

VOLUME 48 NUMBER 1 MARCH/MARS 2009

*Canadian
Philosophical
Review*

DIALOGUE

*Revue
canadienne de
philosophie*



The Canadian Philosophical Association
L'Association canadienne de philosophie

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Explaining the Qualitative Dimension of Consciousness: Precission Instead of Reification

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ABSTRACT: This paper suggests that it is largely a want of notional distinctions which fosters the “explanatory gap” that has beset the study of consciousness since T. Nagel’s revival of the topic. Modifying Ned Block’s controversial claim that we should countenance a “phenomenal-consciousness” which exists in its own right, we argue that there is a way to recuperate the intuitions he appeals to without engaging in an onerous reification of the facet in question. By renewing with the full type/token/tone trichotomy developed by C. S. Peirce, we think the distinctness Block (rightly) calls attention to can be seen as stemming not from any separate module lurking within the mind, but rather from our ability to prescind qualities from occurrences.

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article suggère que «le fossé dans l’explication» qui tracasse la réflexion sur la conscience depuis le renouveau instauré par T. Nagel est dû en grande partie à un défaut de distinctions notionnelles. En modifiant l’affirmation controversée de Ned Block que nous devrions accepter la présence d’une «conscience-phénoménale» ayant une existence propre, nous soutenons qu’il est possible de récupérer les intuitions qui sous-tendent cette proposition sans pour autant endosser une trop coûteuse réification de la facette en question. En recouvrant la trichotomie complète en «type/token/tone» développée par C. S. Peirce, nous croyons que la spécificité sur laquelle Block attire (avec justesse) l’attention peut être conçue comme découlant non pas d’un quelconque module opérant furtivement dans l’esprit, mais bien de notre capacité de prescindir les qualités des occurrences.

Dialogue 48 (2009), 145-183. Printed in the U.S.A.

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doi:10.1017/S0012217309090088

It's not hard to see how philosophers have tied themselves into such knots over qualia. They started where anyone with any sense would start: with their strongest and clearest intuitions about their own minds. Those intuitions, alas, form a mutually self-supporting closed circle of doctrines, imprisoning their imaginations in the Cartesian Theater.

Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 1991

[I]f we ask what has been the impact of semiotics upon philosophy over the course of the 20th century, to answer anything beyond "marginal" would be an exaggeration. This situation, as I read it, is about to change dramatically.

John N. Deely, "The Impact of Semiotics on Philosophy" (paper delivered at the first annual homage to Oscar Parland, University of Helsinki, December 1, 2000)

Introduction

Apparently, it is a little-known fact that the type/token distinction should be *threefold*; the notion unwarrantedly left-out being the *tone*. Although one could seek to redress this harmful omission purely in the name of exegetic fidelity, heeding C. S. Peirce's complete type/token/tone trichotomy can actually help current philosophy out of many quagmires. Specifically, the notion of tone seems tailor-made to explain the qualitative aspect of consciousness. One of the leading concerns animating contemporary philosophy of mind is that no matter how good a scientific account is, it will leave out the feeling of "what it's like" to be conscious. The topic is a particularly hot one at the moment, and has grown into an industry of industrious arguments for and against (see for example Wright 2008). But if the thesis we recommend in this paper is correct, much of this effort is misplaced. Unfortunately, we think philosophers of mind are grappling with their elusive object of study by means of a notional bipartition fundamentally ill-suited to the task.

Our endeavour will be part history of philosophy, part pure philosophy, and—hopefully—part future of philosophy as well. We shall look back at the past with a critical eye, identify a missed opportunity, and present a remediation of this situation that (among other benefits) points the way to a better theoretical understanding of conscious life. We will begin by recapping in generic form a common contemporary take on the mind-body problem (section 1). In an effort to recover some lost insights that might have important repercussions for that debate, we will outline the historical thrust animating Peirce's work (section 2), and then present in an abstract fashion the categorial schema which undergirds his type/token/tone distinction (section 3). With this two-pronged diachronic-synchronic retrieval in place, we will stake out how pre-scission might offer a better way to account for qualia (section 4). As a case study on the benefits of this conception, we will analyze Ned Block's controversial ideas about "phenomenal-consciousness" (section 5), and see whether they might profit from being reformulated in terms of the complete trichotomy

previously canvassed (section 6). Although this article is intended mainly as a contribution intersecting semiotics and philosophy of mind, we will end by addressing some likely metaphysical concerns (section 7).

