Conscious Experiences as Ultimate Seemings: Renewing the Phenomenal Concept Strategy

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Abstract

The Phenomenal Concept Strategy is a popular strategy used to support physicalism in the realm of conscious experience. This Strategy accounts for dualist intuitions but uses the ways in which we think about our experiences to explain these intuitions in a physicalist framework, without any appeal to ontological dualism.

In this paper, I will raise two issues related to the currently available versions of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy. First, most of the theories belonging to the Phenomenal Concept Strategy posit that phenomenal concepts are exceptional and sui generis concepts, and these theories can be shown to be largely ad hoc. Second, these theories may explain the existence of anti-physicalist intuitions, but they do not explain their persistence.

My aim is to put forward a new theory of phenomenal concepts that can rise up to these challenges to the Phenomenal Concept Strategy. In my view, phenomenal concepts are not independent and sui generis concepts. On the contrary, they are closely related to our other epistemic concepts, especially our concepts of “justification”. Thinking about an experience means thinking about a specific kind of justification – an unjustified justification, or, in other words, an “ultimate seeming”. I will show why this explains the existence and the persistence of anti-physicalist intuitions in a non-ad hoc way.

Keywords: conscious experience, phenomenal consciousness, hard problem of consciousness, physicalism, dualism, phenomenal concept, cognitive phenomenology

Some philosophers have tried to show that conscious experience does not threaten ontological physicalism, by arguing that anti-physicalist intuitions concerning consciousness (and notably the intuition of conceivability), which sustain the well-known anti-physicalist arguments (Chalmers 1996; Chalmers 2010; Jackson 1982; Kripke 1980), are nothing but a by-product of certain epistemological features of phenomenal concepts (the concepts we use to think about phenomenal experiences notably, but not only, through introspection). In con-
temporary philosophy, this line of thought has been labelled “the Phenomenal Concept Strategy” (Loar 1997; Papineau 2002; Tye 2003). The Strategy has been the subject of numerous objections (Ball 2009; Chalmers 2007; Goff 2011; Levine 2007); it constitutes nevertheless one of the most accepted physicalist answers to the anti-physicalist arguments concerning consciousness.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I want to raise two issues against the currently available versions of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy. One concerns the kind of explanations of anti-physicalist intuitions provided by these versions of the Strategy. I will show that they can be construed as typical ad hoc explanations, because they have to posit exceptional and sui generis entities (that is to say, here, concepts) in order to reach their explanatory goal and to defend a central thesis (physicalism) against refutation. The other issue concerns what is explained by these versions of the Strategy. I want to show that they do not explain the persistence of anti-physicalist intuitions (even if they may explain their existence), which is nevertheless part of the real explanandum. For this reason, these versions of the Strategy offer merely incomplete explanations.

My second aim is to develop a conception of phenomenal concepts able to meet these challenges. In this conception, phenomenal concepts are not sui generis concepts, but are specific concepts of justifications. Self-ascriptions of conscious experiences using phenomenal concepts amount to self-ascriptions of unjustified justifications (what I will call “ultimate seemings”); and self-ascriptions of these special kinds of justifications are themselves rendered necessary by the norms governing our practices of justification. I think that such a conception can explain the existence and the persistence of anti-physicalist intuitions in a non-ad hoc way, and therefore constitute a satisfying version of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy. This conception also has the advantage to maintain the traditional (Cartesian) link between the (hypothetical) metaphysical specificity of conscious experiences and their peculiar justificatory powers—even if this link is reversed compared to what happens in the traditional picture.

I will proceed as follows: First, I will briefly present the current versions of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy and raise the two aforementioned issues against them. Second, I will present my conception, according to which phenomenal concepts are concepts of unjustified justifications. Third, I will show how this explains anti-physicalist intuitions (focusing on the intuition of conceivability). Fourth, I will explain why my conception meets the two challenges. Finally, I will detail various other virtues of my conception.

