, and the phenomenal character of such experiences is a feature of the relation. A particular sense datum stands in the appearing-redly relation to one’s mind just in case one is having a reddish visual experience.

At first blush, however, it seems to me that sense data fit better with a representationalist theory than with the appearance theory. The reason is this. According to representationalism, phenomenal character is a property of the object of perception. So the whitish quality of my visual experience of the snowy ground is a feature of the snowy-ground-sense-datum. Sense data are specifically fashioned to be the kinds of objects that have qualitative features like phenomenal colors and sounds. What's more, it's unclear what other kinds of properties they can have. So, if one removes phenomenal characters from the objects of perception, from the sense data in this case, and attributes them instead to the relations between subjects and sense data, then it's unclear what properties are left to qualify the sense data themselves. Perhaps sense data are already too weird to take seriously, but making them propertyless certainly makes it worse.

Of course one can just be a physicalist identity theorist about sense data, and this would solve the problem of providing them with properties. So one could say that sense data are brain states (or events), and they have neurological properties independently of their being perceived. Perception, then, would be a matter of the subject—the brain, I suppose—standing in the awareness relation to these brain states, and again, phenomenal character could be a feature of this relation. On this view there is nothing metaphysically suspect about sense data; neither from their location in the physical world, nor from their possession of properties on their own.

But let's set aside sense data for now, as I think they really do fit better with a representationalist theory than with the appearance theory. So what do I propose instead? The picture I have is this, though I still don't know how to make it ontologically kosher. As a result of the brain's processing of information through its various input channels—all physically and functionally describable—a conscious experience results. (Whether this "resulting" is a matter of emergent causation or is itself physically explicable is a question I will leave aside here—after all, there's always that pesky explanatory gap to contend with.) Conscious experience, in line with the appearance view just presented, is a matter of the mind, the subject, being appeared to by an array of virtual objects. Let me briefly elaborate.

Perhaps the clearest way to present what I have in mind is to appeal to the discredited model of the Cartesian theater. We are trying to figure out what it is to experience phenomenal character: the colors, sounds, tastes, and other raw feels that populate sensory experience. We've come to the conclusion (I have, anyway) that experiencing is a kind of relation whose determinates correspond to the various phenomenal characters; in other words, phenomenal characters are ways things appear. So one aspect of the Cartesian theater model has to do with the role of the subject of experience as sole audience member, constituting a point of view on these appearances. But now, what are these appearances?

Here's where the second aspect of the Cartesian theater model comes into play. Just as the objects that seemingly appear to us, that we track, in a movie theater are fictional—or, as I prefer to think of them, virtual—so too the objects of experience are virtual. Perhaps a virtual reality device is a better model than the Cartesian theater, but the idea is much the same. As a result of subconscious cognitive interaction with the world of physical reality, then, conscious experience in the form of a Cartesian theater is constructed. The Cartesian theater is what veridical and hallucinatory experiences share.

So what distinguishes veridical experience from hallucination? Well, it isn't going to be a matter of there really being objects out there in the world instantiating the properties experience seems to attribute to them. Rather, assuming, as I do, that there is a physical reality—describable by physics—outside the mind that disciplines the construction of the theater through causal interaction with the brain, then my experiences are largely veridical. If, however, through envatment, or some other weird occurrence, my brain's constructive activity becomes unmoored from external physical reality, then I'm hallucinating.

I don't know how to make ontological sense of virtual objects, but it seems to me we need some such category anyway. As Georges Rey has emphasized in other contexts,¹⁸ the world as we experience it seems to contain many kinds of objects for which no clear physicalist-reductionist theory seems adequate. From Kanizsa triangles, to after-images, to phonemes, and perhaps even to middle-sized physical objects, the problem of finding a place for such things in the world of physics seems intractable. Yet, it seems hard to explain, or even adequately characterize, our psychological states if we don't quantify over such objects. After all, we classify psychological states by contents, and which objects have which properties and stand in which relations to each other seems to be the very stuff of content. So, maybe having conscious experience just is a matter of constructing, in a Kantian sort of way, a world of appearances. Just maybe.¹⁹

Notes

1. Of course metaphysicians might think there's nothing straightforward about instantiation, but not being a metaphysician I'm happy not to worry about that.
2. Rosenthal (1997) and Lycan (1997) are two prominent advocates of higher-order theory, while Byrne (2001), Dretske (1995), Harman (1990), and Tye (1995) are among the principal representationalists. Lycan is an example of someone who endorses both HO and representationalism.
3. It's not clear to me whether any of the representationalists mentioned above actually holds this position. The one who comes closest, it seems to me, is Dretske.
4. Just to avoid confusion about terminology, what I'm calling here "internalist" representationalism is consistent with the position that the representational contents in question are wide contents, concerning distal properties of objects,

and not narrow contents, or senses. The content of the representation is external, but what's internal is the phenomenal character itself, since it's being identified with a property of the representation, not with a property of the distal object.

5. One might think that IR too can reconstruct experiencing Pe in terms of representing Pe because Pe is identified with E's content, an entity distinct from both E itself and the snowy ground outside. Contents, on this view, are things like propositions, with truth (or correctness) conditions, and therefore not identical to the states of affairs that make them true (or correct). I don't think this helps, for two reasons. First, it seems to me, and I don't want to lean heavily on this, that if we introduce contents of this sort in between the snowy ground's being white and the experiential state, then the right way to describe the situation is that E, the state, *expresses* the propositional content and *represents* the snowy ground; and I think expression, as opposed to representation, is not in the ballpark as an analysis for experience. But second, and more important, it seems very odd to attribute whitishness—what we experience when looking at the snowy ground—to abstract objects like propositions.
6. Unfortunately for me, this will also be a problem for the view I defend below. It's possible that the fix I propose there would work for RR, but I doubt any advocate of RR would buy it. Anyway, as will become clear below, I have an independent reason for abandoning the representational framework, and therefore RR in particular.
7. For a defense of disjunctivism, see Martin (2004).
8. In Levine (2003) I press this objection and respond to various attempts to overcome it.
9. See Thompson (2009) for a defense of this view.
10. For discussion of this objection to HO see Levine (2001, section 4.4), Neander (1998), and Rosenthal (1997).
11. One way around this problem is suggested by Kriegel's self-representational theory. See Kriegel (2006), and Levine (2006) for a critique of the view.
12. Again, see Rosenthal (1997).
13. For blindsight, see Weiskrantz (1986), and for subliminal perception see Marcel (1983).
14. If any such there be, a point that C.L. Hardin (1988) would dispute, at least with regard to color.
15. For versions of this view, see Alston (1999), Langsam (1997), and Levine (2008).
16. Obviously there would be a hierarchy here of determinables/determinates. So visually appearing is a determinate of appearing, but a determinable of visually appearing whitish.
17. Of course materialists would be loathe to endorse this response to the problem of hallucinations. Now, you might try identifying sense data with neural entities, but then you lose the solution to the problem since neural entities don't have the properties presented in experience.
18. See Rey (2005) for a good summary of his position.
19. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Michigan Philosophy Spring Colloquium, March 20–21, 2009. I want to thank the audience for their helpful discussion, and especially my commentator on that occasion, Giacomo Mollo.

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