

Xenology and Kant's Antinomy of Taste

When contemporary philosophers of mind claim that whatever else experience includes, it does not contain pains, colors, tickles and itches, they appear to deny what everyone else on the planet believes. Naturally, they are greeted with howls of derision. Dennett, for example, writes,

My goal is subversive. I am out to overthrow an idea that, in one form or another, is "obvious" to most people – to scientists, philosophers, lay people.... Which idea of [phenomenal presence] am I trying to extirpate? [Phenomenal qualities] are supposed to be *special* properties, in some hard-to-define way. My claim ... is that conscious experience has *no* properties that are special in *any* of the ways [phenomenal properties] have been supposed to be special.¹

And, in case you can't believe what you are hearing, Dennett ends a recent article with the last word:

So when we look one last time at our original characterization of [phenomenal qualities], as ineffable, intrinsic, private, directly apprehensible properties of experience, we find that there is nothing to fill the bill... So contrary to what seems obvious at first blush, there simply are no [phenomenal qualities] at all, i.e., no pains, colors, tickles and itches.

Why do Kantian philosophers of mind attack what is obvious to everyone else on the planet? To see why, let's take a simple example: water.

Water

Let us ask about the meaning of 'water'. According to the aesthetic of the normative functionalist, you don't *see* water (or twater, for that matter), as far as sensible intuition is concerned,

You see an object *as* water,
You do not see *of* it, its waterhood.

On the sensible side, you can say that

You see *of* water, the color of its shivering facing surface.

¹Daniel Dennett, "Quining Qualia" N. Block, et al., *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates* (MIT Press, 1997).

The same thing is true of twin water, twater. You see it *as* twater, and, “of” it, you see its shivering facing surface. The puzzle has been, since the time of Descartes, how the phenomenal element of the experience (what is seen *of* the item), *this shivering facing surface*, and the element of conceptualization (what the item is seen *as*), *this water*, come together into a seamless and unitary experience (or, if you prefer, a unitary consciousness). The Boosters slide back and forth between the “of” and the “as.”

Now notice. From the standpoint of the meaning *water*, *water* is a constructable, an object which exists as a result of the play of the imagination, conceptualization, and the aesthetic experience – elements which are all brought together and coalesce into a single seamless, homogeneous experience. Experience is, at bottom, the fluid and dynamic unfolding construction of image models that include perception, sensation, and imagination (in the Kantian sense).

Meanings are essentially complex, they arise out of the dynamic activity of perception and conceptualization. The phenomenal character, the qualitative content that we find, or that we characterize as the meaning is, therefore, something that is built up. To take it as “Aristotelian clean” or atomic is a mistake. To do so, is to imagine that we could look at the sheer raw input of an experience by utilizing a primordial level of scientific observation lying beyond the veil of experience itself. That is the myth of the given, a “given” in which the essences are lined up ready to go from the outside world into our heads.

As Sicha puts it,

A crucial element in the Aristotelian line of thought is commitment to a “clean” ... Level of “information that”. It is the “cleanness” of the operation of the sense, according to the Aristotelian, that shows that it has a grip on something that is “really there”. By contrast, the only level, according to the [Kantian] aesthetic, that is “clean” is the original sensory state. But, at that level, there is no “information that” and thus no truths. All the remaining stages are “contaminated” by the (“higher”) processes of the understanding...So, the metaphor of ... “foundation” so common among views which accept the “myth of the given” is inappropriate to image-models as characterized by the aesthetic.²

Aesthetic experience consists of image-models which, in turn, are a seamless unity of imagination, imaging and perceiving. We can begin to see why the Kantian regards the sensory as containing tantalus episodes: the original sensory state has no fleeting phenomenal qualities because it lies beyond the end of the tether of our phenomenological analysis. The sheer sensory episodes contain no items represented *as* anything nor do we see *of* them any categorical structure. All “access” to tantalus episodes is “contaminated” by the higher processes of

²Sicha, *KTM*, 580.

understanding. And, as Kant might say, even taking something to be a thing or a *sound* is to categorize it and mobilize higher processes.

On the Kantian's view, then, there *are* sense qualities playing a role in the constitution of objects but:

We do not see *of* objects
Their kind;
Their causal properties;
Their functional properties
Some of their relational properties;
Their past, present, temporal connections or presentness; and
Even some of their sensible properties

(To which I might add, "their twaterness" or "their skyishness.")

By contrast, we can see objects *as*

Dogs, bushes, bears, and wine;
Toxic, brittle, and soluble in water;
Doorstops, hammers, harpoons, ... wine vats [and words];
Too heavy to lift, aunts, and orbiting the earth; and
Scratchy, fragrant, sweet, bitter, and hot.³

Furthermore, with respect to what we can see *of* objects:

We can see of two ice cubes that adjoin each other in a scene, the pink and rectangular facing surface of one on the left and the red square facing surface of the one on the right (including spatial connectedness).

On Sellars' view (a contemporary Kantian),

Phenomenological investigation yields the realization that there are actual cubes of pink in cases where there is no pink ice cube and even when there is no object to be seen as pink. As a result, any account of perception requires that expanses of color volume have a place as states of perceivers. The view that sensible qualities disappear completely and become intentional inexistents is, for Sellars, a mistake.⁴

³*Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics: Sellars' Cassirer LecturesNotes and Other Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Sicha (Ridgeview, 2003): 403.

⁴*Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics: Sellars' Cassirer LecturesNotes and Other Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Sicha (Ridgeview, 2003): 410.

Concluding Remarks

In the Kantian paradigm, there is something for those that support the existence of phenomenal properties as well as for those who deny their existence. The Boosters correctly realize that phenomenological investigation yields manifest expanses of color volume as states of the perceiver (if nothing else). However, the Boosters fail to see that the color volumes belong to image-models that cannot exist at the level of “facts”.

The Scoffers correctly see that color volumes cannot be elements of apprehensible “looks facts” that provide the epistemological foundation for brute “facts of the matter,” i.e., objective givens that serve for describing the world in terms acceptable to the ultimate science. However, they wrongly believe that, in the face of scientific advance, sensible qualities disappear and become intentional inexistents, that is, mere seemings.