1. The Phenomenal Concept Strategy and its Problems

Some philosophers have tried to show that conscious experience does not threaten ontological physicalism, by arguing that anti-physicalist intuitions (and notably the well-known “intuition of conceivability”) are nothing but a by-product of certain epistemological features of phenomenal concepts (the concepts we use to think about phenomenal experiences through introspection). In contemporary philosophy, this line of thought has been labeled “the Phenomenal Concept Strategy” (Loar 1997; Papineau 2002; Tye 2003; see Stoljar 2005 for the expression).

However, most of the theories developed under this label have in common two flaws: First, they are largely ad hoc. Second, they explain the existence of anti-physicalist intuitions, but not their persistence.
Why can we say that most of these theories are *ad hoc*? First, let us note that these theories often posit that phenomenal concepts have extremely specific features, which make them fundamentally different from other concepts: according to these theories, phenomenal concepts are *sui generis*, exceptional concepts. For example, some theories say that phenomenal concepts are pure recognitional concepts (or pure demonstrative concepts), without any associated mode of presentation (Tye 2003; Levin 2007): they are some kind of “blind demonstratives”, conceptually completely independent from other concepts. Some other theories (sometimes labeled “constitutionalists”) state that phenomenal concepts include their referents as parts of their own modes of presentation (Loar 1997), and that any use of a phenomenal concept requires the instantiation of the phenomenal property it refers to (Papineau 2002; Balog 2012) (or of a resembling phenomenal property).

The problem is that these features are “exotic” features, shared by no other concepts. In the case of the demonstrative account, we can note that all demonstrative concepts (except phenomenal concepts) seem to have an associated descriptive mode of presentation which serves to fix their referent in a given context (for “this”, it would be something like “the thing in front of me”). Concerning the constitutionalist account, we can say that a systematic physical inclusion of the referent within the concept cannot be found in the case of any of the other “normal” concepts (and also that it is hard to see why this feature should be conceptually or cognitively relevant (Levine 2007)).

This means that if phenomenal concepts really did happen to have these features, they would be *sui generis* concepts. But positing a new class of *sui generis* concepts represents a huge theoretical cost; and we have few theoretical reasons to posit that such “strange” concepts exist, except the need to defend physicalism. Indeed, these features seem tailored to explain why anti-physicalist intuitions arise, and there is little or no independent support for their existence. Current theories of phenomenal concepts can therefore be considered *ad hoc*.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, current theories of phenomenal concepts explain the existence of anti-physicalist intuitions, but not their persistence. Indeed, let us admit that phenomenal concepts, given their specificity, give rise to anti-physicalist intuitions. The problem is the following: why can’t we just abandon these concepts, and use new concepts instead—new concepts that would probably be quite similar to phenomenal concepts but that would not create such fallacious intuitions?

For example, let us assume that phenomenal concepts are indeed pure demonstrative concepts, without any modes of presentation. Because of this peculiarity, these concepts are supposed to give rise to anti-physicalist intuitions. But if this is true, why should not we just abandon them, and replace them with unproblematic demonstrative concepts (like “this brain state”) in order to refer to the states phenomenal concepts referred to? It would not be the first time (see, for example, the history of science) that fallacious concepts are replaced by new and better ones. For instance, to take a well-known example, we no longer use the Aristotelian concepts of “motion” and “speed”, because these concepts

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1 This kind of demonstrative could still be used through introspection, if we stipulate that what we reach through phenomenal introspection is necessarily a brain state—that is, if we accommodate our introspective and conceptual practices to our acceptance of ontological physicalism.
generate insuperable theoretical problems. It seems as if we should do the same with phenomenal concepts: get rid of them.

However, it looks like we cannot help using phenomenal concepts. They seem central and indispensable to our mental lives. Now this is what we have to explain: not only why anti-physicalist intuitions arise, but also why these intuitions persist. Currently available theories of phenomenal consciousness do not seem able to cope with this problem. Indeed, they do not explain the “necessity” of phenomenal concepts, nor why it seems we cannot live without them.

