

Fringe Consciousness and the Multifariousness of Emotions

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PSYCHE, 8(14), October 2002
<http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v8/psyche-8-14-desousa.html>

KEYWORDS: consciousness, sensation, proprioception, emotion, Capgras syndrome, non-sensory content.

COMMENTARY ON: Mangan, B. (2001). Sensation's Ghost: The Non-Sensory "Fringe" of Consciousness. *PSYCHE*, 7(18). <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v7/psyche-7-18-mangan.html>.

ABSTRACT: Mangan draws his inspiration from James's account of fringe consciousness, but differs from James in focusing on something non-sensory, necessarily fuzzy, though not necessarily fleeting. A long tradition in philosophy has deemed non-sensory elements of consciousness to be indispensable to thought. But those, chiefly conceptual, forms of non-sensory fringe are not Mangan's focus. What then is Mangan talking about? This commentary envisages a number of possible answers, and tentatively concludes that fringe consciousness is essentially emotional. Emotional consciousness involves proprioception, however, hence is non-sensory only in the weak sense of excluding the five senses.

Mangan's engaging paper brings to mind a nice prefiguration in Tennyson's *Ulysses*:

*Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.*

Tennyson's image, though presumably innocent of psychological dogma, appears to carry three implications that closely fit William James's original description of "fringe experience", from which Mangan draws inspiration. But Mangan is at pains to disavow all three. First, Mangan warns against a common confusion of James's "penumbra" with *fleeting* phenomena, whose fuzzy character is due entirely to our inability to inspect them at leisure. Tennyson seems to agree with James: the margins fade when I move. Second, Mangan is interested in what he calls *non-sensory* phenomena, not just in any objects that might appear in the penumbra of focused consciousness. But Tennyson's untravelled world, like James's penumbra, is not necessarily *non-sensory*. It gleams, and might well come into better focus if only to generate a new, equally elusive margin. And third, unlike James, Mangan offers a theory of the role and function of the phenomena in question, which not only explains why we need to have them but why they typically *cannot* be brought into sharp focus as objects of full attention. But in both Tennyson and James it is not obvious that the margins can't be brought to the center: they are not bound to be categorially different from what is at the center of attention: rather there must always be something that isn't in focus at any given time.

I shall suggest that a case might be made for Tennyson and James as against Mangan on all three points. But before I come to any critical comments, let me first endorse the methodology of Mangan's enterprise. It seems to me to be a fine example of what might be termed the New Phenomenology. Unlike classical phenomenology which prides itself on standing in aloof *epoche* from explanatory hypotheses and ontological commitments, the New Phenomenology is in the service of establishing contact with explanation at both the functional and the neurological level. At its most radical, it can serve a reductionist agenda, as in one model of the genre, Paul Churchland's argument for the identity of color qualia with the output of the color processing system in the brain in (Churchland and Churchland 1998, 166-172). Churchland argues that the opponent process theory of colour perception allows for the reconstruction of just exactly the structure elaborated for the color solid on strictly phenomenological grounds. It does not matter that the opponent process theory was constructed to order in order to match the phenomenological structure of colour. For assuming that independent evidenced can be found for that mechanism, the perfect match in structure between the two can serve as an argument for an identity thesis: color qualia just *are* the output of the opponent processes. Conversely, the closeness of the match can itself serve as an argument in favour of the opponent process theory. Thus the methodology promises genuine progress in linking the phenomenal experience and neurological theory even if one is not committed to any identity theory.

Mangan's project is somewhat more modest. While he offers a fairly persuasive argument for a certain range of functional explanations, there is little prospect, as yet, of establishing with any neural processes a strict structural isomorphism of the sort sketched by Churchland for the colour solid. One might, however, speculate a little further about the sort of neurological architecture presupposed by the analysis of those functions. Two types of cases might shed some light on the type of mechanism Mangan seeks for fringe consciousness. One is suggested by (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998)'s discussion of the Capgras phenomenon. Ramachandran's suggestion is that a direct link normally exists between the facial recognition mechanism and the areas controlling the appropriate

