Indeterminacy and Reportability of Phenomenology

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Suppose you are driving seaside with your loved one around the time of sunset. The sun is slowly melting into the sea, it is getting darker gradually. Meanwhile, you suddenly notice all street lightings along the driveway are on. You are not sure when it turned on, you only know it's sometime before you notice. Then, you are suddenly struck with a philosophical question, "Have I *seen* those lights before I notice it? I didn't *know* they have been on, but I might have *seen* them ."

This kind of question has become popular after this sort of phenomenon is scientifically demonstrated in psychology lab: change-blindness. Some philosophers say yes to the question while others say no. A prominent figure of the former position, Ned Block (2007), gives an argument to prove we see more than we can report. He exploits the result of George Sperling's experiment (1960). In the experiment, even though subjects could identify only half of briefly presented alphanumeric characters, they could identify almost all characters in any designated row when cued shortly "after" the stimuli were gone. It suggests that subjects actually possessed information of all the characters in the scene in a fleeting memory system but only part of it was sent to working memory for reporting due to the constraint of memory capacity. Block argues this existence of information of all characters and subjects' testimony to the effect that they saw every character justifies thinking the physical basis of phenomenology is the fleeting memory, hence we see more than we can report.

However, there is another way to incorporate Sperling's result from the viewpoint of the latter position. Our phenomenology might be indeterminate. Subjects' report can be right, but subjects might have seen characters in more indeterminate way, namely as alphanumeric characters *in general* not as characters *with their specific identities*. When cued, subjects' attention is drawn to the designated row, and changes the indeterminate phenomenology more determinate. The altered phenomenology enables subjects to report their specific identities. This is why subjects could make correct answers, it is not because they had seen all characters with their specific identities. If this interpretation is correct, our phenomenology matches we can report: we just see what we can report. James Stazicker (forthcoming) is one of philosophers who thinks this way, and gives a detailed account how attention affects determinacy of phenomenology based on functional architecture of vision and psychophysical evidence (Yeshurun and Carrasco 1998).

On the face of this interpretation, it seems to me several objections can be given from Block's position. He can say indeterminacy only resides in representational content of

perception but not in phenomenology (Block 2008), and he can still keep his claim that the physical basis of phenomenology is distinct from that of reporting by saying the effect of attention is merely causal and attention does not constitute phenomenology. Actually, another psychophysical experiment by Carrasco, Ling and Read (2004), I think, suggests that attention doesn't constitute phenomenology.

Here, it might seem as though the discussion is in the state of stalemate, but it is not actually so. There are conceptual and empirical requirements for the alleged explanations to be correct, and along with trying to satisfy requirements it would be settled that which side is correct. I will argue the current status of discussion doesn't favor Block's position and the future of it isn't also so bright.

References

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