

PHENOMENAL ANTI-REALISM AND THE ONTOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE

I. THE ANHOMOEOMERY OF ORDINARY PROCESSES

Contrast countable *things* (e.g., cars) and amassable *stuffs* (e.g., gold). *Prima facie*:

- Cars are anhomoeomeric: a car lacks proper parts which are themselves cars
- Gold is homoeomeric: any volume within a lump of gold is also a lump of gold.

Too picturesque. In particular, consider fruitcake: division of a fruitcake may or may not leave us with fruitcake as remainder; after all we may simply find ourselves with a sultana and “a mere sultana does not in itself constitute a lump of fruitcake” (Taylor 1985: 70). Also: salad, moussaka, rope, chain-mail, sedimentary rocks (e.g. coquina), and cloth.

Events ... occupy relatively to other situations [Mourelatos' generic name for the referents of verb predications] a position analogous to the one objects or things or substances occupy relatively to stuffs and properties or qualities. (Mourelatos 1978: 430)

Contrast countable *events* and *processes*. *Prima facie*:

- Events are anhomoeomeric: WWII is not made up of WWIIs.
- Processes are homoeomeric: if a jet is flying from 12 until 1 then any interval between 12 and 1 will be one during which the jet has flown some distance.

Again, too picturesque. Consider walking and running:

Human gait involves alternating sequences in which the body is supported first by one limb, which contacts the ground, and then by the other limb. Human gait has two modes, walking and running. One distinction between these two modes lies in the percentage of each cycle during which the body is supported by foot contact with the ground. When we walk, there is always at least one foot on the ground; and for a brief period of each cycle, both feet are on the ground. Accordingly, walking can be characterized as an alternating sequence of single and double support. In contrast, running involves alternating sequences of support and nonsupport, with the proportion of the cycle spent in support varying with speed. For both walking and running, however, each limb experiences a sequence of support and nonsupport during a single cycle. The period of support is referred to as the stance phase, and nonsupport is known as the swing phase ... one complete cycle ... is defined as a stride. (Enoka 2002: 179)

- Highly implausible to hold that for all activities, sub-intervals always determine in independence what is going on during them.
- Cf. sultanas always have enough within them to determine which cakes they are/aren't a part of!
- Nonetheless, a tin can be entirely filled with fruitcake even if a small volume is only so filled in virtue of its being a volume within a volume which is independently fruitcake.
- Likewise, one can run continuously for an hour even if one's single support phases only count as periods during which one is running in virtue of being parts of periods which are independently periods during which one has run.

II. CONSEQUENCES OF ANHOMOEOMERY

Imagine asking whether walking is going on during some interval.

- If we are asked whether some interval is one throughout which walking is going on, question can't be answered just on the basis of what is going on during the interval considered in independence.
- If we ask whether the interval *by itself* counts as a period over which the individual in question has walked, question is quite independent of whether the interval is one in which walking is going on.

Metaphysical moral: very precise questions about the timing of a process may demand that we consider significant timescales to avoid being blind to the presence/nature of a process in question.

III. EXPERIENCE AS PROCESS

- The verb “to experience” takes the progressive form in contrast to states.

I am experiencing colour for the first time! (said by Mary on release from her lab)

I am experiencing a nuisance odour/problems with noise in my neighbourhood.

I am experiencing palpitations/sharp pains in my lower back.

I am experiencing auditory/tactile/visual hallucinations.

I am experiencing after-images on certain objects/a pleasant sensation.

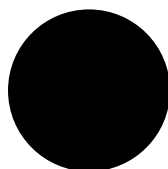
* I am knowing what it is like to see colour for the first time!

