

Multiple Marilyns, Misrepresentation and the “New Skepticism”¹

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I. Introduction

It is very easy to become concerned that things are not how they seem. Worries abound. People hallucinate. The senses sometimes deceive. Straight sticks appear bent, square towers look round. There are optical illusions, mirages, congenital perceptual defects, and cognitive distortions. Worse even: we may be dreaming, insane, or systematically and ruthlessly hoodwinked by maniacal neurosurgeons. The external world, it may seem, is an epistemically unsafe place.

It is with a sigh of relief, then, that one might, after a long day’s uncertainty in the external world, come home to the inner world and comfortably hang one’s epistemic hat. Here we may boldly assert, without fear of reproach, that, while we cannot be sure we *have* a hand, nevertheless, we can be positive that it *seems to us as though* we do. Although the stick may be straight when it deceptively appears to us to be bent, we may rest assured that the stick appears to be bent. We may put our feet up and relax. Granted, this might seem a paltry bit of ground to have retained in the face of skeptical pursuit, but it at least appears to be firm and unassailable ground. Or does it?

In a recent book entitled *Action in Perception*, Alva Noe considers an assault that might be launched on this seemingly stable and firmly entrenched intuitive beachhead. He calls the attack the “new skepticism” and characterizes its affront to common sense as the “paradoxical” claim that “[i]t turns out that we are mistaken in our assessment of how

¹ Conversations with and comments from Bernard Kobes, Brian Fiala, Robert VanGulick, and Kristin Hagan were helpful in the creation of this paper. I shall mention specific contributions where appropriate. Of course, none of the aforementioned persons are responsible for any of my views.

things seem to us to be.”² The new skeptic claims that our reports of how things appear outstrip in detail, clarity, and continuity the information presented to us by means of our sense organs, in particular our visual sense organs. Facts about optic blindspots, change blindness, and poor parafoveal resolution are supposed to show that our sensations do not have some of the qualitative properties they appear to us to have; these facts seem to point to an interior world skepticism. We can be wrong, says the new skeptic, not only about how the world is, but also about how it seems to us.

Noe is unmoved to new skepticism on the basis of these claims about our perceptual apparatus. While Noe expostulates against new skeptics at large, he considers Daniel Dennett his main target. In an earlier paper, Noe calls Dennett “the *eminence grise*, and strongest proponent, of the new skepticism.”³ Noe retains this view in *Action in Perception*, maintaining that “[t]he thinker who has done most to articulate the new skepticism and give it punch is Daniel Dennett.”⁴ The remarks of Dennett’s which Noe purports convict him of new skepticism are largely extracted from Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained*. According to Noe, Dennett’s treatment of the optic blindspot and other visual phenomena entails that we are, at least sometimes, mistaken in our views about our own conscious experience.

While Noe mentions and criticizes Dennett’s views on many sensory phenomena, the example to which he devotes most of his attention is Dennett’s Marilyn Monroe wallpaper thought experiment. The Marilyn Monroe thought experiment has also drawn

² Noe, Alva, *Action in Perception*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004, p. 54.

³ Noe, Alva, “Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2002, Vol. 9, No. 5-6, pp. 1-12.

⁴ Noe, 2004, p. 54.

the attention of David Rosenthal, who takes Dennett's views on the matter to provide support for his HOT theory of state consciousness.⁵

In this paper, I shall consider the Marilyn Monroe wallpaper case in detail. First I shall examine the passage in which Dennett states the thought experiment. I shall then discuss whether Dennett's remarks on the Marilyn wallpaper case are, as Noe seems to think, grounds for attributing to him a new skeptical view. I maintain that much of what Dennett says appears to convict him of new skepticism, however; in the discussion below I hope to soften the blow somewhat. To this effect, I shall identify and attempt to reconcile two seemingly disparate strands in Dennett's view of consciousness as he presents it in his 1991 book. One of these strands, I shall argue, is amenable to Noe's view of visual phenomenology. Finally, I shall consider the upshot of Dennett's Marilyn Monroe case for Rosenthal's HOT theory. I argue that Rosenthal is too quick to count Dennett's views as support for his theory.

II. Dennett and the Case of the Multiple Marylins

In his discussion of 'filling-in' in visual phenomenology, Dennett invites us to

Consider how the brain must deal with wallpaper, for instance. Suppose you walk into a room and notice that the wallpaper is a regular array of hundreds of . . . identical photographic portraits of Marilyn Monroe. In order to identify a picture as a portrait of Marilyn Monroe, you have to foveate the picture: the image has to fall on the high-resolution foveae of your eyes. . . Yet we know that if you were to enter a room whose walls were papered with identical photos of Marilyn Monroe, you would "instantly" see that this was the case. You would see in a fraction of a second that there were "lots and lots of identical, detailed, focused portraits of Marilyn Monroe." Since your eyes saccade four or five times a second at most, you could foveate only one or two Marylins in the time it takes you to jump to the conclusion *and thereupon to see* hundreds of identical Marylins.⁶

⁵ Rosenthal, David M. "Explaining Consciousness" in *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary and Classical Readings*, ed. David Chalmers, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp 406-421

⁶ Dennett, 354.

