

## Who's Afraid of Phenomenological Disputes?

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### 1

When you view a circular disk from a certain angle, does it look *elliptical* to you? People can offer conflicting answers to this apparently simple question on the basis of first-person awareness. But it does not seem that such basic facts about the experience of shape should vary among normally sighted people. Why then don't our introspections tally, and whose are correct? Other introspective conflicts can emerge when we ask how the notion of phenomenal character applies to perceptual recognition and occurrent thought, or what the relation is between consciousness and self-consciousness. We may feel baffled and stymied by all this. What one person finds it "intuitive" to say about experience does not seem so to another—who may in fact find it manifestly false. Thus we somehow stir up disputes about how to describe some shared aspect of mental life through a lack of agreement in the first-person judgments on which we base our descriptions. I will call these "phenomenological disputes."<sup>1</sup>

Such disputes can inspire a disparaging attitude towards first-person reflection. One imagines that if it has a role to play in establishing truths about consciousness, this should be a fairly straightforward matter. So: does the disk look elliptical to you from this angle? Is there a phenomenal character to thought that isn't just a matter of images running through your head? When you answer such questions do you attend (not just to the objects of experience but) to the *experience itself*? What introspection has to tell us should be clear. Just (introspectively) "look" to "see" how it is. When the verdicts that pop into our heads do not agree, and yet there is reason to think we do not differ along the dimension queried, then that just shows how useless first-person reflection is. Thus the disputes are to be resolved, if at all, only by a complete methodological reorientation: one must ask what would explain the evidence available to a third-person observer.<sup>2</sup>

I believe this is a mistaken view. Of course, many questions cannot be adequately addressed by a simple appeal to introspection. But when they cannot, we have an alternative other than third-person theorizing. We need to recognize that our first-person judgments in response to questions about experience are heavily influenced by just *how the questions are put*, by *how we interpret them*, and by *what we assume* about the matter at hand. Differences in these influences, often hidden and unexamined, produce different judgments. So when these seem at odds, we can assess them by seeking out, exposing, and examining what underlies the variance. To do this we do not abandon first-person reflection; we engage in it more deeply. We can pose further questions,

aimed at probing covert sources of the initial disagreement. Answering these partly through first-person reflection, we can argue our way back to the original issue. Philosophically enriched first-person reflection thus has a rightful role in addressing phenomenological disputes.

To make my case, I will begin by clarifying one important source of these disputes, namely, difficulties with the notions of phenomenal consciousness and character. Unfamiliarity with the place of “phenomenal” notions in recent philosophy of mind may leave my brief descriptions of these controversies opaque; I will soon say something I hope will help. However, if they seem a little obscure, this also serves my point: they arise partly from difficulties with interpreting the terms in which they are expressed. But we should not neglect first-person reflection on this account. Rather, we should conclude that sometimes it will further our understanding only in concert with philosophical examination. My claim here is not that such examination will “resolve” phenomenological disputes, if that means: secure firm, near unanimity within a community of specialists. My point is rather that such disagreements admit of reasoned assessment—though with no more assurance of consensus than philosophy generally allows, given its contentious, dialectical, individualistic nature. But if we say that, in this sense, phenomenological disputes are at bottom philosophical, this must not be taken to suggest that they can arise only when someone’s judgment has been shaped (or warped) by exposure to philosophy. And we ought not to suppose these disputes are to be settled by appeal to the imagined purity of “commonsense.” When we talk about mind in a theoretical context, we can address the conflicts and obscurities that appear and deal with potentially distorting preconceptions, only through *more* philosophical sophistication, not less.

## 2

Let’s recall the three disputed areas I identified at the start: (a) perspectival character; (b) perceptual recognition and occurrent thought; and (c) the relationship of consciousness and self-consciousness. Only (b) did I explicitly say involved an issue about “phenomenal character.” And I think phenomenological disputes can arise in all three categories without overt use of phenomenal notions. But it will help us to understand the sources of our disputes and their significance to see how these notions can figure in them.

First, about (a)—someone may say: “I grant that in *some* sense the round disk ‘looks round’ to me, and not just when I’m looking at it face-on. At least, it looks *as if* it’s round. However, that is just to say I have a perceptual *belief* or make a *judgment* that it is round. But we are talking now about *visual experience*—visual sensation—and the phenomenal character of *that* is captured by speaking of some perspectivally limited (e.g., elliptical) appearance.” Someone may object: “On the contrary, at least when I get a good look at it, I do not merely judge—I *visually experience* the disk as round, and that is as

phenomenal as anything is.” In this way, the question about perspectival character can easily be entangled with a difference in views about phenomenal character, based on first-person reflection.<sup>3</sup>

Now consider (b). When we say how something looks to us, just using terms for *color* and for *types of shape and spatial position*, we may agree that we are reporting differences in phenomenal character. But what about “ways of looking” we report in *other* terms? So I say, “It looks as if it’s *a fork*,” or “*a rabbit*,” or “*a cucumber*”. Or how about when we speak of recognizing an individual? (“That looks to me *like Ned* over there”)? Are we still marking differences in phenomenal character? Also, when—speaking “to ourselves” or out loud—we *think*, but without forming a mental image of what we’re thinking *about*, we may ask: is such thinking rightly called ‘conscious’ in the *phenomenal* sense? Are there “cognitive” differences in phenomenal character that are not purely differences in the character of sensory appearance or imagery? Philosophers offer divergent introspectively based answers to these questions.<sup>4</sup>

Differing views about (c) are also caught in disputes about how to apply the notion of phenomenal character. For efforts to clarify a distinction between mere consciousness and various kinds of self-consciousness can depend on identifying the former with phenomenal character. However, some say they find evident to reflection—as a part of the phenomenal character of all conscious experience—a quality of “for-me-ness” understood as a kind of reflexive self-consciousness,<sup>5</sup> thus throwing into question the distinctness of phenomenal consciousness and self-consciousness.

