

## Reply to J. J. Valberg

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Replying to a paper by J. J. Valberg is a very special milestone for me. When I was his student (door, left; bookcase, right; desk-JV-window, front), I frequently resisted what he was teaching me, only to consequently back down when he explained where I had gone wrong. The only thing he never got me to back down over was my advocacy of physicalism – and it turned out I was wrong about that too! Given this history, my current prospects do not look rosy. But this time I have an advantage: because Valberg has underestimated the degree to which his philosophy has influenced me. If he had realised how much I have internalised his teachings over the years – particularly from *Dream, Death, and the Self* (Valberg 2007), but also from everything else he has published or shown me – then I might have been in trouble. As it is, I think I will be OK. Seeing my position as viewed through Valberg’s eyes, as this paper allows me to do, makes me highly suspicious of that position as a matter of instinct. But even with this heightened critical awareness, I am not seeing anything wrong with it; my exposition was inadequate, I have no doubt, but that is all I am seeing.

Central to Valberg’s own position is his distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions of consciousness. As he explains in his paper, we think about consciousness with the phenomenal conception when we think of an experience as ‘some kind of phenomenon (state or process or activity etc.) occurring in our heads or souls’ (p. 191). Thus when I think about my current experience as a distinctive ‘something’, then I am thinking about consciousness *phenomenally*; as if it were a phenomenon in the world, which I could designate like any other phenomenon. I may go on to hold that this ‘something’ is produced by my brain; or can be identified with something in my brain; or is an element of immaterial reality that interacts with my brain; or is an illusionary intentional object; or is one of the building-blocks of a reality which physical descriptions cannot adequately characterise. But in all such cases, the difference pertains only to my metaphysical theory of the nature of what I am phenomenally conceiving.

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Valberg holds, as do I, that this is the conception routinely presupposed in philosophical debates about consciousness. The various sides all conceive of consciousness in this way, and then proceed to argue about the nature of what they are likewise conceiving; whether it is physical, non-physical, or illusory.

Valberg also holds, as do I (being his follower in this regard), that we have another, radically different conception of consciousness which ‘remains in the background’ of these debates (p. 192). This is the horizontal conception, according to which consciousness is *that within which* things appear to us: the horizon of subjective presentation. Thus we may distinguish between a tree and the presence of the tree within my consciousness; if I fall unconscious, the tree will still be there, but it will no longer be experientially present to me. Consciousness, on this conception, is the first-person horizon, or context, from within which certain facts hold, such as that the tree is present to me. It is not a phenomenon we can point to, but rather the horizon in which the phenomena we can point to are present. In itself, the horizon is nothing, but objects and events *appear* within it (as opposed to: simply *exist*). And when objects and events permanently cease to appear within somebody’s horizon, their conscious life is replaced by the nothingness of death.

Valberg thinks that the problem of consciousness, along with the standard responses to that problem – dualism, physicalist reductionism, eliminativism, etc. – arise from a failure to recognise the distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions. As he puts it, ‘the confusion consists in running together our conception of consciousness as something which occurs in our heads, hence as a phenomenon of some kind, with that of the horizon from within which the world is present to us’ (p. 192). Essentially, we presuppose the phenomenal conception, but also think about consciousness from our own, first-personal perspective – thereby employing the horizontal conception without becoming aware of it – to form a conception of a phenomenon whose existence depends on the first-person perspective we take on it: a curious, subjective kind of phenomenon which must somehow be integrated with the objective world. We are thus landed with the problem of consciousness, and inspired to propose a metaphysical theory to deal with it. The error which causes this problem to arise, as Valberg sees it, consists in mistaking the presence of phenomena within the horizon of consciousness, with the presence of puzzling subjective phenomena. And this occurs through neglect of the horizontal conception: we fail to adequately think through what it means to think about consciousness from the first-personal perspective.

Now I internalised all of this many years ago; but since I was not sure what to do with it, it remained compartmentalised within my thinking, just like the ideas of other philosophers who I could see were onto something, although I was not quite sure what – in this particular case, I was sure it was something important, however. I have never doubted the distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions; not since I first grasped it. The question for me was where to take it. And the Transcendent Hypothesis was the answer I eventually came up with. From Valberg's paper, it is clear that he thinks I have neglected the distinction, made the standard mistake he diagnoses of presupposing the phenomenal conception, and simply come up with a new theory about the nature of the 'problematic phenomenon'. That is not how I see it.