The case is likely to strike us as uninteresting unless we compare it to instances of perception that do not involve repeating patterns of images. As Dennett notes, we cannot correctly identify an image as one of Marilyn Monroe unless it falls on the high resolution foveae of our eyes. Earlier in his book, Dennett asks the reader to perform a simple experiment to test parafoveal resolution. Dennett asks us to

Take a deck of playing cards and remove a card face down, so that you do not yet know which it is. Hold it out at the left or right periphery of your visual field and turn its face to you, being careful to keep looking straight ahead (pick a target spot and keep looking right at it). You will find that you cannot tell even if it is red or black or a face card.⁷

The results of this experiment are humbling. The card only becomes identifiable when moved near the center of the visual field. So, let's imagine that we walk into Dennett's Marilyn-room to find that the walls only bear one image of Marilyn, located dead center. We will be able to identify the image as one of Marilyn only if we foveate it⁸. Similarly, if the walls bore only two Marilyn images, a sufficient distance from one another so as to render simultaneous foveation impossible, while we may successfully identify the image we foveate, the other will remain a blur.⁹

Given this humbling fact about parafoveal resolution, one would expect identification of the peripheral Marylins in Dennett's case to be impossible, or at least, to be impossible before foveating each Marilyn image. Dennett offers an explanation for our ability to identify the Marilyn images. According to Dennett, "[y]our brain just somehow represents *that* there are hundreds of identical Marylins, and no matter how

⁷ Dennett, p53-4.

⁸ And, of course, provided that we possess the requisite information about the actress's features, and that we do not get her confused with some other actress, say, Bea Arthur.

⁹ Thanks to Brian Fiala here. Brian and I have tried versions of this experiment; the unfoveated image is, at least in my case, an indistinguishable blur.

vivid your impression is that you see all that detail, the detail is in the world, not in your head.”¹⁰ In order to account for our correct identification of the unfoveated Marilyn images, Dennett posits a subpersonal act of cognitive labeling. When we encounter the wallpaper, we fixate on a few Marilyn images, and our brains label “the whole region “more Marilyns” without any further rendering of Marilyn at all.”¹¹

According to Noe, Dennett’s posit of a cognitive labeling leads to new skepticism.

You can’t make out the Marilyns in the periphery of your visual field in sufficient detail. One way to explain our impression of all the Marilyns. . . is that the brain builds up (i.e., *fills in*) a representation of each of the Marilyns, as it were, across an internal screen. An alternative—the anti-filling-in proposal Dennett favors—is that the brain detects a few Marilyns and the “jumps to the conclusion” that the rest are Marilyns too. If this is in fact what happens, then the brain does not produce a representation sufficient to give rise to the experience of hundreds of Marilyns. Your impression that you see hundreds of them is an illusion!¹²

This conclusion is too hasty. If the above is intended to be a reconstruction of Dennett’s reasoning, it is wide of the mark. Indeed, Dennett does claim that it “is not the case, however, that there are hundreds of identical Marilyns represented in your brain.”¹³

However, he does not maintain that it follows from the absence of such a representation that we lack the internal substrate necessary for an experience of the Marilyns. So far, Dennett has not attributed to ordinary perceivers any systematic error in their views about consciousness. If Noe seeks to uncover new skepticism in Dennett’s Marilyns case, he shall have to look elsewhere.

Aparent evidence for attributing such a view to Dennett, however, is not lacking. Dennett seems to wax new skeptical when he remarks, after having claimed that the brain merely “jumps to the conclusion” that the unfoveated images are Marilyns, that “[o]f course it does not seem that way to you. It seems to you as if you are actually seeing

¹⁰ Dennet, 1991, pg. 355.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Noe, 2004, pg. 55.

