

ATTENTION, EXPERIENCE, ACTION

*To have a bank-teller's experience
is to have done the things a bank-teller does*
—Thau 2002, 203

- The kinds of experience are the kinds of action (for all F, F is a kind of experience iff F is a kind of action)

A phenomenological argument

The kinds of experience are the kinds of ...

1. Visual state
Two-dots
2. Visual state plus attentional spotlight
Phenomenologically too simple, Sartre in the cafe
3. Visual state plus complex structure imposed by attending
Adverbial theory of attention + redundancy worries
4. Visual state plus complex structure imposed by attentive visual acts
Adverbial hence inessential
5. Visual state plus complex structure imposed by visual acts
Cross-modality
6. Perceptual state plus complex structure imposed by perceptual acts
Reasoning, practical behavior in general
7. Perceptual state plus <mumble mumble> plus complex structure imposed by action in general
Pessimistic metainduction on philosophy of perception
8. Action!

The maestro argument

The myth of Mabel

- As philosophers, our current official picture of experiences is the phenomenal state conception, but our historical investigations revealed this to be based in error
- Accordingly, we should start over
- The best place to start is at square 1, with the “common sense” picture
- My method for explicating this picture is to imagine the theory that would be presented, as an explicit statement of her own view (rather than by analyzing what other people have to say about it), by a person who (i) is very good at theory construction in general (unlike the person on the Clapham omnibus) (ii) grasps the common sense picture (iii) is uncontaminated by the phenomenal state conception

The figure here is “Mabel the metaphysician”:

Mabel is highly sophisticated in the use of the best metaphysical and logical tools: her prize-winning papers have addressed such topics as persistence through time, material constitution, essence, and quantification. Mabel has a literal-minded and commonsensical cast of mind, and she is fully competent in the ways of ordinary psychology (indeed, due to her stint as a social worker, more competent than most of us). But Mabel is utterly ignorant of work in the philosophy of mind (having skipped over the second part of David Lewis's *Philosophical Papers I*): she is unfamiliar with either the older or the newer discussion in the philosophy of consciousness (or any of its historical precursors).

One afternoon at the APA, Mabel overhears a few shards of conversation among philosophers of mind: "consciousness . . . experiences . . . nature . . . time for a beer yet? no? . . . well according to my view on the nature of experiences . . .". Mabel thinks:

The natures of experiences, eh? So that's what those people work on (that talk of Mind had always sounded a lot like Hegel, brrrr). Natures are my business, and I've certainly had a lot of experiences . . . mine-clearing in Mozambique, felon-counseling in Fresno—but the experience that changed my life was reading that tattered copy of *On the Plurality of Worlds* I found at the back of the prison library. That was one thrilling experience: blazed right through it in four days (got distracted a bit before noon on the first day, though), staring incredulously the whole time but awed by the rigor. Oh, what it was like! I found the material I read on the third day so exciting that I suddenly decided to apply for PhD programs in philosophy . . . anyway: to work! OK, let's see . . .

Mabel argues as follows:

- A. The types of experience are among the types of action
 - * Argument strategy is generalization over the features we ascribe to occurrences in ordinary first-person narrative, with a bit of tidying up by appeal to pragmatic implicature
- B. The types of action are among the types of experience
 - 1. Any type of action can be performed attentively
 - 2. If one A's attentively, then we can answer: what is it like to be one? with: one is A-ing
 - 3. If we ascribe Fness to an occurrence of which one is the subject in answering that question, Fness is among the types of one's experience
- B*. The types of action are among the types of experience
 - 1*. Any type of action can be performed attentively
 - 2*. If F can occur attentively, F can occur consciously
 - 3*. If F can occur consciously, F is a type of experience

Not quite sure which of B or B* to roll with yet. This depends on what it takes to rebut the overgeneralization accusation against the Pirate and Gorilla argument.