As I see it, the Transcendent Hypothesis is a development of Valberg's thinking about consciousness, which has the distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions at its heart. I was not in a position to simply agree with Valberg about consciousness, because there are certain aspects of where he takes his reflection on the phenomenal / horizontal distinction which I have never been able to accept; and not wanting to be what Lester Young called a 'repeater pencil', I would have avoided the topic of consciousness if I had thought Valberg had it entirely right. It is Valberg's direction of travel *after* the phenomenal / horizontal distinction is made central to reflection on the nature of mind – as I agree that it should be – which has always been the problem for me. Trying to avoid the elements of his account which I could not accept was crucial to working out my own account. There are three of these.

### (1) Impossibilities

Valberg thinks that the horizon of consciousness is a nothingness which is caused by activity in the brain. Since something physical cannot cause that which is nothing at all (nothing apart from what appears within in), he thinks this compels us to accept an impossibility as actual. This, he thinks, is the natural resting place of philosophical inquiry in this area; and he sees wisdom in just accepting and learning to live with it. It is just one of a number of impossibilities which Valberg thinks ordinary reflection ultimately leads us to, and which philosophy can do nothing more than make explicit to us. I respect this position, but my natural and unsophisticated reaction to it – which I am unable to see anything wrong with – is that if something is impossible, then it cannot happen;

so there must be something wrong with the reasoning that leads you to believe that it does happen. I think the task of philosophy is to answer certain kinds of natural curiosity, not to distil, clarify and intensify them, thereafter leaving us to acquiesce in their perfected forms.

## (2) The Phenomenal Conception

Valberg thinks, and I agree, that there is a widespread neglect of the horizontal conception. But it seems to me that he makes the opposite mistake of neglecting the phenomenal conception; if we have two ways of thinking about consciousness, then both should be integral to, and reconciled within, our final account. For although Valberg grants the legitimacy of the phenomenal conception, it has no real place in his account. It serves primarily to provide his diagnosis of where others go wrong, and within his own account, it strikes me as merely an awkwardness. For on the one hand, Valberg thinks that the phenomenal conception, since it applies to phenomena, can only apply to the sole repository of phenomena: the objective world. Thus in his definitive exposition, he says: ‘The point is not (of course) to deny that there are states, events, processes, etc., that occur or go on “in us” (in our brains and nervous systems) when we think, perceive, feel, will, and so on. It is not, in other words, to deny the validity of the phenomenal conception of mind’ (Valberg 2007: 99). And in an earlier treatment, he is clear that, ‘Like most philosophers these days, I believe that the idea of there being a soul (a spiritual substance) in us, and hence the idea that there are soul-related phenomena (spiritual phenomena) occurring in us, is a fiction. The only phenomena occurring in us are, roughly speaking, biological phenomena’ (Valberg 1992: 145). More conclusively still, he goes on to say that, ‘there are no experiential phenomena, only experiential facts’ (ibid.: 146); that is, facts of presence within an experiential horizon. And yet on the other hand, Valberg grants that some of the phenomena that are present to us in the horizon of consciousness are merely ‘internal objects’ which are exhausted by their presence; such as hallucinations. Since these objects do not have independent existence in space and time, they are not part of ‘the world’ (Valberg 2007: 48-9).

Now in his paper, he says that, ‘there is no denying that we at least sometimes conceive of consciousness (experience) in this [phenomenal] way. Thus, e.g., if you observe me looking at my hand, you might think that light rays reflected from my hand are striking my eyes and initiating a complex string of phenomena whose

upshot is yet another phenomenon occurring in me, viz., my visual experience or consciousness of my hand' (p. 192). However, although philosophers standardly conceive the upshot of the causal process to be 'yet another phenomenon occurring in me, viz., my visual experience or consciousness of my hand', Valberg thinks this is an erroneous conception, of course – because there are no experiential phenomena. The only phenomena which the phenomenal conception of consciousness can legitimately be applied to are physical ones in the brain, the causal upshot of which is a horizon of consciousness. If Valberg himself were to accept the existence of experiential phenomena, against his own diagnosis of error, then the problem of consciousness would obviously arise in exactly the same way for him.

