

RED IN THE HEAD

A review of Nicholas Humphrey's Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness

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As a Cambridge graduate student in the late 1960's, psychologist Nicholas Humphrey discovered that a monkey named Helen, whose visual cortex had been surgically removed, could nonetheless visually interact with her environment. Helen's condition--later termed "blindsight" by Humphrey's research supervisor Lawrence Weiskrantz when it was found in humans--became one of the most widely discussed bits of empirical data in the burgeoning field of consciousness studies. Blindsighted subjects guess at well above chance about the shape, orientation, and even color of stimuli that they insist they cannot see. The syndrome presents a kind of vision without conscious qualitative "feel"--a provocative dissociation between the function of vision and its first-person appearance.

Since then, Humphrey has written extensively and insightfully about consciousness. His most recent work, a slim and elegant volume entitled Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness, provides a charming, if brief, summary of his current views, blending themes culled from psychology, philosophy, and even art and poetry. It also offers intriguing speculations on the evolutionary function of consciousness. According to Humphrey, consciousness evolved to appear inexplicable, creating the impression that we are more than mere physical machines. Its mystery is its evolutionary *raison d'être*.

Humphrey holds that blindsight demonstrates the dissociability of sensation (the phenomenal feel of experience) and perception (our awareness of the world). Humphrey adopts the bold suggestion that sensation is not part of the causal chain leading to perception. Instead, sensation makes up a separate, more primitive system playing no direct role in our perception the world.

Sensation is a self-contained evaluative activity--in Humphrey's terms, a subject seeing red engages in the activity of "redding." Humphrey models this activity upon bodily expressions like smiles. When I'm happy, I smile; when red light tickles my eyes, I respond by redding. However, sensory activity isn't connected to outward expression. Instead, it loops inward and privately informs the subject of the activation of the sense organs. This prompts affective responses, but not perceptions of the world.

In stressing the analogy with expressive activity, Humphrey hopes to mold conscious experience into a form amenable to identification with brain processes. And it is plausible that certain features of expression are shared with sensation. Both smiles and sensations of red are "owned" by the subject--only you, for example, can smile your smile. And both smiles and sensations occur in association with specific bodily organs. However, we are aware of our sensations with an immediacy lacking in the case of smiles. This is part and parcel of what it is for those sensations to be conscious. Failing to explain this immediacy leaves us in the dark about why a sensation is conscious. Even if sensation is identified with reentrant feedback loops in the brain, as Humphrey

suggests, we still need a story detailing how these loops make us immediately aware of our sensations.

Though this crucial question is left unresolved, Humphrey's reflections on the evolutionary function of consciousness present an intriguing suggestion: Our sense of the inexplicability of consciousness may expose its function. The apparent mystery of consciousness prompts us to see ourselves as more than mere biological machines, and so to strive all the more to preserve our existence. However, a simpler explanation of this sense of mystery might be the lack of direct, first-person access to the underlying mechanisms of consciousness. But it is in the nature of such just-so speculations that they are extremely difficult to confirm. In the final analysis, the strength of Humphrey's book lies in its skillful blending of ideas from varied sources to stimulate novel ways of thinking about consciousness. In effectively doing so, while presenting a fascinating window on to the thought of a distinguished consciousness researcher, Seeing Red is a wonderful success.