Absurdity and the Explanatory Gap

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Introduction and Scope

Lexical definitions of absurdity contain notions of senselessness, meaninglessness and a general lack of rational order (Webster's, Oxford). Such definitions imply that absurdity is a wholly negative concept. Their emphasis on a certain 'lacking' or 'X-lessness' suggests that the absurd is characterized purely by association with an emptiness or void encountered in experience, reflection or introspection. However, absurdity is not wholly characterized by meaninglessness, irrationality, lack of sense or any other Sartrean negatité. It is a richer concept that is also equally bound up with logic, rationality and sense. In general, the absurd is realized in attempts to unify of two or more logical systems that result in an insoluble explanatory gap. In particular, such a gap it is evident in attempts at unifying phenomenology and scientific realism in the effort to form a scientifically informed theory of mind.

This explanatory gap is, at present, a significant problem for the philosophy of mind in general. It is impedes the reconciliation of two epistemic attitudes, phenomenology and scientific realism, that make claims about the mind and brain, respectively. More broadly, the resolution of these two views is pivotally important for the development of a unified science of mind, brain and consciousness. In this paper, I (1) articulate the compatibility of scientific realism and

phenomenology with respect to understanding the external world and the history of science, (2) illustrate their incompatibility with respect to the mind-brain problem to account for absurdity *qua* a dense explanatory gap between the two views, and (3) discuss how this absurdity affects the human condition in general. Lastly, I consider some objections to my view that the scientific and phenomenological attitudes must be unified. Let us begin by discussing the epistemic attitudes associated with scientific realism and phenomenology in order to understand how their combination brings one to realize the absurdity of the human condition.

Epistemic Attitudes Toward the World

In the *intuitive* human epistemic attitude, the world is understood as it is given in ordinary experience, and this prima facie immediate experience is and this type of knowledge is sufficient for being-in-the-world. It allows one to interact with objects and people, protect themselves from harm and make choices to act in favor of self interest. In this "basic" epistemic attitude, there is no deeper complexity to immediate experience insofar as things *are* as they appear or outwardly behave. One can modify the intuitive attitude by adopting the *phenomenological* attitude, in which the basic image is analyzed, described and formalized in the effort to unearth the structures of consciousness through logical investigations of conscious experience. This attitude intends the same world of ordinary experience as the intuitive attitude, but treats it with a more critical eye. The phenomenological attitude is thus a logical, reflective description of the "manifest image," or "the framework in which man came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world" as defined by Sellars. Defining the details of this framework *qua* conscious experience is the enterprise of phenomenology. By contrast, the *scientific* epistemic attitude intends the Sellars' "scientific image" of the world. That is, the objects, mechanisms and concepts argued to exist by natural science. This

image is *derived* from the manifest image, but replaces basic concepts with ones from scientific theories.

This conscious replacement of the manifest image by the scientific defines the scientific attitude. Thus, there are at least three possible attitudes with which we can intend the world. It is the relation of the latter two that is of interest to us, for if we combine the scientific and phenomenological attitudes in one consciousness, the manifest phenomenological image of immediate conscious experience stands in a Gestalt-like relation with the scientific image of particles, fields, potentials etc. described by theoreticians. That is, one can fluidly switch intentional attitudes when thinking about the world by actively intending either image. This amounts two fundamentally different kinds of knowledge about the world, and this is evident by the inability to *simultaneously* intend an object as manifest *and* scientific. Thus, we can distinguish two epistemic attitudes and corresponding images: (1) the manifest or phenomenological and (2) the scientific. Further, an agent can simultaneously hold these two attitudes in mind, thus modifying the dynamic of conscious experience by making possible the "Gestalt switch" described above.

When one holds both epistemic attitudes in mind, the manifest and scientific images are "superimposed" at all times, the former "concealing" the latter until a relevant scientific concept permeates the manifest image and gives a scientific alternate. These images of the same object are conceptually distinct insofar as they are two different *modes* of knowledge about the same world. Phenomenologically, it is possible to intend either mode *qua* image in any particular conscious scene. For example, I can understand water as a clear liquid or as a mass of loosely associated H_2O molecules. Similarly, I can understand music as a pleasurable tune or a sequence of wave-like disturbances in the air. Both images are accurate and relevant for different purposes. The manifest image/attitude is used in everyday being-in-the-world and in phenomenological description, while the scientific image/attitude is instrumental in theorizing and postulating the features of the natural world, i.e. scientific enterprise. One can investigate and understand the external natural world, the

particular objects in it and our own bodies through natural science, and can also investigate the features of consciousness, experience and the mind in general through phenomenology. Thus we have a scene in which two equally logical and coexistent descriptions of the world are available to us. We can use this information to robustly understand the world, but, I will argue, this ultimately leads to an encounter with a screaming absurdity of the human condition, i.e. the inability to logically reconcile the scientific attitude with the phenomenological attitude.