However, it seems to me that Valberg *already* has this problem: because of his acceptance of internal objects, such as hallucinations. A hallucinatory object is an experiential phenomenon, and experiential phenomena have no obvious resting place in the objective world: hence the standard problem of consciousness. To deny that they exist within the objective world, and claim that they are exhausted by their presence within a horizon, does not tell us what they *are*; if they are phenomena, then like all phenomena, they must have a nature, and if this nature is not physical ... herein we see the old problem re-emerging. Moreover, it seems to me that even without this problem – even if there were no internal objects for Valberg to deal with – his restriction of the phenomenal conception to physical phenomena, such as brain processing, would not be a phenomenal conception of *consciousness*; not unless he were to advocate the physicalist doctrine that brain events are identical to experiential events, which, wisely, he never would. For these physical phenomena, on his view, are simply what *cause* consciousness. They are not conscious phenomena themselves. I conclude that the phenomenal conception has no stable resting place within Valberg's account. He is right to think it is legitimate, just as I do; but in that case it must be integrated with the horizontal conception within a unified account of consciousness.

### (3) Direct Realism

Valberg advocates a sophisticated form of direct realism; it is the only account I know of which, from an experiential perspective, makes proper sense of the title. For if the objects of the world appear within the horizon of consciousness, we are directly aware of them; there are no experiential phenomena to mediate our access.

I have often suspected that the aim of making sense of direct realism motivates much of Valberg's thinking (although I could be wrong about this.) I do not think it is a well-motivated aim; I rather think, following Rorty, that it derives from a history of attempts to find an iron-clad refutation of external world scepticism of the kind which cannot be, and has no need of being, refuted. Something along these lines, as I see it, is provided at a significant juncture in *Dream, Death, and the Self* (Valberg 2007: 111); Valberg's twist is not to attempt to refute scepticism *per se*, but rather disarm it by showing that it is compatible with direct realism. But then, why should we want to be direct realists in the first place? The mainstream of twentieth-century philosophy has presupposed that this is a laudable aim; but that is not a good reason in itself. Valberg offers a simple phenomenological observation; that when we attend – honestly – to our experience, then all we find is the world, not experience itself (Valberg 1992: Chapter 2). This is to be distinguished from the familiar 'transparency' intuition, because Valberg is employing the horizontal conception; experience is not a transparent phenomenon (ibid: 150-1). But nevertheless, whether in its phenomenal or horizontal guise, the whole idea strikes me as thoroughly dubious.

I often find myself travelling home by train at night, sitting next to the window. When you look out of the window in this situation, you can see the landscape passing by, but also a myriad of reflections from the inside of the carriage. What you see can be quite a mess, which it takes some thought to make any worldly sense of; I find myself not really sure what I am looking at and typically give up trying after a while. Now is it really obvious, in such a situation, that 'All we find is the world' (ibid.: 22)? Not to me. It seems considerably more plausible that I find a conscious experience which is the causal upshot of all kinds of things in the world; this strikes me as the *prima facie* situation, once philosophical reflection has begun, but which we can nevertheless easily overlook when viewing conditions are optimal, such as when we stand in front of a tree in broad daylight. And as I point out in *Meaningless*, many of the most prominent philosophers before the twentieth century found this patently obvious. What changed, I think, is that once science came to dominate our intellectual aspirations, the obviousness of this philosophical subject-matter of mediating experience – one which seemed to resist incorporation into the objective world which science can describe – came to seem like something that needed to be dismantled. Direct realism became the goal, and the most natural way to fit this into traditional philosophical concerns was to use it to refute the sceptic. But if the phenomenal conception of

consciousness is legitimate, as Valberg and I both agree that it is, then it seems to me that what we are conceiving must be experiential phenomena which mediate our access to the objective world. The task, as I see it, is to find a way to coherently fit this phenomenal conception in with the horizontal conception. And that is what I was trying to do with the Transcendent Hypothesis.