¹³ Dennett, 1991, pg. 355.

hundreds of identical Marilyns.”¹⁴ He later goes on to remark that “[t]he hundreds of Marilyns in the wallpaper seem to be present in your experience, seem to be in your mind, not just on the wall.”¹⁵

In light of comments like these, it is difficult to refrain from giving a new skeptical reading of Dennett. I maintain, however, that the case is not as clear as it might seem. There are two strands threaded through Dennett’s exposition in *Consciousness Explained* that seem, at times, at odds with one another. The first strand is Dennett’s denial of introspective authority in consciousness. Throughout the book, Dennett makes it very clear that some of our amateur theorizing about consciousness is mistaken. He claims that, “perhaps we are fooling ourselves about the high reliability of introspection, our personal powers of self-observation of our own conscious minds.”¹⁶ But, he also maintains, that “...the reality/appearance distinction at the heart of human subjectivity” is “metaphysically dubious,” as it “creates the bizarre category of the objectively subjective—the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don’t seem to seem that way to you!”¹⁷ This second strand is the denial of the appearance/reality distinction in conscious mental life. If Dennett is a new skeptic, though, it would seem that he must smuggle in an appearance/reality distinction in conscious experience. Dennett’s incredulous remarks on a realm of the objectively subjective, then, ought to give us pause in attributing to him a new skeptical view. But, if Dennett is not a new skeptic, how can we make sense out of his claims that we are sometimes mistaken in our theorizing about our own consciousness?

¹⁴ Dennett, 1991, pg. 355.

¹⁵ Op. cit. pg. 359.

¹⁶ Op. cit. pg. 57.

¹⁷ Op. cit. pg. 132.

Whether or not we claim of Dennett that he is a new skeptic turns on how we interpret his claims about where we go wrong in our views on consciousness. If the Marilyn Monroe wallpaper case provides reasons to think Dennett is a new skeptic, then he must presuppose, in his treatment of it, that we are widely and systematically mistaken about our visual phenomenology. I shall argue in the next section that while Dennett is innocent of positing a systematic error of one sort, nevertheless, he posits an error of another sort.

III. The Charge of New Skepticism: Dennett (Partially) Exonerated

The moral of the Marilyn case seems to be that our experiences in the Marilyn room are not like a snapshot; they couldn't be. Our perceptual apparatus is just insufficient to the task of creating a picture-like representation of the world. But, according to Noe, the conclusion we ought not to draw, and that Dennett does, is that we are systematically mistaken about how things seem. Noe makes two complaints. First, Noe criticizes Dennett for attributing to ordinary perceivers a "snapshot conception" of visual experience. Noe claims that, in order for the skeptical reasoning to go through, we must assume that ordinary perceivers take themselves to have experiences that are, "like snapshots that represent the scene in high-resolution focus and sharp detail."¹⁸ The new skeptic then goes on to show that the physical perceptual data rule out such experiences. Therefore, the argument goes, ordinary perceivers are widely and systematically mistaken about the qualitative character of their own conscious experience.

Noe's second complaint is that Dennett and other so-called new skeptics make "a bad inference from the character of a single visual fixation to the character of seeing

¹⁸ Noe, 2004, pg. 57.

itself.”¹⁹ It is clear that the data available at a single visual fixation is very limited. But, as Noe rightly points out, [i]t is no part of our phenomenological commitments that we take ourselves to have all that detail at hand *in a single fixation*.²⁰ So, if Dennett maintains that since our visual experiences are not photographic in detail after a single fixation, the skeptical conclusion doesn’t follow.

I shall deal with the second complaint first. Noe’s criticism would be damning indeed, if Dennett had reasoned from “the character of a single fixation to the character of seeing itself.” But, Dennett is careful not to attempt a description of the phenomenology of a single fixation. His depiction of one’s experience being one as of hundreds of identical Marilyns is a characterization of one’s experience after having been in the Marilyn wallpapered room for a “fraction of a second.” This is more than enough time for one’s eyes to perform a saccade or two. So, it doesn’t follow that Dennett attempts to make the allegedly faulty inference from the nature of the information available at a *single* fixation to the phenomenal character of seeing. Noe’s criticism is of no avail here, for Dennett’s claims are about our experiences after multiple foveations.

The worry, however, can easily be reinstated. According to Dennett, upon entering the Marilyn wallpaper room, we fixate on a Marilyn image, saccade, fixate on another Marilyn image, and saccade perhaps one more time before fixating upon one more Marilyn image. This is all the looking around it takes in order for our brains to jump to the right conclusion via some act of cognitive labeling. So, clearly it is unfair of Noe to complain that Dennett characterizes a single fixation. It might seem, however, that once our brain generates the label, “more Marilyns”, certainly that label must be

¹⁹ Noe, pg. 57

²⁰ Noe, 2004, pg. 56.

attached to each of our earlier fixations in order to render an experience with the right content. But, according to Noe, the content of our experience is a property of the temporally extended experience of looking around, and not of the experience available at a single foveation.²¹

To exculpate Dennett of this charge would require more space than the present endeavor allows. I shall, however, briefly sketch a response Dennett might give. Dennett gives us insight into a possible reply in his discussion of Orwellian versus Stalinesque revisions of memory.²² Dennett claims that there is a point at which the question whether a memory has been “contaminated” by past memory pre-experientially (Orwellian) or confabulated “*on the upward path*” to consciousness (Stalinesque) ultimately breaks down. He claims that the distinction between Orwellian and Stalinesque revision that seems meaningful at large time scales “loses its force” at smaller time scales, when we have “moved into the foggy area in which the subject’s point of view is spatially and temporally smeared...”²³

I suggest that the distinction between a temporally extended experience of multiple Marilyns and a cognitive labeling retroactively affixed to experiences at single fixations is analogous to the distinction between Orwellian and Stalinesque revisions. At such a small time scale (a fraction of a second), there just is no answer, Dennett might argue, to the question of whether the cognitive labeling gives the experience at each successive fixation the content “more Marilyns” or gives the whole temporally extended experience that content. To suppose that there must be an answer to this question is to

²¹ Thanks to Bernard Kobes for pointing out this possible resurrection of Noe’s original complaint.

