



## More than Meets the Eye: Commentary on Bruce Mangan's "Sensations Ghost"

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**ABSTRACT:** "Sensation's Ghost" identifies one type of non-sensory experience, the quasi-feelings that attend perception, inflecting them vaguely and globally. Following Husserl, I suggest that non-sensory awareness includes much more than the fringe elements Mangan discusses. Every perceptual property can be either sensed, or apprehended in a non-sensory manner. Non-sensory apprehensions are nonetheless part of the occurrent conscious awareness of objects and scenes.

Bruce Mangan's "Sensation's Ghost" (2001) draws attention to the fringe of conscious experience, rescuing it from the fringes of cognitive science. His main topic is the experience of "rightness" and the related (but distinct) feelings of familiarity. The specific descriptions of these two states seem right and appropriately familiar, and his speculations on the functional role of feelings of rightness is intriguing and plausible.

However, he locates his examples of fringe experiences in a larger context of sensory and non-sensory phenomenal properties. Mangan, I think, misdescribes the larger import of the non-sensory in phenomenology and cognitive science. Using Husserl's perceptual phenomenology, I will try to point out some of the richness of the non-sensory world. Although phenomenology ultimately leads to hypotheses about underlying dynamics and even neural implementation (as Mangan notes), for present

purposes I will limit my comments mainly to phenomenology. (For examples of implementation hypotheses, see (Lloyd 2002, 2003).)

The first foundation of phenomenology is the principle of intentionality – “All consciousness is consciousness of something.” But a close second is the distinction between sensory and non-sensory experience. The most thorough guide through this territory is probably Husserl, whose perceptual phenomenology is expounded at impressive length in two early works, his 1905 lectures on the “Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness,” and his 1907 lectures on “Thing and Space” (Husserl, 1893-1917, 1907).

Husserl analyzes appearances (i.e. the contents of consciousness) into two components, which he calls sensation and apprehension.

Appearance...means the lived experience of the sensuous contents along with their interpretation, along with the moment of apprehension that animates them.... [T]hat is something we can notice, which we do not merely speak of but also in a certain sense “see” and can lay a perceiving finger on: it occurs, it comes forth anew, it changes, although it is not a sensuous content.(1907, §41)

“Apprehension,” then, is Husserl’s term for non-sensory elements in consciousness, and it is distinct from “sensuous contents.” These contents are the elements of experience that are presented to us, “as there in the flesh..., actually present, as self-given there in the current now” (1907, §4). In Husserl the sensory/non-sensory distinction is a distinction between two modes of appearance of things and their properties, a mode in which they are sensibly presented to us and a mode in which they are apprehended but not sensed. Importantly, qualitative properties like colors and textures can appear in either mode, and often do. Husserl’s recurring example is the back side of things:

The thing, as given in perception, has more than the appearing... front side... and this “more” lacks presentational contents. It is...co-included in the perception, but without itself coming to presentation. (1907, §16)

The back sides of things are invisible and often indefinite, but they are parts of the perceptual world, part of the contents of consciousness, but through apprehension and not sensation. In addition, apprehension encompasses a vast hierarchy of further non-sensory properties. An object before me appears as a spatially extended thing with a sensuously-given front and an apprehended back, but I can also see that it is a chair, wooden, solid, old, familiar, etc.

Husserlian apprehension has a useful analogue in J. J. Gibson’s concept of an affordance. For Gibson, affordances were actual properties of the visual world, but for present purposes we can “bracket” that idea and consider affordances in their phenomenal aspects. Roughly, a phenomenological affordance is the experience of potentiality. A chair affords a sequence of specific sensory presentations as I approach it, walk around it, touch it, tap it. Part of conscious seeing is a co-occurring awareness of the series of possible sensory presentations afforded by the object. The chair also affords sitting, or it

can serve as a stool to reach a high shelf – another affordance. Meanwhile, it doesn't afford sensuous contents appropriate to wind or fire, nor does it afford much in the way of lunch or transportation. The sensuous affordances tend to be linked to sense modalities, both singly and in combinations. For example, the color afforded by the hidden side of the chair is purely visual (though unseen), but its smoothness can be both a visual sheen and an anticipated tactile sensation. Various visual, tactile, and auditory properties merge in the awareness that the chair is made of wood, and that can combine with other information to fill out my apprehension of it as the chair I bought at a tag sale in 1992, as a happy find, as one among several random chairs in the house, and so forth. The example suggests a spectrum of non-sensory apprehensions, shading from relatively egocentric surface properties to relatively allocentric “objective” properties, like heaviness. All of these are folded into the present, occurrent conscious apprehension of an object.

At this point in this cursory phenomenology, a few general features of conscious apprehension emerge. First, though non-sensory, the chair's affordances and apprehensions nonetheless clearly attach to the chair, and occupy just its spatial extent. Apprehended (non-sensory) properties do not bleed onto the rug or into the air. In their boundedness, they behave like regular perceptual properties. Second, both sensuous contents and non-sensory affordances display regions of focal acuity surrounded by regions of relative indefiniteness. The idea of sensory acuity, as in, for example, focal visual attention, is familiar for sensuous contents. Apprehended affordances often travel in tandem with the sensuous focus: the act of attending to the chair brings forward not only visual details but non-sensory affordance details as well. However (third), the two kinds of focal acuity readily dissociate. Even as I fixate the chair, I can attend to a peripheral object. This covert shift of attention brings forward both a few of the sensuous properties of the peripheral object along with manifold apprehended properties. Indeed, focal apprehension is ultimately untethered to the sensory scene, as I can remove my apprehension from the scene altogether, to meditate on something remote while at the same time seeing the chair. Daydreaming while reading is another familiar example of this dissociation. Finally (fourth), perceptual consciousness is loaded with myriad apprehensions of the types sampled here. Again, just consider the play of the mind, and the harmonics of understanding, as you are reading these words. It would take many Proustian pages to get your conscious experience into words.

