

Review of Kevin O'Regan, Alva Noe “Does functionalism really deal with the phenomenal side of experience?”

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ABSTRACT

Sensory Motor Contingencies belong to a functionalistic framework. Functionalism does not give any explanation about why and how objective functional relations should produce phenomenal experience. O'Regan and Noe as well as other functionalists do not propose a new ontology that could support the first person subjective phenomenal side of experience.

MAIN TEXT

In reading O'Regan and Noe's paper two major concerns are mandatory. First it is difficult to see in what respect the authors' standpoint is different from functionalism, second it is difficult to define objectively what sensory motor contingency (SMC in the following) is without recurring to some kind of external interpretation.

The authors reject the representational framework advocated by several authors (Kosslyn, Thompson, Kim, & Alpert, 1995; O'Brien & Opie, 1999), according to which conscious perception derives from the instantiation of structures somehow similar to external objects. We agree with O'Regan and Noe that this approach has several serious problems, among which: i) apart from geometrical spatial relations, how can the other qualities of experience (colour, smell, sound) be reproduced? ii) there is no compelling evidence of the existence of such structures; iii) if such structures were found there is no *a priori* or scientific theory showing why their presence in the brain should result in some subjective qualitative experience. The authors correctly address all these three issues. To overcome these difficulties they propose “a different approach” whose “central idea is that vision is a mode of exploration of the world that is mediated by knowledge of what they call sensorimotor contingencies”. In itself this is not a strong claim since it has already been made several times, most notably by functionalism. In fact the authors claim that “seeing is a way of acting”: a statement that could be accepted from a functionalist (if not behaviourist) standpoint. Nevertheless it is not clear what is the novelty of SMCs with respect to other forms of functionalism. If we have understood the authors' standpoint, a SMC is a set of compelling correspondences between action and perceived objects. Yet the authors do not provide a general proof of the fact that every visual conscious phenomenal object can be reduced to SMCs. Even if these SMCs could be located, the authors do not explain why these SMCs, which – to their own admission – are just “rules governing the sensory changes produced by various motor actions”, should correspond to phenomenal experiences. The authors should have felt that something is missing when they wrote that “the visual qualities are determined by the *character* of the SMCs set up by the visual apparatus”. A series of questions arises: i) if visual qualities are determined by SMCs, then visual qualities are different from SMC: what are visual qualities? are they something different from SMCs? ii) what is the character of a SMCs? Is something different from a SMC in itself? iii) what are the laws connecting visual qualities and SMCs? iv) it seems perfectly conceivable that SMCs exists without any visual qualities or phenomenal experiences at all, then why SMCs should explain subjective experience?

Although the empirical data collected by O'Regan and Noe can be very helpful in order to build a functionalistic theory of vision and in giving a more complete explanation of the way information is processed by the brain, it does not help to find a solution to the fact that such information processing is correlated to a conscious experience of it. However the authors admit the existence of a gap between SMC and consciousness and they promise to provide more details on section 6.

In that, the authors are adamant in stating their functionalist credo that phenomenal experience does not exist as a real phenomenon. According to them the "qualia debate rests on what Ryle called a category mistake". They wrote that their position does not deny that "experience has a qualitative character", yet it seems to deny the existence of experience in itself. "It is confused to think of the qualitative character of experience in terms of the occurrence of something. Experience is something we do and its qualitative features are aspects of this activity". Unfortunately there are no qualitative aspects available. Since what we do, from a strict objective standpoint, is just a series of physical events there is no quality at all. We do not accept this functionalist credo and hold a different standpoint. The idea that subjective facts are real has gained wider and wider acceptance (Chalmers, 1996; Edelman, 1987; Edelman & Tononi, 2000; Stubenberg, 1998). Leopold Stubenberg makes a straightforward statement about this concept in what he calls *the principle of phenomenological adequacy*. "I will reject everything that does not square with what I take to be the phenomenological data. [...] 'So much the worse for phenomenology' is not a viable option for one who adheres to the principle to phenomenological adequacy. Phenomenology is what the theory of consciousness is supposed to illuminate. If a theory requires us to disregard the deliverances of phenomenology then it is not the theory I seek." (Stubenberg, 1998). The authors' claim that the explanatory gap can be filled just because it does not really exist is not acceptable outside a functionalistic framework.

In conclusion, our main criticism is directed towards three issues. First it is not clear the difference between the SMC approach and functionalism. Secondly, we do not see why the existence of SMCs should entail any phenomenal experience. Thirdly, we do not see what is the ontological status of such SMCs (are they intrinsic properties of matter? do they entail consciousness even when they occur in an artificial machine? are they sufficient to let consciousness emerge?). Yet the authors' approach is valuable since it remarks the possibility to locate consciousness outside the brain. The repeated failure in looking for a neural correlate of consciousness can thus be used as a hint for an approach that includes also the relations with the external environment. Although their approach does not address directly the problem of consciousness it can be the basis for a more radical attempt to locate the phenomenal properties of experience in a broader framework than that of internalism. Yet functionalism could not be enough.

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