Part A

Key idea here is to take episodes narrated from the first person as paradigms of experience and build the theory from there, permitting a certain small degree of the procrusteanism typically involved in theory construction.

Note: the claim is not that to be an experience is to be narrated from the first-person, but rather that we can fix on paradigms of experiences by getting at episodes that are narrated from the first-person. This is akin to Kripke's "sense-giving"/"reference-fixing" distinction.

Mabel/A/B/Barcelona

Mabel begins by cataloguing some paradigms and foils of the phenomenon to be studied. Some foils are birds, bees, rocks, periods of respiration, episodes of dreamless sleep. For paradigms, we look to the experiences; namely, the things we call ‘experiences’; namely, the things under discussion in mundane first-person narratives like the following:

B: And what exciting experience did you have this afternoon?

A: I went for a stroll down to the Raval district. It was very sunny, but a breeze kept me cool. I saw a bunch of interesting buildings along the way. I arrived around 3:30, and hung around the Rambla there for a while.

B: What was that like?

A: Interesting. For one thing, I noticed some old men playing cards and went over to watch. I scrutinized the game carefully, trying to figure out the rules, but couldn’t make head or tail of it—at one point I flashed on a hypothesis but soon gave it up. So I settled into enjoying their easy manner for a while. That lasted about half an hour before I got a bit bored. At that point I realized it was getting late, and after deliberating about the quickest way to get back, I decided to take the subway.

The reports here can be divided into two classes: those literally reporting:

1. A’s stroll down to the Raval district, his hanging around the Rambla, his noticing old men playing cards, his watching the game, his scrutinizing the game, his trying to figure out the rules, his flashing on a hypothesis, and so forth.
2. A’s being cool, his seeing interesting buildings, his being interested, his enjoying an easy manner, his being bored, and whatever experience is reported by the claim ‘it was very sunny’. Prima facie, these classes look pretty different.

I then adopt a “divide-and-conquer” strategy. Some of these reports are to be taken literally, as literally stating the kinds of A’s experiences. Others are taken as *pragmatically implicating* the kinds of A’s experiences.

Some of these utterances can be regarded as transmitting information that would meet these conditions, and others aren’t.

It is clear that some sort of divide and conquer approach will be necessary. After all, it is plausible that it is a necessary condition on being an experience that an occurrence have a subject in some sense, of its being the narrator’s experience that the narrator be that subject, and it is plausible that it is a necessary condition on being a kind of experience that a property be potentially psychological.

So for example, when A says ‘I went for a stroll down to the Raval district’ in answer to B’s question, taken literally, this cashes out in neo-Davidsonian eventish as something along the lines of

- there was a stroll down to the Raval district, e, such that I was the agent of e

Accordingly, we see a potential psychological property being predicated of an occurrence of which A is in some plausible sense the “subject”: the experience is the stroll, and the property is *being a stroll down to the Raval district*.

By contrast, when A says ‘It was very sunny’, this should be regarded as an implicature. Taken literally, this cashes out as something along the lines of

- there was a state of being sunny, *s*, and this locality was in *s*

Here we do not see an occurrence of a distinctively psychological kind of which the narrator is in any plausible sense the subject.

My claim then is that the reports in the first class are the literal reports, while those in the second class are not. Accordingly it is all right to ignore the second class of reports in formulating our theory. If we generalize over the kind of occurrences reported in the first class, we will learn what kinds all of the experiences belong to.

So when we look at the first class, we notice that all of the occurrences reported are actions. I conclude therefore that every kind of experience is a kind of action.

Achievements

Is it indeed the case that all the reports in class 2 report actions? The activities and accomplishments seem to, but what about the achievements? Are *arriving*, *noticing*, *flashing on a hypothesis*, and *deciding to go home* actions or things that happen? They are plausibly not things that get done by doing other things, in violation of Thompson’s criterion for being an intentional action (grounding its parts).

