

CONSCIOUSNESS, INTENTIONALITY AND CONCEPTS: REPLY TO NELKIN

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ABSTRACT: Nelkin doubts that the phenomenal character and intentionality of vision are as intimately related as I say. Centrally, she suggests that intentionality requires powers of conceptualization that the mere phenomenal character of experience does not afford. I respond: if we examine relevant conceptual powers, we will find that they are inessential to a sort of intentionality that is inextricable from the phenomenal character of our vision. Further, the conceptual capacities at issue (and the kind of intentionality to which they are essential) are in any case inseparable from phenomenal character — since differences in phenomenal character reflect differences in visual recognition and visual judgment.

1. Nelkin's Two Challenges

How should we think about the nexus of consciousness, intentionality, and concept possession? This is undoubtedly a central challenge for the philosophy of mind. I thank Dana Nelkin for helping me to focus my attention on this through her careful articulation of doubts about my views on consciousness and intentionality, doubts rooted in the idea that phenomenal consciousness cannot guarantee something allegedly essential to intentionality -- namely, the possession of concepts.

In my book I wanted to argue that phenomenal features are intentional features without advocating a general view about consciousness and concept possession. This seemed desirable, partly because I did not want to add to the length and demands of my project by taking on the obscurities of accounting for this relationship. I still think my argument as it stands warrants the conclusion that phenomenal features are intentional features. But I now think also that I underestimated the extent to which I need to attend to the issues Nelkin raises.

First I will summarize what I take to be the two basic criticisms in Nelkin's remarks.

(i) She says I admit that (for at least some values of 'p' and 'q') its looking to A as if p may differ from its looking to B as q, even though the way it seems to A for it to look as if p does not differ from the way it (phenomenally) seems to B for it to look as if q. So, in the "tire inflation" example: while its looking to me as if the tire is too low differs from its looking to you as if the tire has enough air, the way it seems to each of us for it to look as it does in this case (a.k.a. the phenomenal character of our visual experiences) may be no different. But if I admit this, then it is inconsistent for me to hold also that when it seems to me some way for it to look as if p, the seeming is the same as the looking. Furthermore, I then seem to have reason to doubt that, from its seeming to one as it does to look as if p, it ever follows that it does look to one as if p. And so a key premise of my argument is unwarranted.

(ii) Nelkin argues that a problem arises once I try to answer the question: Does its looking to you as if p entail that you can conceptualize p? (For example, does its looking to you as if something is X-shaped entail you employ the concept of being X-shaped?) If I answer yes to the question (looking-as-if does require conceptualization), then I have not isolated a phenomenal feature independent of conceptualized states (e.g., propositional attitudes), as I purported to do with talk of what is missing in blindsight situations. On the other hand: If I answer no (looking-as-if does not require conceptualization), then I am not entitled to hold something else my argument relies on: that its looking to me as if p is a feature in virtue of which I am assessable for accuracy.

2. Phenomenal Seeming and Looking-as-if: Distinctness and Entailment

In this section I will reply to the criticism in (i). First, I don't believe I committed myself to some general claim of identity between its seeming to one some way for it to look as if p, and its looking to one as if p. In any event, that claim plays no role in my argument that phenomenal features are intentional. So it seems to me that the worries that focus on this claim touch nothing crucial to my case.

My point was not to assert the identity of seeming and looking no matter how the looking is characterized, but to make it clear that my speaking of 'the way it seems for it to look some way to me' should not be taken to entail either that the seeming and the looking are entirely or in every case distinct, or that the looking is something that seems some way to me (an "object of appearance"). I wanted to emphasize this to prevent readers misinterpreting my locution for speaking of phenomenal character so as to commit me to some higher order perception thesis about consciousness.

Now, I admit, I do in a passage Nelkin quotes (on page 220) say, with reference to my example of its looking green to me, that its seeming to me as it does for to look this way *is* its looking this way to me. But that does not generally commit me to identifying seeming and looking, regardless of how the looking is characterized. It did seem plausible to me to say that, where its *looking to me as if something is green* is concerned, seeming and looking cannot be distinguished. But I now recognize that this was a bit incautious. Various considerations -- such as certain interpretations of color-inversion thought experiments -- can dispose one to think that a distinction can be drawn here. For on certain views, because experience with a given phenomenal character would, in different environments, be made accurate by the occurrence of entirely distinct objective color properties, in which case we might say that what color it would look to someone as if something had would differ as well. Though I am not convinced this is the right way to think about color and experience, in my earlier discussion I was not entitled to imply that it was not.

