

Experienced Thought and Self-Knowledge

Non-physicalist views of Consciousness Conference

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May 25, 2016

Dominating Philosophy of Consciousness (for the last half century): The Fortunes of Physicalism

- Is consciousness something **physical**?
- Are all *phenomenal* states, events, facts, or properties, also *physical* states, events, facts, or properties?
- Does the physical **determine or fix** the phenomenal in any sense **stronger than that guaranteed by laws of nature that might have been otherwise?**
- Do our answers to such questions put us in a position to ***explain*** consciousness?
- If our answers to some or all of these questions are negative, should we conclude that the occurrence of phenomenal states **never explains why anything happens?**

A different orientation...

That addresses its questions largely independently of trying either to defend physicalism or refute it.

A non-physicalist (\neq anti-physicalist) project

My overarching interest: **Understanding consciousness and its place in our minds**, with respect to —

- what there is to **explain**,
- what enables us to have **knowledge or understanding**, and
- what has **value** for us.

(“Us” includes at least: cognitively unimpaired human beings.)

A positive, non-physicalist philosophy of consciousness

- My project requires first, *an adequate core conception of consciousness*.
- Aiming to **unify and refine ways of identifying** what has been called “phenomenal consciousness” or “the phenomenal” or “subjective character” of experience—
- so as initially to **leave open** certain basic disputed questions about it, while still **giving us something to work with** in answering them.
- Some of the large questions I would like to answer...

- How (if at all) does the subjective character of experience make it the **appearance of something beyond** it, available for thought?
- How does it enable us to **recognize** what it makes apparent?
- How does it **warrant our thoughts** about particulars, and our classification of them?
- How is it related to **conceptual thought and understanding**?
- How is it related to ***self-consciousness***—both consciousness of one's own conscious states, and consciousness of one's self?
- How does it figure in the way we **know our own minds**?
- Does it differentiate beings that **have minds** from the literally **mindless**?
- What sort of **value** can consciousness legitimately have for us?
- How (for example) can it legitimately figure in attitudes of **empathy**? In the **irreplaceable value** we accord individuals? In **aesthetic** appreciation?

These “how” questions

- are **not** aimed at soliciting hypotheses about *causal processes or mechanisms* that explain how it is done.
- Rather, what is sought are **ways of describing experience** that we can use to spell out the **conditions under which** these things occur (object perception, recognition, conceptual thought, self-consciousness, self-knowledge...).
- My approach to these questions involves the practice of **“critical first-person reflection.”** “Plain, analytic phenomenology.”
- So it also involves a defense of **this against radically third-person methodologies** and wholesale **skepticism** about “introspection.”

One Cross Section of this Project: Experienced Thought and Self-Knowledge

1. Articulate relevant notion of consciousness
1. Clarify question of experienced thought
1. Argument for an “inclusive” answer to question (2)
1. Use (1) and (3) to offer a experiential account of what’s specially first-personal about the warrant had for judgments about one’s own thoughts.

What consciousness is

On my conception consciousness is
“threefold subjectivity”: the *subjectively
experienced theme of subjective
contrast and understanding*.

- i. Subjective Experience
- ii. Subjective Contrast
- iii. Subjective Understanding

Subjective Understanding/“What it’s like” Conception of Consciousness

There is a way of understanding “what it’s like” talk relevant to the presence of consciousness.

We understand “what it’s like” in this way when we think the answer to “What is it like for a bag of rocks to weigh over 300lbs?” may well be: *there is **nothing** it’s like for a bag of rocks.*

When the phrase is so understood, an appropriate response to wondering “what it is like” to have some feature F is to try to **adopt the point of view of what has F, in order to understand what it is for someone to have F.**

Such an interpretation is ***not*** at work when one asks, “what would it be like for Britain to leave the EU?” Or, “what would it be like for a vinyl record to be left out in the sun?”

Interpreting the phrase in the “subject’s point of view” way, we may say:
Conscious states are instances of phenomenal features, and **phenomenal features** are those there is ***non-derivatively*** “something it’s like for one” to have.

