

Phenomenal Concepts

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1) Introduction

This article is about the special, subjective concepts we apply to experience. These are called “phenomenal concepts (PCs)” and they are of special interest in a number of ways. First, they refer to phenomenal experiences, and the qualitative character¹ of those experiences whose metaphysical status is hotly debated. Conscious experience strike many philosophers as philosophically problematic and difficult to accommodate within a physicalistic metaphysics. Second, PCs are widely thought to be special and unique among concepts.²

The sense that there is something special about PCs is very closely tied up with features of the *epistemic* access they afford to qualia. When we deploy phenomenal concepts introspectively for some phenomenally conscious experience as it occurs, we are said to be *acquainted*³ with our own conscious experiences. While philosophers have understood “acquaintance” in various ways, it is generally taken to be a unique epistemological relation that relates a person to her own mental states *directly, incorrigibly*, and, according to some, in a way that reveals the *essence* of

¹ I will talk of the “‘what it’s like’ character’, or ‘qualitative character’ of those experiences, ‘qualia’, and ‘qualia properties’ interchangeably. There are some issues involving representationalism about qualia concerning a possible distinction between “qualitative character” and “qualia”. Later I will mention these issues briefly, but for the most part this possible distinction will not play a part in the discussion.

² There are also philosophers who downplay the uniqueness of PCs – I will come back to this issue when I discuss particular accounts of PCs.

³ The term “acquaintance” was introduced in this context by Bertrand Russell. Russell (1910) developed his famous distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.” He then went on, in his (1918/1919) lectures on logical atomism, to argue, in a Cartesian manner, that we are only ever acquainted with “sensibilia”; roughly, our phenomenal experiences.

these mental states. Such a relation has struck many philosophers as deeply puzzling. Accounts of PCs either have to explain the acquaintance relation, or acquaintance with our phenomenal experiences has to be denied. The way different accounts of PCs handle these issues will be the main topic of this article.

PCs have received much attention in recent philosophy of mind mainly because they figure in arguments for dualism and in physicalist responses to these arguments.⁴ In section 4 of this paper, I will briefly explain how features of our epistemic relation to phenomenal consciousness provide the ground for dualist arguments. In sections 5 and 6 I will discuss some recent accounts of PCs and their role in arguments over physicalism/dualism. But first, in section 2, I will clarify some background assumptions that it is important to put on the table; and in section 3, I will elaborate on the epistemic and semantic constraints on a satisfactory account of PCs.

2) *Some Background*

i) Qualia realism

Throughout the paper I will assume realism about qualia. I use “qualia” in a minimalist sense, that is, the sense of there being something *it is like* to undergo an experience, something one can normally introspect; for example, the feeling of my fingers flexing that (partly) characterizes my present bodily sensation. All accounts of phenomenal experience agree that there are qualia in this sense, though they might disagree on what exactly it means to introspect qualia.⁵ Philosophers who think for whatever reason that there are no qualia might still hold that there are concepts that work much like PCs except that they fail to refer at all.⁶

⁴ According to a widespread understanding of *physicalism*, the world’s fundamental ontology is physical and the best account of that ontology is provided by fundamental physics. Physics also claims that there are only a few fundamental dynamical and perhaps non-dynamical laws that govern the structure of space-time and evolution of its occupants. Physicalism thus understood is defined as follows: all truths, including truths about phenomenal consciousness, are metaphysically necessitated by the complete physical truth about the world. *Dualism*, on the other hand, claims that the complete *physical* description of our world is not the complete description. Contemporary philosophical proponents of dualism generally do not think that there are non-physical entities – as Descartes did – but they do maintain that there are basic non-physical properties. Further, they hold that these properties are mental or proto-mental properties. They also usually think that there are fundamental laws that link mental properties to each other and to certain properties of physical systems. By their lights a complete description of our universe must include truths about where, when, and which consciousness properties are exemplified.

⁵ Main accounts of the nature of phenomenal character are Representationalism (for example, Tye 2000), Higher Order Monitoring Theories (for example, Rosenthal 2002), the Self-Representational Theory (for example, Kriegel 2004), and different varieties of dualism (for example, Chalmers 1996), according to which qualia are either fundamental non-physical, or non-physically realized properties, or they comprise the categorical bases of physical dispositional properties. Some physicalists hold that though qualia are physical, it is not possible to give an explanatorily perspicuous account of them in non-phenomenal terms. The accounts of phenomenal concepts we will discuss are non-committal concerning these debates about the

ii) Basic and non-basic applications of PCs

Some accounts of PCs explain the unique epistemic role of PCs by the way they relate to their referent in a uniquely intimate way. The idea is that in their basic uses, we apply PCs to our experiences *directly* as they occur, merely on the basis of having the experience. One can object to this by observing that the very *same* PCs can also be applied in the absence of the phenomenal experiences they refer to, for example, when we apply them to other people, or our own past experiences; and in these cases it is not plausible to say that the application of the concept is direct or that there is a special, unique relationship between the concept and its referent. Accordingly, some philosophers locate the uniqueness of PCs instead in the uniqueness of the *properties* they refer to, in the luminosity and transparency⁷ of qualia themselves. Those who maintain that there is something unique about the *relationship* between PCs and their referents emphasize the *difference* between basic applications of PCs (closely tied to first person experience itself) and other applications (not so tied), and they count those latter applications as derivative of, and in some important respect different from, the basic ones.⁸

Here is a way to explicate the difference between basic and derivative applications of PCs. We employ PCs in their basic applications when attending to and thinking about conscious experiences and their phenomenal qualities from the first person perspective (i.e. subjectively). “First person perspective” here means that in the basic applications of PCs their reference is (or is exemplified) in the mind of the thinker, and this fact is crucial from the point of view of the application of the concept. In a basic application of a PC a person is aware, for example, that her finger tingles in a particular way and thinks to herself *here it goes again*.⁹ This thought (though not its public language expression) involves a PC and the PC itself is intimately connected to the

nature of phenomenal character, though, as far as the mind-body problem is concerned, some of them have been used to attempt to defeat anti-physicalist arguments.

