Commentary on Benj Hellie's "There It Is"

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Benj's paper, "There It Is," is a systematic account of perceptual justification within a direct-realist framework. One of the paper's main goals is to understand what is happening in so-called bad cases of perception. Benj, like most direct realists, recognizes a fundamental distinction between good cases, wherein one's perceptions are veridical, and bad cases such as corresponding hallucinations. And Benj develops a fascinating semantic framework for perceptual justification, which reveals that bad cases cannot be given rationalizing explanations. As Benj would put it, people's beliefs and behaviors in bad cases can be given exculpations, but not justifications.

Benj's paper covers many topics at the intersection of epistemology and the philosophy of mind, and it's of course impossible to do justice to many of those issues in a short commentary. So I'll just focus on a few things concerning consciousness.

I'll start with a few questions about the connection that Benj sees between rationality and consciousness. Benj claims that justification is somehow intimately related to consciousness. He writes, "the most basic interpretation of the claim that A justifies B means something close to: from the first-person perspective, B was required to maintain coherence of the stream of consciousness in light of A" (p. 2).

I'm specifically interested in whether Benj thinks there can be justifications or rationalizing explanations holding between mental states that occur in the absence of consciousness. Of course, many mental states occur consciously, but there's also a lot of reason to believe that many mental states occur outside of consciousness. In this post-Freudian world, it's common to talk about beliefs' and desires' guiding or

influencing peoples' behavior even when those states aren't conscious. But there's increasing evidence that qualitative states, such as perceptions, also occur nonconsciously, as in subliminal perceiving.

There are many empirical results that suggest there is subliminal perceiving such as Anthony Marcel's masked-priming studies. In this kind of study, people are briefly shown a stimulus, which is followed immediately by a visual mask that prevents the stimulus from being perceived consciously. But it's arguable the people perceive the stimuli in a nonconscious way because they can be primed in certain ways by them (e.g., Marcel 1983; for discussion, see, e.g., Kouider and Dehaene 2007).

But I want to focus on another case that seems to involve nonconscious perception--de Gelder's work with the blindsight patient TN. TN has bilateral damage to his primary visual cortex, and suffers from a phenomenon known as blindsight. TN reports that he does not see objects before him and behaves like a blind person. But de Gelder found that TN was nonetheless able to navigate successfully a corridor which included many barriers (de Gelder et al 2008). There's striking of footage of this online, which I've posted with my commentary (here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFJvXNGJsws). Arguably, what's happening in this case is that, though there was nothing that it was like for TN to navigate the corridor, he perceived the barriers nonconsciously.

So the first question that I'd like to ask Benj is whether beliefs formed or actions performed on the basis of such nonconscious perceptions can be rationally characterized--especially if those beliefs are themselves nonconscious. In other words, does intentional explanation work in the absence of consciousness? Can a state that

isn't conscious justify another nonconscious state or behavior? And if so, why does Benj emphasize the tie between rationality and consciousness?

Now I'm not sure what the direct realist would say about this kind of case. So another question I have is whether Benj thinks that mental states can occur without being conscious. And if not, how would he explain this apparent evidence?

My guess is that Benj would deny that mental states can occur without being conscious because such states seem not to put us into the kind of direct contact with the world that direct realists emphasize. These states do not seem to be, for example, transparent in the direct-realist sense. Indeed, the hallmark of these states is that we're not at all aware that we are in them--so how could they put us in unmediated contact with the world?

One thing Benj might say, then, is that we must downgrade these states in some way--perhaps by claiming that they are not perceptual or even mental. Benj might claim that the mark of the mental is consciousness; and these states are, to use Dennett's (1969) phrase, subpersonal. If only mental states can be subject to the constraints of rationality, then perhaps there's no question here about what the direct realist should say about whether beliefs based on nonconcious perceptual states are evidential. There is no such thing as a nonconscious psychological state.

But I think this reaction might be too hasty. In TN's case, he differentially responds to a range of stimuli during his walk down the corridor, despite being wholly unaware of the states that make him aware of the stimuli. If you asked TN whether he saw the barriers he walked around, he would say no. But TN had to be in some state that registered the information about the barrier that caused him to move around it. It

seems these states play roughly the same functional roles that their conscious counterparts do--they just lack consciousness.

Moreover, such nonconscious states are not bad cases. Whether you want to call these states subpersonal or mental but not conscious, it's not as though TN's state misrepresents the barrier. He does not nonconsciously hallucinate a barrier. And any nonconscious belief formed on the basis of the state would accurately reflect that there is a barrier.

This case is importantly unlike Benj's case of Claire the blind clairvoyant. In Claire's case, she behaves just like one who is sighted, but she lacks a stream of consciousness. Benj argues that what's missing from her consciousness makes her behavior rationally inexplicable. But Claire has nothing to explain her behavior except for her clairvoyance. There is, however, plenty to explain TN's behavior; it's just that what explains it is outside of his stream of consciousness.