I have suggested that ‘phenomenal character’ and ‘phenomenal consciousness’ are terms of art that need explanation if we are to have a grasp of the phenomenological disputes I’ve just sketched. Such explanation is worthwhile because these terms have come to figure prominently in addressing some basic questions about consciousness. Just *what* do we have to explain, when we want to explain consciousness? What are our prospects for explaining *that*? How is that related to brains and behavior? What is it that we *value*, in valuing consciousness? If these questions are not trifling, neither are the phenomenological disputes indicated above. For differences in how one views them can yield very different conceptions of what consciousness is. And that will determine our view of what there is to explain or value, and what strategies for theorizing about it are appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

Though we can, with first-person warrant, judge that our experiences are conscious in the phenomenal sense, and that they differ in phenomenal character, a direct exercise of first-person reflection does not prevent the disputes I’ve mentioned. Nevertheless, first-person reflection does help us to secure what shared understanding we have of the terms in question. Once we see how it does that, we can see also how it leaves room for disputes it can still play a part in addressing.

The following, I suggest, articulates a widely endorsable understanding of ‘phenomenal consciousness.’ We may, on the basis of first-person reflection, consider *sensory appearances*, such as something’s *looking* to us somehow colored or shaped, something’s *feeling* to us somehow shaped or textured, its flavor *tasting* somehow to us, and so on. *The way something appears* to you in this sense can change with perspective or attention, even as you believe *the thing itself* to remain otherwise unchanged (in, e.g., color, shape, position). Sensory appearances, so understood, as well as corresponding forms of *imagery experience* (e.g., visualizing and silent “talking to oneself”) may, on this same first-person basis, be recognized as paradigmatic phenomenally conscious states. To clarify further what this means we can contrast such instances of phenomenal consciousness with either actual or merely conceivable circumstances of their *absence*. So: in a sense there is no way things *look* to people who are completely blind. And with reference to this same sense, we can say that, when “blindsight” subjects deny that they see figures they nonetheless somehow visually discriminate in forced choice tests, their denials are *correct*. For if something must *look* some way to you for you to see it, then we may well suppose they indeed don’t see what they deny seeing. The figures do not look any way to either the blind or the blindsighted. This is to say, these people lack certain *phenomenally conscious visual experiences*. (Though on a certain way of taking ‘experience,’ this last phrase is redundant—there is a sense in which to call something an *experience* entails it is conscious in the phenomenal sense.) Further, we may readily think of people as lacking *any* phenomenally conscious state or experience while dreamlessly sleeping, even if we then still attribute various “standing” subjectively reportable beliefs and intentions to them, and perhaps even if we suppose some kind of cognitive *activity* is then going on in their brains. (Such activity, some may conjecture, explains how they adjust position in bed in response to stimuli, or how they come to a solution to a problem after having “slept on it.”) By conceiving of such *absences* of consciousness, and contrasting these with paradigmatic *occurrences* of it, relying on first-person reflection, we get a foothold understanding of what is meant by ‘consciousness in the phenomenal sense.’

Now, what about ‘phenomenal character’? This refers to a subjectively discernible manner in which phenomenally conscious states may differ among themselves. Differences in phenomenal character are differences in *what it is like* to have experiences, *for one who has them*. We can, in first-person reflection, recognize *differences in appearances* (e.g., “ways of looking”) that illustrate such differences, and contrast these with *other* differences among experiences that do not. So, the subjectively discernible difference between the way a square looks to you and the way a triangle looks to you; the subjectively discernible difference in the way coffee smells to you and the way vanilla smells to you—these count as differences in phenomenal character, if any do. But the difference between *this* triangle looking triangular to you and *that* (qualitatively identical) triangle looking triangular to you is *not* a difference in the phenomenal character of the experiences. Also, suppose you look at a child and say, “She looks about five

years old to me.” If instead you had said, “She looks about *six* years old to me,” that *needn’t* have reflected any difference in the phenomenal character of your *visual experience*. You could have just made a different estimate based on a visual experience with the same character.

Using first-person reflection in this way to gather paradigm cases and consider contrasts, we may articulate and convey a preliminary understanding of these phenomenal notions. We can *refine* our understanding by introducing further positive examples, and other real and hypothetical contrasts.<sup>7</sup> But given just this much shared understanding of ‘phenomenal consciousness’ and ‘phenomenal character’ we can now start to see how phenomenological disputes about their application can arise. Nothing about the understanding of these expressions so far made explicit guarantees ready introspective agreement about the disputes in (a), (b), and (c). Two people could accept my account of these phenomenal notions thus far, and still disagree on fairly basic issues of their application. But such disagreement should *not* lead us to conclude that further reasoned consideration of the disputes is possible only if first-person reflection is abandoned. For we can say *why* such disagreements arise without discrediting further first-person reflection. There are, I submit, at least three factors that explain why there are these disputes over (a), (b), and (c).

