



## **Perception, Affect, and Epiphenomenalism: Commentary on Mangan's "Sensation's Ghost"**

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This commentary begins by explaining how Mangan's important work leads to a question about the relation between non-sensory experiences and perception. Reflection on affect then suggests an addition to Mangan's view that may be helpful on this and perhaps some other questions. Finally, it is argued that acceptance of non-sensory experiences is fully compatible with epiphenomenalism.

Bruce Mangan's article draws welcome attention to genuine, but inadequately theorized, phenomena and it is to be anticipated that his work will form the basis for others' investigations. The more hopeful we are about this direction of development, the more concerned we should be that misunderstandings not be taken up along with the advances. In this commentary, I address this concern by making a small point about a comparison with perception, and a rather more complicated point about an alleged new reason to reject epiphenomenalism. Between these points comes a positive suggestion about the structure of fringe consciousness and sensations that relates to both points.

## 1. Perception

In a somewhat tangential remark in section 2, Mangan suggests that:

Another way to roughly capture the sensory/nonsensory distinction is to think of non-sensory experiences as the contents in conscious[ness] which, when added to and merged with sensations, create perceptions.

Three paragraphs later, the point is reiterated as:

it would seem in cases of this sort that what we mean by a perception is the combination of non-sensory experiences and sensations.

"Perception" is a term that has received a variety of definitions both in philosophy and in psychology. So, perhaps there is some sense of this word that will fit with the quoted remarks so as to give us a sense of rightness about the whole. It is, however, not evident what this sense might be, and this is a matter that will have to be clarified if Mangan's work is to be applied and extended.

To understand the need for clarification, let us note two possible ways of understanding "perception" that do not fit the quoted remarks. (A) Perception is often of fully three-dimensional things, in contrast to sensations, which may involve only a relatively "thin" set of qualities. Thus, we speak of a red sensation or, perhaps, a sensation of red with some dark streaks. But what we would ordinarily be said to see is a tomato, a ball, etc. a full blown thing, with a backside and an inside that are not available to the senses at the moment of perception. Ordinary perception thus seems to involve relating our sensations to some kind of object; the sensations are conceptualized *as* pertaining to a perceived thing of one kind or another.

If we understand perception in this way, then sensation plus a non-sensory experience is not a perception. Adding a non-sensory content to a sensation is not the same as bringing that sensation under the concept of a distal, three-dimensional thing. The impression that a sensory quality is familiar, or "right" in a context classifies neither the type of sensation (color quality, type of odor, etc.) nor the type of object that produces it (tomato, rotting leaves, etc.) Moreover, an experience of familiarity or rightness can pertain not just to a sensation, but also (and perhaps even more characteristically) to the distal things one takes oneself to be perceiving.

(B) An example that occurs in the paragraphs from which the quoted remarks were taken is the loss of meaning consequent upon repeating the word "grudge". The use of this example suggests that "perception" of a word is taken to be an occurrence of an auditory sensation together with a non-sensory experience. It is further suggested in these paragraphs that the non-sensory experience is the meaning of the word, and that people "identify the non-sensory component with the word's *meaning* – as that meaning is directly felt in consciousness" (emphasis in original).

Some philosophers will recognize in this suggestion a denial of a point that Wittgenstein labored mightily to establish, namely, that the meaning of a word is just not a kind of thing that can occur in a momentary episode. Others may be reminded of recent suggestions that thoughts have a distinctive, non-sensory phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> Without going into these arguments, however, we can easily see a distinction between (i) experiencing a word as *having* a meaning and (ii) the meaning that it has. If we are to identify the non-sensory experience in the word-repetition case with anything, it would seem better to say that it is a sense of loss of (i) rather than a loss of(ii). For example, we can experience the extermination of meaningfulness with any number of different words; the peculiar experience we have when the word becomes "just a noise" is something common to these different cases, not a distinctive kind of loss corresponding to each word.

## 2. The Aboutness of Affect

If sensation plus non-sensory experience is not bringing sensations under concepts or adding meaning to auditory content, what is it? I suggest that a helpful model for the way non-sensory experiences are related to other phenomena can be found in affect. The point of taking the structure of affect as our model is that it is built into affect there is always some sensation or some thing upon which it is directed. Analogously, experiences of familiarity, or of rightness (or their opposites) are directed upon something: they are experiences of familiarity *of* a certain something, or experiences of rightness *of* a sensation, thing, action, or what have you.