⁶ Rey (2007), for example, denies that phenomenal concepts refer to any properties at all and so he denies the existence of qualia altogether. He still thinks that phenomenal concepts play an interesting and unique role in our mental life. Eliminativists, however, may not want to deny altogether that there is something it is like to see a red rose, or at least, that it *seems* that there is something it is like to see a red rose. I won’t pursue this matter here.

⁷ I use “transparency” here not in the usual sense it is invoked in arguments for representationalism, but rather, to indicate the sense that qualia properties reveal their essence (and the fact that what is revealed is their whole essence) directly to their subjects.

⁸ These are not exclusive options for those who think that there is something unique about PCs. Papineau (2007), for example, thinks that there is something unique about phenomenal concepts but it doesn’t lie either in a unique reference relation, or in some special feature of the referent; it rather lies in a special feature of the physical vehicle of the concept. More on this later.

⁹ I will refer to thoughts and concepts by *italicized* expressions.

very itchy kind of experience that it is referring to.¹⁰ In the case of basic applications of PCs the token concept and its reference are both occurrences in the person's mind. This is different from other kinds of concepts (and also from the non-basic applications of PCs). For example, one can think the descriptive concept "the present king of France" without – absurdly – there being any king in one's mind or, for that matter, anywhere at all. But in a basic application of a PC the reference is in the thinker's mind.

In non-basic applications of PCs, we are thinking from the first person perspective (i.e. subjectively) only in a derivative sense, without there necessarily occurring exemplars of that qualia. These applications are subjective only via their connections to basic applications of PCs. Non-basic applications of PCs can refer both to a person's own experiences and to those of other people and creatures.¹¹ For example, when Mary thinks that she will later experience the taste of lemon or that Sam is currently experiencing this taste, she doesn't literally experience a lemony taste herself.

What is the relation between basic and non-basic applications of PCs? One suggestion is that a non-basic application of a PC, as, for example, in Mary's thought *I will soon experience the taste of lemon*, requires some previous basic application of the concept to an instance of the type of phenomenal experience it refers to (i.e. the lemony taste); or at least it requires a previous instantiation of the experience itself. There are two ways to understand this requirement. One is as a claim about how we acquire PCs. The other is as a claim about necessary conditions for possessing PCs. The former seems correct as a (contingent) matter of fact, but the latter may be false. Here is an argument that it is false due to Dennett (2007).

Suppose that Mary possesses the concept *lemony taste*, having previously tasted a lemon, but she is not now experiencing a lemony taste. Dennett imagines "Swamp Mary" who comes into existence and who duplicates Mary's intrinsic physical (and, if there are such, non-physical) properties. Swamp Mary doesn't share all of Mary's concepts but it seems very plausible that she shares Mary's phenomenal concept *lemony taste*. She can "recall" a lemony taste, anticipate it, compare it with other tastes, and so on. Dennett says that she has the concept. But if so, the occurrences of previous instances of **lemony taste** are not constitutive of possession of the concept *lemony taste*, and non-basic applications of *lemony taste* are possible for a person even before she ever had a basic application of the concept.

What makes "basic" applications basic then, as opposed to the "non-basic" ones? It is clear that to possess a PC *lemony taste* it is necessary to be capable of recognizing an instance of **lemony taste** as falling under the concept, that is, to be able to produce a *basic* application of *lemony taste*. But this is too weak; the capacity in question is a trivial capacity of any normal human. There could be a person, let's call him "Joe" who has never experienced a lemony taste,

¹⁰ PCs can be singular concepts referring to a particular qualitative experience or predicate concepts referring to a type of qualia. I will primarily discuss the latter. Though there are different construals as to the difference between them, a plausible view (Papineau 2006) is that the singular concepts are more complex than, and derivative of, the predicate concepts, involving descriptions like *the particular pain I am having right now*.

¹¹ Under certain circumstances, even basic applications of PCs can refer to the phenomenal experiences of others, for example, when one thinks that another person is having the same type of experience one is currently undergoing. Kati Farkas made this point in conversation.

and so can't recall, compare, anticipate, etc. the taste, in short, doesn't have the concept *lemony taste* at all; nevertheless, he would also have this capacity. But there is a capacity Swamp Mary has that Joe doesn't, which arguably is constitutively necessary for possession of the concept *lemony taste*, namely the capacity of recognizing lemony taste when she encounters it *as the same taste* she attributed to others on occasions when she didn't have the experience.¹² This is why basic applications are basic; a concept can be a non-basic application of a PC only if certain non-trivial counterfactuals involving basic applications hold. This condition also explains the subjectivity of PCs.

iii) Qualia and Representation

Most (perhaps all) phenomenal experiences are representational. For example, a token of a visual quale **blue**¹³ represents a blue expanse or the sky or perhaps both. If qualia represent then it is plausible that they represent non-conceptually. That is, they do not have language-like structure but rather are akin to pictures and represent in something along the lines of the way pictures, images, graphs, and other so-called "analogue representations" represent. Exactly how analogue representations work is controversial.¹⁴

According to one view of qualia, qualia are not intrinsically representational. A way of thinking about this is to say that they are aspects of sensation and can occur in the absence of representational content.¹⁵

Some qualia-realists, for example, Loar (2002), hold that phenomenal states and their qualia are themselves representational, in the sense that there couldn't be non-representational qualia. According to his view, however, there is more to qualia than representational content; in other words, representational content doesn't *exhaust* all there is to it.