- Mourelatos provides a better test: process predications have mass quantified nominalization transcriptions. Thus, “I am experiencing colour for the first time!” transcribes as “There is, for the first time, *some* experiencing of colour by me!” This is mass quantified; hence a process predication.
- Contrast, “I saw colour for the first time!” which transcribes as “There was *a* (one) seeing/sighting of colour for the first time by me!” This is count quantified and so an event predication.
- Thinking of experience as a process is not in competition with count quantified talk of *experiences*. Experiences (events) result from division of experience.
- If experience is a process, the host of cases like walking compel us to consider the possibility that experience is anhomoeomeric too.
- If it were, then, as with walking, a mistake to think that we can always answer questions about the nature/existence of experience at very short time-scales independent of longer time-periods.
- This fact has important consequences for contemporary philosophy of mind. A case in point:

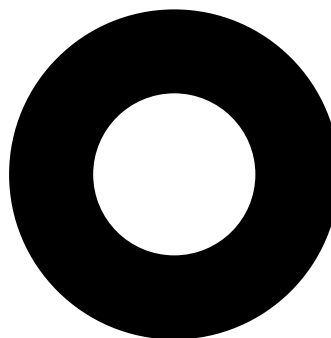
IV. DENNETT’S MASTER ARGUMENT

[A] target that is highly visible when presented briefly by itself can be rendered completely invisible by the subsequent presentation of a non-target object in the same (or nearby) spatial location. ‘Backward masking’ of this kind has its strongest influence not when target and mask objects are presented simultaneously, as intuition might suggest, but rather when a brief temporal gap [up to 100ms] is inserted between the presentation of the target and the mask.. (Enns Di Lollo 2000: 345)

Consider then a brief (say, 10ms) presentation to a subject first of a disc and then very shortly afterwards (say, 50ms) a ring in the same location.



First stimulus



Second, masking stimulus

Subjects consistently “swear that there was only one stimulus: the ring” (Dennett 1991: 141). If they are genuinely conscious of the disc, then this is not something that they are in a position to attest to.

Dennett avers that there are two accounts to be given between which nothing can decide.

- Stalinist account: only the ring is perceived; a delay in consciousness explains missing disc.
- Orwellian account: no delay; both disc and ring are perceived but the disc rapidly forgotten.

Why does the availability of these two accounts threaten anti-realism? According to Wright discourse exerts Cognitive Command just if

It is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within the discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standards of acceptability, or variation in personal evidence thresholds, so to speak, will involve something which may be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming. (Wright 1992: 144)

Realism is committed to CC. Wright: “show that a discourse lacks it and you will blow away with one stroke all conceivable forms of realist resistance” (*ibid.*: 148).

A reconstruction of Dennett’s argument.

- i. Assumption: Cognitive shortcoming on the part of the subject of experience is ruled out a priori with respect to their own current experience.
- ii. Thus, assuming Cognitive Command, competing accounts of a subject’s own phenomenology must also be ruled out a priori or excusable as a result of vagueness etc.
- iii. But competing accounts of a subject’s own phenomenology can be found which are not so excusable (here, Orwellian/Stalinesque accounts of masking).
- iv. Thus, the assumption of Cognitive Command is false; discourse about the phenomenal does not exhibit Cognitive Command.
- v. Hence, realism cannot be true.

V. VERIFICATIONISM AND SELF-INTIMATION

Is there really no possible way for us to decide between the two accounts? And even if there were, would that establish that there was no genuine difference? After all, by hypothesis, the Orwellian account admits a very brief phenomenal experience [of a disc] while the Stalinesque story does not. This looks like a pretty definite difference, whether or not we are ever smart enough to devise scientific experiments, the results of which favour (by standard scientific criteria) one account over the other. To deny that this is the case is to embrace old fashioned verificationism. And to this I am inclined to reply by modifying a remark of Mr. McCawber: “Verificationism! Foul play, sir! Take a drop more grog and you’ll get over the weakness of believing in verificationism.” (Tye 1993: 894)

In the case of perceptual knowledge ... one can construct a case ... where the subject is a brain in the vat, say – and everything will still seem the same to the subject. ... But in the case of consciousness, one cannot construct these sceptical hypotheses. ... There is no situation in which everything seems just the same to us but in which we are not conscious ... (Chalmers 1996: 195)