Some readers may be inclined to object that there are undirected, or "objectless" affects such as generalized anxiety, a sense of strangeness ('the world is somehow out of joint'), or a sense that all is right with the world. Although it is not clear that Mangan himself would raise this objection, it requires a brief response. The indicated cases can be regarded as complexes, in which one kind of element is diffuse bodily *feelings* that are neither affects nor directed upon anything. (Compare nausea: this is a feeling in the stomach, but it is not *about* anything. Of course, my dislike of this feeling is directed – namely, upon the feeling of nausea.) Another element in such cases is, indeed, directed but upon many things, not just one thing. In depression, for example, nothing may seem interesting or worthwhile. But this kind of negative evaluation is not lacking of direction upon anything; its peculiarity is rather that it is directed upon each of the things to which one may successively attend. Again, if one is in a bad mood, one's irritation is not undirected, but rather directed to each of many things that, in other circumstances, would not be objects of negative affect. More generally, a mood can be regarded as a disposition to have a certain kind of affect toward a large number of things. Such dispositions are often accompanied by bodily feelings, e.g., fatigue or muscular tension. The directedness of affect is not analyzable into an undirected experience, plus a sensation or perception, plus a judgment to the effect that the latter is causing the former. A sense of the justice of

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<sup>1</sup> Proponents of distinctive (non-sensory, non-imagistic) phenomenology of thoughts include Pitt (forthcoming), Siewert (1998) and Strawson (1994). My own view is opposed to these suggestions. The distinction I make in the text helps in seeing how we can accept Mangan's non-sensory experiences while avoiding commitment to distinctive phenomenology of thoughts.

some result, for example, is an attitude directed upon that result, not a combination of a generalized sense of goodness of the world together with a recognition of the result, or even together with a judgment that the result is what is causing a generalized sense of goodness. Likewise, I suggest, a sense that a name I have finally thought of is the right one is a kind of inward 'comment' on that name. The asymmetry between the name itself and the acceptance *of* it as fitting, or right, is not the same as the asymmetry that holds between something judged to be a cause and something judged to be an effect.

The analogy I am suggesting concerns only the structure of the relation between affects and what they are about, on the one hand, and non-sensory experiences and what they are directed upon, on the other. To see this point clearly, note that although familiarity is positively correlated with positive affect, it is not the same, as we can easily see when they are opposed. ("Oh no, not this crashing bore again.") So, I am not suggesting that non-sensory experiences *are* affects. I am saying that they seem to have the same *structure* as affects, in that they are constitutionally directed upon something.

Both affects and non-sensory experiences are like perception (as contrasted with thought) in that they come with a sense of being forced upon us. This sense may well be an illusion: on reflection, it does not seem impossible that we could have a future instance of the very same taste that we now like, yet dislike it. But when we are enjoying our food, it does not *seem* that we can separate the taste from the liking. Similarly, indignation at some injustice seems forced upon us by the circumstances, and dislike of pain seems forced upon us by the pain itself. Likewise, the sense of rightness of a name we have been trying to retrieve, and the sense of unfamiliarity of a face, come to us as apparently inevitable consequences of the presence of that name or face in the circumstances. But although affects and non-sensory experiences are *like* perception in their apparent inevitability, neither are attributions of sensory qualities (e.g., red) or physical object properties (e.g., tomato) to anything.

### 3. Epiphenomenalism

Mangan believes that his paper suggests a new argument against epiphenomenalism.

For beyond the almost universally recognized feeling that we do somehow exercise volition, we can now see that the overall structure of consciousness also appears to be designed to allow the exercise of willful activity. The feeling that we have the power to shift attention fits precisely -- like a key in its lock -- with a complex control mechanism hidden in the background of conscious experience.

This quotation comes from the very end of the paper, but there are numerous anticipations of its point. These come in the form of causally loaded expressions used in many places in the paper. Examples (with location by section number) include the following. Non-sensory, or fringe, experiences are held to "mediate" -- in particular, to mediate retrieval -- (1, 4.3, 7); to have a "hardware function" (5); to "perform . . . functions in consciousness" (5.1); to "execute" a retrieval function (5.1); to "do cognitive work" (6); to "guide" (6, 10); to "influence" (8); and to have "functional efficacy" (8).