**1. *The Role of Paradigms and Contrasts.*** Notice that when I explained what I mean by ‘phenomenal consciousness’ and ‘phenomenal character’ I relied heavily on paradigms and contrasts. And the use of these terms clearly does not involve acquiring a capacity for applying them via perceptual recognition—as with terms for color or shape, for example. But when explanation of a term’s meaning relies heavily on paradigms and contrasts, and we cannot apply it through perceptual recognition (that is, e.g., “just by looking at things”), we often have trouble determining without controversy how it applies to further cases. This has long been a source of problems. (Think of Socrates and terms like ‘piety,’ ‘courage,’ and ‘justice.’) This is a general difficulty in philosophical thought—not one that arises specifically from a reliance on first-person reflection. And so, if our understanding of phenomenal notions depends so much on examples, it is not surprising that we run into disagreements about how to apply them when we get beyond the paradigms in which we anchor understanding.

**2. *The Recurrence of Disputed Terms.*** Consider now some of the key expressions I used in explaining phenomenal notions: the terms ‘appearance,’ ‘imagery,’ and ‘what it’s like.’ Difficult questions can be raised about each of these that affect our application of the phenomenal notions they’re used to explain. For example, there are different conceptions of sensory appearances. Some may interpret sensory appearance as a species of belief or judgment. Others may see it as “representational” or at any rate “intentional” in nature, but still as distinct in kind from perceptual judgment. Still others may discern in appearance some non-intentional element of mere “sensation.” How one stands with respect to such alternatives can affect how one views some of the

phenomenological disputes I've mentioned. So, when one considers topic (c), and asks whether phenomenal consciousness involves some reflexive self-consciousness, questions can arise about whether our relation to our own experience is a kind of perception or sensing. But how we answer such questions will depend on what notions of sensory appearance and perception we bring to the table.

We can see too how problems with the notion of imagery can complicate first-person reflection, and make phenomenological disputes possible. Most of us will introspectively identify clear cases of visualizing (say), and grasp the point that not all differences in what we're *thinking* are differences in something *visualized*, or in any other modality-specific way *imagined*. But that is not enough to make it generally clear to us just what separates differences in what we are (in the narrow sense) *imagining* from further, properly *conceptual* differences, and when *exactly* one or the other sort of difference occurs. To the extent we are unclear about this, we can be insufficiently clear in our understanding of questions about topic (b)—such as whether there are differences in the phenomenal character of *thought* that aren't differences in that of *imagery*.

The notion of “what it's like” to have an experience is notoriously difficult to clarify in a way on which all readily agree. Some seem to use it more or less primitively, with little effort at explication beyond pointing at sensory paradigms; some connect it essentially to higher order representation;<sup>8</sup> others say it has meaning only in the context of the phrase ‘*knowing* what it's like’ where this is taken to attribute a kind of know-how; and some see it as requiring “uniformly type-identifiable features” such as found in sensory experiences of (e.g.) color.<sup>9</sup> Still others (such as myself) see this “what it's like” talk as marking an aspect of experience about which one can entertain a special type of *curiosity* (one wants to know what it's like)—a type of curiosity satisfiable only by one's having the experience in question, or by imagining having it. When parties to the discussion construe this key notion so variously, they are likely to have trouble agreeing on just when a difference in what it's like to have an experience constitutes a difference in phenomenal character.

The general point is this: the words we use to explain phenomenal notions bring along their own thorny difficulties of interpretation, and that can cause disagreements in first-person judgments employing those notions.

**3. Different Background Assumptions.** What I have offered to convey a basic understanding of phenomenal notions enjoys no special canonical status. And when others use the terms ‘consciousness’ and ‘phenomenal character’ they may haul along a different set of assumptions that shape *their* interpretation of these terms so as to affect how they frame and answer questions. For example, some may from the start articulate their understanding of such differences in phenomenal character as I point out in my paradigms so as to limit them explicitly to differences classified as “sensory,” or as having an awareness of “sensory

qualities (or qualia).” And if one does that, then (in connection with topic (b)) one will not be able to confirm by first-person reflection that thought, and not just imagery, is phenomenally conscious in the sense I intend. With regards to topic (c): one may see it as an objection to perceptual models of self-consciousness, that first-person reflection reveals no qualities of one’s states of mind analogous to, but distinct from, sensory qualities of color, sound, odor, etc. Assumptions couched in terms of ‘quality’ and ‘qualitative character’ can direct introspection in other ways as well. Some will think what I refer to as phenomenal character is comprised of two dissociable aspects: *subjective* and *qualitative* character, and they will conceive of the former as involving an “awareness of” the latter, constituting some form of self-representation without which an experience cannot be said to be conscious at all. Bringing this background to bear can make “phenomenologically manifest” to others some self-representational aspect in my paradigms of phenomenal consciousness for which I find no warrant in first-person reflection.<sup>10</sup>

Another assumption that can lead to phenomenological dispute has to do with the prominent part the word ‘feel’ plays in some philosophers’ use of first-person reflection when discussing consciousness. Phenomenal character, they start by assuming, is the “feel” of experience. So wherever a difference in such character is concerned they expect to find it natural to report this as a difference in *feeling*. This is sometimes joined with a focus on *belief* as the paradigmatic cognitive—as distinct from sensory—mental state. Thus when they do not find warrant in introspection to talk of the way beliefs *feel*, they count this as reason to doubt that non-sensory states have phenomenal character.<sup>11</sup> Or else, they profess to find no differences in phenomenal experience associated with thinking other than differences in imagery and feeling. Then—since they assume differences in feeling are distinct from differences in thought—they conclude phenomenal character does not properly belong to non-imagistic thought.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, if one finds the term “feel” obscurely ambiguous here, and is unwilling to assume it has any clear sense that serves as a litmus test for phenomenal character, then introspection will not tell against the phenomenal character of thought in this way.<sup>13</sup>