Representationalists about phenomenal consciousness (e.g. Harman 1990, Tye 2002) go further and claim that the phenomenal quality of an experience can be accounted for *entirely* in terms of its representational features. Such accounts deny the qualophile's claim that phenomenal character goes beyond representation, but they are generally understood as being realist about phenomenal character.

iv) Concepts: the Language of Thought Model

Most of the recent discussion of phenomenal concepts presupposes the representational theory of mind (RTM). According to the RTM, beliefs, thoughts, intentions and so on involve representations that refer, have truth conditions and so on. For example, Mary's thought that *Sam experiences a lemony taste* refers to Sam and is true iff he experiences a lemony taste. The RTM

¹² There are various other accounts of the exact relations non-basic, derivative applications of PCs bear to basic ones. See e.g. Papineau (2007).

¹³ I'll refer to phenomenal properties by expressions in **bold** type.

¹⁴ It is sometimes claimed, e.g. in Fodor (2007), that a non-conceptual representation, unlike linguistic representations, does not possess a canonical decomposition.

¹⁵ Block (2003) seems to hold that there can be qualia in the absence of representation.

says that concepts are constituents of thoughts. So Mary's thought is composed from the concepts *Sam* and *experiences a lemony taste*. Most of the contributors to the recent discussion also assume, as I will, the "language of thought" (LOT) account of the representations involved in thinking, belief, intention, and so on.¹⁶ According to the LOT there is an internal mental language, *Mentalese*, and thinking, deciding, and so on are processes involving tokenings of expressions of this language.¹⁷ On the LOT account concepts are "words" of *Mentalese*. Some concepts correspond to singular terms, some to predicates, and so on. Just as in the case of words, there are concepts (types) and tokens of these types. My concept of, for example, Jerry Fodor is a type – a mental word *Fodor* that is tokened on various occasions.

Exactly how concepts should be individuated is controversial. Among the proposed determinants of a concept are its vehicle, reference, mode of presentation, and conceptual role. By "vehicle" I mean features of the way the concept is realized in the brain. A concept's mode of presentation is the way it presents or purports to present its reference.¹⁸ For example, the perceptual concept that I am now tokening of my computer screen presents it in a particular way (as black on white with blue borders, as in front of me, etc.). A concept's conceptual role involves the class of causal and/or inferential relations among thoughts (and other *Mentalese* expressions) that contain the concept. For concepts in general, there is controversy concerning whether all, a special subclass, or none of a concept's conceptual role is individuating of the concept.¹⁹ But, as we will see, it is plausible that a PC does have a unique conceptual role. A concept's mode of presentation and its conceptual role are distinct but related. In the case of some concepts, for example the first person concept *I*, it is plausible that the unique way in which the concept presents the thinker to herself is completely determined by its conceptual role. Whether the modes of presentation of PCs are determined by their conceptual roles will be discussed below.

In this framework PCs, being concepts, are particular kinds of words in *Mentalese*. This framework will allow us to raise the question of what (if anything) is special about PCs by discussing what is special about their vehicle, reference, mode of presentation, and conceptual role.

v) Phenomenal and Psychological Concepts

¹⁶ The originator and foremost exponent of this view is Jerry Fodor; see e.g. Fodor (1975).

¹⁷ *Mentalese* is a hypothesized language over whose expressions mental processes are defined. It is a language in the way that computer languages are languages and of course is not a language for communication. Some philosophers resist the LOT hypothesis but it is widely employed in cognitive psychological models of mental processes.

¹⁸ For some concepts, e.g. descriptions, the concept's reference is determined by its mode of presentation. But for other concepts, for example names, reference may be determined by more than, or factors other than, the mode of presentation.

¹⁹ Holists (e.g. Ned Block 1994) say all of the role is individuating, molecularists (e.g. Peacocke 1992) say just some, and atomists (e.g. Fodor 1987) say none.

It is important to distinguish PCs from what have been called “psychological concepts.”²⁰ Psychological concepts characterize mental states functionally in terms of causal relations with stimuli, other states, and behavior and are distinct from PCs.²¹ For example, the psychological concept *itch** may be (simplistically) characterized as the *state that is caused by tissue irritation and causes scratching*.²² In contrast, the PC *itch* picks out a certain sensation (**itch**) directly, without the mediation of a functional or behavioral mode of presentation. A psychological concept is a third person concept in the sense that the mental state that it refers to does not play any direct role in the mental machinery associated with the concept nor does the concept contain any reference to the subject.

Fifty years ago or so most philosophers of mind would have declared that there cannot be PCs. I have in mind the verificationist and behaviorist views that dominated philosophy of mind in the mid-twentieth century and still linger in some places. Wittgenstein (1953), in his famous private language argument,²³ argues that for a term (concept) to have meaning (or reference) it must be possible to intersubjectively check whether an application of that term is correct.²⁴ The third person psychological concept of *itch* just mentioned is like this since in principle anybody can check whether or not a person is in a state that satisfies the characteristic causal role. But PCs, if they exist, are not like that. This led him to the view that first person attributions of

²⁰ The term “psychological concepts” was introduced by Chalmers (1996).

²¹ There are two ways of understanding functional characterizations of properties. One as picking out the first order state type, if there is one, that satisfies the functional characterization and the other as picking out the second order functional property specified by the functional characterization.

²² Concepts of experience that characterize their referents representationally are, in a physicalist framework, special cases of psychological concepts.

²³ His remarks in §§ 243-315 are often referred to as the “Private Language Argument”.

²⁴ Wittgenstein puts the point this way:

Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign “S” and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.—I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated.—But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition.—How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation — and so, as it were, point to it inwardly.—But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign.—Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress upon myself the connection between the sign and the sensation.—But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’.
(1953, § 258)

sensations don't possess truth conditions but rather are used to express pain in something of the way an exclamation "ouch" does. However, few philosophers now would accept this radical conclusion.