Consciousness as unborrowed what-it's-likeness

Conscious state: instance of a phenomenal feature, i.e., a feature there is *nonderderivatively* something it's like for one to have.

“Non-derivatively ”(or fundamentally)” something it's like for X to have F just when: not due entirely to (not “borrowed from”) X's having features that either:

- (i) F could occur without, or
- (ii) could occur without F.

Case (i) borrowing: **you keep F, while losing G**, and the “what it's like” completely goes away. And then **there would be *nothing* “it's like”** for one to have F, in the relevant sense. What is it like for one to weigh over 300 lbs? *Nothing*, unless, e.g., weighing this much also feels somehow to what/who does.

Case (ii) borrowing: **you could lose F, and keep G, without changing “what it's like.”** There is something it's like for you to taste durian. But instead of durian you could taste ersatz durian. And what would *that* be like for you? Let's suppose: *just the same*. Then what it's like for something to taste to you as durian does is the fundamental thing—the bona fide phenomenal feature.

More on what “what it’s like” means in this context

There is **something it’s like for you** to have some feature, in a sense relevant to identifying the notion of consciousness, just when:

that feature is suited for a *kind of understanding to be sought by “adopting the subject’s point of view.”*

That is, it’s a feature suited for **subjective understanding or curiosity.**

What is it to subjectively understand a feature?

- To have an understanding of it available only by adopting the point of view of a subject that has it. For example: **Durian's tasting as it does (or would) to you** is suitable for you to claim or desire a **type of understanding** of *what that is*, which:
 - one **gets** of at least *some* features **by *having them oneself*** (if one has any such understanding at all)
 - and which may be reasonably **sought** by trying to ***imagine having them oneself***.
- Its tasting to you as it does is suitable for you to claim (or want) to have a way of understanding what it is, which you might get by something's **actually tasting** that way to you, and that you might *seek* by **trying to imagine** something tasting that way to you.

Consciousness as underived suitability for subjective understanding or curiosity

Conscious state: instance of a phenomenal feature, i.e., a feature *nonderderivatively* suitable for subjective understanding or curiosity.

“Non-derivatively” just when: not due entirely to the presence of features that either:

- (i) the target feature could occur without, or
- (ii) could occur without the target feature.

Case (i) borrowing: if you kept target F, while losing G, its suitability would completely go away. What is it to weigh over 300 lbs? Suitable only if something else that might be absent is in fact present—e.g., *feeling* to someone as it does to weigh over 300lbs.

Case (ii) borrowing: you could lose F, and keep G, and still have all that made F suitable. Tasting durian is suitable. But instead of durian you could taste ersatz durian. And that would have everything that made tasting durian a suitable target for subjective understanding.

Consciousness:

subjective understanding/“what it’s like” conception

- **A conscious state is an instance of a phenomenal feature, a feature there is non-derivatively something it’s like for one to have. And that’s the case just when:**
 - it is non-derivatively suited for one to claim or desire a certain subjective understanding of *what it is to have that feature* .**
- **Two states differ in phenomenal character (they are instances of distinct phenomenal features) just when they differ with respect to what makes them fundamentally suited for subjective understanding or curiosity.**

The Question of Experienced Thought (aka “cognitive phenomenology”)

I take this to be, most basically, if **roughly**, it’s a dispute between:

- “**Restrictive**” views.

Whatever **phenomenal character** is associated with **thinking**, this is “exhausted by” or “restricted to” a sort that could be had *without the conceptual understanding* involved in thinking. E.g., by having only purely sensory states with “non-conceptual” or “low-level” content.

- “**Inclusive**” views.

Phenomenal character of thinking includes a kind that can be had only *with the conceptual understanding* that is involved in thinking. How one episodically thinks and how one occurrently understands expressions are **included** in, are fully part of, what is subjectively experienced by us.

Why Care about the Inclusive/Restrictive Controversy?