²² Dennett, 1991, pp. 115-126.

²³ Op cit., pg. 119.

express allegiance to the Cartesian Theater of Consciousness view; it is to presuppose an appearance/reality distinction in subjectivity. This, according to Dennett, is a mistake.

The above discussion is regrettably condensed, nevertheless, I hope it points to the makings of a Dennett-friendly solution. I turn now to Noe's first complaint: that Dennett presupposes the snapshot conception of visual experience. Noe remarks that, "...the many Marilyns that are outside your focus do not seem to you to be present in sharp focus and high-resolution detail."²⁴ The new skeptic, however, argues that since we do not have the high-resolution experience we take ourselves to have, we are in error. If Dennett's characterization of our experience of the peripheral Marilyns entails that we take our experience to be picture-like, not only is he guilty of a new skeptical view, but also, he misdescribes the phenomenology. Noe rightly points out that, "Dennett's claim—"it seems to you as if you are actually seeing hundreds of Marilyns"—is right only if we take it to mean, roughly, that one takes oneself, on the basis of vision, to have a sense of the presence of the wall as covered with Marilyns."²⁵

There doesn't, however, seem to be any reason to suppose that Dennett means any more than this. It is true that Dennett says we think that we see hundreds of Marilyns. If he is a new skeptic, then there must be some systematic way in which we are wrong to think so. Clearly, Dennett does not think we are mistaken in taking there to be Marilyns on the wall on the basis of what we see for, "there are, indeed, hundreds of identical Marilyns out there on the wall, and you're seeing them."²⁶ It is equally clear that we are not mistaken about how the scene seems to us, for "[i]t seems to you as if you are actually seeing hundreds of identical Marilyns."²⁷ So where does Noe get the impression

²⁴ Noe, 2004, pg. 56.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Dennett, 1991, pg. 355.

²⁷ Ibid.

that Dennett attributes an error to ordinary perceivers? I maintain that Dennett's remark "[o]f course it does not seem that way to you" is the culprit.

In order to understand just what Dennett commits himself to in this passage, we must ask ourselves, "What way does Dennett think it doesn't seem to us?" We find our answer in the preceding paragraph. There Dennett says that, in order to render an experience that has the content we report our experience as having, our brain "jumps to the conclusion that the rest are Marilyns," and "labels the whole region "more Marilyns." Herein lies the rub: it does not seem to us as if this conclusion-jumping or labeling has occurred. When we see the Marilyns in virtue of cognitive labeling, we introspect nothing that doesn't happen when we see individual, non-repeating images of Marilyn. There is a part of the perceptual process that is unavailable to us.

Still, there are many parts of our perceptual process that we fail to detect: the firing of neurons, the flow of visual information across the optic nerve. Why should our failure to detect Dennett's alleged subpersonal labeling mechanism at work count as some kind of mistake? Earlier in his book, Dennett gives voice to a suspicion that underlies much of what follows. "I suspect," Dennett admits, "that when we claim to be just using our powers of inner *observation*, we are always actually engaging in a sort of impromptu *theorizing*..."²⁸ It is in this theorizing about the Marilyns case that Dennett claim we are mistaken. We are taken in by the view that, since we seem to *see* each those Marilyns, there must be something *inside our heads* that corresponds to each Marilyn we see. It is this claim that Dennett rejects. We merely represent, in some abstract way, *that* there are hundreds of Marilyns. We do not create a detailed representation of each Marilyn. To suppose that our abstract way of representing the Marilyns couldn't possibly

²⁸ Dennett, 1991, pg. 67.

be the substrate for the rich and detailed experience we report having is already to fall victim to the armchair theorizing about consciousness against which Dennett warns. It is only insofar as this mistaken bit of theorizing constitutes a deeply held and widely influential thread in our ordinary discourse and thinking that Dennett's attribution of a mistake here counts as a posit of a wide and systematic error on our behalf.