2. Phenomenal Concepts as Concepts of Ultimate Seemings

I wish to defend a conception that could avoid these pitfalls. My starting point is the notion of “seeming”, which I define as follows: It seems to me that P when I have a reason to believe that P (or a justification for believing that P). In other words, it seems to me that P when I am in a situation such as, ceteris paribus, I should believe that P (in a sense of “should” which implies that I can be held responsible for the fulfillment of this duty). If I am rational, the fact that I believe that P implies that it seems to me that P, but not conversely; I can both believe that it seems to me that P and that not-P. Such a conception does not account for all the ordinary or philosophical uses of “seem”, but this is not my purpose.

Rationality commands that I be able to justify my belief that P by self-ascribing a reason to believe that P, and in the same way rationality also commands that I be able to justify my belief that I have a reason to believe that P. That is to say: if I self-ascribe a reason to believe that P, I should be able to justify this self-ascription by making the following mental acts:

1. I assert that Q (a fact distinct from the fact that P and from the fact that it seems to me that P)
2. I assert that the fact that Q is a reason to believe that P
3. I assert that (1) and (2) are the reason why it seems to me that P.

These assertions are not actually made every time it seems to me that P. However, rationality commands that such assertions be available every time it seems to me that P, even if I am not disposed to produce them explicitly; and in various situations I indeed would have to produce them explicitly. It will be the case, for example, when it seems to me that P while not believing that P (if I want to rationalize such situation); also when, in a conversational context, I disagree with another subject, and I want to convince her by expounding and justifying my reasons to believe what I believe; or when I enter into a process of examination and evaluation of my beliefs.

We sometimes self-ascribe some very peculiar kind of “seemings” I call “ultimate seemings”. They happen to be what we call conscious experiences. What

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2 Three precisions here: first, one can see that this notion of “seeming” is fundamentally a normative notion. Second, this notion of “seeming” expresses an “internal” notion of justification, that is to say, a justification which is necessarily accessible to a subject to which something seems to be the case. This is made necessary by the idea according to which the subject can be held responsible for the epistemic duty conveyed by the seeming; but this doesn’t mean that I am committed to an internalist account of epistemic justification—as I will explain later. Third, it is important to keep in mind that the notion of seeming I am now expounding is purely epistemic, and in no way phenomenal (yet).
are these “ultimate seemings”? They are what I self-ascribe when it seems to me that P while, even if I judge that it could be the case that not-P (that is to say, I judge that “P” is a contingent statement), I judge that there is no fact Q which could be used to fulfil the conditions (1), (2) and (3); that is to say, I judge that I cannot justify the fact that it seems to me that P by appealing to another fact.

In other words, when I self-ascribe an “ultimate seeming” that P, I judge that I am in a situation such as, ceteris paribus, I should believe that P, and in which there is no fact (different from the fact that I should believe that P) in virtue of which I should believe that I should believe that P.

To sum it up, when I self-ascribe introspectively a conscious experience that P:

(A) I self-ascribe a reason to believe that P (where “P” is a contingent statement)
(B) I judge that this reason is not itself justified (that I have no reason to believe that I have a reason to believe that P)
(C) I nevertheless maintain, in spite of (B), that I have a reason to believe that P (maybe because of the nature of our informational, and particularly perceptual, devices: sometimes we do not dismiss an unjustified reason to believe that P, because we cannot help believing that we have a reason to believe that P).

I think that this conception accounts for our introspective self-ascriptions of experiences. To show this would require an extensive argumentation, which I cannot produce here for reasons of space, but I will give an example in order to show how it is supposed to work.

Doris is reading a book next to Frank. Frank believes that Doris is a philosopher. Why does he believe that (that is to say, how can he justify his belief)? Because Doris is reading a book by Kant and because someone reading a book by Kant is a reason to believe that the person is a philosopher. Why does he believe that Doris is reading a book by Kant? Because the words “Kant” are printed on the cover of the book (and because that is a reason to believe that the book is indeed by Kant). Why does he believe that these words are printed on the book cover? Because he sees that they are so printed (and the fact that he sees them so is a reason to believe that they are indeed so). Why does he believe that he sees that? Because it seems to him that it is so; that is to say, it simply seems to him that the words are so and so. And at this point, he cannot go further to justify his beliefs; at this point, he will call his last reason to believe that the words are so and so a visual experience of the words being so and so. Indeed, he can only self-ascribe a last reason to believe something, which is also an unjustified reason to believe something, an ultimate seeming: a conscious experience.