There seem to be several strategies available for accommodating achievements. On a case-by-case basis one could say of each report that:

- i. its object is in fact an action after all—for instance, one can be held responsible for failure to arrive/notice/create, even though they occur suddenly
- ii. what is reported isn’t actually an achievement, but rather a rapid accomplishment
- iii. it merely implicates some action

Alternatively one could say that while it is not the case that every experience is an action, the achievements are still constitutively linked to actions:

- by being their attainments of their teloi (arriving in the Raval is the telos of strolling to the Raval; deciding to go home by subway is a determinate of the telos of deliberating how to get home)
- by initiating their occurrence (flashing on a hypothesis initiates thinking about that hypothesis; noticing some men playing cards initiates observing those men playing cards).

On this approach it would not be true that the types of experience are all types of action, but action would remain the “backbone” of experience.

‘What it’s like’

We see ‘what it is like’ functioning as follows: B already knows that A’s experience of hanging around the Raval was a case of hanging around the Raval, so B knows the type of that experience. And yet she asks A what it was like. What is she trying to accomplish?

A responds to the question by asserting that he underwent a range of further experiences—he was the subject of: a noticing of old men playing cards; a going over to watch; and so forth.

It is natural to think of these further experiences as *parts* of the queried experience, and their types as *specifying* the condition of the queried experience: of giving further information or detail about how it was, but only accidentally so.

Accordingly, in at least some cases, “what e was like” is the kind of a part of e.

Are there cases in which “what e was like” is e’s kind? Plausibly, if an experience is given by an inessential feature, such as its time or place of occurrence: “I had fun in the city last weekend” “oh yeah, what was it like” “hung out with Bill: ate too much drank too much didn’t get much sleep”. Perhaps in this case *hanging out with Bill* is the type of the queried experience.

Two philosophical consequences of this:

- i. No natural way into the phenomenal state conception
- ii. What an experience is like is not always its kind (though it is at least the kind of one of its parts)

In general then we would be better off to stop putting so much weight on this locution.

Reflections on the style of argument

The argument involves a bunch of shenanigans, which I will have to pay off further down the road

1. Explain what the relations among the relevant phenomena are such that we speak of them all in the same discourse despite their fundamentally different subject-matters
2. Display the pragmatic story clarifying which actions are implicated by reports in the second class (class 2 reports are heterogeneous so there is not a single story waiting in the wings)
3. Explain why things are better off this way than under various candidate competitor stories

This can all be done, I think; the point is that it needs to be done. We won’t worry about 1 and 2 for now, but we will get involved with 3.

The Pirate and Gorilla argument

We can argue that properties of events that merely happened to one cannot be types of experience. Suppose that one is slipped a mickey and then shanghaied. While one is utterly out, one is stuffed into a burlap sack and dragged through the docks, then chucked into the scuppers.

One might later relate this: “then I was stuffed into a burlap sack and dragged through the docks, up the gangway and chucked in the scuppers. I came to clapped in irons and with a hideous headache”.

Of course *being stuffed into a burlap sack* was not part of what it was like for one. So since it is possible to have this property without its being part of what it is like for one, this property is, *prima facie*, not a kind of experience.

We can also argue that the kind of one’s perceptual state cannot be a type of experience. The gorilla strolls across the stage. You see the gorilla but *seeing a gorilla* does not characterize what it’s like for you. Hence, *prima facie*, this property is not a kind of experience.

The reply

This style of argument also shows that actions cannot be types of experience. Any action can be taken momentarily off line to do something else (or for an insta-snooze). But when that happens, that action type does not characterize what it is like for one. So going by your reasoning, actions are not types of experiences either.

Accordingly, your argument proves that there are no experiences. Thus, something is amiss.

The rebuttal

Actually, all my argument-form shows is that *prima facie*, occurrences of this kind are not kinds of experience. If we have independent reason to accept them as such, we may accept them as kinds of experience. Part B of my argument purports to show that every kind of action *is* a kind of experience. So I am not stuck with an overall package in which I deny that there are any experiences.