IV. Dennett and Noe Reconciled

As we have seen, it is crucial to the new skeptic's position that she accept an appearance-reality distinction in conscious experience. The new skeptic is committed to showing us how it can be that we take our conscious experience to be different from how it really is, how our conscious seemings may differ in some way from our actual seemings. I hope to have shown that there is a plausible way to read Dennett that does not attribute to him an inconsistency on the issue of there being such a distinction in conscious experience. It is my aim in this section to attempt to bring Dennett's view of perceptual content into line with Noe's so-called, "enactive" or "sensorimotor" view of perceptual content. To this aim, I must say something about just what Noe's view is.

Noe's is a view about how our perceptions come to have the content we enjoy. Although he restricts much of what he says to vision, he intends his results to generalize across other modalities.²⁹ Noe's main thesis is that "[p]erceptual experiences acquires content thanks to the perceiver's skillful activity."³⁰ In the case of vision, Noe maintains that the visual world is the world made available to us by looking around. It is in virtue

²⁹ See Noe's discussion on pg. 2.

³⁰ Noe, 2004, pg. 3.

of our implicit understanding of how our movements affect the way things appear to us that our perceptions come to have the content they do.

Part of Noe's view is his denial that we perceive the world in virtue of building internal representations of our environment. Instead, our access to detail is virtual access. Noe draws an analogy with the way information is accessed online.

If experiences are not Machian³¹... then efforts to explain how the brain can give rise to the sort of detailed internal representations needed to subserve such experiences are misdirected. To experience detail virtually, you don't need to have all the detail in your head. All you need is quick and easy access to the relevant detail when you need it. Just as you don't need to download, say, the entire *New York Times* to be able to read it on your desktop, so you don't need to construct a representation of all the detail of the scene in front of you to have a sense of its detailed presence.³²

Instead of creating complex representations of our world, according to Noe, we allow the world to supply the information we need.

Dennett's remarks on hallucination reveal at least partial conceptual allegiance with an enactive view of perception. In the opening chapter of his book, Dennett capitalizes on the old brain-in-a-vat tale in order to make a point about hallucinatory experience. Dennett claims that the enormity of the task facing the imagined evil neuroscientists in the familiar thought experiment is far greater than is usually acknowledged. For, the scientists must create a fully interactive environment for an intelligent and inquisitive envatted brain. Dennett asks the reader to imagine that he is a newly envatted brain. You wake to find yourself lacking in sensory experiences save for an auditory awareness of music. As the evil scientists begin to stimulate your brain, however, you come to feel as though you are lying on your back on a sandy beach. You

³¹ By 'Machian' here Noe means to refer to a famous drawing by E. Mach (1886) that is "meant to be a depiction of what the seeing of the room is like, a treatment of the visual experience itself. Mach's drawing represents visual experience as sharply focused, uniformly detailed, and high-resolution. The visible world is represented in consciousness in full detail." Noe, 35.

³² Noe, p. 50.

feel your finger stirring the warm sand. But here, Dennett claims, the scientists run into trouble. For, “[s]uddenly, they are faced with a problem that will quickly get out of hand, for just how the sand feels will depend on just how you decide to move your finger.”³³ The illusion will be completely shattered if your experiential expectations are not met.

Now, whether we agree with Dennett that the practical impossibility of creating a computer program capable of stimulating the brain in such a way as to sustain the illusion of a concrete, three dimensional world renders brain-in-a-vat skeptical scenarios epistemically irrelevant is wholly unimportant here. What is important, however, is Dennett’s claim that such “strong” hallucinations are unlikely because of the nature of our sensorimotor capabilities. It is because, “[h]allucinators usually just stand and marvel” that their hallucinations persist. The lack of a “desire to probe, challenge, or query” on the behalf of hallucinators is responsible, according to Dennett, for the continued presence of their hallucinations. Dennett suggests that perhaps “passivity is not an inessential feature of hallucination but a necessary precondition for any moderately detailed and sustained hallucination to occur.”³⁴ If Macbeth were to reach for the hallucinated dagger, try to pick it up, or walk around it in order to see it from a new angle, taste it, rap it with his knuckles to hear the sound of it and witness its solidity, he would find, most likely, that it is a mere illusion. Multimodal, sustained, and strong hallucinations are very uncommon, and “there is something of an inverse relation between strength and frequency [of hallucinations]—as well as between strength and credibility.”³⁵

³³ Dennett, p. 5

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

What, one might be willing to inquire; does any of this have to do with our theory of *veridical* perception? According to Dennett, when the visual system is functioning normally, “[t]he brain can relax, and let the real world provide a surfeit of *true* information...”³⁶ The brain is able to “relax” during veridical visual perception because the detail and information available to the visual system is present in the environment. There is no need for the brain to build up a complex and enduring picture of the world in order to represent reality, for its perceptual systems can refresh their information by turning to the world. The detail is all *out there* to be sensed.

