On Smithies' Argument from Blindsight

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Abstract

Declan Smithies' *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness* (2019) is a defense of "Phenomenal Mentalism" according to which, necessarily, which propositions *X* has epistemic justification to believe at any given time is determined solely by *X*'s phenomenally individuated mental states at that time. Smithies offers two kinds of arguments for Phenomenal Mentalism: the ones that appeal to particular cases such as blindsight (the "arguments from below") and the ones that appeal to general epistemic principles such as the JJ principle (the "arguments from above"). My focus is on the former. More precisely, I focus on a particular argument from below in Chapter 3, which I call "Argument from Blindsight". According to this argument, the cases of blindsight show that consciousness is necessary for perceptual justification. In response, I raise two worries about Argument from Blindsight: first, it is difficult to find a plausible interpretation of "full rationality" according to which the premises are true (Section 2) and, second, the argument oscillates between empirical and stipulative discussions of blindsight in a potentially problematic manner (Section 3).

Keywords Consciousness · Blindsight · Perception · Perceptual justification

1 Introduction

Declan Smithies' *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness* (2019) is a defense of "Phenomenal Mentalism" according to which, necessarily, which propositions *X* has epistemic justification to believe at any given time is determined solely by *X*'s phenomenally individuated mental states at that time. Smithies offers two kinds of arguments for Phenomenal Mentalism: the ones that appeal to particular cases such as blindsight (the "arguments from below") and the ones that appeal to general epistemic principles such as the JJ principle (the "arguments from above"). My focus is on the former. More precisely, I focus on a particular argument from below in

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Chapter 3, which (following Berger, 2020) I call “Argument from Blindsight” or “AFB” for short.

According to AFB (Smithies, 2019; see also Smithies, 2014, 2016), the cases of blindsight show that consciousness is necessary for perceptual justification. AFB goes as follows:

Premise 1: Blindsighted subjects are not disposed to form beliefs noninferentially on the basis of unconscious visual information, but rather to withhold belief instead.

Premise 2: Blindsighted subjects are not thereby any less than fully rational.

Premise 3: If unconscious visual information in blindsight provides a source of noninferential justification for belief, then blindsighted subjects are less than fully rational insofar as they are not disposed to form beliefs noninferentially on the basis of unconscious visual information, but rather to withhold belief instead.

Conclusion: Therefore, unconscious visual information in blindsight does not provide a source of noninferential justification for belief.

In the following, I raise two worries about AFB: one is about the notion of “full rationality” in Premises 2 and 3 (Section 2) and the other is about an equivocation in AFB (Section 3).¹

2 Full rationality

Premise 2 of AFB says that blindsighted people are not thereby any less than “fully rational”, which is plausible, according to Smithies, because blindsight is a purely perceptual deficit; there is no notable cognitive deficit in blindsight. Premise 3 says that if unconscious visual information in blindsight provides a source of noninferential justification for belief, then blindsighted people are less than “fully rational” insofar as they are not disposed to form beliefs noninferentially on the basis of unconscious visual information, but rather to withhold belief instead. AFB successfully establishes its conclusion only if there is a plausible interpretation of “full rationality” according to which both Premises 2 and 3 are true. It is, however, not easy to find such an interpretation of “full rationality”.

Premise 3 is certainly plausible when “fully rational” is interpreted as “ideally rational” or “perfectly rational”. Arguably, ideally or perfectly rational agents are not disposed to withhold belief when their unconscious visual information provides a source of noninferential justification for belief. But this interpretation makes Premise 2 implausible (Berger, 2020). The lack of cognitive deficits in blindsight does

¹ Berger (2020) raises two objections to AFB. First, Premise 2 is rejected because blindsighted subjects are less than fully rational. After all, humans in general are not fully rational; there is no reason to think that blindsighted subjects are any better. Second, Premise 3 is rejected because norms of rationality apply to the states of the same kind. Even if unconscious visual information provides a source of noninferential justification for belief, blindsighted people are fully rational insofar as they proportion their *unconscious* beliefs to their *unconscious* visual information. Berger’s first objection is related to one of my objections (the one about “full rationality”), but the latter is more serious than the former.

not show that blindsighted people are ideally or perfectly rational. In general, people with normal cognitive capacity are biased, influenced by irrelevant factors, under computational and other relevant constraints, etc.

