Frey on Experiential Transparency and Its Rational Role

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Christopher Frey’s short essay raises many important issues.¹ Frey puts forward a particular interpretation of the idea of experiential transparency, and on its basis, he criticizes a central thesis of my book, Empiricism and Experience (henceforth: E&E)—the thesis that the given in experience is purely hypothetical.² Frey argues that experiential transparency shows that the given is not merely hypothetical, and he proposes a specific enrichment of it. Frey offers his proposal in a constructive spirit. He argues that the richer given helps with my principal goal, namely, to work out a viable empiricism. Frey thinks that the richer given makes possible a more robust defense of empiricism than I was able to provide.

Frey puts forward the following as his reading of experiential transparency: “the sensuous qualities, objects, and states of affairs that are phenomenally appreciable in an experience are always appreciated as being, being instantiated in, or being about something other than either (a) oneself qua ego or (b) the experience as such.”³ Frey’s reading captures, I think, an important aspect of experience: sensuous qualities such as red and rough are not experienced as qualities of oneself or one’s experience. However, the reading also raises questions: Is this “experiencing as” an aspect of the phenomenal character of experience?⁴ Or is it instead an aspect of an


²By “the given” in an experience, I understand the rational contribution of the experience. Note that in this reply I presuppose familiarity with the theory offered in E&E.

³P. ZZZ. See fn. 12 in Frey’s paper for a clarification of the thesis.

⁴I follow Frey in using the expression “phenomenal character,” but I want to stress that the expression does not carry its usual baggage here. For example, phenomenal character is not necessarily constituted by subjective qualities. The fundamental notion in the theory of E&E is that of subjective identity of experiences. Phenomenal character is an abstraction useful for talking about subjectively identical experiences. Talk of phenomenal character does not commit one to saying that subjectively identical experiences literally share some properties or are directed to the same qualities.
accompanying conceptualization, for instance, of what Wilfrid Sellars called, the “perceptual taking”? In his statement of experiential transparency, Frey speaks about “appreciation as.” Later in the essay, he says that transparency is “phenomenally appreciable.” This suggests that Frey takes the distinction between the self and the other to be significant for the phenomenal character of experience. But does the distinction have this significance? And if it does, is it because the self is present in experience? Or does the distinctness of “the other” from the self somehow phenomenally manifest itself even without the presence of the self? These are some of the difficult issues that Frey’s formulation raises. I do not have space to pursue these issues here, and I will simply accept Frey’s formulation of experiential transparency. I will take it that Frey captures an aspect of experience that is relevant to its rational contribution. The question I want to pursue is what precisely this relevance consists in.

Frey thinks that the transparency of experience yields prima facie entitlement to views that “equip one with the conceptual resources to think in terms of self and other (p. ZZZ).” This rational contribution goes beyond the one I isolated, and Frey claims, it helps with the defense of empiricism. It enables us to rule solipsism as an inadmissible view on purely experiential grounds. The transparency of experience, Frey thinks, does not confer prima facie entitlement on solipsism and, consequently, it enables us to rule the view as inadmissible.

Frey’s argument faces two difficulties. First, solipsism appears to respect experiential transparency as Frey characterizes it. According to solipsism, sensuous qualities are instantiated in

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6I think Frey’s formulation does not capture the full force of transparency, but this point is not relevant to the principal argument of his paper.

7Frey offers other formulations as well of the prima facie entitlement. I will take note of one other formulation below.

8See E&E, p. 108, for a description of the solipsist view under discussion.

I had declared solipsism inadmissible for an a priori reason, namely, that it is a rigid view. Frey sees a remnant of rationalism here, but this is an error. Reason does not, in my account, have any a priori insight into the structure or content of reality; it rules views inadmissible only in the service of experience.

Note also that even if we accept Frey’s conclusion about the given, the usefulness of the notion of rigidity is not undermined. The idea that rigid views are inadmissible does essential work in the defense of empiricism.
sense-data, and these are quite distinct from the self. The contrast between “the self” and “the other” demanded by Frey’s experiential transparency is thus respected. Frey, rightly, refrains from building substantive conditions—e.g., mind-independence and objectivity—into the notion of “the other.” He says that “appeals to phenomenal character cannot settle questions about whether experiences are of sense data (fn. 16).” In an earlier note, he remarks that in an experience of pain there is “an apparent confrontation with something other than oneself (fn. 13).” If the contrast between “the self” and “the other” is understood as thinly as this, then the solipsist view does have the conceptual resources to distinguish the two. The solipsist view respects experiential transparency, and it should earn prima facie entitlement.⁹

Second, there is a difficulty in the move from the idea that solipsism lacks prima facie entitlement to the idea that solipsism is inadmissible. The concepts of admissibility and of prima facie entitlement are quite separate from one another. Why think the former requires the latter? The concept of prima facie entitlement makes an appearance in Frey’s argument but does no useful work there. Frey could have argued directly for his thesis that any view that does not respect experiential transparency is inadmissible. It is this thesis that is doing the real work in the defense of empiricism.

I cannot accept, then, Frey’s proposal about the given in experience. The idea that an experience provides prima facie entitlement to a view seems to me otiose at best.¹⁰ The genuine contribution of Frey’s paper lies not in its proposal about the given, but in its isolation of a source

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⁹In another formulation of the rational role of experiential transparency, Frey says that those views earn prima facie entitlement that explain the manifestation of transparency. But it is doubtful that solipsism is any worse off on this score than our commonsense view. Neither view, it appears, provides any explanation of transparency.

¹⁰The prima facie entitlement is of little value when one and the same experience provides an identical entitlement to an infinity of contrary views. Indeed I think it is improper to attribute prima facie entitlement in such cases. If one source provides prima facie entitlement to a proposition (e.g., “X is red”) then it cannot at the same time provide prima facie entitlement to a contrary proposition (e.g., “X is yellow”). The prima facie entitlement provided by a source (e.g., a particular testimony) can be defeated by another source (e.g., a different testimony), but it does not arise from the original source in a defeated state. This holds, I think, whether prima facie entitlement attaches to propositions or to views.
of admissibility constraints.\textsuperscript{11} Admissible views are sensitive to experience. What Frey points out is that there is a dimension of sensitivity, constituted by the general features of the phenomenal character of experience, that goes beyond what I isolated as non-rigidity.\textsuperscript{12} These general features may well be a rich source of admissibility constraints of the sort Frey has formulated. It is a merit of Frey’s essay that it highlights how reflection on the phenomenology of experience can be a source of epistemological insight.

References


\textsuperscript{11}This way of conceiving the rational role of transparency has one advantage. Transparency is a highly general feature of experience, and we can account for its rational role without pinning the role on any particular experiences.

\textsuperscript{12}I am inclined to put the principles gained from this source under the same head as receptivity, which I briefly discuss in \textit{E&E}, pp. 95-96. Note that the point here is consistent with the idea that “phenomenological transparency . . . has no epistemic or semantical force (\textit{E&E}, p. 146).” The notion of phenomenological transparency I was talking about is not the same as Frey’s “experiential transparency.” Furthermore, my principal concern was to deny that phenomenological transparency lends any support to the idea of the propositional given or to that of privileged semantical links.