Even if this example does not replace an argumentation, I think it shows why it is plausible that the self-ascription of a conscious experience does indeed amount to the self-ascription of an unjustified justification to believe something (or, in other words, of an ultimate seeming). We talk and think about our conscious experiences when we are unable to go further in the chain of justification; when the only thing we can say to justify a belief is that “it just seems to me that it is so”, and nothing more. And I think that the fact that we are sensitive to the demand for justification of our beliefs (that is to say, that we think that each of our beliefs can be asked to be justified) renders necessary some self-ascriptions of ultimate seemings (on pain of infinite regress).
3. Explaining the Intuition of Conceivability

I believe that this conception of what it means to self-ascribe a conscious experience is plausible. But here is the important point: if this conception is correct, it explains the main anti-physicalist intuition, that is to say, the intuition of conceivability. Indeed, this intuition is based on the fact that it always seems possible to have a conscious experience (say, pain) without the brain state which is supposed to be identical with it (say, C-fiber activation), and conversely. And this appearance of possibility cannot be explained away by saying that in such cases, we do not conceive pain without C-fiber activation, but merely a thing that appears to be pain without C-fiber activation. Indeed, when it comes to conscious experiences, “appearing to be pain” and “being pain” are the same thing (Kripke 1980).

This last fact is explained by my conception. Indeed, a thinker cannot think “it seems to me that I have an experience that P but I do not” because such a thought would imply that the subject self-ascribe a reason to believe that she has an experience without having the experience; that is to say, that she self-ascribe a reason to believe that she has an ultimate reason to believe something without having this ultimate reason to believe something. But such a self-ascription is conceptually impossible, because conscious experiences are precisely conceived of as reasons to believe which cannot be justified by anything else. In other words, if experiences, when thought about introspectively, are conceived of as “ultimate seemings” (reasons to believe which themselves are not justified by any reason), it is by conceptual necessity impossible that I have a reason to believe that I have an experience without having this experience. Indeed, I implicitly asserted, when introspectively self-ascribing a conscious experience, that such a reason (that I could have without having the experience itself) does not exist. This explains why, when it comes to conscious experiences, there is no appearance/reality distinction (and that itself explains the intuition of conceivability).

This conception of phenomenal concepts is very traditional in a way, even if it consists in a reversal of this tradition. Indeed, according to the Cartesian tradition, it is because conscious experiences have a special, purely mental, non-physical nature, that they can be known in a better and indubitable way, and therefore can constitute the basis for the justification and the foundation of our knowledge.

In my theory, the link between metaphysics and epistemology is maintained, but goes the other way. It is because our concept of justification requires us to ascribe some ultimate justifications (on pain of infinite regress) that we are led to self-ascribe such ultimate seemings, that it to say, unjustified justifications (what we call conscious experiences). And it is because these justifications are conceived as fundamentally unjustified that we cannot make any appearance/reality distinction about them, which makes us tend to think (falsely) of them as having a non-physical nature.

3 I will not consider here other anti-physicalist intuitions, because it would make my paper too long. Rather, I will do as if these intuitions all amount to the intuition of conceivability. At the end of my paper, I will quickly say a word about other dualist intuitions.
4. Answering the two challenges

A. This theory is not ad hoc

Compared to other theories of phenomenal concepts, this conception has a first advantage: it escapes the objection of being ad hoc.

First, in my view, phenomenal concepts are not sui generis concepts. They belong to the family of epistemic concepts; more precisely, they are concepts of justification. Of course, they are very specific concepts of justification: they are concepts of unjustified justifications. But this specificity itself can be understood and analyzed as being composed of concepts that are already available: an unjustified justification is nothing but a justification which, *de jure*, is not itself justified.