Dennett illustrates what he calls the “virtual presence” in consciousness of the external world by means of an analogy with a library:

Compare the brain to a library. Some research libraries are gigantic storehouses, containing within their walls millions of books, all quite readily accessible in the stacks. Other libraries keep fewer books on hand, but have a generous and efficient accessions system, buying whatever books the library users demand, or borrowing them from other libraries, using a swift interlibrary loan system. If you don’t keep the books stored on the premises, the delays in access are greater, but not much greater. We can imagine an electronic interlibrary loan system (using fax or computer files) that could obtain a book from the outside world faster than the swiftest runner could fetch the book from the stacks. A computer scientist might say of the books in such a system that they were “virtually present” in the library all along, or that the library’s “virtual collection” was hundreds or thousands of times greater than its actual hard-copy collection.³⁷

Our conscious visual experience works in essentially the same way, according to Dennett. The objects of visual experience are in the world, not in the head. The notion of a stable, persistent, clearly resolved visual field is not hallucinatory, but neither is it the result of there being an internally represented visual environment possessed of stability, sharp resolution, and clarity. The detail is in the world; our consciousness of perceptual presence is virtual. Facts about change blindness, attention blindness, optic blindspots, parafoveal resolution, and saccadic suppression are likely to suggest that, since the visual

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Dennett, pg. 360.

field appears unified, clearly resolved, there must be somewhere it all comes together. It is this response to the visual and psychological facts that creates the felt need for the “Cartesian Theater,” a “place where whatever happens “in consciousness” *really* happens, whether or not it is later correctly remembered.”³⁸

As I mentioned above, it may seem as though Dennett’s characterization lands us in new skeptical territory only if we presuppose what Noe calls a “snapshot” conception of perception. Our propensity to posit a “snapshot” view of visual phenomenology, Dennett argues, is a side-effect of the persistent notion of mind as a “Cartesian Theater”. Dennett alleges that the metaphysically loaded metaphor of the theater of consciousness persists because “[s]ome thinkers have their faces set so hard against “verificationism” and “operationalism” that they want to deny it even in the one arena where it makes manifest good sense: the realm of subjectivity.”³⁹ Once we abandon our fear of operationalism⁴⁰ and tear down the Theater while expelling its homuncular audience, however, the apparent need for an appearance-reality distinction in conscious experience disappears.

Dennett’s project in dismantling the Cartesian Theater, however, is in no way inconsistent with his adopting a Noe-style action theory of perceptual content. Actually, such a view is rather amicable to Dennett’s treatment of visual perception. Dennett’s metaphor of the library of consciousness ought to remind us of Noe’s remarks on the virtual presence of visual objects.

It sounds, in the passage I quoted above, as though Noe has taken a page from Dennett; both seem to agree that visual experience is virtual experience. In light of so

³⁸ Dennett, pg 132.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ By adopting the intentional stance in doing heterophenomenology, as Dennett would no doubt suggest.

many shared views about virtual presence, there needn't be any reason why Dennett and Noe cannot offer consistent treatments of the Marilyn Monroe wallpaper case. In fact, Dennett's query "since, as we know, your gaze can shift in a fraction of a second to draw information from any part of your visual environment, why should your brain bother importing all those Marilyns in the first place?" seems to reveal that he denies the snapshot conception of visual experience in favor of a view according to which our knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies confers content on our visual states. The subpersonal labeling mechanism he points to might well be the product of years of skillful applications of sensorimotor knowledge. The application of our knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies seems a quite plausible explanation for the existence of the mechanism to which Dennett avers. This sort of reading of Dennett, I maintain, is very amiable to Noe's view.

V. The Upshot of the Marilyns Phenomenon for Rosenthal

In what follows, then, I shall make the assumptions that (i) Dennett and Noe hold an enactive account of perception, and (ii) such an enactive account of perceptual content is true.

Given these assumptions, I wish now to consider the implications of Dennett's case for Rosenthal's HOT theory of state consciousness. In a recent article, Rosenthal claims

When we see all the repeating, photographic portraits of Marilyn Monroe, it seems subjectively that we see all the repeating tokens at once with equal resolution. But that cannot be; we see most of those tokens parafoveally, and parafoveal resolution is far below that of foveal vision. Here as elsewhere, we're aware of our representations in ways that diverge from what we know those representations must be.⁴¹

⁴¹ Rosenthal, David, "Varieties of Higher order theory," in Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness: An Anthology, ed, Rocco J. Gennaro, John Benjamins Publishing, Philadelphia, 2004, p 35.