Potential implications for:

1. strategies for **explaining** consciousness
2. the **epistemic** role of consciousness
3. its **place** in mind
4. the **value** of consciousness,
5. the nature and proper **use of first-person reflection** (“introspection”)

How should we frame the issue?

“sensing” and “thinking”

- **“Sensory features”**: found in the activity of various standardly recognized perceptual modalities along with bodily feelings of pain and pleasure, cold and warmth, and kindred sensations, plus whatever analogs of these there might be in imagery.
- **“(Robustly) Conceptual Activity”** requires one have capacities for voluntarily making inferences, classifications and analogies (robust “conceptual capacities”).
- **“Merely (or purely) sensory features”**: sensory features whose possession at a time is insufficient for the occurrence of robustly conceptual activity at that time.
- **“Thinking”** occurs, in the relevant sense, just when there is an instance of **(robustly) *conceptual activity*, of a sort** that may occur even when it’s not the case that something then thought of is **sensorily apparent or recognized**.
- Any occurrence of **“understanding an expression”** is an occurrence of **thinking**.

My Thesis of Experienced Thought (an inclusive view)

(E) Common **differences in phenomenal character suffice for differences in how you are understanding words** when you utter or hear them, or in **how you are thinking of something**.

This implies that: commonly, when your **subjective experience changes in kind**, your **conceptual activity changes in kind**, and this is not merely contingently so.

So, given *what it's actually like for you to understand*, there is no legitimate way to hold that *completely constant*, while *stripping away from it all understanding*, or switching out actual differences in understanding for very different ones.

What makes ways of occurrently understanding expressions or thinking **suitable for subjective understanding** does not entirely derive from features you can have in their absence, or in the presence of quite different understanding.

What “Experienced Thought” is (and is not)

- E does **NOT** entail that there is “non-sensory” cognitive phenomenology...
- **IF THAT** means that experiences of thinking have phenomenal character that could occur unchanged in a subject who had **no sensory states or in just any old combination with sensory states.**
- E could be true even if the phenomenal character of **every experience of thinking or understanding is inseparable from *some* sort of sensory feature.**
- E **does entail** that experiences of thinking have a subjective character that occurs in subjects who **aren’t sensing *what they’re thinking about.***
- But E does **not** require that thought have some **purely non-sensory** phenomenal character; it just says thought’s phenomenal character is **not *merely* sensory**—not just the sensory kind you can have in the absence of conceptual activity.

Why Be Inclusive?

Some forms of argument I've developed or am working on:

- I. Experience of understanding
- II. “It just occurred to me”
- III. Semantic self-knowledge**
- IV. Pleasure of understanding
- V. Experience of self-expression

Semantic Self-Knowledge Argument

1. There are ordinary cases of changes in the subjective character of experience when there are changes in conceptual understanding.
1. In these cases, I can identify **no sensory changes**, such that **what it is like** for me to experience **those** *without* the variations in understanding is ***just the same***.
 - I read something without following it. Then I re-read it and understand it in a certain way.
 - I take an ambiguous phrase one way, then flip to a different interpretation.

Semantic Self-Knowledge Argument

3. Focus now on those **experiential differences** that are **irreducible to *purely sensory* ones**.

Are these differences *not-merely-sensory* only because they aren't in any way *sensory*, or because they suffice for differences in thought or understanding (which *merely* sensory differences by definition can't do)?

3. Notice: if they had been *missing*, what it's like for me would be the **same** as **what it's like for me** in some cases where I was either **understanding *nothing*** or **understanding something *quite different***.

Semantic Self-Knowledge Argument (cont'd)

5. Consider a case of taking an expression to mean something. Now: if (counterfactually) **what it was like for me had been the same** as what it's like for me in certain other cases where I was **understanding nothing**, or understanding something quite **different**, I'd think I'd **lost my knowledge of what I was actually meaning** by the expressions (or taking them to mean) at that time.

(Whether that's because I'd not be taking them to mean *anything* just then, leave open for the moment.)

There's no reason to doubt I'd be correct about this: in the counterfactual circumstance, I wouldn't then know that I was understanding the expressions as I do in the actual condition.