My leading thought when arriving at the Transcendent Hypothesis – using Valberg’s manner of thinking about dream scepticism, but in light of my three sources of dissatisfaction with his final position, as detailed above – was that if *this* were a dream (me sitting at my desk; you reading these words in whatever your current situation is), then the dream objects I am experiencing must have some kind of reality or nature behind them. Since I take the phenomenal conception to be legitimate, the natural explanation of this is that my experiences of the dream objects are something real. Now in light of the horizontal conception, the reality possessed by the experiences could only be found in a context transcendent to the dream; one in which I am asleep in the objective world and dreaming all of this up (i.e. dreaming the situation in which I am typing at my desk). A model is thereby suggested of consciousness placing us within a horizon in which we find a world to be present (the dream world, in this case), with the reality of consciousness existing in a context which transcends the horizon (the objective world, in this case). Assuming that this is how consciousness always works, and that dream experience is not metaphysically special, I then formed the Transcendent Hypothesis, according to which the same happens in waking life. According to this theory, the reality of waking consciousness is transcendent: it transcends the horizon in which we find the objective world. (I have missed out various complicating factors for clarity of exposition, but they are all there in the book.)

This account fully integrates the horizontal and phenomenal conceptions. The central insight to the horizontal conception, as I see it, is that is that consciousness places us within a horizon, with a world presented inside it, and the reality of the presentation outside it. But since I also take the phenomenal conception seriously, I think the presentations of an objective world which take place within our ordinary, waking horizon (as well as presentations of things that evidently do not belong to that world, such as hallucinations) *are* something: subjective experiences. Since these subjective experiences are found within the horizon of consciousness, then according to the Transcendent Hypothesis, their reality must

transcend that horizon. But since this is also true of the objective world which these subjective experiences indirectly inform us of, the reality of the objective world must also be found in a transcendent context; in the sense that it is the nature of transcendent reality which ensures the effectiveness of our interpretation of conscious experience in terms an objective world. So the reality of everything must be transcendent, to cut a long story short. We live in a transcendent reality which we make sense of with an ultimately incoherent mixture of subjective and objective thinking.

On my view, nothing in the objective world causes or causally affects consciousness, so unlike Valberg, I am not required to accept impossibilities as facts. The objective world and horizon of consciousness are not an ontologically divided being and nothingness, as I see it, but rather two elements of the same representational package: a package we use to make the best sense we can of a reality whose true nature will always radically transcend human understanding. Objective conditions do *seem* to cause subjective, experiential ones, of course, but this is because we must represent subjective experiences as occupants of the objective world in order to apply our causal understanding to them, and thereby predict their comings and goings. Our representational package commits us to causally integrating experience with the objective world, but also provides the philosophical resources to see that this cannot really be what is going on; that we must be misrepresenting the transcendent reality, in order to think of it as different people having different outlooks on the same objective world. The representational package cannot be accurate as a whole, in the sense that it cannot capture the nature of the transcendent reality; which, in the final count, is all there is. But it is a package that works, such that outside of philosophy, we can say that the anaesthetic caused the pain to stop without any qualms whatsoever.

You might sum up the difference between my account and Valberg's as follows. On his account, we must recognise consciousness for the nothingness it is, and thereby learn to accept the impossible fact that nothingness is causally integrated with the objective world. On my account, we must recognise consciousness as a transcendent reality which we misrepresent in terms of subjective experiences, horizons and an objective world, and thereby learn to accept that its causal integration with the objective world is merely apparent. I do not think these two answers are so utterly dissimilar. On the contrary, I think the Transcendent Hypothesis is a Valbergian conception of consciousness, which makes some changes to the original in order to answer the question of what

consciousness *is*. (Valberg thinks this question is misconceived and I do not.) It seems to me a natural extension of Valberg's account.

With this in mind, let us turn to Valberg's three objections to my theory of consciousness. They are all directed to an account according to which conscious experiences are phenomena that belong to a transcendent reality. Well, I do think that we *conceive* of conscious experiences as phenomena (because I accept the legitimacy of the phenomenal conception), and I also think that *what we are conceiving of* has transcendent reality. But here is the crucial point: I think *everything that exists has transcendent reality*. Valberg, I suspect, is thinking of the transcendent reality as another world; but I am thinking of it as our world. On my view, reality is transcendent; and there is only one reality. Since the independent nature of our world is transcendent, it is not something we can substantively describe. But we can and do substantively describe the one and only reality by misrepresenting it as experiential phenomena in causal dialogue with an objective world. We do not thereby capture its independent nature, but our descriptions work for all purposes apart from this metaphysical one.