According to Rosenthal, “Dennett’s discussion is congenial to higher-order theories.”⁴² If Dennett is right, it appears as though ‘what it’s like’ to see the Marilyns depends on some cognitive process. On Rosenthal’s view, “a mental state is conscious just in case it is accompanied by a non-inferential, non-dispositional, assertoric thought to the effect that one is in that very state.”⁴³ So, a state M is conscious for S just in case S has another state M* that represents S as being in M. Despite Rosenthal’s rather strong language (i.e., the consciousness-conferring HOT must represent one as being in *that very state*), he allows for the possibility of mistaken or inaccurate HOTs. Rosenthal considers his theory’s ability to account for this phenomenon an advantage, for “[t]here is a well known tendency people have to confabulate being in various intentional states...”⁴⁴ On Rosenthal’s view, what it’s like for S to be in M is determined “not by that state’s intrinsic properties but by the way [S]’s HOT represents it,” or, the way in which M* represents M.⁴⁵ So, if Dennett is right, it appears as though what it’s like for S to see the Marilyns depends upon some process occurring in S’s brain by means of which the region S sees is labeled “more Marilyns.” If this process is a higher order thought, then Dennett’s case speaks in favor of Rosenthal’s view.

It might seem immediately clear that the cognitive labeling device Dennett postulates must be one that operates on S’s visual representations in order to yield S’s phenomenal visual field. What else could it be? So it appears that “...consciousness sometimes mischaracterizes the way we represent things.”⁴⁶ On Rosenthal’s HOT theory, something like the following occurs. Upon walking into the Marilyn wallpaper room, S

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rosenthal (2002), p. 410.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Rosenthal (2004) p. 36.

comes to be in a first order visual state, M, that represents the foveated Marilyns as clear and sharp, and the parafoveal ones as less so. When S's visual state, M, becomes conscious, however, it becomes so in virtue of a higher order thought, M*, that represents S as being in a state slightly different from M, say M'. M' is a state in which the Marilyns are represented as uniformly clear and sharply resolved. If this characterization seems inimical to Rosenthal's suggestion that the consciousness conferring state M* must represent one as being in the very state it makes conscious, we can instead think of M* as representing M, but doing so in an M'-ish kind of way. So, if Rosenthal's account is the best way to describe what goes on in Dennett's Marilyns phenomenon and other cases of repeating field images, then these cases provide support for HOT theory.

It does not seem immediately clear, however, that Dennett's alleged labeling device need take the form of a higher order thought. For all Dennett claims, the thought, if indeed the labeling mechanism produces thoughts, in virtue of which S comes to see that the Marilyns are uniformly resolved might be one that fails to represent the first order perception of the Marilyns. Dennett claims that "its seeming to [S] this way does not require *rendering* in the brain."⁴⁷ The appearance as of hundreds of Marilyns needn't be the result of a cognitive function that takes as an argument a flawed, first-order sensation and produces as a value a sharp, clearly resolved perception via directing a HOT on the first-order representation. The labeling mechanism is "directed" not at a representation of the Marilyns, but at the Marilyns themselves. It represents Marilyns out there in the world, not somewhere in the ill-famed Cartesian Theater.

Dennett's suggestion seems something more like the following. When S walks into the Marilyns room, S's visual sense organs deliver information with the content

⁴⁷ Dennett, p. 364.

M: [Marilyn in the middle surrounded by vague blobs]

to S's brain. Now, the labeling process doesn't act on this information and 'repair' it pre-experientially such that M comes to have the veridical content

M': [Marilyns everywhere].

Rather, what happens instead is that the sensation S has upon walking into the room has content M, and there is a process that takes place in S's brain that has the content M', and M' makes it into the most updated version of S's phenomenal draft. Notice, the sensation with content M needn't be the object of some brain process of S's in the way the HOT theory would require. There needn't be a thought that represents S's visual sensation M in an M'-ish kind of way. There needn't be a thought that represents M at all!

Another reason to be wary of Rosenthal's appropriation of Dennett's Marilyn's case is Rosenthal's suggestion that HOTs can make us "conscious of mental qualities that were already there."⁴⁸ Rosenthal suggests that states with qualia need not be conscious, but rather that they might exist unconsciously, resulting in there being nothing it's like to have them. When these states become conscious, it is in virtue of a HOT directed upon them. While what it's like to be in these states depends upon what qualitative properties the relevant HOT represents them as having, the HOT serves to make conscious qualitative properties that were already there.

In the Marilyn's case, however, something quite different happens. When S sees the Marilyn's, his sensation couldn't have the qualitative properties that are later 'revealed' in consciousness, for S's sensory apparatus is incapable of generating sensations with those properties. So, the HOT in virtue of which S's visual perception of

⁴⁸ Rosenthal 2004, pg 40.

the Marilyn becomes conscious couldn't be bringing to light qualitative properties that were already there in the target state. By Rosenthal's own lights, "[w]hat it is to be a particular mental quality is a matter of its position in the quality space of the relevant modality."⁴⁹ But, in this case, the relevant modality is vision, and vision is notoriously poor in the parafoveal region. The "quality space" generated by parafoveal vision lacks the fineness of grain that the "quality space" of foveal vision enjoys.