Premise 2 is certainly plausible when “fully rational” is interpreted as, for example, “sufficiently rational within realistic computational and other relevant constraints”. The lack of cognitive deficits in blindsight shows that blindsighted people are at least sufficiently rational within realistic computational and other relevant constraints. But this interpretation makes Premise 3 less plausible. It is empirically conceivable that sufficiently rational agents without cognitive deficits are disposed to withhold belief when unconscious visual information provides a source of noninferential justification for belief. It is empirically conceivable, for example, that sufficiently rational agents without cognitive deficits tend to be somewhat conservative when it comes to belief formation. Such conservative agents cannot be ideally or perfectly rational, but perhaps they can be sufficiently rational.

There is some evidence that normal human agents are such conservative agents. In a classic study of the jumping-to-conclusions bias (Huq et al., 1988), it is found that people with psychotic delusions tend to reach a conclusion with less evidence than non-clinical people. It turns out, however, the judgment of those with psychotic delusions is more reasonable than the judgment of non-clinical people from a Bayesian point of view.² Thus, strictly speaking, it is not the case that people with psychotic delusions have the bias of jumping-to-conclusions; rather non-clinical people have the bias of hesitating-to-reach-conclusions. The authors wrote: “it may be argued that the deluded sample reached a decision at an objectively ‘rational’ point. It may further be argued that [non-clinical people] were somewhat over-cautious” (Huq et al., 1988, 809).

“Ecological rationality” (which is characterized as the “fit between structures of information-processing mechanisms in the mind and structures of information in the world”; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2007, 170) faces the same problem. Premise 2 is certainly plausible when “fully rational” is interpreted as “ecologically rational”. Perhaps the lack of cognitive deficits in blindsight shows that blindsighted people are at least ecologically rational. But this interpretation makes Premise 3 less plausible. It is empirically conceivable that ecologically rational agents without cognitive deficits are disposed to withhold belief when unconscious visual information provides a source of noninferential justification for belief. It is empirically conceivable, for example, that ecologically rational agents without cognitive deficits tend to be somewhat conservative when it comes to belief formation. Huq and colleagues suggested this possibility when they wrote that the bias of hesitating-to-reach-conclusions among non-clinical people “may, in certain circumstances, be ecologically valid, serving as a useful general strategy under conditions of uncertainty” (Huq et al., 1988, 811).

² But a non-Bayesian conception of rationality (such as the ecological conception) can yield a different interpretation of the bias. See also van der Leer & McKay 2014 for a different interpretation of the bias.

3 Actual and stipulated blindsight

In defending each premise of AFB, Smithies oscillates between empirical and stipulative discussions of blindsight in a potentially problematic manner.

For instance, Premise 1 is defended by the empirical observations of actual blindsighted people such as DB (Weiskrantz, 1997). Premise 2 is also defended empirically, in terms of the empirical observation that blindsight is a purely perceptual deficit³; there is no notable cognitive deficit in blindsight.

In contrast, Smithies' discussions of Premise 3 are stipulative rather than empirical. Smithies stipulates that there is no conscious vision in blindsight cases. Without this stipulation, Premise 3 does not even get off the ground. Smithies is aware of the empirical controversy over the presence/absence of conscious vision in blindsight cases, but he sets it aside by stipulating that there is no conscious vision in blindsight cases.

Smithies also stipulates that blindsighted people have no relevant metacognitive beliefs about their own (un)reliability. Without this stipulation, Premise 3 faces the following objection: unconscious visual information provides some *prima facie* justification, but it is defeated by the metacognitive beliefs about their own (un)reliability, which is why blindsighted people are fully rational in withholding belief. Smithies sets aside this objection by stipulating that blindsighted people do not have such metacognitive beliefs.