[T]he [broadly perceptual] view [of introspection is] that the existence of mental entities and mental facts is, logically speaking, as independent of our knowing about them introspectively, and of there being whatever means or mechanisms enable us to know about them introspectively, as the existence of physical entities and physical facts is of our knowing about them perceptually, or of there being the means or mechanisms that enable us to have perceptual knowledge of them. (Shoemaker 1994: 271)

SELF-INTIMATION: If a subject is undergoing perceptual experience with certain experiential properties, then that subject is in a position to know that they are undergoing perceptual experience with those properties simply in virtue of so undergoing.

Challenge: If some aspect of your experience was simply beyond your ken how could it then contribute to what, subjectively, it was like to be you?

VI. STAND-OFF

Dialectic

- Introspection rules out Orwellianism – don't need any "crucial experimental result" (Dennett 1991: 142).
- Puzzle: why does Dennett think that the realist faces competing accounts as opposed to just Stalinism?
- Orwellian counter-argument attempts to show that the first disc *must*, after all, be perceived.
- Stalinism best seen as attempt to preserve the invisibility of the disc in the masking trial whilst acknowledging the central plank of the Orwellian challenge.
- Stand-off arises because the costs of Stalinism parallel the costs of Orwellianism.
- My reply to all this is that both positions are premised on a false assumption.

Orwellian Challenge

- If no ring had been presented, subjects would have seen (and been in a position to report) the disc.
⇒ Dilemma: Either disc seen in both cases or consciousness delayed by *at least* 50ms quite generally.
- If the disc *is* seen, then SELF-INTIMATION must be mistaken.
- But necessary delays in consciousness implausible since, "There is abundant evidence that responses under conscious control ... occur with close to the minimum latencies (delays) that are physically possible" (Dennett 1991: 122).
- The Stalinist can respond by arguing that what retrospectively seem to be very quick conscious responses are in fact unconscious. But gone is the attractiveness of the Stalinist's insistence that a subject's conscious experience is something they are in position to know about.

VII. DIAGNOSIS AND CHALLENGE

Should we insist that the disc was experienced because if the ring hadn't intervened the disc would have been reported? That would be to make the mistake of supposing that we could "freeze-frame" the film in the Cartesian Theatre and make sure that the disc frame really did make it into the Theatre before the memory of it was obliterated by later events. (Dennett 1991: 142)

STRONG PSA: Irreducibly temporal facts have no place in explanations of sameness and difference across experiences. Present tense psychological facts are necessary and sufficient to explain any sameness or difference between conscious episodes. (Motivated if one thinks processes are homoeomeric.)

Trial 1: single disc presented at t_0 ; subject sees the disc at $t_0 + \delta t$ and reports having done so.

Trial 2: disc is presented, then masking ring 50ms after; subject reports seeing only the masking ring.

Very natural to ask: "What does the subject see at $t_0 + \delta t$ in the Trial 2?"

- We then think: either δt is very short, so subject sees the disc but shortly forgets (Orwellianism).
 - Alternatively, δt is longer, enough time for the disc to be "processed out" (Stalinism).
 - But this assumes that we can legitimately ask what is true at $t_0 + \delta t$ without taking into account the nature of subject's experience at any subsequent times. If experience is anhomoeomeric/Strong PSA rejected, we cannot assume this. Orwellian challenge fails.
- ✗ CAUSAL CONSTRAINT: For any experiential property whose instantiation by experience is the causal upshot of the visual (or auditory etc.) processing of certain information, experience cannot instantiate that property until the relevant information has begun to be received and processed. (Seems attractive.)
- ✗ But cf. WALKING CONSTRAINT: Walking is a part of the causal order. Thus, one cannot instantiate the property "... is walking," at t unless sufficient activity has gone on to ground walking at t regardless of what may come after t . (Clearly false as soon as we think about anhomoeomeric nature of process.)