Thus **the presence of these experiential differences** makes a difference to semantic self-knowledge—it's **epistemically crucial**.

But might they still make no difference to *how I was understanding* the expressions at the time?

Semantic Self-Knowledge Argument (cont'd)

6. Suppose the *experiential changes* made *no* difference to changes in *how I occurrently understood* the expressions. Then *knowing the experiential changes* happened wouldn't suffice for *knowing how I understood* the expressions.
7. But then **something would need to be *added*** to get the semantic self-knowledge that (we agreed in (5)) would be lost when the experience changed.
8. **All that is available to me to know** in this situation that I wouldn't already have: *how I was then understanding the expressions*. But if **that** is all we can add, then since that **by itself would suffice** for the relevant knowledge, the **experiential differences** in question would be epistemically idle.
9. But by (5) this is false; **they are epistemically *crucial***.
10. Therefore we should reject the assumption in (6)—the **experiential changes** are *not* indifferent to changes in how I understood the expressions—they **make a difference in how I understand them**. So: E.

But does the subjective experience of thinking determine *content* of thought?

1. If the *subjective experience* of understanding expressions differs in ways it commonly does, then **how you understand** those expressions differs.
1. If *how you understand* those expressions differs, then *what you are thinking* (by understanding them) somehow differs .
2. If *what you are thinking* differs somehow, then the *content* of your thought somehow differs.
3. Whatever implies a difference in the content of your thoughts at least partly determines the contents of your thoughts. We may call whatever content differences are so determined “phenomenal content.”

A Phenomenal Approach to the Question of First-Person Warrant

- Suppose we grant E.
- And we grant that the phenomenal character of our experience somehow plays an essential role in making it distinctively first-personally knowable.
- But *how* is this so?
- How does the fact that your thought is conscious give you a special sort of right to judge that you're thinking it?

Phenomenal-Indexical Thought

- Consider forms of thought expressible as
 - “The way this feels to me...”
 - “The way this tastes to me...”
 - “The color this looks to me...”
- Thoughts expressible using complex phrases combining demonstratives or indexicals and “appearance” words (or other terms that pick out phenomenal features) to identify these features.
- Call these “phenomenal-indexical thoughts.”

Identification for Recognition

In some phenomenal-indexical thought you can understand *what* phenomenal feature you are *thinking* of...

in a way that enables you to *recognize further characterizations of what feature you are thinking of as correct or incorrect...*

provided there is **no defect in your understanding** of the terms in which you would express your thought, a defect which would impair your capacity to make these classifications. (“The color this looks to me is... *magenta.*”)

What I mean by saying: this form of thought sometimes constitutes “**identification for recognition.**”

Compare:

First-person and **second-person**
phenomenal-indexical thought in which
you “identify some phenomenal feature
for recognition.”

- “The color this looks to *me*...”
- “The color this looks to *you*...”

The first and second person ways of thinking about experience differ. For:

(a) It could be both true and informative to find that *the color that this looks to me = the color that this looks to you*.

(And, of course, this is not because I might discover *I am you*.)

And more importantly ...

(b) when I identify for recognition some phenomenal feature in *first-person* phenomenal-indexical thought, I INEVITABLY ACTUALLY HAVE THE FEATURE IDENTIFIED.

(Whereas, when I identify for recognition some feature in *second or third* person phenomenal-indexical thought, the person in question may well *not* have the phenomenal feature identified.)

Thus there is a type of **first-person** thought about experience that is essentially dependent on one's actually having that experience.

To have the *thought* the thinker must have the very phenomenal *feature identified in the thought*.

On what grounds (b)?

Why do I say that when I identify for recognition some phenomenal feature in *first-person* phenomenal-indexical thought, I inevitably actually *have* the feature identified?

Phenomenal Features: You Can't Think of Them in This Way Without Having Them

Recall what phenomenal features are: features fundamentally suited for one to claim or desire a certain **subjective** understanding of **what it is to have them**.