On reflection, I should have been more careful here to avoid saying anything that would leave the impression that my argument depended on a general identification of its phenomenally seeming to one a certain way and its looking to one as if p.

What then *is* crucial to the argument of Chapter 7? It is this. There are *some* ways of saying how it looks to me as if something is, such that, if it (phenomenally) seems to me as it does for it to look these ways, it could not fail to look these ways to me. In particular, I hold that there are ways of speaking of shapes, sizes, orientations and locations that will do the job. We may at least sometimes be reduced to uninformative demonstrative expressions here (e.g., 'It looks to me as if something *there* is *this* shape, and *this* much bigger than something *there* with *this* shape'). But I also propose that if, for instance, it seems to me as it does for it to look to me as if there's something X-shaped on my left, then it does look to me as if there's something X-shaped on my left. And since its spatially looking to one in such ways is clearly intentional (by my ("assessability for accuracy" standard), phenomenal features (its seeming to me as it does) are enough for a certain kind of visual-spatial intentionality.

But now: why do I not affirm quite generally that this sort of seems/looks entailment holds, regardless of what sorts of predicates we place in the ellipsis of 'It looks to me as if...'? I think that it is less clear the entailment holds for other types of predicates we might plug in here to make true assertions. It is, I think, less clear that seems/looks entailment holds when 'cat', 'apple' and 'boy' fill in the ellipsis, for example. Now one may acknowledge that the entailment holds in the case of some spatial predicates, while non-arbitrarily questioning whether it does in these other cases. For one may (not unreasonably) assume that in the latter cases, it looks to A as if ...F..., only provided that A can recognize F's by how they look, and perhaps also: only if A thinks or judges that something is F by how it looks. And then one may question whether these conditions are secured just by its phenomenally seeming a certain way to A. To address such concerns needs further consideration.

Thus far the key point in my reply to Nelkin comes to this. My argument relies on a seems/looks entailment holding in some cases (cases where how things look spatially configured and distributed is at issue) in order to show that intentionality is inherent to the phenomenal character of vision. But the fact that this sort of entailment is not clear in *other* cases gives me no reason to doubt that it holds in the cases to which I appeal. For there are special reasons why it appears more questionable in the other cases. These reasons have partly to do with concerns that arise about the sufficiency of phenomenal character for recognition, and thought or judgment.

Now I would agree with Nelkin that once I take the discussion to these issues, and in particular, once I consider the phenomenal character of thought, I should not try to argue that its seeming to one as it does to think that p entails that one does think that p. So as not to bog down in recapitulation of my book, I will simply refer the reader back to Chapter 8 of my book, for relevant discussion. Here I will just remark that acknowledgement of this point does not prevent me from arguing the key point that, once we fix the phenomenal character of one's thinking, then, to be the thinker of a thought assessable for truth or falsity, no kind of interpretation of the phenomenal character of the thought needs to be added.

I also want to register this. One can agree that in some cases at least (for some values of 'p'), it won't do to identify its seeming to one the way it does for it to look as if p, or its seeming the way it does for one to think that p, with that looking or thinking itself. But this needn't involve one in saying that the looking or thinking itself **seems** some way to one, or that one's intentional features seem to one some way. Nelkin slips into this latter way of talking sometimes, but I purposely avoid it: again, I think it smacks of interpreting phenomenal character as some sort of higher order appearance, which I think would be a mistake. And surely my stance here is at least intelligible. We may say that, from its seeming to me as it does for it to look as if *this* is F, it does not follow that it looks to me as if this is F. For we might say that it could seem to me just this way, even when it does not look to me as if this is F, simply for the reason that there is, in the case at hand, no referent of 'this' in existence (as, arguably, in a case of hallucination). But to say all this would not require us to say that the looking itself seems some way to me, that it is an object that seems.

In any case, the heart of my response to (what I'm calling) Nelkin's criticism (i) is this. There are cases in which the seems/looks entailment either does not hold, or where it may be sensibly questioned, even while we accept there are cases in which it does hold. The latter cases are all that I need for the success of the argument of Chapter 7.1-6. Moreover, cases where it does not hold need not be (and I think should not be) described as ones in which looking or thinking or intentional features seem some way to the subject.