The Influence of Science on Thought and Experience

Scientific theory describes a world that is fundamentally different the world we can immediately experienced. No one has ever "seen" an electromagnetic wave. Rather, we experience light and darkness. For the individual, science offers robust explanations of natural objects and phenomena that penetrate the manifest image and turn it inside out, thus influencing the fundamental character of conscious experience. For example, my heartbeat becomes the effect of atrio-ventricular contraction rather than a simple beating in my chest. The sun is no longer a giant hot light in the sky, but a burning sphere of hydrogen and helium spinning at thousands of miles per hour. These and analogous shifts are consequences of holding the scientific and phenomenological attitudes in one consciousness. The scientific image opposes the manifest image, but still remains coexistent with it, enabling the possibility of the "Gestalt switch" described above. Furthermore, the scientific image can become more detailed and robust over time and influence the very character of thought and experience itself. We can illustrate the former by taking a brief look at the relationship between science and philosophy and the latter by a simple phenomenological experiment.

After the Scientific Revolution of the 16th century, scientific concepts such as Newtonian mechanics, Copernican heliocentrism and atomism in chemistry and physics became premier

explanations of the natural world. During the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant caught wind of Newton's work and it significantly influenced his theory of space in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. The explanatory power of science continued to gain steam in the 19th and 20th centuries with the discovery of subatomic particles, Einstein's theory of relativity, Darwin's theory of natural selection and the inception of molecular biology. In tandem, the idealism and pragmatism popular in the 19th century gave way to more scientifically inclined philosophy that produced phenomenology, existentialism and analytic philosophy. In many ways, such changes embody the increasing primacy of the scientific image. Philosophers writing in the later stages of scientific advancement show clear consciousness of scientific truths, some using them as material for doing philosophy. For example, Nietzsche articulates a view that hinges on "organic" causation, which can be interpreted as a biological view of causality. In general, it is plain that concepts and objects (e.g. atoms, molecules, fields) from natural science interact with human thought. This is even evident in literature, e.g. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. As science advances and philosophy integrates its concepts, the resulting scientifically informed way of thinking sets up the relation between the scientific and phenomenological epistemic attitudes that, I claim, produces the absurd.

To illustrate the effects of scientific thought on conscious experience, we can do a phenomenological experiment. First, intend the manifest image by paying attention to colors, sounds, motion etc. as they appear (i.e. intuit the world phenomenologically), then intend the scientific image by thinking of of photon scatter, Doppler effects, electrostatic forces etc. that constitute the scientific image (i.e. intuit the world scientifically). Compare the two experiences and the knowledge that comes from them. Which knowledge is best or most accurate? In truth, it is a matter of purpose. That is, the phenomenological account of the manifest image is correct if we are discussing conscious experience and the scientific account is correct if we are discussing the physical nature of the world. If we have two equally correct descriptions of the world, shouldn't we be able to connect these descriptions through a unifying concept?

Bridging Gaps with Scientific Realism

Scientific understanding thus gives us a systematic and empirically rigorous point of view from which to think about the world that stands in a curious relation to fundamental phenomenological claims about conscious experience and contradicts common sense intuitions from immediate experience. Case in point, the scientific proof that "solid" objects are mostly empty space conflicts with my conscious experience of solid objects and empty space. If both phenomenological and scientific descriptions are both accurate, how are we to understand their relation to each other? Although the scientific image tends to replace the manifest image (at least for scientists), it is grounded in the manifest image. That is, scientific theory works from the manifest image to posit (sometimes) imperceptible scientific and theoretical objects. If this were not true, the "Gestalt switch" described above that, for example, lets us behold a symphony and a superposition of airborne waveforms, would not be possible. This resolution between the two images entails bridging the gap between conscious experience and scientific explanation with *scientific realism*, the view that the world described by scientific theory *is* the real world. If one is aware of both the scientific and phenomenological, then she can unite these descriptions by conceding that the world that appears in immediate experience is but the surface or mere appearance of the scientific world. In this way, the phenomenological and scientific are compatible. One can be a scientific realist, but also accommodate the phenomenological description of conscious experience by understanding the phenomena as basic appearances and the scientific as the true nature of the phenomena. Thus, the phenomenological and scientific images can be resolved by adopting a scientific realism about the external world.