Second, I think that my view is *prima facie* plausible, even if we are not considering the fact that we do have anti-physicalist intuitions. Indeed, if one grants that humans are engaged in practices of justification of their beliefs and that they are sensitive to the demand of justification of their beliefs, she understands why they are led to self-ascribe some unjustified justification to believe things (on pain of infinite regresses in the chains of justification). Therefore, I think that the core of my view concerning phenomenal concepts is plausible even if we set aside the fact that we actually do have anti-physicalist intuitions.

For these reasons, my account escapes the objection of being ad hoc.

B. This theory explains the persistence of anti-physicalist intuitions

My view implies that, inasmuch as humans are engaged in practices of justification and are sensitive to the demand for justification concerning their beliefs, they will be led to self-ascribe some ultimate seemings (understood as unjustified justifications). Then, anti-physicalist intuitions concerning the metaphysical nature of these seemings will naturally arise.

Besides, getting rid of these anti-physicalist intuitions would require to get rid of phenomenal concepts (understood as concepts of unjustified justifications). But it does not seem possible as long as we are engaged in practices of justification, given that the use of phenomenal concepts is made necessary by the very functioning of these practices of justification.

So, my account shows not only why anti-physicalist intuitions arise; it also explains why these intuitions persist, and why we cannot get rid of phenomenal concepts. Indeed, anti-physicalist intuitions are a consequence of some deep and fundamental features of our nature as epistemic subjects: the fact that we are located creatures, of whom it is required that they give reasons for their beliefs.

C. A few more precisions

One could think that my account is committed to epistemic foundationalism, or to epistemic internalism, which are both contested views. However, I am only committed to the thesis that our folk concepts of justifications are internal concepts of justifications, and that in our folk practices of justifications we are sensitive to the demand for justification of our beliefs (sensitivity which leads, when philosophically systematized, to epistemic foundationalism and epistemic internalism). These points seem supported by the fact that epistemic internalism and
epistemic foundationalism were the mainstream during the vast majority of history of philosophy.

It is also important to note that my thesis does not concern the nature of phenomenal states, but only the nature of our concepts of phenomenal states. It states that, when we self-ascribe a certain phenomenal experience through introspection (using phenomenal concepts), we self-ascribe an unjustified justification to believe something (what I called an ultimate seeming). It does not state that phenomenal experiences really are ultimate seemings. Indeed, I have shown that ultimate seemings are conceived in a way which precludes us to understand them as physical. That explains why anti-physicalist intuitions arise concerning phenomenal consciousness; that also means that, if physicalism is true (as I think it is), there cannot be ultimate seemings in the real world (and phenomenal experiences, inasmuch as they exist, cannot be ultimate seemings). However, this fact does not preclude us to conceive (falsely) of them, through introspection, as being that way.

On another vein, I want to make clear that my account can retain some advantages of the classical theories of phenomenal concepts. For example, one advantage of the demonstrative conception is that it explains the “fineness of grain” of phenomenal concepts (the fact that, for example, we can introspectively discriminate many more colur hues, on the basis of a current visual experience, than what we are able to conceptualize when we do not experience them). However, my own conception, being partly compatible with the demonstrative theory of phenomenal concepts, can also explain this phenomenon. Indeed, if the self-ascription of a phenomenal experience amounts to the self-ascription of an ultimate seeming that P, nothing precludes “P” to be a thought constituted by concepts which are themselves demonstrative (and fine-grained) concepts.

5. Other virtues of this approach
I will now detail three other virtues of my approach. First, note that most of the theories of phenomenal concepts explain anti-physicalist intuitions as being the result of brute psychological facts (for example, of some hard-wired features of human brains). These theories offer a mere causal explanation of these intuitions. On the contrary, my account offers a real understanding of why these intuitions arise and persist, by locating them in a comprehensive picture of our conceptual practices of justification. In other words, my account offers a meaningful explanation of anti-physicalist intuitions. I think this to be an advantage of my account.

