

Illusionism

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The old woman and the beetle

You're in a busy city in a country you've never visited before. An old woman in a colourful dress emerges from the crowd, smiling and holding something out to you. She tells you to take it and examine it. Intrigued, you do so. It's a small wooden box with a hinged lid, a clasp and a peephole in the top. It's completely empty. The woman tells you to close the lid, fasten the clasp and hold the box tight. She waves her hands around, utters a spell and invites you to look through the peephole. You are surprised to see a huge, colourful beetle inside. The woman repeats her performance and tells you to open the box. As before, it's empty. She takes back the box, smiles and waits patiently for a tip. It seems that the woman did something miraculous, remotely transporting a beetle into and out of a sealed box. What would you think had happened?

Broadly speaking, you'd have three options. First, you might think that the episode was miraculous, and that the woman did, in fact, have mystic powers. Second, you might assume that there must be a scientific explanation of what happened; perhaps there was some hidden mechanism that allowed the beetle to sneak in and out of the box. And third, you might suspect that it was all an illusion. Maybe there never was a beetle in the box; perhaps the woman just made it *seem* as if there was.

Wouldn't the last option be the most likely one, even if you couldn't imagine how the illusion had been created? At any rate, wouldn't it be worth exploring the hypothesis that the beetle was illusory? Illusionism about consciousness is the view that we should adopt a similar attitude towards the apparent miracle of consciousness.¹

The hard problem

Think about what happens when you have a conscious experience – when you're *biting* into a Marmite sandwich, *watching* a seagull fly towards you, and *kicking* a lamppost in anger because the seagull has flown away with your lunch.² When you undergo these experiences, lots of things happen in your nervous system. Receptor cells in your sense organs react to physical stimuli (chemicals, light and tissue damage) and send electro-chemical signals to your brain. There, sensory regions process these signals, extracting information about the world and the state of your body. This information is then sent

¹ The beetle box story is inspired by a famous example used by Wittgenstein. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 100.

² This is not an advertisement.

around the brain to various systems, and these systems generate physiological and behavioural responses and a vast array of (mostly unconscious) psychological reactions. All of this is immensely complex, but none of it seems miraculous in the light of modern science.

However, consciousness seems to involve something else, too. Each experience appears to have a subjective quality or ‘feel’ to it. When you reminisce about your sandwich, what you miss is the *mental quality* – the *taste* itself, as you were appreciating it in your mind. It’s as if the sensory processes in your brain don’t just extract information about things and produce reactions to them, but also generate accompanying mental qualities – the qualities of taste, smell, colour and so on – which are sent to an internal arena, where they are appreciated by an internal observer: the inner you, your conscious self.

Now, this does seem miraculous. How does the brain produce these qualities, this inner show of colours, sounds, smells, tastes and bodily sensations? How does the brilliant beetle of consciousness appear in the wooden box of the brain? This is the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness, and it looks *really* hard. The problem is made even harder because these mental qualities seem to belong to a private world that is completely inaccessible to anyone else. Scientists might map out your brain processes in fine detail, but they’d never capture the qualitative essence of your experience. The show in the internal theatre is for the ‘inner you’ alone, poised somewhere between the incoming information and the outgoing reactions.

Three options

What should we think about this apparent miracle? As with the beetle box, we have three options. First, we might accept that consciousness cannot be explained scientifically. This view proposes that our brains have a distinct non-physical aspect – like a soul or mental essence – in addition to the physical features described by science. This route has its problems; the chief one is explaining how this non-physical aspect interacts with the physical brain. Suppose for a moment that consciousness *did* involve a non-physical mind or mental essence – that when you look at a ripe tomato, your brain generated a sort of non-physical ‘mental redness’. How would that mental redness get to *affect* you? If it was to affect what you think, feel, say, or do, it’d have to have an impact on the systems that control those things. But brain systems are triggered by patterns of neuron firing, not by qualities! It looks like this path quickly leads to a dead end.

Secondly, we might be convinced that there must be a scientific explanation: ‘If we can explain all of the brain’s mechanisms and how they represent the world, then maybe, just maybe, we might understand how the brain produces mental qualities!’ The

main problem with this view is that we can imagine physical mechanisms operating without any subjective ‘feel’ attached to them. Science could explain all of the physical mechanisms, but it would still be missing the *feeling* of the mechanisms. As my good friend Philip Goff likes to put it, ‘How could an equation ever explain to someone what it’s like to ... taste paprika?’³ So, another dead end.