If that's what they are, then at least some will be such that *you and I* do sometimes understand what features they are by having them ourselves. (If such features occur at all, we understand what at least *some* of them are in this way.)

But if we didn't have such features when we **identified them for recognition in first-person thought**, then we would *never* understand what such features are by having them.

For there's just *no better candidate occasion* for us to have this sort of understanding. If I don't subjectively understand what it is for something to look to me the way I identify when I think: *the color this looks to me is...*, then I never will.

Therefore, whenever you **identify *phenomenal* features** for recognition in **first-person thoughts**, you **actually have them**.

Notice, it does *not* follow from this...

- That experiences (instances of phenomenal features) essentially **refer *to themselves***, or are **conscious of themselves**.
- That your experiences (“appearings”) themselves infallibly *appear* to you via an (“inner”) **sense-like faculty**.
- That experiencing your own experiences ***constitutes*** understanding them.
- That sincere first-person judgments about your own experience can **never be false**.
- That introspectively-based views about what’s **necessary or possible** where consciousness is concerned cannot be mistaken.

How such reflection works in the case of phenomenal thought

- Parallel to the way I can think of sensory phenomenal features, as, e.g. *the way this looks to me*—
- I can think of, **identify for recognition**, a cognitive phenomenal feature, as *what I am thinking*.

Warrant for reflection

- i. Parallel to the way I can think of sensory phenomenal features (e.g. “*the way this looks to me*”)—I can **identify for recognition** a cognitive phenomenal feature as: *what I am thinking*.
- ii. Since the feature is **phenomenal**, I **understand** what feature I so identify (and would understand what I mean by ‘what I am thinking’), **only if I actually have it**.
- iii. I am entitled to the **default presumption** that I do **understand what I mean**, and so I have warrant for **judging** I do have the **identified feature**, when I think of *what I am thinking*.

Note: the thinking-feature I correctly judge myself for these reasons to have is not one that I have merely because of the so-called “self-verifying” nature of higher-order thinkings. It is, we might say, a “non-derivative first-order thinking.”

Warrant for reflection

- iv. Since this way of thinking (being phenomenal) is a feature *I in fact have* (given that I am thinking of it in the “identifying for recognition” way), and since it is “a thinking,” to *say how* I identify it, *beyond* just “how I am thinking”—is also for me to *give it expression*—to “express a thought.” (E.g., what I’m thinking is...what should I advise my student.)
- iv. Could I be **incorrectly expressing** my own thoughts? Only if my **understanding** of what I was saying was (perhaps momentarily) **defective or inadequate** (“I misspoke”; “Oh, that’s not quite the right way to put it”).
- v. But I am **entitled to assume my semantic competence** in the absence of reason to doubt it, so I am **entitled to judge that I am thinking about what I am talking about** (when I say, e.g., “what I should advise my student.”).
- vi. Thus, I am **warranted in judging that I am thinking about what I should advise my student.**

- viii. Now I wouldn't even understand what I meant by terms for various species of thinking, if I were neutral about whether any episode of thinking I judge myself to experience is ever also (e.g.) a *supposing*, or an *imagining*, or a *doubting*, or a *wondering*, or a *thinking that* (something is so) (a “judgment”).
- ix. Thus in the absence of reason to doubt I understand what I am saying, I have warrant for judging what and how I am thinking—e.g., judging *that I am wondering what I should advise my student*.

Looking back—what I’m proposing: An approach to philosophy of consciousness

- That encompasses more than **the physicalism/antiphysicalism scrummage**. Oriented by questions about *what consciousness is and what forms it takes*, posed in the interest in of determining:
 - what there is to explain, with respect to consciousness
 - how it figures in mind and understanding, and
 - how it figures in values

.... questions addressed by means of **critical first-person reflection**.
- I’ve offered a slice of this:
 - A “**what it’s like**” conception of consciousness can be interpreted in terms of suitability for **subjective understanding and curiosity**,
 - its role in semantic self-knowledge supports the view that **conceptual understanding is experiential**, and
 - these taken together support a **experience-based account of the warrant had for reflection on one’s own thought**.