Second, I think that my view is not only able to explain the intuition of conceivability, but also other important dualist intuitions. For example, my view can account for what we could call the “intuition of subjectivity”. It is often said that conscious experiences are problematic for physicalism because they appear to be fundamentally subjective, in a way that no physical object is. They are always for a subject (Nagel 1974); one can also say that there is an intrinsic “forme-ness” in every conscious experience (Levine 2001; Kriegel 2005). But if we indeed think about our conscious experiences as “seemings” (understood as reasons to believe), this is explained in quite a natural way. Indeed, a reason to believe always concerns a subject which is responsible for the epistemic duties which constitute this reason to believe. Without a subject who has beliefs and can be held responsible for them, there can be no reasons to believe understood.
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in this sense. This explains why conscious experiences always concern a subject and are for a subject—because it is the subject herself who is concerned by the normative dimension conveyed by a reason. The case here is quite similar to the case of an order: an order always concerns someone who is ordered to do something by someone else. There can be no order that is not addressed to someone who is concerned by the order (because, if the order creates a duty, this duty must be fulfilled by the person who received the order and no one else). In the same way, there can be no conscious experience without an epistemic subject concerned by the epistemic duty; any experience will be for such a subject.

My view also has a third advantage: indeed, it not only addresses the metaphysical problem of consciousness. It also gives a framework able to solve some of the current debates concerning the existence of a “cognitive phenomenology” (Bayne and Montague 2011).

There is an on-going debate concerning the existence of a cognitive phenomenology. Some philosophers assert that there is a phenomenology specific to thoughts, while others do not accept any phenomenology above and outside the sensory and the emotional. The following dialectic often takes place: the defenders of the existence of a cognitive phenomenology put forward examples of phenomenal contrasts, where two mental states differ from a cognitive and a phenomenal point of view, but not from a sensory point of view. For example, it is often said that two subjects who hear the same sentence pronounced, say, in French, would have two different experiences if one of them understands French and the other does not, whereas they would have the same sensory phenomenology (Strawson 1994: 5-6). On the other hand, the opponents of cognitive phenomenology highlight cases where two states differ from a cognitive point of view, without any phenomenal difference. For example, it seems that judging that 17 is a prime number does not feel any different from judging that 19 is a prime number (Nichols and Stich 2003: 196).

I think that my view offers a framework which accounts for these cases and these distinctions, because it predicts which thoughts are likely to be considered as presenting a phenomenal aspect and which are not.

Indeed, in my view, the self-ascription of a phenomenal experience amounts to the self-ascription of an ultimate seeming. Such an ultimate seeming is what we self-ascribe when we think that we have a reason to believe something even if we think that there is no justification for this reason itself; it is an unjustified justification.

Now let us think about the way new information is made available for a cognitive system like ours. Sometimes this information is the result of a conscious inference; at other times this information is the result of a sub-personal and unconscious process. On my view, we have to expect that the availability of a new piece of information would have a phenomenal aspect in the second case, but not in the first case. Indeed, in the first case, this information can be justified by the subject, which has access to the evidential basis of this information (that is to say, to the premises of the conscious inference). In the second case, the subject is unable to justify this new information which just happens to “come” to her. This information, which can be considered by the subject as a reason to believe something about the world, is itself unjustified: when thinking about this

4 Namely, to believe that the situation represented by the information is indeed the case.
information, the subject will conceive it of as an “ultimate seeming”, an unjustified reason to believe—it will be thought to be phenomenally given.

Therefore, we have to expect that any information which is made available to the subject without the evidential basis for this information being made available itself would be thought by the subject to be phenomenal. This is precisely the case of sensory, perceptual and hedonic information, but this is also the case of some types of “cognitive” information produced by encapsulated and unconscious devices, such as the identification of certain objects, of faces, the understanding of an oral or written sentence by an expert speaker/reader, etc. So, my view predicts that some cognitive information will be considered as phenomenal by the subject, and these kinds of information precisely match the typical cases of experiential thoughts put forth by the defenders of the existence of a “cognitive phenomenology”. I take it to be a confirmation of my view. It is also a theoretical virtue, because it shows that my conception of phenomenal concepts could set the basis for a framework able to solve some problems belonging to the “cognitive phenomenology” debate, by explaining which thoughts are considered by subjects as phenomenal, which are not, and why it is the case.5

References


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