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A somewhat eliminativist proposal about phenomenal consciousness

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Abstract: This paper develops a proposal about phenomenal consciousness that is (somewhat) eliminativist in two respects. First, regarded in the light of some common ways of conceiving of consciousness, the proposal is "deflationary". Second, it opens up space for a development in which what we now naturally think about as consciousness turns out to be many different things.

1. Introduction

Let eliminativism about an object, x , or property, X , be the claim that x doesn't exist or X is not instantiated. Atheists are in this sense eliminativists about all gods, Christians are eliminativists about Zeus. More universally, we tend these days to be eliminativists about impetus, caloric and phlogiston.

One may wonder how global the threat of elimination is. Among the objects and properties that we take to exist or be instantiated today, which ones may be up for "elimination" tomorrow? This paper focuses on the case of phenomenal consciousness, or "what it is like" to be in certain mental states.

It is often claimed that consciousness is secure against elimination. Flanagan, for example, urges that consciousness differs importantly from objects and properties that have been "eliminated" in the past. Phlogiston was hypothesised to exist because it could explain phenomena that are more immediately present to us, like burning and rusting. But consciousness is not, or not only, assumed to exist because it explains

other, more immediately observable phenomena. Consciousness is also, and perhaps primarily, assumed to exist because it is *itself* immediately present to us. As Flanagan puts it: "consciousness as a phenomenon to be explained has a secure place at the observational periphery" (1992, 33; cf. also Chalmers 1996, 102).

It's easy to feel the force of Flanagan's suggestion. However, I shall try to cast some doubt on it in what follows.

Section 2 makes some preliminary remarks about "eliminativist" and "revisionist" outcomes of theoretical developments. Section 3 develops the somewhat eliminativist proposal about phenomenal consciousness. Section 4 elaborates on the eliminativist character of the proposal. Section 5 comments on the relation between the proposal and "monitor theories" of consciousness.

2. Eliminativist and revisionist conclusions

Every now and then, we realise that things are not quite the way we once thought they were. Nothing is quite the way Newtonians thought that mass were. The element centrally involved in burning and rusting is not the way phlogiston was taken to be. The heat of a body is not what caloric theorists thought it was. Royalties don't exercise power with a divine mandate, and solidity is not a matter of being dense all over.

In some cases where we realise that things aren't the way we thought they were, we end up saying *eliminativist* things like, "there is no x". In other cases, we end up saying *revisionist* things like, "x is not quite what we thought it was".

What determines whether, in a given case, we end up saying one thing or the other? Presumably the *magnitude* of our change of view – however exactly that should be measured – plays some role. If our views on a topic change (by some measure) to a significant extent, we are presumably more inclined to draw an eliminativist conclusion than if they revised to a lesser extent. But it's possible that more "pragmatic" factors play a role as well, for example, whether researchers judge that

they will make a greater impact by using one or the other kind of formulation (c.f. Churchland 1986, 283-4; and Stich 1996, chapter 1).

However that may be, it seems to me that, whether in a given case we end up talking in an eliminativist or a revisionist way is not *as such* of any interest. What is of interest is our change of view, and I suggest that we can achieve at least an intuitive sense of how significant such a change is that is independent of how we end up speaking. For example, if Lavoisier had convinced us to say things like, "phlogiston exists but it's not what we thought it was", I suggest that we could have achieved the same appreciation of the theoretical change that he contributed to bring about.

I shall next develop a proposal concerning consciousness. Whether accepting this proposal would lead us to make eliminativist or revisionist claims, I believe that, if one comes from a certain natural and commonly occupied starting point, it would amount to a significant change of view.

3. A proposal about phenomenal consciousness

I shall develop my proposal in three steps.

Step 1: Sifting out the "Galilean qualities". Consider a visual experience of a ripe lemon in good lighting condition. Salient in this experience is a certain yellowish quality. It's somewhat tricky to make this quality a joint topic of conversation, because there are so many disagreements about it. For example, while naïve realists take it to be a property of lemons, sense-datum theorists to be a property of sense-data, some qualia theorists may take it to be a property of conscious experiences, and others take it to not be instantiated at all. There is also disagreement about how we talk, should talk, and can talk about this quality. Some find it natural to use the term "yellow" to talk about it, but others think that we don't have a public language term for it, and even that we *can't introduce* such a term (Thau 2002, section 5.13).

But despite these obstacles, I think we can make this kind of quality a joint topic of conversation. Whatever instantiates it, and whatever it can and should be called, it is

the kind of quality that is most salient in our colour experiences. I will suppose that we have a shared understanding of which type of quality this is.

I will call these qualities "Galilean", since I take it to be the kind of quality that Galileo was concerned with when he discussed what qualities belong to the world and what qualities belong to the mind. (I shall later distinguish these from alleged qualities of another type.) I use "Galilean quality" broadly, for qualities that are salient in various sense perceptions like sight, smell and taste, and bodily sensations like pains and itches. However, for brevity I shall focus on the Galilean qualities that are displayed in colour experiences.

My first proposal in working towards a somewhat eliminativist view of phenomenal consciousness is that *Galilean qualities are not constitutive properties of phenomenal consciousness*. Galilean qualities may be not instantiated at all, or they may be properties of objects like lemons. In either case, they don't contribute to constitute what it is like to have a conscious experience. I call this *The Separation Thesis*, since it says that consciousness and the Galilean qualities are, in a certain sense, separate.¹

The Separation Thesis is presumably somewhat controversial. But it is surprisingly hard to say *how* controversial it is. Even though it is quite central to our understanding of what consciousness is, few philosophers who discuss consciousness make clear whether they accept or reject it. (No doubt the difficulties in talking about the quality, noted above, contribute to this unclarity.) However, my impression – largely based on an admittedly non-scientific selection of conversations – is that few philosophers would deny The Separation Thesis out of hand. Moreover, and more importantly, I'm inclined to think there are good reasons to accept the thesis. Space does not allow an elaboration of these reasons however, and here The Separation Thesis will be just assumed.