3. The Conceptualization Dilemma.

Now on to what I have classified as Nelkin's second criticism. The basic worry behind this is that the phenomenal character of sensory experience will not bring with it what is requisite in the way of concepts for the experience to be either accurate or inaccurate of anything. One possible way to respond to this challenge would be simply to deny the link between intentionality and conceptualization the criticism deploys. More particularly, in response to Nelkin's remarks, I might argue that it may indeed look to A as if p, even where A does not possess the concepts we use in reporting how it looks to A -- the concepts conveyed or expressed by the sentence we put in for 'p'. In fact, it has become common for advocates of "nonconceptual content" to question the assumption that the concepts we use in reporting the content of someone's intentional states must be possessed by the subject whose states they are. So I might resist Nelkin's criticism by holding that conceptualization is not required for intentionality.

However, I do not choose to respond in this way. In my view, we should not start by stipulating or assuming or evoking intuitions that subjects have or may lack certain concepts, when they have this or that sort of experience. What is meant by having a concept, or lacking it, is initially too vague or ambiguous (or vaguely ambiguous) to build anything on. So it would not be right to respond to Nelkin's challenge by simply answering either yes or no to the question: Does its looking to A as if p require that A be able to conceptualize that p? We must first try to be more explicit about what we think is involved in *conceptualization*. Only then do we have any business relying on convictions about its relationship to the truth of 'looks as if' statements.

Now I believe there are a couple of things people have in mind when they talk about conceptualization in this context: certain capacities for recognition, and the ability to engage in appropriate sorts of reasoning. Now it may indeed seem plausible to interpret 'It looks to someone as if something is F' so that its truth requires that this someone can recognize things as F's generally, and maybe also, is disposed to make the right sort of inferences about F's. Perhaps that is what may incline us to say that for it to look one as if p, one needs the appropriate concepts.

Given this, are we really left with the difficulty Nelkin raises? First, let's think about this in connection with powers of recognition. Consider again my example: it looks to me as if there's something X-shaped on my left. The question arises: On my interpretation, does its looking to me as if there's something X-shaped on my left require that I can recognize things as X-shaped generally? The Nelkinian dilemma would then be: (a) If yes, then I haven't isolated phenomenal seeming from conceptualized states, as I purport to do. (b) If no, then it is not plausible that its looking to me as if there's something X-shaped on the left when there is not, is enough to yield that conclusion that the way it then looks to me is inaccurate.

Once the dilemma takes on this form, I think it is clear enough to be addressed. And my response is this: neither (a) nor (b) seems to me correct. First let's consider (a). My blindsight thought experiments ask us to consider what is missing when it does not look any way to the subject on her left, even though she is disposed to make a judgment about what is there, triggered by her visual system. This is crucial to my strategy for focusing on the notion of a phenomenally conscious visual experience, and so, on the notion of phenomenal consciousness generally. However it simply plays no essential role in this strategy that we think of this missing visual experience as something one could have without conceptual (such as visual-recognition)

capacities. It is true that, if the missing visual experience (the “looking”), and the hypothesized blindsight judgment that remains in its place, both involve conceptual capacities, we cannot correctly contrast the two by saying that one requires concepts and the other doesn't. But this is fine with me. I just don't see why my attempt to isolate the notion of phenomenal consciousness via blindsight thought experiments is jeopardized if the looking that follows from phenomenal seeming is, in some sense, conceptualizing. Indeed, I explicitly maintain that the exercise of the capacity to visually recognize something as of a given type (a conceptual ability presumably) — is manifest in the phenomenal character of experience -- the experience of recognition. (However, it will not be immediately granted by all that recognition is experiential, and this is a point that needs discussion. I try to make a start on this in Chapter 7.9.)

Now let's look at the (b) horn of the dilemma. Again, (b) does not seem right to me. That is, while I can certainly imagine someone might take 'It looks to A as if something is X-shaped' to entail 'A can recognize X-shaped things,' one also might reasonably *not* interpret it that way. And if one needs a difference in locution to mark the difference in meaning, that can be devised in a way that preserves my overall argument.

