41.0 The Problem

The main challenge to functionalism - that with which we are currently concerned – is that functionalism fails to capture the subjective feel of conscious experience. According to functionalism, what makes a particular state a pain is that state’s functional role, not its intrinsic quality – not its, as it were, qualia. And this, according to functionalism’s detractors is wrong headed.

This paper is concerned with whether or not functionalism can account for the subjective feel of experience, or the “what it is like” to undergo a particular experience.

There are three arguments claiming that functionalism cannot:

1. When you attend to a pain in your leg, you are aware of an intrinsic quality of your experience, where this quality is something that the experience has in itself, apart from its relations to other things.

2. A person blind from birth could know all the physical and functional facts of color perception without knowing what it is like to see something red.

3. It is conceivable that two people can have similarly functioning visual systems desire differences in the way things look to people (inverted spectrum).

42.0 Intentionality

Our experience has content.

But the content of an experience need not exist – i.e. I can hallucinate a pink elephant when there is no pink elephant present. I can search Florida for the fountain of youth, I can paint a picture of a unicorn.

There are two senses of see – one that demands a causal connection with the object one sees, and one that does not. We will call the former the ‘success’ sense of seeing.

The argument from illusion and sense-data fallacies turn on a misunderstanding of this point – If I see a pink elephant, there need be no pink elephant that I am seeing. Moreover, when I see a unicorn, I cannot turn my attention to features of my visual experience. The only features I come across are features of the unicorn. Compare the case of a painting of a unicorn. In that case, I can come across features of the brush strokes or paint – but there are no mental brush strokes or paint that I can introspect in my head. There are only features of the content of my experience.

Note: the pain one feels in your leg because of a slipped disk is not exactly like the pink elephant that one sees. The pain one feels in a slipped disk is more like the afterimage one sees after staring at a color for a length of time. Both are still the intentional objects of the experience, but they are “illusory” pains.
43.0 Returning to the Objections

1. The objection fails by confounding a quality of the intentional object of the experience with a quality of the experience itself.

When attending to a pain in one’s leg, one attends to a quality of an occurrence in one’s leg, and this occurrence is presented as an intrinsic quality of the occurrence in one’s leg – not of the experience of the occurrence in one’s leg.

2. Mental representations are constructed from concepts, and a person who is blind from birth lacks a certain concept – a phenomenal concept that one can only acquire through perceptual acquaintance with a certain color (acquittance in the right way). Thus The person blind from birth does not know the whole functional story because they do not know that seeing red things typically causes the deployment of the phenomenal concept RED.

3. The objection turns on the same fallacy as 1 – The only way to get to the conclusion that Fred and Alice mean different things by their words “red” and “green” is to assume the sense-datum fallacy, and that was dismissed in 1.