The above is a robust way to understand the external world and, from this position, we may be inclined to think that we can extend scientific realism all things-in-the-world, for it accounts for both their appearance and fundamental natural constitution of phenomena and remains compatible with phenomenology, which discusses how objects "show up" in experience. Scientific objects simply "show up" in phenomenal consciousness as they do in the manifest image. However, when trying to extend scientific realism to inquiries concerning oneself and others as *conscious* beings in addition to physical ones, the approach falls short in bridging the gap between the scientific and the phenomenological. That is, when thinking about the nature of oneself and others as biophysical entities capable of conscious experience, scientific realism is limited in its explanatory power. We can prove this by illustration.

In the external world, one encounters physical objects that are thoroughly comprehensible through applying the scientific analytical approach described above and accepting that the manifest image is the appearance or perceivable datum of scientific objects. This comprehensibility also extends to non-animal biological objects, i.e. plants and microorganisms. Such objects are intelligible as biophysical systems or machines that "act" in accordance with the laws of nature, as in the exhibition photo- and chemotaxis in bacteria or phototropism (the growth and orientation in the direction of sunlight) in plants. These phenomena are perfectly intelligible in terms of molecular events described by modern molecular biology. For example, in bacterial taxis, transmembrane receptors on the cellular surface bind chemical molecules or respond to photons, triggering a chain of molecular events that reverses the direction in which the flagella rotate, propelling the organism toward the strongest density of chemoattractant or intensity of light. However, this form of mechanistic scientific explanation does not wholly suffice when one attempts to understand himself *qua* physical being *and* conscious agent. Is agency a complicated version of biological taxis? If we entertain the notion, why doesn't the experience of agency have an intentional character? These

attempts to craft such a description leads one to the absurd that lies at the convergence of scientific realism and phenomenology. This is evident by the following investigation.

In scientific terms, one's constitution is biophysical and material in the same sense that the rest of the external world is. Every person is a complicated network of interacting atoms and molecules. In the body, these atoms and molecules are sequestered into cells, which are themselves organized into tissues, organs and organ systems supported by circulatory, nervous and respiratory systems. These facts are confirmed by biology and physiology. One's visual apparatus (eyes, optic nerve, visual cortex etc.) is thus fundamentally biophysical. Furthermore, it is activated by external physical existents (photons). Photons from the sun or artificial light sources (which are also both describable scientifically, n.b.) are reflected, absorbed or scattered in accordance with the physical composition of the objects they encounter and, after reflection, they contact the photoreceptive cells of the eye by travelling through the cornea, aqueous humor and lens and stimulating electrochemical potentials in retinal photoreceptors. This initiates an electrochemical action potential in the retina that travels down the optic nerve and to the visual cortices of the brain. Scientific explanation is robust until this point, but lacks an explanation for how activity in the visual cortex produces the conscious visual experience that I can understand and describe with phenomenology. Rather, science says it simply happens, with little insight on how we get from molecules to experience. Thus, the absurd is exposed as the explanatory gap that lies between the physical scientific and manifest images of the self. It is here, at the convergence of scientific realism and phenomenology where we encounter the absurdity of the human condition and its associated questions: How are we to explain how electrical activity in the visual cortex constitutes and produces conscious multimodal sensory experience? How does the brain constitute the character of conscious experience (i.e. what it is like to be conscious) the structures of consciousness described by phenomenology?

If one understands the objects of experience (including the body) as a scientific realist and his consciousness as a phenomenologist, the human condition is rendered absurd insofar as it desires to know something that seems fundamental to its very existence, i.e. how the physical is transformed into the phenomenological with respect to the mind and brain. Keeping conscious of the simultaneous duality of scientific and phenomenological awareness, we can understand that, as humans, we have a physical structure that is subject to the same natural laws that govern falling bodies and orbiting planets, but should not assume that the same is true for our conscious experience despite what the scientific image may suggest. There is a phenomenological 'lifeworld' an manifest image of meaning in experience that is superimposed on a world described by science, but logically distinct from it from it. Nevertheless, the scientific image constantly asserts its primacy as it expands. It seeps into the very core of the human condition, changing one's perception by establishing a perspective that competes with the phenomenological scene of 'ground' and 'figure' described by Sartre. We can make sense of this in the external world through scientific realism, but cannot do so for the conscious self—and this is absurd. Obscured to our knowledge and awareness are the details of the grounding relation between self and body and mind and brain.