Some hold (e.g. Chalmers 1996, 2006a) that psychological and phenomenal concepts are so different (and different in such a way) that they cannot refer to the same property. Other philosophers of a physicalist persuasion think they might, even though they present their referent in very different ways.²⁵

3) *Desiderata for a theory of phenomenal concepts*

Here is a list of semantic/epistemic features that PCs have been held to have in relation to phenomenal consciousness. An obvious constraint on the adequacy of an account of PCs is that it either has to explain them, or it has to explain them *away*, that is, show why claims about these features seem plausible even though nothing real corresponds to them.

- a) *Acquaintance. We know our conscious states not by inference but by immediate acquaintance which gives us direct, unmediated, substantial insight into their nature.*
- b) *Asymmetric epistemology. We are directly aware of our own conscious states in ways no one else can be. As we have observed above, one can be aware of one's conscious states simply by attending to them; to be aware of others' conscious states one has to observe their behavior.*
- c) *Infallibility/incorrigibility intuition. We seem to be infallible about certain judgments involving certain phenomenal concepts – for example, my judging 'phenomenal red is occurring right now'. The reason we tend to believe this is that it doesn't seem as though any belief concerning objective matters of fact can coherently override or correct our own judgment about what we feel when it occurs simultaneously with the experience.*
- d) *Transparency. When one turns one's attention to one's own conscious perceptual experience, one is aware of the features of the objects perceived.* There is a stronger version of the transparency thesis advocated by *representationalists*.²⁶
- e) *Experience Thesis. Only subjects who have undergone or at least are currently undergoing*

²⁵ Papineau (2002, 97-98) makes the point that natural language psychological words like "pain" are ambiguous between phenomenal and psychological concepts of pain or perhaps express a concept that is an amalgam of the two.

²⁶ See e.g. Harman (1990), Tye (2000), and Jackson (2004) for transparency arguments. Representationalists argue that when one attends to one's conscious experience one is aware *only* of the representational content of the experience, or, alternatively, *only* of features of the objects perceived, and conclude from this that, contrary to common sense, there are no intrinsic, qualitative, introspectable features of conscious experience. This is a controversial thesis that runs counter to the acquaintance thesis. I am merely noting the disagreement; we cannot go into the merits of the argument here.

the relevant phenomenal states can acquire the corresponding phenomenal concepts.

- f) *Fineness of grain. There is a fineness of grain in experience that cannot be captured by the phenomenal concepts possessed by the subject of experience; certainly not by concepts that can be applied and reapplied in thought.* We can discriminate between millions of different shades of color experiences, but we can only form at most a few dozen standing color experience concepts.
- g) *Semantic stability. PCs refer to the same properties independently of the actual context; i.e. their extension can be determined independently of any empirical discoveries.* In contrast, the reference of semantically unstable concepts (like e.g. *water*, which refers to the liquid, transparent, etc. stuff that the thinker is in contact with) is actual context dependent.
- h) *The conceivability of zombies. A scenario in which zombies exist cannot be ruled out on a priori grounds.* Zombies are creatures that are physically exactly like human beings – they move like us, apparently speak and behave intelligently – but they completely lack phenomenal experience. There is “nothing it’s like” to be them. Zombies are conceivable, since no amount of information couched in physical and causal terms is a priori logically sufficient for the application of a basic PC. Whatever a person may learn about the causal role or neurophysiological nature of what is going on in her (or anyone else’s) brain (or any physically characterized facts) is obviously not a priori sufficient for her to judge that she is experiencing a particular qualia. In contrast, some philosophers claim, all other truths, for example the truth that there is water in the Danube, are a priori derivable from the full physical²⁷ truth.
- i) *The explanatory gap. A closely related issue is what Joe Levine (2001: 76-80) calls the “explanatory gap” between physical and phenomenal descriptions, i.e. between a physical description of a person who is having certain experiences, however detailed and informative, and a phenomenal description of those same experiences.* No current accounts bridge the gap, and the gap appears to be in principle *unbridgeable*. The problem doesn’t seem to be that we don’t know enough of the functioning of neurons and their interconnections. We certainly will learn a lot more about all that in the future. One way to explicate the difference between the usual perspicuous reductive explanations we encounter in science and the putative cognitive or neuro-physiological reductive explanations of phenomenal consciousness is that whereas the hypothesis that phenomenal consciousness is non-physical will always seem *comprehensible*, the hypothesis that, for example, water is not H₂O but some non-physical property just doesn’t seem intelligible.

Many find (a)-(i) deeply mysterious. Some of these features present a challenge to any theorist of phenomenal concepts. However, they, and especially semantic stability, the conceivability of zombies, and the explanatory gap, are particularly worrisome if one is a physicalist, and so wants to show that both phenomenal experiences and our concepts of them are physical in nature.

²⁷ Chalmers (1996).

4) *Anti-physicalist arguments*

Though a number of different dualist arguments have been proposed in the last thirty years,²⁸ all of them have to do with one of the epistemic/semantic features listed above. I am going to summarize some of the main lines of argument below.²⁹

The conceivability of zombies. The conceivability of zombies, or some equivalent thesis, has been the key premise in so-called conceivability arguments. A statement S is conceivable³⁰ iff it can't be ruled out a priori. Accordingly, zombies are conceivable since no phenomenal statement is a priori derivable from information couched in physical and causal terms. Some dualists (e.g. Chalmers in this volume) claim that this sets phenomenal truths apart from all other truths; truths about water, or mountains, stars, or tables, are, on this view a priori derivable from the basic physical truths.

The other key premise of the argument is that if zombies are conceivable, they are possible. If, as follows, zombies are possible, then there are some truths that are not metaphysically necessitated by the complete physical truth about the world, and therefore physicalism is false.