If I have described non-sensory experience correctly, then Mangan's phenomenology of the non-sensory captures only one species of non-sensory experience. For example, Mangan observes that fringe states like the feeling of rightness tend to be diffuse. “They have a cloud-like quality that usually spreads out over larger portions of our conscious field than that occupied by focal-sensory contents.” (Section 1) In addition, for Mangan these states are “trans-sensory,” not identifiable with particular sense modalities. In contrast, what I've called phenomenal affordances are neither diaphanous nor diffuse, but rather attached very specifically to objects in the perceived world. Nor are these non-sensory experiences trans-sensory. The unseen backside of a chair includes a number of visual properties, like shape and color, along with many more abstract properties. Mangan observes that “there are a virtual infinity of non-sensory experiences.... Free-floating anxiety, the feeling of causal connection, the sense of “mineness” underlying our concept of self, many aspect of emotion—these are all non-

sensory experiences—are the realm of intuitions and hunches.” (Section 2) But this virtual infinity is still less than all. Mangan, I think, assumes that sensory and non-sensory denote types of properties. For Husserl, in contrast, sensory/non-sensory distinguishes modes in which any property may appear to us. Once we grasp this idea, that we may be occurrently aware of any property without currently sensing it, the vastness of the non-sensory realm of consciousness really appears. Accordingly, there are two fringes in experience: the fringe of the sensuous, exemplified by parafoveal vision, and the fringe of the apprehended, the faint monitoring of objects outside of the focus of apprehension. Feelings of rightness or familiarity, then, are global non-sensory apprehensions of a scene or object.

To conclude this commentary, it may be useful to contrast Mangan’s paper and Husserl’s phenomenology with a few of the assumptions cognitive science has inherited from philosophy. The perceptual phenomenology sketched here, inspired by Husserl, illuminates and challenges the picture of the human mind that has dominated cognitive science since its emergence from behaviorism. As explicated in the cognitive tradition, humans are crafty responders to subtle environmental conditions. Our principal cognitive accomplishment is the accurate representation of our world. The building blocks from which these representations emerge are sensations. Historically, philosophical empiricism held that atomic sensations were sufficient to generate human experiences; rationalism tweaked this view with the addition of pre-empirical scaffolding for sensation. Lurking in both views was an assumption about implementation, namely, that sensation is transduction, or the conversion of one form of stimulus energy (e.g. light) into another (e.g. neuronal action potentials; in the dualist tradition, transduction crossed the boundary from stimulus to idea.) Accordingly, the sensational and non-sensational were construed as two types of properties. The sensational properties were those that could be detected by low-level transducers, while the non-sensational properties were not directly present in stimuli, but only inferred properties based on the detection of the sensational properties. In memory and anticipation some faint version of sensational properties could be entertained, but these were somehow echoes of the original physical transduction.

The decades passed, and consciousness became an acceptable topic of research. Consciousness was naturally construed as a projection of the traditional picture of mind, as follows: our awareness of present sensory properties is coupled to occurrent transductions of physical stimulus properties; and our awareness of present non-sensory properties is always “off-line” compared to sensation. That is, non-sensory properties are experienced only indirectly, as reflective abstractions derived from sensations. This, in effect, moved all the non-sensory properties out of the realm of perception altogether (and into “cognition,” distinct from perception). So any perceptual phenomenology tended to be artificially limited to the sensational. Mangan rightly objects that this picture tends to shove the non-sensory out of phenomenology altogether.

In Husserl, as noted above, the distinction between the sensory and the non-sensory is not a distinction between types of properties. Rather, it is a distinction between modes of presentation of properties of any type. Color can be sensuously given, but can be present without being sensed – and still constitute an experience of color (for example, when it is apprehended on the back side of an object). Similarly, abstract properties can also be presented “in the flesh.” We can be confronted with the fact that an object is a

chair no less than by its redness. Within Husserlian phenomenology, transduction is neither necessary nor sufficient for constituting any phenomenal property.

In short, Husserl cuts the mind loose from the stimulus environment. This detachment is essential. It is most clearly expressed right at the heart of phenomenology in the principle of intentionality itself. The basic structure of intentionality is a correlation between the subject and object poles in experience. No property can be exhaustively presented at the object pole, coextensive with sensory transduction. Every property in experience has the capacity to oscillate in and out of givenness in the current now. That is, every entity or property needs the capacity to be apprehended, but not sensed.

I conclude, then, in broad agreement with Mangan's paper: the study of consciousness is not complete until it addresses the non-sensory components of experience. Indeed, following the tradition of Husserl, it appears that until the non-sensory is addressed, the study of consciousness has hardly begun.

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