The account of phenomenological disputes I’ve suggested does not pretend to completeness. I have only just begun to explore how these three named factors foster disagreements, and there seem to be others at play. These may include: aversion to, or unfamiliarity with—even inaptitude for—patient, recurring introspection of the sort needed; resistance to serious reconsideration of issues on which one is already strongly committed; various ways in which trying to attend to experience can alter it so as to confuse or mislead; and finally, there is the *subtlety* of many of the phenomena concerned—and where forging the language for teasing apart relevant differences requires effort and creativity they may be easily elided or distorted. Moreover, I have just now focused only on disputes arising over the use of explicitly phenomenal notions. But what I’ve said here plausibly has wider application. Recall that I have not conceived of

phenomenological disputes in a way that confines them, by definition, to disputes over use of the notion of phenomenal character. I submit that mentalistic vocabulary—whether overtly “phenomenal” or not—is replete with terms that can give rise to divergence in first-person judgments not plausibly attributable to individual variations in the matters about which they judge. And this can be partly accounted for by the three factors I’ve listed: our understanding of the terms is anchored in paradigms and contrasts; we explain this understanding by appeal to other expressions whose use is also controversial or unclear; and there are extensive and obscure differences in assumptions connected with our use of the terms.

Because of this, it would be naïve to expect a simple introspective consensus about the questions found in phenomenological disputes. There are just too many ways interpretation of relevant terms may differ or be unclear, and too many ways for disputable, submerged, or half-articulate assumptions to influence our thinking, for it to be reasonable to expect these factors will not shape introspective judgment in ways that lead them to diverge. But nothing about this implies that first-person reflection has no rightful place in further reasoned debate on the disputed matters. We should do here what I take it we should do with *philosophical controversy generally*: strive to identify clearly and patiently the areas of agreement and disagreement; expose and question unstated assumptions; draw relevant distinctions and articulate alternatives; and make explicit the implications of the claims at issue. Through this open-ended process, we try to find material that will enable us rationally to decide what to think in response to the original question. While conclusions thus reached are never beyond revision, and we can never be sure our work of clarification is completed, we can in this way arrive at more precise, more comprehensive, and better reasoned views, even if we can’t get everyone to agree with us. We can proceed similarly in phenomenological disputes, with reliance on first-person reflection. In the glance I took just now at how these can arise on account of the three listed factors, I referred several times to (b) and (c) area disputes, but did not refer specifically back to (a), the topic of perspectival character. I now want to show how here too implicit differences in how we interpret our terms and what we (perhaps only implicitly) assume give rise to divergent introspections. Then I will illustrate how, by attention to these differences, we can address phenomenological disputes.

### 3

Suppose that, when viewing the disk at an angle, you say, on the basis of introspection: “It *looks elliptical* to me.” Suppose I resist describing my experience this way. I say: “It’s true that the disk in some way and in some sense *appears differently* as its surface is positioned at various angles relative to me. But it doesn’t follow—and I should not say—that it (or anything) literally *looks elliptical* to me from such an angle.” Such controversies once typically arose in the course of arguments about “sense-data.” Nowadays the concern with such

cases is likely to be different: what to say about the relation between the *phenomenal character* of visual experience, and its *intentional* or *representational content*. Though this dispute may appear trivial, just how we resolve it can affect how we understand the intentionality of perception and its relationship with perceptual constancy, with broad implications for the psychology and philosophy of perception.<sup>14</sup>

I assume it is not plausible to maintain that each party to such a dispute is correct with regard to the character of his or her own visual experience, and just wrong about how things appear *generally* to normally sighted people. If our first-person judgments about how to characterize our experience in these respects genuinely do conflict, *somebody is getting it wrong*. So then, are we reduced here to a foot-stomping clash of introspections? Not at all. I might start by proposing that the point of this “elliptical appearance” talk is to report differences in the disk’s visual appearance due to changes in perspective—*differences which we all agree are there*. But given that this is the purpose of this kind of “looks” talk, I would further suggest that, if you say, “The disk looks elliptical to me from here,” we could make *the same point in other terms*—something like: “From here the disk looks shaped to me in such a way that it would be exactly hidden from me by an *elliptical patch* placed in a certain plane perpendicular to my current line of sight”<sup>15</sup> Now, if *that’s* all you really want to say by asserting that the disk looks elliptical to you from there, I will *agree* that, in this sense, it also looks elliptical to me from the same perspective.<sup>16</sup> So, when faced with an apparent introspective impasse, instead of just stomping our feet, we can see whether making an interpretation explicit will show our initial “disagreement” to have been illusory.

But suppose you resist my interpretation: then what? I might then argue that if we interpret the elliptical appearance talk *differently*, this would seem to have further, unwelcome implications. I could also explain that the unacceptability of these implicit assumptions would lead me to reject *that* interpretation in favor of one (like that just proposed) which lacks them.

What are these unwelcome implications? If you don’t interpret elliptical appearance talk in roughly the manner I have just suggested, then it seems you will be committed to saying that as the initially elliptical-looking disk turns, it (or something, maybe a sense-datum) looks to you *differently shaped*. So you would be saying the *change in the shape’s appearance* constitutes an *apparent change in shape*. Now I would reject this “Protean” view of changing appearances. Of course, I agree that when perspective changes, introspectively I do have warrant for saying that the way its shape looks to me changes. But I do *not* have first-person warrant for saying that the disk (or anything currently apparent to me) *appears to change shape*. On the contrary, it looks unchanging, *constant* in shape during the viewing as a whole.