The explanatory gap. The gap argument starts from the premise that there is no perspicuous explanatory relation between a physical description of a person undergoing some experiences, and a phenomenal description of those same experiences. The problem is related to the conceivability of zombies, but it can be stated without appealing to the notion of conceivability, or any thesis linking conceivability and possibility, and so has the advantage that it doesn't rely on any substantial assumptions about concepts and conceptual truths. It only relies on a contrast between the *comprehensibility* of the hypothesis that phenomenal consciousness is non-physical and the *incomprehensibility* of corresponding hypotheses involving properties figuring in the special sciences, for example, heat, life, digestion, etc.

The key premise of the gap argument is that if physicalism is true there can be no explanatory gap between true descriptions of a phenomenon and some physical description of the same phenomenon. But, the argument goes, since there is an explanatory gap between phenomenal descriptions and *any* neurophysiological description, physicalism is false.

²⁸ Kripke (1972), Nagel (1974), Jackson (1982), Robinson (1993), Bealer (1994), Chalmers (1996, and this volume), White (2007), and Nida-Rümelin (2007).

²⁹ I will confine myself here to the conceivability and gap arguments. Arguments from semantic stability are based on variations of the premise that if all the concepts in some identity claim are semantically stable then its truth or falsity can be determined a priori, coupled with the claim that psychophysical identities contain semantically stable terms and yet they are a posteriori. From these premises dualism follows. The exact definition of semantic stability and the formulation of the corresponding arguments are too complicated to go into in this discussion. Related arguments are Nida-Rümelin (2007), and White (2007); Chalmers' (2006 and this volume) two-dimensional framework also yields a version of the argument.

³⁰ Chalmers (2002) distinguishes between two notions of conceivability: positive, and negative conceivability. I am going to rely on the notion of negative conceivability here, given its greater clarity and simplicity.

There is a physicalist reply to these arguments that is based on the idea that a zombie can meaningfully mimic these arguments and arrive at a false conclusion (Balog 1999). But this reply leaves the puzzling epistemic features the dualist arguments rely on unexplained. A stronger reply to the dualist arguments would be to show that these features can be explained physicalistically. Since (a)-(i) are all epistemic/semantic in nature, and our epistemic relation to phenomenal consciousness is mediated by PCs, it is plausible that (a)-(i) will be explicable by appeal to the nature of PCs. The insight that is at the core of what came to be called the “Phenomenal Concept Strategy”³¹ is that to account for the key epistemic/semantic features of PCs we do not need to invoke the nature of phenomenal consciousness itself; it is enough to invoke the special nature of PCs. To what extent this is possible is the key issue both from the point of view of theories of PCs and from the point of view of the ontology of mind. This is what we are going to discuss in the next two sections.

But before that I would like to mention another type of physicalist response to the dualist arguments: *analytic functionalism* or *analytic representationalism*.³² Analytic functionalism or representationalism is a doctrine about the *meaning* of phenomenal terms; it is the doctrine that such meanings can be analyzed in functional or representational terms. *Pain*, for example, according to the analytic functionalism, has a conceptual role that connects it (in the meaning-constituting way) with complex concepts like *typically caused by injury*, *typically causes avoidance behavior*, *typically causes saying “ouch”*, etc. Analytic functionalism or representationalism rebuts the conceivability arguments by denying the premise that zombies are conceivable.³³ Anything that has an internal state that plays the appropriate causal roles/has such and such a representational profile (and zombies do have such states) is, by definition, in pain. Analytic functionalism/representationalism, of course, has to explain why zombies seem conceivable even though they are not.

However, this view, just like the analytic behaviorism that is sometimes attributed to Wittgenstein, runs into problems with the first person applications of PCs. In our first person – and usually considered basic – applications of phenomenal concepts functional role/representational profile is not even in play. We can apply phenomenal terms *directly* to the phenomenal states that we are currently aware of, without the mediation of any functional, representational, behavioral, or physical definition or physical criteria. Therefore it doesn’t seem that such criteria can constitute the meaning of phenomenal terms.³⁴ Also, analytic functionalism

³¹ Stoljar (2005) introduced this phrase.

³² See e.g. Lewis (1966) and Jackson (2003).

³³ See also Kirk (2005) for an interesting argument against the conceivability of zombies whose grounds go beyond analytic functionalism.

³⁴ Functionalism or representationalism about phenomenal experience is not disputed here. For all we said about analytic functionalism/representationalism, functionalists/representationalists (e.g. Harman 1990, Tye 2000) might be right that qualia are functional/representational states, or, at any rate, it might be that every phenomenally conscious experience always is representational (though this is a contentious claim for e.g. bodily sensations). What is at issue is whether PCs can be *analyzed* in functional/representational terms.

or representationalism cannot account for many of the features on our list (a)-(i). Because of these problems, a majority of philosophers have taken a different approach.

5) The “Phenomenal Concept Strategy”

Most recent theories of phenomenal concepts are driven by a desire to provide an account of phenomenal concepts that explains features a-i. Dualists appeal to non-physical *qualia* whose very nature is to be *present to* the mind, to be objects of immediate awareness by acquaintance. They tend to think acquaintance is a primitive relation; or they attribute its special nature to the non-physical nature of qualia themselves.³⁵ They attempt to explain (a)-(i) by this special, non-physical nature of qualia and acquaintance, and they maintain that the conceivability of zombies is explained by their possibility, and the explanatory gap is explained by an ontological gap. This approach has been criticized by physicalists as merely labelling a mystery, instead of making a serious attempt to deal with it. More to the point, there are also serious problems with dualist metaphysics, one of which is the problem of how a non-physical property can causally engage the rest of the cognitive system.