Valberg's first objection is that it is implausible to hold that our commonplace beliefs about experiences causally interacting with objective conditions 'are the result of a mistake' (p. 190), namely that of misinterpreting transcendent conscious experiences. He asks, 'why we should have the aim of interpreting consciousness as an indirect awareness etc. Or, if it not meant to be an "aim", why suppose that we place such a convoluted and (no doubt) misguided construction on things when all we *seem* to be doing is – in our habitual inductivist way – ascribing a causal connection on the basis of an observed succession of phenomena (e.g., taking drugs and an alteration in the way objects look to us)?' (p. 190).

The first thing to say is that there is only any prospect of a mistake being involved if you are doing metaphysics. In all other walks of life, we will of course continue to talk about objective conditions causing and being caused by experiences. But if we want a metaphysical interpretation of what is going on, then mine will say that this involves misrepresentation; those offered by metaphysical realists who believe in causal transactions between objective conditions and experiences, will say the representation is accurate. Both are fully in accord with the manifest situation, namely that there *seem* to be such causal interactions (note that Valberg says 'seem' in this context too) – and non-metaphysical talk can and will ignore these subtleties.

But then, why do I place this particular ‘construction’ on things? Because I take the phenomenal conception to be legitimate; unless you are an eliminativist, I cannot see how you can avoid this. As I made clear earlier when discussing Valberg’s treatment of the phenomenal conception, I do not think that even he has found any alternative; if brain states are the only things the phenomenal conception can apply to, as he has argued, then I think he actually *is* an eliminativist (in the phenomenal sense only). But if the phenomenal conception is legitimate – if experiences are among the phenomena we refer to – then since they cannot belong to the objective world, I cannot see how they actually can be in causal dialogue with the objective world. So given that we certainly do conceive of them as such, this must be a misrepresentation. Moreover, if experiences are phenomena, then since experiences perceptually inform us about the world, the natural thing to say – and what you *will* say, I think, so long as you are not determined to be a direct realist, for motivations I find highly dubious – is that this perceptual access is indirect.

Valberg’s second objection is that, ‘in order for me to misinterpret C, that is, to take it to have properties it does (or could) not have, I would first have to single out C referentially. Yet if C belongs to a transcendent reality, this is not possible’ (p. 190). He goes on to say that, ‘If this were a dream, the reality that transcends the dream would be, for me, nothing more than “something” that exists or is there – “something” into which I might emerge. In that case, it is not clear how I might, in thought, single out for reference the entities – the objects and phenomena – that comprise the supposedly transcendent reality. They would not be entities about which I might form either a correct or an incorrect interpretation’ (pp. 190-1).

My answer to this is simple: Valberg is right and so the theory he is criticising is wrong. But it is not my theory. He is thinking of individual experiences as things which belong to a transcendent reality, rather than objective reality; he is thinking of transcendent reality as another world. On my view, transcendent reality, conceived as such, is indeed ‘nothing more than “something” that exists or is there – “something” into which I might emerge’ (although I could only emerge into it if it is not the final context, given the horizontal structure of consciousness). We cannot pick out individual objects and events that carve transcendent reality at the joints, and certainly not when we refer to experiences, whose nature can be seen to be illusory within the horizon that contains the objective world. Nevertheless we can conceive of it in a manner which is not in accordance with its independent nature; we can conceive of transcendent reality as imminent reality. And this is

what we do with objective thought, and the shadow concepts we borrow from it in order to conceive of individual experiences. Our objective conception of reality, which gives us our conception of representation vs. misrepresentation (PML, Chapter 7), plus the phenomenal conception of experience, is what facilitates reference. Reference is thereby made to transcendent reality – because there is nothing else to refer to – but metaphysical reflection reveals that despite the utility to us of the referential distinctions we make in this way, they cannot be sensitive to the independent nature of this reality in the straightforward manner which metaphysical realism about the objective world supposes. Thus metaphysics must turn its back on objective thought when it comes to describe this independent nature, leaving it with a mere ‘something’.