Benj's account of how we describe others' behaviors from the third-person perspective is complex, but it would seem that TN's actions are perfectly rational from the third person. TN is walking along, his eyes focus on a barrier, and he moves around it. Why did he move around it? Because there was a barrier. And it's clear that the nonconscious beliefs formed on the basis of the nonconscious perception must interact in ways with his standing beliefs. Presumably TN believes that one cannot walk through a barrier, which, coupled with his newly formed belief that there is a barrier, causes him to alter his course.

But Benj might respond that viewed from the first person there is no rational explanation. Since TN has no stream of consciousness, or at least has no stream of

consciousness regarding the barriers, he can't maintain coherence of the stream by forming the belief that there is a barrier because he perceived it.

This response, however, raises complex issues regarding what to count as first personal. Benj notes that "[t]he notion of 'from the first-person perspective' is not exactly the same as 'according to the subject'" (p. 2), so it could be that there is barrier according to TN but not from TN's first-person perspective. It's not clear, however, that states outside of consciousness do not count as being from the first-person perspective.

So I want to know why Benj privileges coherence in the stream of consciousness over coherence for the person generally. That is, I don't see why a better gloss of 'A justifies B' isn't simply that B was required to maintain coherence *for one* in light of A? If TN had the standing belief that there were no barriers, his registration of information about a barrier would doubtless result in disruptions of his behavior. He might not immediately report a feeling of confusion, but I imagine there would be delays in his ability to act on that information. That is, TN is forced to believe that there are barriers in order to maintain coherence--not in his stream of consciousness, but for himself generally.

Though he does not explicitly address nonconscious states, Benj says that anything perceived but outside of one's attention is not rational. He asks, "how 'rich' is a perceptual state? Does it accommodate only what one is 'attending to' (looking at, feeling, and the like), or does it accommodate everything one perceives, a broader classification? My use concerns the former: any residue has no direct presence within one's stream of consciousness and therefore cannot be rationally significant" (p. 30). And I presume Benj means here attended and perceived consciously.

It's worth pointing out, however, that there's mounting evidence that attention occurs in the absence of consciousness (e.g., Koch and Tsuchiya 2007). I understand that this claim is controversial (e.g., de Brigard and Prinz 2010), but it seems one can attend to things both consciously and nonconsciously. So if I perceptually attend to something outside of consciousness, might that be rationally significant?

So it's ultimately not clear what Benj would say about such cases. If rational processing can occur even in people with deficits such as blindsight, why not think that rationality often occurs in the absence of consciousness for the rest of us?

I do think it's not unreasonable for one who is studying rationality and the mind to start by restricting one's focus to consciousness because conscious states are the ones we are aware of in a subjectively-unmediated way. By contrast, we come to be aware of our nonconscious states only in mediated ways, such as via testimony or conscious theorizing. This might give the impression that conscious states are personal-level states, whereas nonconscious states aren't even mental. But it seems that on further investigation this approach to rationality may leave out a host of states that at least seem to be rationally explicable.

I'd like to close by asking about how often it is that we are capable of being given rational explanations. I'm thinking that it may be that bad cases are actually quite prevalent. If we are not subject to rational explanation in bad cases, then it may be that we are frequently transitioning in and out of being capable of being given rationalizing explanations. Consider, for instance, Grimes' (1996) notable change blindness paradigm wherein subjects visually attend to a picture of a parrot that switches back and forth from green to red when subjects saccade. Subjects sometimes fail to report

noticing the change for quite some time, even though the color of the parrot is quite salient. What it's like for them stays constant--say, like seeing a green parrot. So the subjects switch back and forth between bad and good cases. And it's arguable that these kinds of phenomena occur somewhat frequently in daily life.

Or, instead, consider the blind spot. We are constantly in an illusory state, in part because of the brain's so-called filling in of the blind spot. And there's evidence people can attend to the area of the visual field corresponding to the blind spot (e.g., Lou and Chen 2003). Are beliefs formed on that basis irrational? Even though the perceptions corresponding to the blindspot are not necessarily veridical, it would seem reasonable to suppose they are or have the policy that we regard them as such.

And what about global bad cases such as finding oneself in the Matrix or under the sway of Descartes' demon? Presuming the Matrix is a systematic bad case, can we only offer exculpation of those in that kind of unfortunate scenario, but no justification?

It would seem, then, that we are always at least partially in a state of uncertainty about whether or not we are in bad cases. I don't necessarily see this as an objection to Benj's model, and I think in places Benj even recognizes it as a possibility, but I do think it's an interesting upshot and I'd like to know what Benj would say.

Again, many thanks to all participating in this special session, and I look forward to the following discussion.

References

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