Smithies argues that these stipulations are justifiable; they enable us to avoid irrelevant empirical controversies and focus on philosophically relevant cases. Smithies might be correct about this, but there is another and more serious issue; AFB seems to be committed to a problematic equivocation. Premises 1 and 2 are about actual cases of blindsight (because they are defended on the basis of empirical observations), while Premise 3 is about stipulated cases of blindsight (because it is defended on the basis of stipulations). This leaves the possibility that Premises 1 and 2 are true about actual cases but Premise 3 is not (in which case AFB fails vis-a-vis actual blindsight), or that Premise 3 is true about stipulated cases but Premises 1 and 2 are not (in which case AFB fails vis-a-vis stipulated blindsight).

To avoid this problem, Smithies needs to do one of the following; either he focuses on actual cases and shows that all premises (including Premise 3) are true about them, or focuses on the stipulated cases and shows that all premises (including Premises 1 and 2) are true about them. The former option seems to be difficult, which is why Smithies appeals to stipulation in order to get around empirical controversies about actual cases. Perhaps the latter option would be Smithies' choice.

Smithies' task, then, is to show that not only Premise 3 but also Premises 1 and 2 are true about stipulated cases where it is stipulated that, first, blindsighted people have no conscious vision and, second, they do not have any metacognitive beliefs about their own (un)reliability.

³ It is not obvious, however, that blindsight is a purely perceptual deficit; for instance, blindsight might involve a metacognitive failure in the prefrontal cortex (Ko & Lau 2012). In order to avoid this empirical issue, Smithies might introduce another stipulation that blindsight is a purely perceptual deficit. In this case, Premise 2 is stipulative rather than empirical.

The first stipulation about the lack of conscious vision seems to be harmless. Premise 1 is plausible in the stipulated cases of blindsight without conscious vision. Perhaps actual blindsighted people have some degraded conscious vision (e.g., Philips 2021), but even they do not form relevant beliefs. Then, the stipulated blindsighted people without conscious vision are not more inclined to form relevant beliefs than actual blindsighted people with some degraded conscious vision. Thus, Premise 1 is very likely to be true about the stipulated cases. Premise 2 is also plausible about the stipulated cases of blindsight without conscious vision. Actual blindsight is a purely perceptual deficit (but see footnote 3), which supports Premise 2 about the actual cases. Similarly, the stipulated blindsight is a purely perceptual deficit (at least, there is no particular reason to think otherwise), which supports Premise 2 about the stipulated cases. Thus, Premise 2 is also very likely to be true about the stipulated cases.

In contrast, the second stipulation about the lack of metacognitive beliefs can be problematic. For instance, Premise 1 might not be true about the stipulated cases of blindsight without metacognitive beliefs. At least it is empirically conceivable that Premise 1 is false about stipulated blindsighted people without metacognitive beliefs; they are in fact disposed to form relevant beliefs. It might be argued, for instance, that the actual blindsighted people do have metacognitive beliefs about their own (un)reliability, which is why they are not disposed to form beliefs. The stipulated blindsighted people, in contrast, do not have metacognitive beliefs and are disposed to form beliefs. Premise 2 can also be disputed. At least it is empirically conceivable that Premise 2 is false about the stipulated blindsighted people without metacognitive beliefs; they are in fact less than fully rational. It might be argued, for instance, that rational cognitive functioning requires metacognitive beliefs about their own (un)reliability.⁴ Without metacognitive beliefs, the stipulated blindsight people are not capable of rational cognitive functioning. This is true even in the radical stipulation case where the blindsighted people “just came into existence and have no track record to draw upon” (Smithies, 2019, 79). Even for such instant agents, rational cognitive functioning requires some *prior metacognitive beliefs*.

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Data availability I do not analyze or generate any datasets, because my work proceeds within a theoretical and philosophical approach.

⁴ A view of this kind is part of the predictive coding framework. Bayesian prediction-error minimization requires expecting precision, which is a second-order process of estimating the reliability of (first order) prediction-errors (Hohwy 2013; Yon & Frith 2021).

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