Physicalists, on the other hand, try to explain (a)-(i) in a manner compatible with physicalism. A satisfactory explanation would be one on which (a)-(i), far from posing a problem for the physicalist view, turned out to be features the physicalist would *expect* to arise in our relation to phenomenal consciousness. On this view, metaphysical dualism is false; however, there is a *dualism of concepts*. PCs are unlike other concepts in ways that have very significant ramifications for how we ordinarily think about the mind, specifically, they are responsible for our inclination to believe in dualism – even though dualism is false.

The *locus classicus* for the Phenomenal Concept Strategy is Brian Loar’s paper “Phenomenal States”.³⁶ Loar suggested the idea that PCs are *direct recognitional* concepts.³⁷ Abstracting from some of the details, what he seems to have in mind is that when a person is having a particular experience she can deploy a concept that refers directly to that experience; Loar also suggests that the mode of presentation of a PC involves the experience itself.

We can understand the subsequent discussion of PCs as developing two different strands in Loar’s original proposal. One kind of account elaborates on the idea that PCs *refer directly*,³⁸ so

³⁵ Some dualists, for example, Chalmers (2003), have more to say about acquaintance and phenomenal concepts. I’ll discuss those proposals below.

³⁶ Loar (1990/1997). The idea that the mind-body problem is a product of the special ways in which we conceive (in the first person) of our phenomenal states is first formulated in this paper. A similar proposal by Scott Sturgeon (1994) appeals to the special epistemology of phenomenal states.

³⁷ Loar, like other proponents of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy, focuses his attention on the *basic* applications of PCs, and thinks about the non-basic applications as somehow derivative of the more central, basic cases. See the earlier discussion of basic and non-basic applications of PCs.

³⁸ Stoljar (2005) argues that there are analyticities involving phenomenal concepts and that this refutes the idea – integral to the Phenomenal Concept Strategy – that PCs are direct and

it emphasizes the *special conceptual role* of PCs; the other tries also to make good Loar's suggestion that *the mode of presentation* of PCs in some way involves the experience itself. I am going to sketch the basic ideas underlying these theories in the rest of this section.

A) *Direct reference accounts*

Those who focus on the directness of the reference of phenomenal concepts have proposed *causal-recognitional*, *demonstrative*, or *information-theoretic accounts*.

i) *Causal-recognitional account*: Tye (2003), for example, claims that PCs are special recognitional concepts that refer directly. They have no associated reference-fixing descriptions; their mode of presentation is empty, so to speak. According to Tye, PCs refer via the causal connection they have with their referents. On this account, a phenomenal concept *C*,

refers to a phenomenal quality *Q* via *C*'s being the concept that is exercised in an introspective act of awareness by person *P* if, and only if, under normal conditions of introspection, *Q* is tokened in *P*'s current experience and because *Q* is tokened. (Tye 2003, p. 7)

But since someone could be wired to recognize another person's brain-states (that happen to be phenomenal states), it is clear that to be a PC it is not enough to be a recognitional concept of a phenomenal state. Tye thinks that for the concept to be a PC it also has to have the right sort of functional role. This functioning, however, cannot be specified a priori in a way that eschews any phenomenal language.

ii) *Demonstrative account*: A number of philosophers have suggested that PCs are a sort of demonstrative. On Perry's account (2001), PCs are demonstratives, equivalent to something like "this qualitative character", where the demonstrative is guided by a perceptual state to its referent. Levin, on the other hand, suggests that PCs are type-demonstratives without any mode of presentation at all. She thinks physicalists "should reject the claim that phenomenal concepts require some sort of "presence" of, or "acquaintance" withthe quality denoted, since this claim is backed only by the intuitions that they have already explained away." (2006, p.15)³⁹

unanalyzable. However, his examples merely show that there are analytically necessary conditions on something being a conscious state but not there are analytically *sufficient* conditions, and this is all a proponent of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy needs to be committed to.

³⁹ Chalmers (2003) criticizes demonstrative accounts on the grounds that demonstratives pointing to current experience have different cognitive significance from direct phenomenal concepts evidenced by the fact that I can conceive of the experience I am demonstrating to myself right now as having a different character from what it actually has.

iii) *Information-theoretic account*: Aydede and Güzeldere (2005) have proposed an information-theoretic analysis of the special relation between phenomenal concepts and sensory concepts. On this account, we are wired to acquire sensory concepts from our experiences (for example, concepts of particular colors, sounds, shapes, etc. are triggered by the corresponding experiences). These sensory concepts double as phenomenal concepts when we use the same cognitive structures in introspection.

All of the above accounts are aimed at explaining the conceivability of zombies and the explanatory gap in a manner compatible with physicalism. The main point is that there is nothing in the idea of direct reference appealed to in the recognitional and demonstrative accounts that is at odds with physicalism – but once you have concepts that refer directly in the way suggested by these accounts, the conceivability of zombies and the existence of the explanatory gap will follow. Consequently, the conceivability of zombies and the existence of the explanatory gap are compatible with physicalism.

These accounts, however, are less successful at explaining some other features on our list.⁴⁰ An examination of (a)-(i) suggests that a successful account of PCs will posit an intimate co(a)-(i)nnnection between conscious states and the concepts we form of them. We can see this by considering that the above accounts conceive of PCs and their referents as distinct existences related by causation. It seems that this leaves too much of a distance between, for example, a basic application of the PC *pain* to a particular pain as it occurs and the particular pain itself, as on this view their occurrence is independent. In particular, it is conceivable on this account that a basic application of *pain* be tokened by someone in the complete absence of pain. But it seems that this is really inconceivable. Anybody who tokens a basic application of *pain* is really in pain.