emotional responses (particularly the amygdala). The sight of a close relative--a parent, in the case of Ramachandran's patient Arthur--normally triggers an affective response, which is itself subject to a "familiarity" evaluation. In Arthur's case, the direct link to the area in charge of generating the affective response is missing. As a result, the affective response to his mother or father is not produced. This sets up a incongruity between the strictly cognitive familiarity check that applies to the face and the missing familiarity check applied to the expected affective response. The *illusion de Sosie* or Capgras delusion is then no more than a perfectly perfectly reasonable inference: the person before me is not my mother, since I get a characteristic thrill when my mother appears and I'm not getting it now. On the other hand, she looks exactly like my mother. Therefore she is an impostor, a stranger who looks just like my mother. This hypothesis is particularly neat in its capacity to explain why it is that the "impostor" syndrome only occurs with persons to whom the person is particularly close: typically parents or spouses. It doesn't occur with the recognition of just anyone, because in most cases of recognition a more or less indifferent emotional reaction is normal, not aberrant. If something like this is correct, it would imply that the emotional aspect of recognition is subject to an independent familiarity marker. In those cases where the person recognized is both familiar and affectively significant, both markers are involved in the required "ID check". The sense of unfamiliarity, or the absence of the required sense of familiarity, fits in well with the notion Mangan is exploring. It also suggests a further testable hypothesis to account for the fact that the Capgras phenomenon tends not to occur over the telephone: Are there distinct links from the auditory system to the amygdala? In that case they may remain unaffected by the broken link with the visual area. The latter, however, will still cause a sense of discrepancy when both channels are open.

A similar story might plausibly be told concerning obsessive-compulsive disorder, the other striking case of pathology mentioned by Mangan. OCD affects specifically not the sense of familiarity but of the feeling of "rightness." OCD may be seen as resulting from some sort of disconnection of the normal emotion of rightness in relation to recent memory of having taken necessary precautions. The relevant emotions here would be specifically *epistemic* emotions, which as (Hookway, 2001) has pointed out have been almost wholly neglected in the literature but constitute an extremely important aspect of our ability rationally to reason our way to new beliefs. If I didn't experience *doubt*, I wouldn't launch on an inquiry in the first place. If I didn't have the feeling of *rightness* about an inference, I wouldn't rely on it. If I didn't have the feeling of *conviction* about a conclusion, I wouldn't infer it. The patient suffering from OCD lacks some of those normal feelings. OCD has traditionally been taken to be a *neurotic* syndrome calling for psychoanalytic diagnosis and therapy. But the fact that some of these cases are apparently capable of clearing up under the influence of a targeted drug such as Prozac (Kramer 1993) suggests that this apparent complexity is an illusion. Here again, though, we can see an apparently non-sensory fringe phenomenon at work.

Now for some of my doubts.

It is a crucial part of Mangan's thesis that the "fringe" phenomena he describes are *non-sensory*. They don't pertain to any of the five sensory channels. He expands on this in two

ways: one identifies being *cross-modal* as a sufficient condition: "it is safe to say that any experience that occurs in more than one sensory mode is non-sensory." The second (on the same page) suggests that we

think of non-sensory experiences as the contents in conscious[ness] which, when added to and merged with sensations, create perceptions. Or... [i]f we begin with a full fledged perception and strip it of its normal non-sensory content, what is left is ... naked sensations. The missing something is the non-sensory component of the original experience (Section 2).

Both these approaches point to arguments that have a long history in philosophy, going back to Plato's *Theatetus*, Aristotle's "common notions", and Descartes's second *Meditation*. This last text, for example, contains Descartes's famous reflections on the identity of the melting piece of wax: in order to grasp its essential nature, Descartes argues, we must subtract the sensory input, since that appears to be inconsistent through time. He therefore concludes that the nature of the wax is not perceived, nor is it "in any way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone" (Descartes 1986, 31).