But why do I describe matters in this, non-Protean way? My reasons draw on further first-person reflection. I note that there are differences in the changing way things look to me, such that from the way some things thus look to me, I can judge them to *change shape*, while from the rather different (though also changing) way other things look to me, I can judge them to *remain the same shape*. For example: from the changing way the blobs in a lava lamp look to me, I can judge that the blobs are changing shape, whereas from the way the rotating disk changes its appearance to me, I can judge that the disk does not. But how can I describe this key difference in the way things look as appearances of shape change—a difference evident to first-person reflection—on which such contrasting *judgments* of shape can be based? The non-Protean has a straightforward proposal: I *judge the disk is constant in shape*, from its *looking constant in shape* to me through changes in the way its shape appears, whereas I judge the *blob to alter shape*, from its *appearing to me to change shape*. So the key difference in the way things look to me through changing appearances of shape is this: some look to me constant in shape, others look to me changing in shape. This is an answer Proteans cannot give. For in either case they want to say that what appears, appears to change shape. So what can they say the *difference* in appearance is? Perhaps something like this: when I judge that the disk is constant in shape, I do so on the basis of its appearing (no less than the blobs) to morph, *plus other contextual beliefs and apparent “cues”* that are *not* found in the lava lamp case.

Now I would grant that things generally appear to change shape—or not—only within a broader field or context of appearance. But just what *are* these contextual beliefs and appearances which, when put together with the alleged appearance of morphing, somehow supposedly yield a judgment of constant roundness? Unless Proteans offer a clear and coherent alternative account of the differences in appearance from which I judge constancy of shape and alterations of shape, and make the case that I actually *have* the background beliefs their view requires, a non-Protean view is to be preferred.

More can be said against the Protean view—also grounded in first-person reflection. For example, suppose we accept that *relations of depth* are visually apparent, and not merely judged: e.g., things look concave or convex in the same sense in which they look circular or square, red or green. Thus—in the disk example—the edge of what appears *looks* now *nearer*, now *farther*, *just where it is in fact*. But then what happens if we combine this with a Protean view—which says that nearly everywhere change in appearances of shape amount to apparent changes in shape? Then it seems, as the disk turns, we will have the same edge appearing to us at the same time both *bending* (Protean-style) as the disk turns, and *just where it is—rigid*. But to attribute such a pervasively self-contradictory nature to visual appearances of shape would render unintelligible how they could ordinarily be accurate. Now someone might reject the initial assumption that there are indeed appearances of depth. One might (like David Hume) assume instead that visual appearances are never more than two-

dimensional. But even this needn't bring dialogue to a standstill. For it is possible to train first-person reflection elsewhere, and argue back from there. We need to consider: can we, on the basis of reflection, describe certain experiences at all, if not as *illusory visual appearances of depth*? If not, then we should not object to describing ordinary *non-illusory* cases as appearances of depth either.

Each of the moves made in this dialectic calls for further examination.<sup>17</sup> But the point now is just to show how, when confronted with what might seem like some kind of introspective standoff, we can continue rational dialogue, without abandoning first-person reflection.<sup>18</sup> We can proceed similarly when we turn to the type (b) area of dispute—visual recognition and occurrent thought. Suppose you say, “When talking about differences in how something *looks* that are differences in *phenomenal character*, we can use color and shape terms. The ways red and green look differ, the ways squares and circles look differ, and those are differences in the phenomenal character of experience. But where we go beyond such terms, and speak of something looking as if it's a spoon, a leaf, a letter sigma, or where we speak of recognizing individuals (that looks like Jack Nicholson!), there's no difference in phenomenal character of experience marked. What we have, is just *visual experience* with the very same character as could belong to the experience of someone to whom it *doesn't* look as if it's a spoon (a sigma, whatever), or can't recognize Jack Nicholson, plus, a *judgment or belief* that there's a spoon, etc. And believing and judging are not phenomenal mental states.”

Against this, I would hold, speaking also from introspection, that the recognizable visual appearance of a thing belongs as much to the phenomenal character of my experience as does its looking a particular shade or shape. When something or someone does not merely look to me as an object shaped and colored thus and so, but I *visually recognize* it, the experience is phenomenally different. What it's like to *visually recognize* it *as an F* (or *as A*) differs from what it's like to experience it as merely shaped and colored thing, which I may or may not happen to believe is an F (or is A). And for that matter, I would say, an episode of thought involved in judging something so is *also* conscious in the same (phenomenal) sense as visual experience.

Let's again assume that these different accounts do not simply reflect individual differences. It's not true that somehow I have experience that is pervasively cognitively richer in phenomenal character than yours. Are we then simply at an impasse? Again, no. Start by leaving aside the issue about non-sensory cognition. Now with regards to the point about visual recognition, let's try to find an area of agreement. *Sometimes* when we speak of differences in what it “looks to us as if” someone or something is, these are not differences in the phenomenal character of visual experience. (Again, this may well not be the case when I distinguish its looking to me as if Sally's five, from its looking to me as if she's six.) Still, I wouldn't have said she looked to me as if she were *twelve*,

unless the phenomenal character of my visual experience were somehow different. Would my opponent wish to deny that?