Loar tried to capture the special intimacy between phenomenal concepts and phenomenal states by proposing that the mode of presentation of a PC involves the experience itself that the concept refers to. If thinking about one's own current pain already somehow involves pain itself then the situations we have been talking about are ruled out. But how should this idea be best understood? As Papineau⁴¹ points out, by 'mode of presentation' we cannot mean an associated *description* that we can already think and use to refer to an entity which has those properties the description attributes. That would be presupposing PCs in the explanation of those very concepts. We have to think about the mode of presentation of PCs in some other way.

B) *The special modes of presentation of PCs*

Carruthers (2004) is another proponent of the recognitional account: he proposes that PCs are *pure* recognitional concepts; that is, recognitional concepts that don't have any descriptive modes of presentation. However, he does seem to think that there is something like a mode of presentation that guides PCs to their referents. Carruthers observes that via our introspective judgments we are *acquainted* with our experiences, and he proposes that to account for the acquaintance relationship we need to posit higher order experiences of experiences that guide our

⁴⁰ Some philosophers – for example, Dennett (1991), Levin (2006), – deny these other features of our epistemic access to consciousness.

⁴¹ Papineau (2002), ch. 4.

PCs to their referents. This is because he thinks that an account of PCs should “accommodate our sense that we are directly *aware of* what grounds the application of a phenomenal concept, in a way that need involve no a priori connections with non-phenomenal concepts” (2004, p. 17). These higher order experiences, he believes, are riding piggyback on our first order experiences in that first order experiences, when they are available to a “mind-reading” faculty, themselves acquire higher order analog, experience-representing contents. Each state that is an analog representation with the content red_a is at the same time an analog representation with the content experience of red_a,’ (2004, p. 22)

Just as sensory representations of red guide applications of our concept *red*, these higher order experiences of experiences guide, in a special, direct, yet substantial way, applications of our PC *reddish*.⁴²

Constitutional Account

On Carruthers’s view, the special mode of presentation PCs have is to be accounted for partly by the special nature of phenomenal experiences themselves (that they represents themselves) and partly by the special nature of PCs (they are direct recognitional concepts guided by these self-representing states). There is another way of thinking about PCs which is silent about the nature of phenomenal states but still incorporates Loar’s suggestion that phenomenal states themselves are involved in their own presentation by PCs. This view – the constitutional account – involves variations on the idea that phenomenal concepts are *constituted* by the phenomenal experiences they refer to. More precisely, on this view, every concept *token* applied to current experience is constituted by a current *token* phenomenal experience, and – on most versions of the constitutional account – this fact is crucial in determining the reference of the concept.

On this account, there is an intimate relation between a phenomenal concept and its referent; more intimate than any causal or tracking relation. It is also a way of flashing out the idea that the experience serves as its own mode of presentation. Metaphorically speaking, a token of the reference provides the ink in which the token concept is written.⁴³

In terms of the RTM/LOT model, what is special about PCs then is that, in so far as they have a mode of presentation, it has to do with the special *vehicle* involved in the basic applications of the concept/mental representation.⁴⁴ Not only is it the case that a token state that

⁴² By “reddish” I mean the type of phenomenal experience typically caused by seeing red objects in ordinary light, etc.

⁴³ Notice that this view of PCs is distinct from the self-representational account of phenomenal states. The latter is a view of the nature of phenomenal states and is compatible with constitutional and non-constitutional accounts of PCs (see e.g. Carruthers’ recognitional account), while the former is a view of PCs and is compatible with different accounts of the nature of phenomenal states. Of course, one can combine the self-representational account of the nature of phenomenal states with the constitutional account of PCs and claim that the kind of self-representation that is essential for a sensory state to be phenomenally conscious is just to be represented by a PC partly constituted by the sensory state itself. *Ouroboros* indeed.

⁴⁴ That means, among other things, that PCs in their basic applications simply don’t have descriptive modes of presentation.

realizes a token concept is also a token of the referent, but it is *because* the concept is so constituted that it so refers. Unlike most concepts – for example, the concept *dog*, where it doesn't matter exactly what neural configurations constitute a particular token of *dog* as long as the requisite causal/informational relations between it and dogs hold – in the case of phenomenal concepts, for example, the concept *pain*, constitution matters for reference, both in terms of how the reference is determined, and in terms of how the concept cognitively “presents” its reference.

Versions of this view have been proposed, on the physicalist side, by Hill and McLaughlin (1999), Papineau (2002, 2006), Balog (2006), and Block (2006), and David Chalmers (2003) put forward a variation of this account on the dualist side.

The constitutional account can explain many features of our epistemic relation to phenomenal consciousness on our list *a-i*. Take the infallibility of certain kinds of phenomenal judgments. On the constitutional account, tokens of a phenomenal concept that refers to a particular type of visual experience, say reddish, are constituted in part by tokens of that type of experience. Then, for example, in a basic application of the judgment '*I am experiencing reddish*' one's judgment cannot fail to be true.

Semantic stability is also easily explainable on the constitutional account. PCs refer to the same properties independently of the actual context because – according to the constitutional account – their reference is determined by their constitution (and conceptual role), and that is independent of any external factors.

Explanations of the other features on the list (*a*)-(*i*) can be constructed on the constitutional account as well. I will only mention the response to the Conceivability Argument that this account of PCs makes possible.