Thirdly, we might say that the non-physical aspect of experience is illusory. It *seems* to be there, but it isn’t really. This view has come to be known as ‘illusionism’. Illusionism completely avoids the hard problem. It says that we don’t have to explain how our experiences have a private qualitative aspect, since they don’t really have one. All we need to explain is why we *think* they have one, which – I believe – can very likely be explained in terms of brain processes.

As with the beetle box, illusionism seems like the most obvious response to the problem. However, despite its promise, it remains a minority view, and it’s often written off as ‘denying consciousness’. In fact, Galen Strawson has said that illusionism is ‘the silliest view ever held in the history of human thought’.⁴

Does illusionism deny consciousness?

Illusionists don’t deny the existence of consciousness in the everyday sense. We don’t deny that creatures have conscious experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. We really do *taste* Marmite! What illusionists deny is that experiences involve awareness of non-physical, private mental qualities, presented like a show to some kind of inner observer. In other words, we deny that the Marmite taste is a private inner quality. There’s definitely a box, but there isn’t really a beetle in it!

On the illusionist’s view, conscious experience is essentially an informational process. Think of it like a news report rather than a theatrical show.⁵ Of course, this report isn’t in a human language – it’s in the brain’s internal language of neural signalling – and it’s not for the benefit of an ‘inner you’. Sensory systems pass their reports directly to the brain’s control systems, which generate the physiological, psychological and behavioural responses mentioned earlier. You – the person – are the sum of all this activity.

If this isn’t clear, think about what happens when you are having a conversation. When your partner asks you, ‘Why are you so hungry? Did a seagull fly off with your lunch again?’ You don’t rehearse the words before you open your mouth. You just say,

³ Philip Goff, *Galileo’s Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 26.

⁴ Galen Strawson, ‘A Hundred Years of Consciousness: “A Long Training in Absurdity”’, *Estudios de Filosofía*, no. 59 (2019), 32

⁵ More accurately, a vast collection of news reports all being told at the same time, as multiple channels of sensory information and interpretation unfold in the brain. This is known as the ‘multiple drafts theory’. See Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown, 1991), 101–38.

‘Of course not, you’ve told me a hundred times not to eat my sandwiches by the harbour.’ The words come to your lips spontaneously thanks to underlying processes in your brain. They are *your* words, but you didn’t consciously choose them, and you have absolutely no idea how they were produced. Most of our behaviour is of this spontaneous kind, and thank goodness it is. Otherwise, we’d never get anything done!

So, illusionists reject the idea of an inner show, decked out with non-physical qualities, presented to an inner observer. That’s the kind of consciousness we *do* deny. However, some people think this is wrong; they say that these qualities are the very *essence* of consciousness! In fact, idealists go so far as to say that there is *nothing else* to the world: everything exists in the mind! According to this view, it’s the physical world which is illusory. Idealists *deny* the existence of consciousness as we illusionists conceive of it – they deny the existence of a physical brain! So, each of us could be accused of ‘denying consciousness’, but I don’t think it is a very profitable way of moving the debate forward. Let’s just say illusionists and their opponents disagree about what consciousness *is* and get on with working out who is right.

Putting the ‘illusion’ in illusionism

As we’ve seen, illusionists deny that consciousness is an inner show. Instead, we say that having conscious experiences involves processing information about the world. But that’s not the whole story. After all, we can do more than just experience the world around us; we can think *about* our experiences too. We can recognize our experience (‘it tastes like Marmite’), say whether we like it (‘absolutely’) and describe the experience to other people (‘you’ll probably hate it’).

You might also think that this presents illusionism with a problem. Why? Because it feels like these internal experiences are made up of distinctively *mental* properties. Think about it this way. Science tells us that the things we experience aren’t what they seem to be; colours are actually light-reflecting properties of surfaces, sounds are pressure waves in the air and tastes are molecules in our food. But they appear to *us* as non-physical qualities – ‘redness’, ‘*meow*’, ‘coffee taste’. Where are these qualities if they’re not in our minds?

The first thing to say is that illusionists don’t deny that we can be aware of our own experiences. Of course we can look inwards and introspect! However, we do hold that introspection misleads us about the nature of our experiences. As illusionists see it, introspection – like sense perception – depends on **sub-personal** mechanisms of reporting and reacting. It doesn’t involve an inner self which is experiencing non-physical qualities. Introspection is just another layer of information processing, this time directed onto other brain processes.

Introspective mechanisms monitor the complex informational and reactive processes that make up our experiences and send information about them to the brain's control systems. These control systems report on the brain's activities, as well as on the world outside, and these reports are crafted and edited to suit the needs of the systems that receive them. Control systems then use these reports to generate reactions to the experience in the form of beliefs, utterances and emotional responses, and all of this happens at a sub-personal level. The result is that you – the person – are sensitive to the nature of your own experiences.