Moreover, the argument in Part B does not generalize to show that the types of “passion” and perceptual state are kinds of experience. Accordingly, my position is stable in this respect.

Finally, while an “implicature” story that is friendly to me can be presented very easily, the competition does not, so far as I can tell, enjoy this blandishment. [That’s a promissory note of course.]

[This is where it becomes an issue which of B and B* I go for.]

Part B

Version B is the version that lives in the short précis, version B* is a more high-tech version that may be more responsive to the pirate-gorilla issue

- B. The types of action are among the types of experience
 1. Any type of action can be performed attentively
 2. If one A’s attentively, then we can answer: what is it like to be one? with: one is A-ing
 3. If we ascribe Fness to an occurrence of which one is the subject in answering that question, Fness is among the types of one’s experience
- B*. The types of action are among the types of experience
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1/1: Any type of action can be performed attentively*

Presupposition: the “adverbial theory of attention” (Mole: main argument is that the only act we can find that would constitute “attending” would be “binding visual features” but this can occur in the absence of any attentional phenomena.)

Thought here is that attention is not a type of occurrence but rather a manner in which occurrences of a given type can occur or fail to occur. On this view, o may be attentive, but o could have been inattentive. By contrast, if o is a stroll o could not have occurred as a fast run or an eating of dinner or as anything but a stroll.

- This theory is intuitively correct. When my attention shifts around I don't thereby stop doing anything in particular: I just redistribute attentiveness status over a pre-existing stream of activity. When someone tells me to pay attention, he is telling me to do what I am doing in a superior way, not to stop doing anything in particular.
 - With Place/Ryle, against Repaired Ryle: some acts cannot be performed inattentively—observing is an example
- Anything can be performed inattentively: my observation of enemy movements from the watchtower is interrupted momentarily by an important text. I go on observing but do so inattentively while I attentively send a text.
 - Actually I stop observing and start texting
- This sounds like a gimme. I hereby legislate that this is not so for the purpose of simplifying theory. If you think there is this activity of “attending” you need to explain what it has in common with “playing poker attentively” or “thinking about math attentively” or “gardening attentively”. I have it easier.
 - Yo mama!

Argument for my main claim: which sorts of occurrences can attentiveness qualify? Paradigms are actions, foils are biological processes. No clear cases in which action can't be performed attentively so let's legislate.

2: If one A's attentively, then we can answer: what is it like to be one? with: one is A-ing

Seems right, I hope.

3: If we can answer: what is it like to be one? with: one is A-ing, then A-ing is a kind of experience

Evidently.

2: An F (by kind) can occur attentively just if an F can occur consciously*

Sort of a tradition of thinking that attentiveness is a determinate of consciousness—Ryle and Place both seem to be into this idea, the psychologists accuse themselves of saying “attention” as a euphemism for “consciousness” and so forth.

3: If an F (by kind) can occur consciously, Fness is a kind of experience*

Definition or something.

Back to Pirate and Gorilla

The form the argument here should take (whether B or B*) interacts, recall, with the dialectic in part A over the following:

the argument in Part B does not generalize to show that the types of “passion” and perceptual state are kinds of experience. Accordingly, my position is stable in this respect.

This better come out true!

Inclined to think that version B* fares successfully here but version B does not. The problem is with 3: it does seem true that ‘I saw a gorilla’ *can* be used to state what an experience is like for one (I claim there

is an implicature involved here but I am inclined to think that making appeal to this at *this* juncture would beg the question).

By contrast, the package of 2* and 3* fares better: it does not really make sense to say ‘I attentively saw a gorilla’ or ‘I was attentively kidnapped’ (unless the attention is on the part of the kidnappers!). So while it might make sense in some contexts to say ‘I consciously saw a gorilla’, this is dinged by its crash with 2*.

We can’t repair 2 as a biconditional to be able to make the same point because we don’t want to say that A is part of what it is like to be one just if one A’s attentively: this would crash with the texting arguments.