So, Rosenthal owes us a non arbitrary way of distinguishing between cases where preconscious qualia are 'lit up' by HOTs and cases, like S's conscious sensation of the Marilyn, where qualia are confabulated. A critic of the HOT theory might reasonably ask why our brains would have evolved to produce sensations with qualitative properties when we could have evolved to have veridical confabulatory HOTs instead. The qualitative properties of our mental states, on Rosenthal's view, contribute nothing, over and above how they are represented, to what it's like to be in those states.

Granted, this is by no means a knock-down argument against Rosenthal, but rather a suggestion that he cannot so effortlessly reap the benefits of Dennett's thought experiment. In order for the Marilyn case to count as evidence for Rosenthal's view, one must first do some explanatory work along the lines suggested above.

VI. Concluding Remarks

I wish to make clear that I do not intend to represent myself as having given a definitive rendering either of Dennett's or Noe's position. What I wish to maintain, however, is that on the arguably plausible rendering I *have* given, not only are Dennett and Noe in agreement, but also, Dennett's Marilyn case plainly does not count as support

⁴⁹ Ibid.

for Rosenthal's HOT theory. It seems equally clear that other views are better disposed to explain the phenomenon.

In closing, I wish to suggest another alternative. One might suspect that going higher-order in an attempt to explain our representational systems' ability to overcome organic limitations such as blindspots, poor parafoveal resolution, and saccadic suppression was a misguided first step. Perhaps our perceptual systems can perform the sort of self-correction we appear to enjoy in our phenomenological realm without recourse to any representing of our mental states. It might be that our systems need to carry some meta-psychological content, but this is consistent with a first order representational view of consciousness.

I wish to suggest that the sort of labeling device Dennett mentions and the sensorimotor knowledge to which Noe points in explaining the content of visual experience might be accommodated within a first-order representationalist framework. If, as I have suggested, the mechanisms in virtue of which our phenomenal world comes to appear to us as unified proceed, not by representing mental states, but rather by representing the world, perhaps a first-order view is in order.

As Dennett urges us to keep in mind, "the absence of representation is not the same as the representation of absence. And the representation of presence is not the same as the presence of representation."⁵⁰ Perhaps our phenomenal world seems unified, as Dennett urges, in virtue of our brains' simply *ignoring* the informational 'gaps' left by our optic blindspots, saccadic suppressions, and our poor visual acuity in the parafoveal region. Noe takes a similar stance in explaining the appearance of unity. According to Noe, we are able to 'fill in' the gaps in virtue of employing sensorimotor skill. The brain

⁵⁰ Dennett, p. 359.

needn't produce pictures in the head to fill in experiential gaps. Noe asks, "[w]hy should the brain need to represent [the world] in all its detail, when all the information you need is available when you need it by eye and head movements?"⁵¹

The upshot is that the Marilyn's phenomenon and similar cases where the world's detail appears to be 'filled in' in conscious experience do not tell decisively in favor of any particular theory of consciousness, and may even tell against Rosenthal's view. The perceptual presence we enjoy can be accounted for by acknowledging the role our sensorimotor knowledge plays in perception. The apparent unity of the phenomenal field can be explained by the brain's uncanny ability to ignore the right events. We needn't postulate any higher-order process that alters our states preconsciously like some ghostly editor in the Cartesian cutting room; rather, we may suggest that the brain represents phenomenally the unity of the external world by neglecting to represent the gaps left by the perceptual apparatus. If we wish to persist in the Cartesian theatrical metaphor, unity arises not because the audience interprets away the gaps, or fills in the absences in the performance, but rather because the audience just isn't paying attention to the 'missing bits'. We represent the world accurately because we fail to attend to certain of the inner-workings of our representational systems. Just as the audience fails to attend to the activity going on backstage, costume changes and so on, while they enjoy a unified performance, so too we neglect our own backstage goings on and enjoy a unified phenomenal field. As they say in the theatrical industry, that's show business.

⁵¹ Noe, p. 62.

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Multiple Marilyn's, Misrepresentation, and the “New Skepticism”

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper I consider Daniel Dennett's (*Consciousness Explained*) famous Marilyn Monroe wallpaper thought experiment. The case has recently been appropriated by David Rosenthal ("Explaining Consciousness") as support for his HOT theory of state consciousness. Dennett has recently come under attack in Alva Noe's *Action in Perception*. There Noe makes the claim that Dennett is committed to a 'new skepticism'. The aim of this paper is, in part, to defend Dennett against charge of new skepticism. I also purport to show that neither the Marilyn Monroe thought experiment nor Dennett's treatment of it throws any support on a higher order theory of consciousness, *a fortiori*, it fails to support Rosenthal's version of such a theory.