Reading between the lines, I get the distinct impression that Valberg thinks it is puzzling (to put it mildly) and rather odd (to go a little further), that I say there is a transcendent reality. Well here is a really straightforward way of looking at it. Whenever you want to say what reality really, truly is, you always have to point blindly outside the horizon to a mere “‘something” into which I might emerge’, as Valberg puts it. That is why I say that reality is transcendent: it is transcendent to (outside of) the horizon. The objective world, by contrast, is *within* the horizon; it is within a *representation of* the true reality. Point inside and you get our representation; point outside and you get what we are representing. Since what we are representing is outside, we say that reality is transcendent. That sounds like a sensible enough position to me.

Valberg’s third criticism (p. 191) is premised on the view that I think *this* (the here and now in which I am typing these words and take myself to be wide awake) is a dream; Valberg thinks this because he thinks believing that reality is transcendent, is equivalent to believing that waking life is a dream. Based on this premise, he says that out anyone who believes this is *not* a dream (i.e. normal / sane people), cannot accept my position that consciousness is transcendent without absurdly denying the existence of their own consciousness. The reason is that if they accept that consciousness is transcendent, while denying that there is a transcendent reality (as there cannot be if this is not a dream, according to Valberg’s reasoning), then they must deny the existence of all consciousness, including their own.

This seems both right and unsurprising. If somebody thinks there is no transcendent reality, then they would hardly be attracted to the position that consciousness is transcendent; unless of course they had eliminativist ambitions.

But I think there is a transcendent reality (because I think reality is transcendent) and I do not have eliminativist ambitions. So the real question is surely: does believing that there is a transcendent reality, as I do, commit you to the view that this is a dream? Or we might just ask: do I think this is a dream?

Well, there are eminent philosophers around who take the idea that this is a computer simulation designed by aliens very seriously. And there would be a certain panache involved in embracing the claim that this is a dream; of the kind currently in-vogue, as eliminative materialists try to subvert the anti-physicalist meme of zombies by proudly proclaiming: ‘I am a zombie’ (e.g. Garfield 2016: 75). However I am afraid that I am not saying anything so radical and exciting, so no: I do not think this is a dream. I do not think I have ever seriously entertained the thought that this might *really* be a dream; not in the sense of not already being sure at the moment the issue arises, and consequently having to decide one way or the other. Moreover, I am certain that the position that this is a dream is not entailed by my theory. For if this is a dream, then the world which transcends it is the objective one. But according to my theory, the world that transcends what I call ‘waking life’ (the kind I am now engaged in), is not the objective world, but rather (in the final context) the independently existing reality, i.e. transcendent reality. Hence according to my theory, this is not a dream; the implication is squarely built into it.

In the process of making this final objection, Valberg says that, ‘If (as I believe) this is not a dream, there is no transcendent reality’ (p. 191). But why not? Valberg thinks that from the perspective of a dream there is a transcendent reality; his whole philosophy is built around this idea. From the perspective of a dream, the transcendent reality is the objective world in which you are asleep in bed, dreaming. He thinks that the horizon of the dream can be displaced by the wider horizon of waking life. But given that we are conscious both in a dream and in waking life, and so must apply the horizontal conception of consciousness in both cases, why should the same not apply to the consciousness of waking life? Surely, once more, there must be a transcendent reality: the reality which is transcendent from the perspective of waking life. (Transcendence is a *relative* notion.) Otherwise, from the point of view of the horizontal conception, what is supposed to be ontologically grounding our waking consciousness? You could say ‘nothing’: because consciousness is a nothingness. But in the dream case this was not Valberg’s answer. The answer was to be found in the objective world: somebody was dreaming and the physical reality of this caused their dream

experience. Well, it cannot be a matter of causation when we are talking about a reality that transcends the objective world. And once you get this far, you have more or less arrived at my Transcendent Hypothesis. I think I have followed Valberg's principles through consistently, given that I wanted to go somewhere different with them.

## References

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