Presumably not. This suggests my opponent's view should be developed along these lines: "Focus on these cases where we distinguish between something looking as if it's F and looking as if it's G, where F and G *aren't* merely *spatial* or *color* terms. In such cases, we can always in principle distinguish, in first-person reflection, the difference in content of the two *visual experiences* involved (if any), *without speaking of F and G*, and just relative to detail of *spatial and color features* that appear. (This would presumably be the case in the example of the difference between someone's looking five, and looking twelve years old.) F and G then belong, strictly speaking, not to the intentional content of the *visual experience*, but to the difference in content of an associated *judgment* or *belief*—which lies outside the phenomenal domain."

According to me, on the other hand, there *are* phenomenal differences in the look of things that can't be captured entirely in this way: i.e., as differences in the details of the merely spatial features and colors experienced.

Notice again how hard it is even to clarify what's really under dispute. So it would be wrong to expect these questions to be addressed by straightforward appeal to introspection. There is too much that first needs patient working through, even to frame the issue properly. But once we *have* clarified the issue, we start to see what questions we need to pose. Perhaps, for instance, we should now seek out examples of differences in visual appearance, which we can agree involve differences in the phenomenal character of visual experience, but where we *can't* find relevant apparent differences in spatial or color detail on which to pin the differences in character. Consider, for example, when you suddenly recognize a person's face after first viewing it without recognition (and now it *phenomenally looks* different to you). Can you discern in reflection some visually apparent spatial features of the face that eluded you until the moment of recognition, which you can conceive of otherwise than as "the look of Jack's face"? If not, then visual recognition involves a difference in phenomenal character that can't be attributed, on the basis of what is available to first-person reflection, to a mere difference in the detail of spatial representation. Here we should also consider "Gestalt shifts." Assuming these involve changes in the phenomenal character of visual experience, we may (for instance) ask: can you go from seeing the figure as a *duck-picture*, to seeing it as a *rabbit-picture*, without discerning corresponding apparent differences of detail in just where the line falls? Can you switch from seeing a figure as an M to seeing it as a ("lazy") sigma without detecting any corresponding difference in apparent spatial detail? Consider this string of marks: : - (). In context you could see the parentheses as the mouth of a sideways face, or (with a bit more difficulty) as a numeral zero. Can you find yourself switching between seeing "colon minus zero" and "sideways face," without a detectably coincident change in apparent spatial detail? If so, then first-person reflection finds differences in phenomenal

character that it can't attribute to mere differences in the fine-grained content of spatial representation. Again, this is only a start, but it illustrates how we can think beyond the initial impasse.<sup>19</sup>

Even if the phenomenal character of *visual experience* is relatively "thin," phenomenal character will be very inclusive *on the whole*, if it pertains not just to sense experience and imagery, but also to non-imagistic thought generally. Let's turn now to this aspect of topic (b). Once more, we must recognize that initially there will be unclarity and lack of agreement here about how even to frame the questions. So it would be a mistake to think we should address this sort of issue simply by asking "is there a phenomenal character of thought and understanding, and not just of imagery and sense experience?"—triggering a first-person judgment, and leaving it at that. And if we do ask some such question and find ourselves with discordant introspections, it would clearly be absurd for one side to try to persuade the other simply by urging "*Look harder!*"

But it would *not* be absurd here to urge ourselves to *think* harder. *First*, we must work to make sure the issue is clear. By saying my occurrent thought is phenomenally conscious, I *do* mean to say that, when I speak with comprehension, I *experience the thinking* I express in speech. (I do not merely experience the perception or imagery of speech.) But I do *not* mean to claim that this very thought-experience could occur, with the very same phenomenal character, in the absence of any experience of speech whatsoever. And I do not mean that what it's like for any old thought about Jack Nicholson to occur to you is just the same as what it's like for you to make a *judgment of visual recognition* you would express by saying "That's Jack Nicholson!"<sup>20</sup> Nor am I claiming that there is, for each thought that occurs to me, a special "feel" similar to the feel of an itch or an ache. Introspective judgments against *these* claims do not speak to the issue. It *is* relevant to note here that I can also speak of "feelings" in cases that are rather *different* from itches and aches—as when I speak of feeling confident or doubtful about an answer, and feeling confused, or clear about what was just said. But notice, if these differences in *ways of feeling* constitute differences in phenomenal character, that does not help segregate phenomenal character to the sensory side of some sensory/cognitive fence. For these are feelings (unlike itches and aches) I cannot identify introspectively except in terms of what I *thought* or *understood*—which, presumably belongs to the cognitive domain.

Finally, in addressing this issue we need to make explicit where we can likely agree: sometimes thoughts do *occur* to us; sometimes thinking is something we *do*, and sometimes we take (understand) certain phrases *on an occasion* in one way rather than another. Moreover, what we thus think or understand is nothing we then imagine in a modality specific way (e.g., visualize), and there are subjectively discernable differences in *what* and *how* we occurrently think or understand. We largely agree these differences are there. The disagreement seems to be over whether any of *these* differences are

properly thought of as *phenomenal*. How we view this matter affects our conception of consciousness in theoretically salient ways. For whether we regard phenomenal consciousness as specifically a *sensory* matter will affect how we theorize about it.