Introspection is also our channel of self-knowledge. Ask yourself now, 'What am I experiencing in the lower part of my left leg?', and the beliefs you form will be the product of information in your brain's reports. Since that information is in the brain's internal language (neural signalling), you won't have any access to the details. You'll just immediately know that you're having an experience and that it's of a distinctive kind, which you can only describe as a simple 'feel' or 'quality'. The experience isn't really a simple quality, of course. It's a highly complex state of your brain. You think of it as a simple quality only because your brain tells you so little about what it really is!

What's more, you'll tend to judge that you're aware of this quality *directly* and with absolute certainty. When we ask ourselves, 'What am I experiencing?', we immediately find ourselves with strong beliefs on the matter. But here's the point: we have no awareness of the introspective mechanisms responsible for generating these beliefs. We just know that we're feeling a sharp pain in the shin, or the cramp of a Marmite-less stomach.

Perception is similar. When we look around us, we immediately form beliefs about what's there without any awareness of the brain processes that produce them. There's an important dissimilarity, though. With perception, we know that there *are* mechanisms involved; we know that we need eyes to see, ears to hear and noses to smell. With introspection, it's different: we don't even know that the mechanisms exist! Consequently, since we know nothing of the mechanisms that produce our introspective experiences, we assume that there aren't any! This leads us to accept the illusion that the qualities of our experiences are presented to us directly, as if by magic.

There's another difference which further reinforces this illusion. We all know that our senses can mislead us about the world, and we have ways of checking the accuracy of the beliefs they produce. For example, if you suspect that your eyes are playing tricks on you, an optician can take a look and find out what's going wrong. With introspection, it's quite different. We have no idea whether or not our introspective mechanisms can mislead us, and we have no way of checking their reliability. It's not like you can get a friend to introspect on your brain processes for you – although this might change with

future technology! That's where the illusion comes from: since you have no way of questioning the beliefs introspection produces, you assume they're unquestionable.

The result is that introspection systematically misleads us. Its impressionistic sub-personal reports on complex brain processes lead us to think that we have direct and infallible awareness of private mental qualities, but we don't. *This* is the 'illusion' in illusionism.

Is illusionism self-defeating?

The most common complaint is that illusionism is self-defeating. Many people think that it doesn't make sense to say that experience *itself* could be an illusion. Consciousness is the thing we access the world *through*! I only know a seagull flew away with my lunch because I had a conscious experience. All we know for certain, is that we're having experiences. Everything else is secondary. Illusionism seems to shoot itself in the foot!

This objection gets it the wrong way round. Consciousness doesn't come first, it comes second. Think about it in the context of evolution. The first living creatures wouldn't possess complex introspective systems like the ones I've described. Not at all. The first things they'd be able to do would be (relatively) simple tasks like finding food or avoiding danger, which are essential for survival. They would need to be aware of opportunities and threats out there in the world, not of events in their own minds. Only later on in the evolutionary process did creatures develop the capacity to monitor and respond to their own mental processes. This shows us that it's not 'my awareness of my experience of the seagull' that comes first, but my awareness of the seagull itself.

'They're real, dammit!'

I have tried to give a sense of what illusionism is and why it's worth taking seriously. Still, you may feel, it just can't be right. The feel of things – the *taste* of Marmite, the *pain* of hunger, the *guilt* of lying to your partner – these can't be just a matter of information. They're too *concrete*, too *vivid*, too *present*! 'They're real, dammit!'

That's a natural reaction – and one that is predicted by the illusionist theory itself. As we have seen, our judgements about our experiences will be compelling in just this way, since they are produced by mechanisms of which we have no awareness. I have given only a simplified sketch of the processes involved here, couched in metaphorical terms of reporting and suchlike. In reality, the full picture will be immensely complex, and it will take many years of scientific work to complete it. As we slowly fill in the picture – mapping the vast, intricate, multi-layered web of informational and reactive processes – the gap between the illusionist's theory and our personal impression of what is happening will diminish. We just need to put the work in and be very patient.

Walking away

The next day, you are walking in the town when you spot the old woman again. She looks younger than she did yesterday, and you notice with a shock that her colourful dress is covered with images of beetles. Determined to solve the mystery, you approach the woman and beg her to tell you how she made the beetle appear. She smiles. 'Oh, I didn't make anything appear', she says. 'You see, I'm a hypnotist. I simply hypnotized you into believing you'd seen a beetle.'