Hill and McLaughlin's paper (1999) is primarily a reply to Chalmers' Conceivability Argument for dualism. Elaborating on a suggestion by Nagel (1974), Hill and McLaughlin argue that phenomenal concepts and physical concepts are governed by very different epistemic constraints, and they presuppose the use of radically different faculties. Since conceiving of zombies requires the joint exercise of phenomenal and physical concepts, they argue, there is no reason to conclude that the conceivability of zombies must be explained by their possibility. As they put it:

“Given...[the] differences between sensory concepts⁴⁵ and physical concepts, a sensory state and its nomologically correlated brain state would *seem* contingently related, even if they were necessarily one.” (1999, p. 449)

On their account, phenomenal concepts are special recognitional concepts that are constituted by their referents:

When one uses a sensory concept to classify one's own current experiences, the experiences that guide and justify one in applying the concept are always identical with the experiences to which the concept is applied. Sensory states are self-presenting states: we experience them, but we do not have sensory experiences of them. We experience them simply by virtue of *being in* them. Sensory concepts are recognitional concepts: deploying such concepts, we can introspectively recognize when we are in sensory states simply by focusing our attention

⁴⁵ “Sensory concepts” in Hill and McLaughlin's usage apply to what we have called phenomenal concepts.

directly on them. (1999, p. 448)

Block (2007) has a similar view of phenomenal concepts. He discusses the nature of phenomenal concepts in the context of the many versions of the Property Dualism Argument (see, e.g. White 2007) a close relative of the Conceivability Argument:

...if a token phenomenal feel does double duty... (as a token of an aspect of both the pain and our way of thinking of the pain), no extra specter of dualism arises. If the phenomenal feel is a physical property, then it is a physical property even when it (or a token of it) does double duty. (Block 2007, p. 263)

There are many questions the constitutional account raises, but one is particularly urgent: how do phenomenal concepts come to refer to experiences that they themselves exemplify? How does the constitution relation determine or partly determine the reference of a phenomenal concept? The idea that it does seems strange, since it is not the case for most concepts. The concept *dog* is not constituted by dogs, and the fact that the concept *atom* is constituted by atoms has nothing to do with why it refers to atoms. The problem of how phenomenal concepts refer is a pressing one for philosophers across the board; but whereas dualists can appeal to a primitive relation of acquaintance, physicalists are under a strict obligation to provide a naturalistic account; that is, an account that appeals only to physicalistically respectable entities and properties.

The idea of an item partly constituting a representation that refers to that item is reminiscent of how linguistic quotation works. The referent of “___” is exemplified by whatever fills in the blank. In a quotation expression, a token of the referent is literally a constituent of the expression that refers to a type which it exemplifies and that expression has its reference (at least partly) in virtue of the properties of its constituent. Some physicalists have tried to follow up on this idea to explain the reference of phenomenal concepts.

Papineau (2002) has put forward one of the most elaborate versions of the constitutional account. He suggests that phenomenal concepts are formed by prefixing perceptual experiences with the operator ‘the experience...’. He calls this the quotational account of phenomenal concepts. He hopes to give an answer to questions about the reference of phenomenal concepts by invoking teleosemantics:

We should also note that phenomenal concepts are compound referring terms (composed of an ‘experience operator’ and a ‘perceptual filling’). ...[A] causal or teleosemantic account of phenomenal concepts will view the contribution of the parts to the semantic value of the whole as depending on the systematic contribution which those parts make to the causes or biological functions of the wholes they enter into. (2002, p. 117)

Papineau (2007), however, apparently in keeping with the teleosemantic account, claims that the fact that phenomenal concepts are constituted by exemplars of their referent plays no direct role in explaining *why* they so refer. This amounts to a repudiation of the idea that phenomenal concepts work in similar ways to quotation expressions.

Balog (2006), on the other hand, holds that phenomenal concepts are very closely analogous to quotation expressions and that one must look to the *conceptual role* of phenomenal concepts for an explanation of this.

These versions of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy are all meant to support physicalism by invoking the special nature of PCs to explain the epistemic puzzles involving phenomenal consciousness. However, since these accounts are neutral about the nature of phenomenal properties, they can be adopted by a non-physicalist. Chalmers (2003) himself proposes a version of the constitutional account. On such an account, the explanations of most aspects of our epistemic relation to phenomenal consciousness will look much the same with the exception that phenomenal concepts are constituted by non-physical states. However, according to the Phenomenal Concept Strategy, there will now be two parallel explanations of features (a)-(i). Take the conceivability of zombies. The dualist says that zombies are conceivable because phenomenal properties are not physical or functional properties. But this explanation is redundant since, as we have seen, there is an explanation of why zombies are conceivable in terms of the special nature of PCs. Accordingly, the Phenomenal Concept Strategy, if successful, provides support for physicalism and undermines the rationale for dualism.

6) Critics of the Phenomenal Concept Strategy

Levine (2007) observes that our epistemic relation to our own experience (i.e. our acquaintance with it) seems *substantive* in a way that differs from our epistemic relation to anything else. He thinks that accounts of phenomenal concepts that appeal to directness of reference or constitution falter on the fact that they cannot really explain the substantivity of acquaintance. Directness of reference doesn't in itself explain the substantive nature of acquaintance. Constitutional accounts try to explain the substantivity of acquaintance by appeal to the *cognitive presence* of phenomenal properties in our phenomenal concepts, which, in turn, is explained by *physical presence*. This last move, however, according to Levine, is bound to fail.

In a related vein, Chalmers (2007) poses an intriguing dilemma for the Phenomenal Concept Strategy. Let C be the physicalist's account of phenomenal concepts, or the physicalist's account of *key features* of these concepts responsible for our epistemic relation to phenomenal consciousness. He argues that if a scenario physically exactly like ours is conceivable where C is missing, then C is not physically explicable. On the other hand, if such a scenario is not conceivable then C cannot explain our epistemic situation.

These criticisms provide challenges for the Phenomenal Concept Strategy. There are other worries for the strategy relating to how, on a physicalist account, determinate reference to an objective property can be achieved by subjective phenomenal concepts (see e.g. Papineau 2002, ch. 7). Many of these problems require purely philosophical treatment; however, one might wonder if in the future psychology and neuro-science will not play a larger role in our quest to understand phenomenal consciousness and acquaintance.

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