All this begins to move us beyond some brute clash of introspections. There are many other points to consider. Here are four. (i) Consider cases where you recite a text in a language you fluently understand, and recognize as meaningful speech, but—because of inattention—you do not just then *follow* the meaning of what you are saying. This can, from the first-person point of view, be distinguished from the experience of saying the same words while following or attending to the meaning. You need not start to *form images* of what you're talking about to start following the meaning. Is this still not a difference in experience, in “what it's like for you,” in phenomenal character? (ii) Consider cases where a given phrase you hear or utter is first taken one way, then, suddenly, understood differently by you. (“Bring some coke to the party!” Oh, *that* kind.) At least sometimes such changes occur without any corresponding change in imagery. Now again, are they not still changes *in experience*? Isn't there a difference in *what it is like* for you to switch interpretations from one to the other? (iii) Consider cases where a sentence, because of its syntactical oddity or complexity, or because it is in a language you understand with difficulty, is not understood *until you re-read* it. There is an experience of suddenly “getting what it means,” which needn't involve forming an image. Do you ever have experience of precisely that same character without understanding (or even *misunderstanding*) anything at all? Could you? (iv) Consider times when you are struck by a thought you only afterwards try to verbalize (whether to yourself or out loud), where what you say you just thought is nothing you recall having formed a visual or other image of at the time the thought occurred to you. Maybe what you thought about is not even the *sort* of thing you could visualize, or imagine in some other modality-specific way. When such thoughts occur to you, is that not experience, and is there not something it is like for you to have it?

In my view these cases can show that phenomenal consciousness is not somehow exclusively sensory; it includes thoughts that are non-imagistic or occur through our understanding what we say or hear in a certain way.<sup>21</sup> However, this can become clear only with determined attempts to sharpen our interpretation of the relevant notions of experience, thought, and understanding, and—especially—this “what it's like” talk.<sup>22</sup> And all these examples, and others, need careful reflection, if we're to address the phenomenological dispute, and decide for ourselves. If one initially finds counter-intuitive the idea that occurrent conceptual thought is phenomenally conscious, it is not enough to dismiss it with a hasty “Well, that's not how it seems to *me* introspectively!” We need to go through a careful process of examining distinctions and assumptions, to consider and reconsider cases, lying ready to notice them in our daily experience, and to draw out their implications for the issues at hand—a process that utilizes first-person reflection.

I have sketched only some ways in which first-person reflection can be used to reason about phenomenological disputes. And unfortunately I have not had space to say much about area (c)—consciousness and self-consciousness. But I hope it's clear that we needn't be so dismayed when we encounter introspective conflicts. For, given the concepts we have to work with, and our susceptibility to influence from implicit and ill-examined assumptions enmeshed with complex historical associations, intellectual habits, theoretical commitments and agendas—we really should not *expect* to elicit immediate introspective consensus. In fact, given how entrenched and indefinitely extensive such assumptions can be, how much work it can take to draw them out and critically examine them, how little will there often be to do this, and how unclear it is when it has been done sufficiently, we should probably expect some rather *stubborn* disagreements. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't use first-person reflection to try to get a clear and well-reasoned view. It means that first-person reflection is capable of needed self-revision only through sustained and scrupulous philosophical criticism. Reflection on experience needs to include self-examination in something like the Socratic mode.

I do not mean to rule out *other* ways of getting beyond apparent impasses. One may try to appeal—not to first-person reflection—but to experimentation based on observational evidence, and brain imaging. However, we should not assume that such third-person approaches offer our only option when faced with phenomenological disputes. And we shouldn't suppose that, by ignoring differences in interpretation and background commitments, and by refusing to enter the dialectical jungle (daunting as that may be), we will improve our understanding of consciousness. Because of the difficulty in locating and adjudicating such differences, our efforts to do so may never issue in solid professional consensus. That may just be the lot of philosophy. But without such efforts we will not even understand what we are talking about well enough to reason well about it, and such consensus as we appear to find may be illusory, or reflect only a shared refusal of critical scrutiny.<sup>23</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I do not use 'phenomenology' (as is now common) to mean the same as 'phenomenal character.' For me, phenomenology is an attempt to explain philosophically salient distinctions pertaining to the mind that relies crucially on the special type of warrant ("first-person warrant") with which one may apply such distinctions to oneself in judgments expressible with the first-person singular

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pronoun (“first-person judgments”). First-person *reflection* then, is that manner of thought in which one makes first-person judgments about one’s mind, for which one would claim first-person warrant. This is for me the same as *introspection*. (And I use *that* term with no commitment to inner sense doctrines of how first-person judgments possess the distinctive sort of warrant they do.) So: in my lexicon “phenomenological disputes” are disputes that arise in the context of attempts to do phenomenology—i.e., to rely on first-person reflection to arrive at a critically acceptable general framework for discussing mental phenomena. (For more on how I understand phenomenology, and how phenomenological disputes can be addressed in rational dialogue without abandoning first-person reflection, see my forthcoming article in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*.)

<sup>2</sup> Approximately this view was urged by John Campbell in comments at the 2005 SPAWN Conference at Syracuse University on my (forthcoming) paper. The current paper was inspired partly by Campbell’s Humean exhortation there to “commit to the flames” philosophy of mind conducted in my (phenomenological) manner, and by the troubled reactions of some present to the occurrence of what I’m calling phenomenological disputes.

<sup>3</sup> At the SPAWN 2005 conference, Jesse Prinz defended the view that the phenomenal character of visual experience is limited to such perspectively constrained content, as part of a general strategy of confining the content of consciousness to a relatively narrow range of mental life, in the interests of making it more theoretically tractable—somewhat along the lines of Jackendoff (1987). This evidently contrasts sharply with the view of Alva Noë (also present) who maintains that even the hidden sides of objects have a kind of “virtual presence” in the content of experience (see Noë 2004).

<sup>4</sup> At SPAWN 2005 among the defenders of a relatively more inclusive view of phenomenal consciousness were Ned Block and Robert Van Gulick. Prinz championed a more restrictive view. Tye (1995, 2003) and Dretske (1996) were among those present who advocate representationalist views of phenomenal character that restrict it to the sensory domain.