Hardline essential attentiveness

- The chair recognizes the voice of residual anxiety:
 - Because you think actions are long-lasting, your view predicts the bizarre result that we are having experiences when we are sound asleep! Your arguments are beguiling indeed but this unfortunate fact remains. Your response is that we are not having any experiences *attentively* when we are sound asleep. While that certainly serves to provide a “consciousness-relevant distinction” between sleeping and waking life, I can’t help but feel as though your view about the natures of experiences fails to answer the most fundamental question, which is *what is the difference between sleeping and waking life?* I am inclined to prefer to your view that the kinds of experiences are the kinds of action, the view that the kinds of experiences are the kinds of *attentive* action.
- Well, attentiveness isn’t essential to its instances ...
 - It’s not essential to any action instancing it *qua action*: qua experience, it is essential (or talking the two-thinger talk you like, attention creates experiences floating on a basis of actions).
- This theory strikes me as fairly close to my view, as it recognizes an essential connection between experiences and actions, even if it is not an identity of kind. Nevertheless, your theory is explanatorily deficient with respect to mine. It is not the case that the *only* think we want out of a theory of consciousness is a theory of the difference between the lights being off and the lights being on. A big fact about consciousness that a range of authors have remarked on is its *unity*: and along these lines, my theory provides a greater unity internal to consciousness (though due to its structural similarities, your theory provides a parallel unity at the basis of consciousness). Attention is a butterfly, flitting to this and to that: fixing consciousness just to attention, we get something pretty weird ...
 - [Cutting in:] Now hold on a second, your theory undermines the unity of consciousness as well! We all have a range of actions running in parallel, many of which are mutually isolated. On your view the stream of consciousness should just fly apart!
- You hold on, fool. Let’s consider an example and see how this can all be resolved:
Over the course of an afternoon, I prepare for a trip, explore Barcelona, maintain friendships, think about various philosophical issues, walk down the street, maintain my health, watch fellow pedestrians, admire architecture, and so forth—all at once. As I do so, what I am doing attentively flits around:
Hm, what time are we leaving, and is it Wednesday or Thursday . . . let’s see, 30 days hath June, OKWednesday. Wednesday—hey, that’s two days from now, bunch of stuff I need to wrap up before heading out [form structural “model” of various tasks; modify it in various ways]. Hey, interesting window display, what’s this [looking at stuff] cool,

moving on. Whoops, watch out for that guy. Do I look like a local? Probably not. When I get back I should give a call to X, it's been a while. Remember the time we [having an episodic memory] things got crazy—Interesting hat there—ah, that's what I should say about the point Y was pressing me on; whoa, red light—smelly exhaust—amm, seems like that forces me to say that p, would that be a bad thing? Something to think about. OK green light, hey watch it buddy. Nice to be getting my constitutional, have to get back into the swing of things when I get home. Also catch up with the Zs, fun hanging out in their back yard last year [flashing on the scene of Mr. Z luring a bat by tossing a tennis ball]. Wow cool building, yeesh ugly building. Hungry, where's that bakery? Right, around that corner. Back to philosophy: Ah [structural "model" of a dialectic pops up as a haptic image]—if I say that p, I can also say that q, hm, what opens up then . . .

What is under the "lights" from moment to moment is illogical and bizarre, admitting no coherent narrative description.

Isolated but dynamic experiences and evanescent but selective attention pose distinct threats to the coherence of my experience; but fortunately, each resolves the threat posed by the other. Considered synchronically, my conscious life is at risk of flying apart due to the isolation of my parallel streams of experience; attention preserves coherence in the moment by ignoring almost all of the streams at any time. Conversely, considered diachronically, my conscious life is at risk of becoming inaccessible to any comprehensible narrative due to the flights of attention (whether endogenous or under pressure from the demands of multiple streams of experience); the dynamism of the streams prevents this by persisting through time and periodically recapturing attention.