In my view, it is precisely because of the relation between scientific and the phenomenological awareness in the same consciousness that the absurd emerges. It is through the former that we, quite reasonably, begin to think that we ourselves are describable in scientific terms, i.e. as a finite entity ultimately reducible to its highly interconnected grouping of physical entities. Such a notion is not preposterous, and is a view held by some neurobiologists and philosophers of mind. Through the latter, we understand the structure of conscious experience as it is given to us. We should be able to connect these two rationales but cannot, and it is absurd that this problem appears so insoluble. With respect to the mind and brain in particular, there is presently no systematic logical or scientific explanation for the relation between brain activity to conscious experience and we lack a robust account for linking biophysical and phenomenological concepts. In

short, scientific realism is inadequate in explaining the phenomenon of conscious experience itself, which certainly exists in the world. It can explain the constitution of the objects of experience but cannot give an account of experience itself *qua* its genesis or its features. We can say that conscious experience is correlated with brain activity, but it is a much stronger (and unverifiable) statement to say that conscious experience is *grounded* in brain activity or that brain activity causes conscious experience in some way. We cannot prove scientifically how brain phenomena produce conscious experience; we have a mere correlation, which, by definition, does not imply causation.

This explanatory gap and the absurdity it carries with it is intellectually challenging because it suggests that the explanatory power of science and to the rigor of phenomenological description are mutually exclusive with respect to the relationship between mind and brain. Science and phenomenology provide systematic approaches to describing the events logically prior to conscious experience and the events of conscious experience, respectively, but, as the above shows, converge on an apparent absence of logical connection and compatibility. They bring the intellect to a void of indeterminacy that begs to be filled, but cannot be by any adequate natural or theoretical explanations. This void is central to the mind-brain problem, and we can even go so far as to understand the absurdity that links the scientific to the phenomenological *as* the mind-brain problem. The existential reality surrounding this problem for the man of scientific awareness and phenomenological reflection is that he has the ability to describe the body, brain and external world in terms of natural science and the mind in terms of phenomenology, but has no third logic or principle to unify the two spheres of knowledge. This is genuinely absurd in the sense that Camus offers insofar as man perceives a gap between what he knows and what he desires to know that seems ultimately unbridgeable. In this sense, the life of the scientifically aware and phenomenologically reflective is absurd by virtue of its resistance to becoming intellectually unified.

A principle objection to my view is that I have created a dualism where one does not exist. One could conceivable argue that my emphasis on the disparity between the physical and the

phenomenological is an illusion perpetuated by an false belief that the manifest and scientific images are in fact distinct. An argument from this position may be structured as follows: The scientific and manifest images are two alternative descriptions of the same object. That is, the scientific image is one particular way of talking about the world, and the manifest image is simply the same description in a different language. This would press on my claim that the scientific and phenomenological worlds are fundamentally distinct from one another. A second feature of this objection is that it dissolves my concerns pertaining to the mind and brain by the "same object, different language" argument. In this view, the connection between the brain and conscious experience is not mysterious, because mind and brain are fundamentally the same thing. That is, a person with this view may claim that when I have a conscious experience and describe it phenomenologically, I am simply expressing brain phenomena in syntactic language. In general, these arguments constitute an objection from identity against my view.

