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# Phenomenology, Methodology, and Advancing the Debate

A Reply to Aleksandra Mroczko-Wąsowicz

Rick Grush

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The following topics are briefly discussed: First, the different senses of what counts as phenomenal, and in particular how this might influence how our results are described; second, the methodological limitations of our original study; and finally, some ways that the commentary by Mroczko-Wąsowicz charts out potential theoretical advancement of the results we presented in our study.

## Keywords

Methodology | Phenomenology | Subjective report | Synesthesia

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## 1 On the nature of phenomenology

First, as Mroczko-Wąsowicz quite rightly points out, there are different understandings of what *phenomenology* is, with concomitant differences in what *phenomenal adaptation* might mean. The distinction drawn is between phenomenal conservatism, and phenomenal liberalism; the former being constrained to the vicinity of sensory features, and the latter including various cognitive phenomena, such as expectations and associations, among others.

We chose to use the term in the more restrictive sense for a number of reasons. First, as the more restrictive of the two, it is less controversial that what is included counts as genuinely phenomenological. Second, in many circles at least, the more restrictive understanding seems to be what people generally have in mind. The more liberal understanding is one that is endorsed more commonly only among specialists.

What I am about to say may be a matter of splitting hairs – and so I ask for forgiveness

in advance. I am in complete agreement that the distinction is a valuable one to make, and that in our original article we just ran with the more restrictive definition. That said, it doesn't seem to me that with this distinction in hand one is raising "alternative interpretations" of our results; rather one is providing a different way of *describing* the same result. On a conservative definition of what counts as phenomenal, we did not find phenomenal adaptation. But if one adopts a liberal understanding of the term that includes various cognitive phenomena, then it would be correct to say that we did, in fact, find some phenomenal adaptation. So long as there is clarity on what exactly was found, and on how one intends to use the key terms, then this shouldn't be cause for confusion or concern.

Where things could get interesting would be on a possible third way to understand phenomenal – call it the *radical* understanding. On the radical view, there is nothing to phenomenology other than the sort of cognitive phenomena that the liberal view intended to add to the more narrowly sensory understanding. For one who holds such a view, we may very well have found the beginnings of phenomenal adaptation *tout court* when we found the beginnings of elements of cognitive adaptation.

This hairsplitting aside, I couldn't agree more with Mroczko-Wąsowicz's point that when getting into the details of discussions about phenomenal adaptation, a solid understanding of the different ways that the key terms might be understood is crucially important, and in this respect her commentary is an excellent supplement to the discussion we provided.

## 2 On methodological limitations

Mroczko-Wąsowicz goes on to, quite reasonably, point to some of the shortcomings of our pilot study. In fact, we pointed out many of these same shortcomings ourselves. There are a couple however that are worth saying at least a bit about.

Mroczko-Wąsowicz points out that some of our findings are based on subjective report, and that there are "doubts about whether subjective reports are trustworthy." While in general this is

entirely correct, there is a sense of phenomenal adaptation according to which what we were studying is precisely *how things would seem to the subject*. It is undoubtedly the case that even in such situations one is not *limited to* what subjective report might have to say on the matter. Indeed, this is among the reasons we included other experiments as part of the protocol. But the phenomenon that I *subjectively notice and can report on* when I adapt to the spatial distortion of new corrective glasses, or to the color distortion of blue-blocking sunglasses is an interesting one, and one might reasonably wonder if one can get an analogous adaptation effect – the same subjectively noticeable and reportable effect – with respect to rotated colors.

This is related to a second point. Mroczko-Wąsowicz echoes our claim that it is a shortcoming of the study that the researchers themselves were subjects. Surely it is the case that knowledge of the experiment and the phenomena to be studied can bias the results. Of course I agree completely with that.

Nevertheless, I am reminded of a point made in conversation by Vilayanur Ramachandran. In a moment of venting about some objections made to some of his results, he hypothesized that he could show psychologists a talking pig and they would scoff that it was an n of 1.

In the present case, it is true that having the experimenters themselves be subjects effects the results. But even so, if it turned out that I or the other subject JK did end up in a state that seemed to us to be one of phenomenal adaptation, then this would still be interesting, because if nothing else it would demonstrate that we could get the effect in anyone if we just briefed them on the experiment beforehand. If I hypothesize that hitting myself on the head three times with a baguette will make me able to speak fluent French, and I do the experiment and it *does*, this is an interesting result even if I was both experimenter and subject.

In any case, Mroczko-Wąsowicz and I are in a great deal of agreement about the limitations created by the methodology of our pilot study, and these limitations need to be kept firmly in mind when anyone ventures to interpret our findings or follow up on them.

### 3 Advancing the debate

The final set of points made by Mroczko-Wąsowicz concerns synesthesia, and in particular how the phenomenon presents an interesting complement to the sort of phenomenon we studied. When we were initially brainstorming the experiment we discussed what might happen if a synesthete were to wear the rotation gear. But that line of speculation never got past the brainstorming stage, since just doing it with ourselves proved enough of a challenge. While it has some significant differences from synesthesia, we did make an attempt to see whether the McCollough effect would adapt. But the subjective effect was very small, and didn't last long enough into the protocol to get any data at the time when there might have been some adaptation.

Mroczko-Wąsowicz makes some fascinating points about how our study and synesthesia complement each other in interesting way that would be strong motivation for anyone following up on our study to try to include some synesthetes among the test subjects.

### 4 Conclusion

We tried to make our initial article streamlined and not burdened with too much detailed theoretical discussion. Since we hope the interested parties will include not only philosophers but also psychologists and cognitive scientists, the thought was to present the results, which we thought were quite interesting and suggestive, and leave the more detailed theoretical discussions and possible follow-up experiments to others. In this respect Mroczko-Wąsowicz's commentary is exactly the sort of detailed theoretical follow-up we hoped others might be inspired to produce on the basis of our results. I am grateful to her for fantastic commentary.