Let me clarify this point. First consider, when it seems to you as it does for it to look as if there's something somehow shaped on your left, when your experience has that phenomenal character, then it surely follows that it spatially looks some specific way to you, even if we grant that you may still, in some sense, lack the capacity to recognize things as correlatively shaped. But how, on that assumption, is this way of looking to be characterized? I might try: '*That* (referring to something on my left) looks *this way* to me.' (Here 'this way' picks out the particular way that something on my left looks configured to me, distributed in space.) But adoption of such a locution in this context has a defect. It appears to commit me to saying that its seeming to one a certain way would guarantee that there exists something that looks to one some way. But that, I believe, is not correct. (Here I would invoke my argument against sense-data in 7.4.) So we need a way of reporting the spatial looking that follows from the phenomenal seeming which does not carry such existential entailments. And it is natural to put into service the locution, 'It looks to A as if...' but without assuming that the way we characterize what shape, size, orientation, location it looks to A as if something has entails that A can recognize shapes, sizes, orientations, locations of the general types involved in the characterization. So it seems legitimate to interpret 'look as if' talk in a way that does not carry this implication regarding the subject's powers of conceptualization.

Of course, it also is undesirable to use this locution in an ambiguous way. So maybe we should employ some slightly different form of speech to serve our purposes here. One possible way of doing this: we could distinguish 'It looks to me as if something is X-shaped on my left' (which we take to entail the possession of recognitional-conceptual capacities) from 'It looks X-shaped to me on my left' (which, let us stipulate, we do not).

Once we've gotten this far, it seems to me the rest of my argument goes through. From its seeming to me as it does for it to look X-shaped to me on my left it follows that it does look X-shaped on my left. But even if that doesn't guarantee us the power to recognize X-shaped things generally, there is some condition, which is not an interpreting condition, which when added, still yields a relevant assessment for accuracy. Just add, for example: there is nothing X-shaped on my left. It follows that the way it looks to me then is inaccurate: my experience of space is somehow distorted or perhaps even hallucinatory. And so the looking is intentional. (Here's a kind of illusion that could occur in this sort of situation: a diagonal bar tilting one way lies behind another tilting in the opposite direction (so a drawing of the bars from one's perspective would contain an X-shaped figure). But the two bars look fused from where one is, not one behind the other. The way it looks to one is thus inaccurate. But this doesn't require the capacity to recognize this and other figures as X-shaped by how they look.)

So, I don't find the second horn of Nelkin's dilemma compelling. One may have visual experience of space while lacking certain powers of conceptualization — recognitional powers

regarding the relevant spatial characteristics. But even so, the spatial looking guaranteed by phenomenal seeming is an intentionalistic sort of looking. For it is a sort of looking in virtue of which one is assessable for accuracy, a sort of looking susceptible to correctness, illusion, hallucination.

This defense does not, I claim, depend on neglecting that other aspect of conceptualization that I alluded to earlier — the powers of reasoning or inference. For let's now consider this. Here the relevant Nelkin-like argument would go as follows. We pose the question: Do we interpret 'It looks to A as if...F...' to entail that A has reasoning capacities or inferential dispositions essential to possession of the concept of an F? (a) If yes, then phenomenal seeming has not been successfully isolated. (b) If no, then -- though the looking may well follow from the seeming -- the looking is not a feature in virtue of which one is assessable for accuracy.

But here again the dilemma does not seem to me particularly damaging. This time let's take the second horn first. It doesn't seem to me that (b) is correct. Let's assume the earlier conclusion, that the looking guaranteed by phenomenal seeming even in the absence of recognitional capacities is still an intentionalistic sort of looking. Then surely whatever sort of looking is secured by the phenomenal character of visual experience, but which may remain in the absence of the reasoning powers involved in relevant concept possession, will also be a sort of looking that is adequate for visual intentionality. So the second horn of the dilemma is not threat, and its removal is adequate to preserve my argument against the Nelkin criticism.

Now what about (a)? Again I just don't think my strategy for isolating the notion of phenomenal consciousness depends on getting one to divorce it from conceptualization.

But here one may ask: if we do interpret 'looks as if' talk in a way that imputes inferential capacities, are we not speaking of visual *judgment* now, not just visual *experience*? Well, perhaps, but in any case it is a kind of visual judgment still distinct the hypothetical blindsighter's judgment. Neither to the blindsighted nor to the blind does it look as if something is on his left, even if we take looking to be a conceptualizing, judgment-laden sort of thing. At least, there is an interpretation of 'look' available to us that makes sense of this.