Now the problem with these historical reminiscences is that while they seem reasonably clear and appear to capture the very same concept as Mangan's, they draw the distinction in a different place. There is nothing in the least "amorphous" or "fuzzy" about being conscious of such non-sensory items. On the contrary, they appear to be universals or *concepts*, bearing, we might surmise, the same relation to the five senses as conceptual art bears to the plastic arts: you don't have to see it to get it, you just have to think about it. But concepts have commonly been regarded as on a par with sense-data by some of the tradition that regards sense-data as directly apprehended in consciousness. In Russell's terms, for example, both are capable of being *known by acquaintance*. (Russell 1948). And indeed it is a perfectly ordinary fact of experience that we sometimes experience being conscious of a concept or notion that is quite devoid of any perceptual component. It does not seem plausible to claim that these are invariably on the fringe rather than in the focal point of the searchlight of consciousness. Take the concept of addition, for example. This may evoke visual images, but the visual images in no way need to be at the center of attention. They are in any case ancillary to the focus of attention.

What of the other features summarized in the list in Section 5?

(1) If non-sensory experiences include awareness of concepts, I see no reason why they would need be "diaphanous".

(2) The claim that they are "low resolution" is one which seems to make sense only of analog representation. Insofar as they are constituted by the experience of apprehending concepts, non-sensory experiences don't seem to qualify for variable resolution. Non-sensory concepts, in their dependency on--or at least close association with--language, would seem to constitute digital representations. The key feature of digital representation is that it requires a pre-arranged finite set of basic discrete elements (such as the

phonemes of speech, the DNA bases making up codons, the discrete sampling and pitch frequencies in musical recording) which are combined to form complex representations. This determines a maximum level of resolution possible for any given representational space. In that sense, for any digital representation, resolution is part of the set up, not part of the experience.

(3 and 4) Nor is there any reason to expect them to be either "elusive" or "more evident in the periphery of consciousness." Sometimes they are, and sometimes not.

Hume argued that "ideas", being "copies of impressions", are necessarily less vivid and forceful than the impressions from which they are copied. But that doesn't seem to be the sort of thing Mangan is after. And in any case that fifth feature is the one to which Mangan stresses that there are "striking exceptions" (Section 5).

So Mangan's target is not, after all, the sort of non-sensory consciousness explored by those historical precedent. But what then exactly is it? The phenomena to which Mangan is attempting to draw our attention are surely real. Surely, too, the suggestions he makes about the sort of function they might have in regulating various trade-offs required by the constraints set by the limited capacity of the conscious work-space are plausible. So rather than taking the phrase "non-sensory experience" more seriously than it must be intended, let me ask: What then are the really crucial attributes of these aspects of experience, whatever they really consist in?

One possible answer is that the penumbra of all experience consists in the myriad weaker associations that we have with any and all of its aspects. These don't normally come into focus. In much the same way, when we use a given word, we seldom think of the occasion when we first learned it. Nevertheless, that and perhaps some subsequent occasions are bound to have left a residue of faint associations, and those associations constitute a kind of aura around the word. Since that aura of associations (whatever their vividness in consciousness, if any) varies from person to person, they are of no use in establishing a common basis of mutual communication. For that reason, I suspect we are programmed to ignore those associations, though they would certainly fit what Mangan says about their endless variety: "there are a virtual infinity of non-sensory experiences--rightness and familiarity, with their opposites wrongness and novelty, are only four of them:.... The list is endless" (Section 6).

Many of those fringe associations are sensory, however. (Proust is famous for his ability to evoke such associations: when the madeleine is dipped into the tea, the fringe experiences that come flooding in are not just non-sensory experiences but memories that clearly include a wealth of sensory images.) So they can't be quite what Mangan is after.

A better answer, I believe, is that the experiences Mangan is drawing attention to are inherently *emotional*, in a sense closely related to James's sense of emotion. That is to say they involve an evaluative response to proprioceptive apprehensions that are somehow referred to external objects (or indiscriminately to the world as a whole, as in moods). Mangan hints at this in his penultimate section (dissociation and emotion) but it remains ,