Step 2: Noting the elusive character of whatever is left. Suppose The Separation Thesis is right. What then is phenomenal consciousness like? If what it's like to

¹ In Sundström (2007) I invoke The Separation Thesis to argue that the problem is often mischaracterised; I also suggest that eliminativism about consciousness should be taken seriously

experience a ripe lemon is not in part constituted by a Galilean quality, what *is* it like? It seems that whatever is left is pretty elusive. In fact, once the Galilean qualities are assumed to not be part of consciousness, one may start to wonder whether there is much or anything left of the phenomenon at all. Perhaps consciousness doesn't have such "secure place at the observational periphery" after all?

It has been suggested to me in this context that consciousness may be constituted, wholly or in part, by a set of non-Galilean qualities. The suggestion is that an experience of a ripe lemon displays *both* a Galilean quality and a quality of another kind. Even if the former doesn't constitute what the experience is like, the latter does.

However, even if I search really hard, I fail to find in my experiences a set of qualities over and above the Galilean ones. Granted, this may be because my introspection is deficient, or because I'm blinded by some prejudice. However, it may also be because there are no extra qualities there, and that those who seem to find them are projecting on the basis of some prejudice. My present case assumes that the latter view is the right one.

Step 3: Identifying whatever is left with first-person awareness. One might think that, even if steps 1 and 2 above are taken, there remains a robust and salient phenomenon of consciousness. For compare your typical, familiar visual experience of a ripe lemon with a subliminal experience of a ripe lemon. There is a striking difference between the two. The subliminal experience goes on "in the dark" while the other one has a vivid phenomenology.

The difference is surely salient. However, it seems to me that it can plausibly be accounted for in a rather deflationary way. The proposal is that the difference is simply one of first-person awareness. In the normal case, I am aware in a peculiar first-personal way of my visual experience, or that I have it. In the subliminal case, I'm not aware – or at least, I'm not aware in that way – of my experience or that I have it.

(section 5). The present paper traces a somewhat different route from The Separation Thesis to

4. The eliminativist character of the proposal

It is natural to think of phenomenally conscious states as somehow "shining" or "glowing". From that perspective, the present proposal seems to "deflate" our conception of consciousness. A tree doesn't shine any more when it is perceived than when it is not perceived; what comes and goes is only the relational property of being perceptually registered. According to the present proposal, the difference between a typical, familiar perception and a subliminal perception is of just the same kind.

The deflationary character of the proposal can also be brought out by contrasting it with certain suggestions about what "phenomenal realism" entails. According to Block, for example, you are a phenomenal realist only if you accept that consciousness resists a priori or armchairs analyses in "non-phenomenal terms" such as "representation, thought or function" (Block 2002b, 392). The present proposal would seem to qualify as non-realism about phenomenal consciousness, by Block's lights. It says that, if there is phenomenal consciousness at all, it is nothing other than a kind of representation, to wit, first-personal awareness; and, while it is presumably advisable to take into account everything you know about the world when you assess the proposal, I suspect it qualifies as an "armchair analysis", by Block's standards.

In addition to being deflationary, there is a further way in which the present proposal opens up space for an eliminativist-style development about phenomenal consciousness. Our understanding of the peculiar kind of first-person awareness we have of certain of our states is not terribly advanced, and it is certainly a live possibility that we will eventually distinguish rather different types of such awareness. For example, it is not obvious that one and the same process is in play when I am (i) aware that I experience a ripe lemon, (ii) aware that I want to marry my girlfriend, and (iii) aware that one of my tacit beliefs is that Winston Churchill had a kneecap. If consciousness is nothing other than a peculiar kind of first-personal awareness, and if there are several different kinds of such awareness, we may well end up judging that what we once thought about in terms of "consciousness" was many things.

5. Relation to monitor theories

There is a family of views according to which the phenomenal consciousness of a state is, at least in part, a matter of that state being "monitored" in some special way. On some such views, the consciousness of a state is a matter of the state being, in part, a representation of itself (e.g. Kriegel 2003). On other such views, the consciousness of a state is a matter of it being represented by another, "higher-order" state, which may be either perception-like (e.g. Lycan 1996) or belief-like (e.g. Rosenthal 2002).

What is the relation between the present proposal and these views? Two remarks are in order.

First, many or all monitor theorists take monitoring to constitute only a *part* of phenomenal consciousness. For example, Kriegel distinguishes "two aspects" of what a conscious experience of blue is like: a "qualitative" aspect and a "*for-me* aspect" (2005, 23). Monitoring is supposed to account only for the second, for-me aspect. The qualitative aspect gets a separate treatment. The present proposal is different. It suggests that consciousness doesn't have a qualitative aspect at all. Whatever qualities are displayed in conscious experience are not constitutive properties of what it is like.

Second, even with respect to the "for-me aspect" of consciousness, I believe the present proposal differs from at least some monitor theories. At any rate, I think there's a difference in what the views purport to explain. The present proposal is emphatically *deflationary* about consciousness. Monitor theorists don't always or even standardly advertise their view as such, and it may not be how many or all of them regard the matter. It may be noted, though, that critics often emphasise the deflationary character of monitor theories, and complain that the theories reduce consciousness to a triviality (e.g. Block 2002a, 214; and Chalmers 1996, section 4.5). If the present proposal is right, these critics may well be right that monitor theories are seriously deflationary, but wrong to suppose that this tells against them.

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