With a background of expressions like these, it must indeed seem natural to affirm a causal role for non-sensory experiences.

If, however, we look for *arguments* that might support the causal loading in these expressions, we find only one. This argument is expressed or alluded to in many places, perhaps most plainly in the following quotation from section 4.3.

Functionally, both the sensory and non-sensory fringe help to mediate retrieval, but non-sensory experience contributes far more to this process, both because it provides the feeling that something more is accessible, and also because non-sensory experiences are able to represent relationships of almost infinitely greater scope, both in terms of abstraction and of spatio-temporal relationships, than the sensory fringe can.

There is no doubt that there are many occasions on which (a) we feel that something more is available, and (b) some further content subsequently becomes available. However, to move from this fact to the conclusion that there is a *causal contribution* by (a) is to make the simple and plainly illicit move from correlation to causation.

An intriguing fact about Mangan's paper is that in many ways it supports a view of our abilities that is extremely congenial to epiphenomenalism. Just consider the extraordinary power that Mangan attributes to unconscious processing in the generation of feelings of rightness. As he himself points out, the experience of rightness draws on global resources; that is, many things may be relevant to the rightness of a particular sensation, perception, or thought in a particular context, and it is often the case that many of the relevant aspects must be accessed and brought together to cause there to be an experience of rightness. E.g., the sense of "fit" between "kite" and "goes better on the beach" depends for its production on a process that brings together things we know about kite flying and things we know about beaches (broad unoccupied expanses without vertical impediments). Now, on Mangan's own view, this process of accessing background knowledge and bringing it together goes on unconsciously. (Our analysis of what is involved is entirely an after-the-fact reflection on an event that happens in a phenomenological instant.) Again, a sense of familiarity must, if veridical, depend on a process that accesses record(s) previously laid down and connects them with present input; and again, this process happens unconsciously, supplying only its result (the sense of familiarity) to consciousness.

If we are asked to reject epiphenomenalism, we are asked to hold that unconscious processes can do some very complex things by way of causing appropriate non-sensory experiences, but they cannot go on to cause further neural events that will, e.g., activate memory traces and result in further conscious, imagistic material. No reason whatever has been given in Mangan's paper for accepting such a limitation on the abilities of unconscious processes. Indeed, what is denied to them seems no more complex than what is allowed to them; thus, the anti-epiphenomenalistic hypothesis seems not only unsupported, but unparsimonious.

A further point that goes back to Wundt (1912) begins by noting that retrieval of familiar items, for example, will surely require the activation of a very large number of neurons. Not just any large set will do, of course they must be neurons that are correctly connected with present inputs and appropriate traces from previous experience. An experience of familiarity (or of rightness, or of immanence of surround, etc.) has no such complexity to it. Mangan properly notes the elusive aspect of non-sensory experiences, but their elusiveness provides no reason to suppose that they have a high degree of complexity that we somehow fail to notice (nor does Mangan in any way suggest that they do). But then, we must choose between the hypothesis

(EPI) The complex neural causes of the non-sensory experiences are themselves sufficient to produce the complex events required for retrieval, and other sequels to non-sensory experiences

and the hypothesis

(Anti-EPI) The relatively simple non-sensory experience itself provides an additional element, without which the complex neural causes of the non-sensory experience would not be sufficient to produce the usual sequels.

The (Anti-EPI) hypothesis invites the difficult question as to how a relatively simple experience could manage to get connected to the right set of neurons to produce a relevant sequel, if its neural causes are insufficient to do the job a burden which the (EPI) hypothesis does not share.

Opponents of epiphenomenalism sometimes suggest that it is a stultifying view, because accepting it would imply that there could be no research program in the study of consciousness. On the contrary, however, an epiphenomenalist outlook leads very naturally to important and conceptually clear research questions. In the present context, one of these questions is: What is the brain organization that both produces certain non-sensory experiences and is connected to memory or to action-initiating brain regions in such a way as to eventuate in retrievals, or in actions (e.g., shortly after production of certain experiences of rightness)? If we bear in mind the structure discussed in section II above, another question arises: What is the brain structure that corresponds to the fact that non-sensory experiences are directed upon some sensory experience, or perception, or thought? These questions point to difficult science, science that may even be beyond our present technological capabilities. But they seem to be the very questions that, in the fullness of time, we would want a science of consciousness to answer.

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