

The Sense of Agency, as Operationalized in Experiments, is not a (non-conceptual) Experience/perception, but is a (conceptual) judgment

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Many researchers propose a possibility of "cognitive phenomenology," the proprietary ability or tendency of non-sensory phenomena like beliefs, thoughts, actions, etc., to generate perceptions or experiences that are comparable (but independent of and irreducible) to sensory phenomenology such as vision, audition, etc. Their main arguments include the "phenomenal contrast" apprehended between different thoughts and the "(content) grounding" of thoughts in their corresponding phenomenology. In a similar vein, it is being proposed that the "Sense of agency" (SoA) – the unique phenomenology experienced during voluntary or self-generated actions which is proprietary to motor processes, particularly the (efference copy based) comparator process – is one of those instances of cognitive phenomenology (e.g., Tim Bayne, 2008). The proponents of SoA argue that a phenomenal contrast can be apprehended between voluntary and passive actions (Shaun Gallagher, 2000), and the thoughts of agency are grounded in the phenomenology of the agency (Bayne and Pacherie, 2007). However, the proposal of cognitive/agency phenomenology has come under attack due to lack of sensory basis for cognitive/agency phenomenology (e.g., Myrto Mylopoulos, 2015). Similarly, the equating of perception/phenomenology and cognition/thought also being criticized as an instance of experimental pitfall (e.g., Firestone and Scholl, 2016). In this spirit, I also argue that the purported (experimental) instances of SoA (phenomenology) are a case of experimental pitfall.

My argument is based on five points: (1) all most all the SoA experimental operationalizations had uncertainty with respect to (agentive causal) contingency (and thus making the participants susceptible to judgment effects); (2) the SoA as well as its corollary of the comparator process assumption are not consistent – e.g., some experiments showed self-attribution bias while some others found other-attribution bias – and are not coherent with other psychological processes – e.g. there exist empirical dissociations or non-correlations between motor actions (i.e., comparator's efference copies) and the SoA reports; (3) it can be argued that the SoA reports are due to prior beliefs and/or on-line generated heuristic judgments, particularly due to the prevailing contingency uncertainty; (4) the influence of prior beliefs and heuristic judgments (in participants' reports about SoA) as well the presence of inconsistent and incoherent findings in the research domain of SoA can be (alternatively) explained by interpreting the instances of SoA to be conceptual judgments rather than non-conceptual phenomenology – as the non-conceptual phenomenology has "iconic" format while the conceptual judgment has "compositional" format.

I substantiate my conclusion that the (experimental) instances of SoA are judgments (or conceptual) rather than perceptions/experiences (or non-conceptual) by providing a (thought experiment like) demo that reveals that, under contingency certainty, the instances of SoA are actually due to sense of ownership (SoO) – where the SoO is the awareness of self, including self-generated actions, generated through peripheral sensory processes such as vision and proprioception, etc. (while the SoA is the proprietary of central comparator process) (Gallagher, 2000). If the SoO can account for the reports of "I did it" then the construct of SoA is theoretically redundant. Thus, I conclude that the SoA, as operationalized in the behavioral experiments, is not an instance of (nonconceptual, iconic) cognitive/agency phenomenology but a (conceptual, compositional) judgment effect (and possibly an experimental artifact).

References:

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