If we isolate the features of the scientific and manifest images of a particular object and prove them to *not* be identical, we will see that the claim that they are identical to one another is false and can dismiss this part of the identity objection. Consider the experience of fear. Phenomenologically speaking, "fear" is an emotion that affects consciousness in a particular way and it not inextricably linked to any particular object. That is, I can feel fear for an array of different reasons that involve different objects. For example, I can be both afraid of a poisonous snake and be afraid of falling deathly ill. My conscious experience of fear in both cases is associated with a particular feeling that makes the world "show up" for me in a particular way that I identify as fear. Fear is also biological and is linked to particular areas of the brain, namely the amygdala. Comparing the conscious experience of fear and the brain activity in the amygdala, it is obvious that these two things are not identical. One is an emotion and the other a biophysical event and it is not provable that the experience of fear itself is a physical phenomenon. The emotion may be associated with (or even caused by) by the biophysical event, but it is decisively not identical to the biophysical event. By

abstraction, this response applies to the mind-brain identity objection as well, which is hasty on its face. It suggests that the mind to be identical to the brain, or that human action and higher psychological phenomena are the *same thing* as brain activity, and this seems obviously false. Such an account materializes the immediate phenomenological reality of the 'lifeworld' into an alternative expression of brain activity that is perceptible and reduces things such as critical thinking, literature and philosophy to different "translations" of brain activity. This is suspect at best, and we ought not be satisfied with the objection from identity.

A second objection is that my view assumes an intellectual monism insofar as I suggest that there *must* be a way to unify scientific realism with phenomenology. The main points here are (1) that not all descriptions of reality need to be incompatible with each other and (2) that when two attitudes conflict, one should be dismissed. With respect to (1) an objector may argue that the world is structured such that it can be explained in different ways for particular purposes. For example, physics and biology both explain the world, but do so with different goals in mind, and these different goals lend themselves to different explanatory theories. Since both sciences are aimed at different goals, the objector may maintain that there is no reason to presuppose that logical unity is possible across disciplines and map this claim onto the fundamentally different goals that distinguish phenomenology from natural science. If the objector holds (1) to be true, then he may follow by claiming that one only needs to hold an epistemic attitude that is relevant to a particular intellectual pursuit. That is, if I am doing phenomenology, I can temporarily dismiss the scientific image, or if I am doing natural science, I can temporarily dismiss the scientific image. This would abandon my unification problem in favor of an intellectual instrumentalism governed by nature of the particular ends associated with an inquiry.

In response to (1), I offer that there is equally no eminent reason to presuppose that alternative logical descriptions of the world are not necessarily compatible with one another. If anything, one should assume that compatibility is the norm for the following reasons. First, natural

science and phenomenology describe the *same* world. That is, both natural science and phenomenology describe objects of experience. Natural science describes their physical constitution and phenomenology describes how this natural constitution "shows up" in experience. As such, it is not unwarranted to assume that alternative descriptions of the same world should be logically compatible, for they are derived from the same basic thing. For example, if I take a photograph of the same person with two different filters or lenses, the images will nevertheless be superimposable. In response to (2), I would maintain that intellectual instrumentalism is a matter of Bad Faith when discussing a topic such as the human condition as it relates to scientific realism and phenomenology. Phenomenological description is correct if we are discussing conscious experience and scientific description is correct if we are discussing the physical nature of the world. To deny the validity of phenomenological reality is to deny the validity of one's immediate experience and, while to deny the scientific reality is to deny empirical facts about the world. Either way, denial of one description is a lie to oneself. For example, to deny that the table on which I work is composed of atoms which themselves are composed of protons, neutrons and electrons is, given the present state of human thought and natural science, irresponsible. Moreover, to think that my phenomenological understanding of the world is merely a guise of scientific facts is also erroneous unless I want to reduce notions about the character of conscious experience to the consequence of physical interactions. Thus, to declare the primacy of one image or theory over the other is unwarranted. They exist together and both are accurate. In short, running from one's own phenomenology is to run from oneself and the richness of conscious mental life, and running from scientific descriptions of the world is to run from physical reality as it is currently knowable by empirical investigation.

Thus we have concluded that the human condition is absurd because it cannot explain ho the objects and concepts defined by natural science can give rise to conscious experience. This absurdity is realized in the convergence of scientific realism and phenomenology at an explanatory gap that, at present, seems unbridgeable. What then remains for the agent who values the

simultaneous consciousness of the scientific and manifest images as valuable? Does he have to abandon the attempt to unify scientific realism and phenomenology? The answer is a resounding, "no!" As an alternative (albeit temporary) solution, I maintain that a combination of scientific realism and phenomenology is better adapted to understanding the mind and the world as logically distinct for the time being. It is enigmatically absurd that the relation between these two views give way a dense void that evades reason, but, nevertheless, more robust understanding from both perspectives may elucidate possible material for logical connection in the effort to bridge the gaps enveloping mind, brain and world.

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