well, at the peripheral fringe of what he says. The idea that fringe phenomena are emotional has several advantages. First, it fits in nicely with some of Mangan's examples. The striking case of the kite passage illustrates something like the "aha!" feeling, perhaps tinged with relief. Second, it seems that those feelings are brought about by the fact that one understands, that one is able to *construe* the passage as *meaningful*. But that too is characteristic of emotions in general (Roberts 1988). Emotions typically provide a framework in the light of which we construe a situation and identify a range of relevant responses. Third, to think of fringe experiences as emotions goes some way towards explaining why they are, in the typical case, essentially regulative of the focal phenomena rather than constituting those focal phenomena in themselves. Emotion quite generally seem to have a regulative function (de Sousa 1987; Damasio 1999). On the other hand it doesn't preclude them from moving to centre stage; and indeed it seems sometimes they do, subject to another "trade-off", this time "between sensory and non-sensory" experience (Section 3.5). When they do get our attention, however, they remain "fuzzy," as Mangan notes, but not for the reason he gives. Instead it may be because they are (mostly) not the sort of emotions that have been categorized or named. I have already mentioned the possibility that both "rightness" and "familiarity", if they are not themselves emotions, at least have emotional variants. Finally, Mangan's insistence on the "virtual infinity" of his fringe phenomena fits emotional experience--providing we cease to think of the range of possible emotions as exhausted by those we have names for. Nameless emotions form the greater part of our lived experience and condition the tone of our mental lives at every moment (Campbell 1994).

If it turns out that the essential feature of the "fringe phenomena" that interest Mangan is that they are, as it were, wispy emotions, then we have an explanation for the inadequacy of the more obvious interpretation canvassed above. "Non-sensory" excludes only the "five senses"; so if we allow proprioception as being sensory in a wider sense, it doesn't really mean non-sensory. It actually just means *emotional*. If that is right, then I think Mangan has indeed drawn attention to a feature of experience that has been little noticed by philosophers, though it seems familiar to poets and novelists. It is also a point that did not escape William James, namely (quoting somewhat out of context) that "almost every stimulus . . . will . . . engender the particular complex of feelings of which the psychic body of the emotion consists" (James 1884, 199).

Let me stress again, however, that the "complex of feelings" that James has in mind here consists in *bodily* feelings. Given James' own view of what emotions are, it seems ironic that Mangan should draw his inspiration from James and at the same time insist on the non-sensory nature of the relevant feelings. For James thought emotions were essentially perceptions of bodily states. Not perceptions mediated by the five primary sensory channels, to be sure--but how important can that be? Proprioception is a kind of sensory perception. So in the end it turns out that the non-sensory fringe is none other than *emotional content*, and is perceptual if not strictly sensory after all.

Let me in closing return to Tennyson and James, and the three points of apparent disagreement alluded to at the outset.

First, while Mangan is surely correct in thinking that the elusiveness of fringe experience is not due to their fleetingness alone, that character might still play a greater part than he allows. For if James is right in thinking that "not only the heart, but the entire circulatory system, forms a sort of sounding-board, which every change of our consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate" (James 1884, 191), then it is exceedingly unlikely that we should ever find ourselves in a situation stable enough to allow leisurely perusal of our fine-grained emotions. But that doesn't in itself require that the emotions be intrinsically "fuzzy."

Second, while we are no longer inclined to believe James's insistence that "the emotional brain-processes not only resemble the ordinary sensorial brain-processes, but in very truth are nothing but such processes variously combined" (James 1884, 189), it remains true that much of emotional experience appears to involve some sort of proprioception (Damasio 1999). In that sense, it can be said to be "non-sensory" only in the most restricted literal sense.

In truth I am not at all convinced that any single analysis will fit all the "fringe phenomena" Mangan has in mind. But if, as I believe, many of them are indeed, in the final analysis, none other than the emotional background of our thoughts and perceptions, then it is unsurprising that they should be relatively elusive, but it does not follow that they are necessarily so by nature. Emotions are subtle, complex, and hard to capture in language when we lack the crutch of conventional categories. But the main reason the "fringe" remains elusive is just what Tennyson implies: beyond anything we can bring into focus, there is always something else. The something else lies on the margins, not because it is the *kind* of thing that cannot be brought under scrutiny, but because it hasn't yet been the object of focused attention. That is certainly an observation worth making; but it is not clear that its truth requires vindication in terms of neurological anatomy and function. Rather it seems to come as close as anything can to the status of a conceptual truth, the common-sense truism that while any point can lie at the center of some sphere, not all points can be central to the same sphere at once.

Acknowledgement

I thank two anonymous referees for invaluable criticisms and suggestions on an earlier draft.

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