In this connection, perhaps it will be useful to clarify the import of the remarks I make in my "tire inflation" example (pp.86-7), on which Nelkin dwells. The point of this example was not to assert that the way it seems to one person, when it looks to her as if the tire is low, may be just the same as the way it seems to another, when to her it looks as if the tire has enough air. No, the point was first, to concede that one may indeed be inclined to think this, even if one accepts my notion of phenomenal character. And so I ought not simply to build into my way of talking about phenomenal character a presumption to the contrary. However, I do think that, to the extent one can distinguish visual experience from judgment based on visual experience, (as apparently one can in the tire example), it will be right to say that the phenomenal character of two persons' experience can be the same, while their visual judgments differ (as do those of the tire inflation judges). However, thirdly, none of this precludes my saying (in line with Chapter 8) that the way it seems to the makers of these visual judgments to make them also differs. And nothing prevents me from taking some uses of the 'It looks to one as if...' locution to report the occurrence of a conscious visual thought or judgment based on a contemporaneous conscious visual experience. And this, in fact, is how I would be inclined to understand the 'looks as if' talk involved in the tire inflation case.

Let me now highlight my main points of response to what I have called Nelkin's criticism (ii). First, to tie 'looks' talk to conceptualization does not undermine my use of blindsight thought experiments to help clarify what is meant by 'phenomenal consciousness' and 'phenomenal character.' Second, we may well conceive of visual experience having phenomenal character in the absence of certain conceptual (recognitional, inferential) capacities. But that would not completely remove its intentionality: for the way things look spatially arranged and configured can still be accurate or inaccurate. And third, the kind of intentionality that requires such conceptual

capacities is reasonably seen as inextricable from the phenomenal character of much of our actual experience and thinking.

4. Summary

As usual, things have gotten a bit intricate. But that should have been expected: Nelkin's criticism is complex and subtle and these are quite complex and subtle issues. However, I do not wish the basic points I have wanted to make in clarifying my position to get lost amidst the complexities. So let me close by listing these.

(1) One may interpret 'It looks to A as if ...F...' so that its truth requires that A have the concept of F. This in turn may be taken to require that A can recognize F's, or can make inferences about F's of an appropriate sort. But thus interpreting 'looks as if' talk in no way precludes our conceiving of a form of spontaneous blindsight, in which one judges that there is an X on one's left, where it does not, in this sense, *look* to one any way at all. Thus it does not prevent us from using 'look' thus interpreted to explain the notion of phenomenal consciousness, and of phenomenal character.

(2) One may also interpret 'It looks to A as if...F...' so that its truth does not require A have the concept of F (where this is taken to involve recognitional or reasoning abilities regarding F's). And one may interpret 'It looks F to A there' in this manner. But these are still senses of 'looks' in which it may either accurately or inaccurately look some way to someone (thus they are "intentionalistic" senses of 'looks'). And they are also senses in which its seeming to A as it does for it to look a certain way entails that it does look this way to A.

(3) If we interpret looks talk as "concept involving" -- as in (1)-- it could not seem to us just as it does for it to look to us in this sense, if we lacked the relevant conceptual capacities. For the exercise of capacities for visual recognition, as well as differences in what we (conceptually) think, are manifest in the phenomenal character of our experience and thought. So it would be a mistake to suppose that such conceptual capacities need to be added to the phenomenal character of experience and thought, before one possesses the sort of intentionality that requires those capacities.

(4) We can acknowledge cases in which the phenomenal character of visual experience is constant, though the visual judgment that one bases on that experience differs (such as in the tire inflation case). Such differences may be reported by use of 'looks as if' talk. But it is consistent with all this to say also: (a) In this sense, it cannot look as if anything is so to the blindsighted (or to the just plain blind, for that matter). (b) Even when visual experiences do not differ in phenomenal character, visual judgments can and do.

Keeping these points in mind, as well as the arguments in my book, one may see how I can consistently respond to Nelkin's critique, and thereby defend a central theme of my work thus far: that we can be robustly realistic about phenomenal character, and critical of reductionist theories of it, while being critical too of the tendency to sever "sentience" from "sapience" and place phenomenal consciousness only on the first side of that divide.