<sup>5</sup> Uriah Kriegel (2004 and forthcoming) has defended this view (reminiscent of Brentano’s). Near relatives of it are advocated by Smith (2005) and Zahavi (2006)—though Zahavi would emphasize that on his view this reflexive self-consciousness does not take consciousness as an *object of representation*. I argue on phenomenological grounds (in Siewert 1998, Chapter 6) against the notion that conscious states are necessarily self-representational.

<sup>6</sup> For example, some relatively restrictive views of phenomenal consciousness (e.g., those of Dretske, Prinz, Tye) suggest that a theory of it should be framed as a theory of specifically sensory representation. Some potentially more inclusive views are suggested by the idea that phenomenal (“what it’s like”)

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consciousness is constituted by higher order representation (e.g., Rosenthal (2002)). Other forms of inclusive views (e.g., those of Block (2002) and myself) would support the notion that since phenomenal consciousness resists a functional account, more biologically specific approaches to it are appropriate.

<sup>7</sup> As I try to do in Siewert (1998, Chapters 3 and 4).

<sup>8</sup> Lycan (1995, 2004), Rosenthal (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Georgalis (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Kriegel (see note 5) and Lycan (1995), and in his SPAWN comments on Kriegel) agree on this use of a distinction between subjective and qualitative character.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Nichols and Stich (2003, p. 198).

<sup>12</sup> See Putnam (1981) and Robinson (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Siewert (1998, pp. 292-296).

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Tye's (1995, 2003) discussions of these issues, largely in response to Christopher Peacocke's and Ned Block's arguments that there are non-representational "sensational" qualities of experience. For some discussion of how such controversies relate to perceptual constancy and intentionality, see Noë (2004) and my discussion of his views in Siewert (2006).

<sup>15</sup> I distinguish my proposal here from similar ideas found in Noë (2004, p.83) and Tye (2003, pp.78-9), as I understand these. My view differs from Noë's because it does not suggest that the disk appears the same shape as the occluding patch. My view differs from Tye's, because I don't think my visual experience in such a case *represents* something's being a shape that "would be occluded by an ellipse placed in a plane perpendicular to my line of sight." (My reason is this: if such an elliptical patch would *not* have hidden the disk from me, my experience would not, on that account, have *misrepresented* the disk. Rather, in that case, I would simply not have had the type of experience in question at all.)

<sup>16</sup> Notice it would be inappropriate to use 3d shapes (e.g., "ovoid") to do the job for which this kind of "looks" talk is enlisted (even though it's true they too would occlude the object), because the *point* of this locution is to pick out differences in visual experience due to change in perspective. Since *many different* 3d shapes would occlude the object from a given perspective, talk of what 3d shapes would hide it does not map onto the experiential differences we're trying to track. (Thanks to Eric Schwitzgebel for pressing me on this.)

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<sup>17</sup> I offer a fuller discussion Siewert (2006).

<sup>18</sup> Some may press me for a general statement of *method* for reasoning about phenomenological disputes. But I resist this, because I am worried it might be misleading and unduly restrictive about the ways in which first-person reflection can enter into philosophical argument. Kriegel (forthcoming) in his discussion of (somewhat differently conceived) “phenomenological disputes” is not so reticent. And he characterizes my (Siewert 1998) way of showing that “high-level properties are phenomenologically manifest” (his terms) as the “contrastive” method. I welcome his advocacy of the idea that such disputes are amenable to rational discussion, but I am concerned his description of the contrastive method leaves out too much that I want to say goes into my phenomenological arguments.

<sup>19</sup> For a nice detailed example (relevant to the current dispute) of how to argue phenomenologically for a relatively rich conception of the character of visual experience, see Siegel (2006).

<sup>20</sup> As Wilson (2003, p. 417) seems to assume.

<sup>21</sup> I discuss (i)-(iv) in Siewert (1998), Chapter 8. Pitt (2004) concentrates on the significance of (iii). Robinson (2005) argues against our views.

<sup>22</sup> The importance of this is particularly clear when we consider Georgalis’ (2003) discussion. He argues that the notion of “what it’s like” that marks differences in phenomenal character is really restricted to sensory states (and only to non-intentional aspects of these), on the grounds that *this* notion requires that *what it’s like to have an experience E* “type-identify a uniform feature.” Clearly we need to ask what is meant by “type-identifying a uniform feature.” For example—would it be adequate for this, that *what it’s like for me to wonder whether the coffee’s done* is similar enough on various occasions, that I can count them all as *what it’s like for me to wonder, etc.* (and not as: what it’s like to *hope* or *conclude* the coffee’s done)? It seems to me I don’t need to be in a position to say what it’s like for me to wonder whether the coffee’s done is *exactly* (uniformly?) the same every time (for I can’t even say this where *what it’s like to experience red* is at issue). Other questions arise here—for instance, regarding the separability of the phenomenal and the intentional in the sensory domain. In any case, we are not here faced with an area of brute, inquiry-resistant disagreement.

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to the participants at the 2005 SPAWN Conference for stimulating me to think harder about these issues—especially to John Campbell (despite his threat of fiery doom). I would like to thank the audience at Claremont Pomona College for their feedback on a talk I presented on this material. I am indebted also to conversations and correspondence with Dave Chalmers, Brie Gertler, Brian Keeley, Alva Noë, Uriah Kriegel, David Pitt, Susanna Siegel, Eric

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