Our goal throughout will be not to corner the reader into some argumentative “clincher” aggressively forcing her to adopt a given thesis, but rather to lay out an alternative way of “picturing” a particularly troublesome aspect of the cognitive situation. The issue of whether to take up a certain perspective instead of another is what Rudolf Carnap would have called an “external” question. This doesn’t mean, however, that there is no fact of the matter or that the choice is wholly unconstrained; it just means people are always free to choose. Now fecundity is surely a factor in such decisions, as is long-term promise. But primitive proclivities are undoubtedly strong determinants as well, and can sometimes issue vetoes in the face of more rational considerations. One would hope, however, that reigning intuitions can eventually be exchanged for better ones, if there is a genuine openness to the prospect. Such a project is admittedly ambitious—some would no doubt say exceedingly so. Still, it is this optimistic assumption which has driven our bid.

1. What it’s like

Very few theorists drawn to the study of consciousness demonstrate much inclination for historical matters. That is understandable enough. After all, the seemingly intractable mysteries of subjective experience are arguably as far as one can get from publicly-observable events long past. Perhaps this explains why, in spite of the fact that pretty much everyone agrees that the mind-body problem as we know it essentially begins with the reflections of Descartes, few theorists actually consider the question from such a wide historical angle. As we shall see in the next section, this is not without its consequences. Be that as it may, most contemporary accounts of the debate over the nature of consciousness tend to adopt a more proximate starting point. So that’s where we’ll start too.

A fitting moment in this regard (to choose but one notable landmark) is Thomas Nagel’s 1974 essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” As Paul Churchland writes, “Nagel’s compact argument is a prominent flag around which much antireductive opinion has rallied” (1996, p. 196). Indeed, the paper deserves mention for the manner in which it defiantly challenged the then-prevalent “wave of reductionist euphoria” (Nagel [1974] 1997, p. 519).¹ But Nagel’s polemic was no mere curiosity, and went on to find a wider audience (and contribute to a weakening of its opponents) precisely because it gave voice to a compelling intuition most feel should be binding for explanations of consciousness generally. If Frege’s militant anti-psychologism marked the beginning of a long period of disrepute for the very idea of consciousness in many philosophical circles, Nagel’s work heralded a resurgence of interest in the topic. Such a return was in all likelihood inevitable, and the central merit of Nagel’s paper is that it craftily goaded that all-too-human trait, curiosity. As Gary Gutting remarks, “Those with strong naturalist inclinations are free to

give up thinking about issues that do not admit of rigorous empirical treatment. But doing so will not eliminate the body of traditionally philosophical issues that cannot be so treated, nor the general human need to engage such issues” (1998, p. 11). Although the vocabulary itself was (and remains) rather coarse, Nagel’s original idea of an elusive “what it’s like” dimension proper to conscious life captured an important aspect that is seemingly left out by most theoretical accounts.

By its very nature, the idea Nagel gestured at makes for a very slippery object of discourse. Colin McGinn, for instance, borrows the biological perspective adopted by Nagel and turns it on its head. We shall never know what it’s like to be a bat, Nagel argued, because as life forms we simply shall never be bats. McGinn basically accepts this argument, but then gives it a reflexive twist. On this view, our humanity may give us enough insight into ourselves to have an intuitive sense that there is something “it is like” for us to be the conscious beings we are; however, that same humanity prevents our inquiries from attaining a robust theoretical comprehension of this qualitative facet. As a result, McGinn suggests that just “as traditional theologians found themselves conceding cognitive closure with respect to certain of the properties of God, so we should look seriously at the idea that the mind-body problem brings us bang up against the limits of our capacity to understand the world” ([1989] 1997, p. 532). If this turns out to be correct and the worries which are typically brought on by the study of consciousness are fundamentally the product of an insurmountable impediment, then it is difficult to see what theorists could do about that fact—save commit themselves to some sort of methodological embargo on all things subjective. For those who believe the difficulties at hand are of this nature, such renunciation is not an option, but a *fait accompli*.

That strategy would of course reprise the general leitmotif of most twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophizing about consciousness, human or otherwise. Such resignation notwithstanding,² it seems right to acknowledge that despite its relative remoteness from the standpoint of theory, each of us knows intimately what it’s like to enjoy conscious experience. Fully aware of how much explanation-worthy material is left behind when we refuse to tackle the issue of “what it’s like” for us to be the sorts of beings we are,³ Nagel’s essay thus made it a point to push for a more hopeful gloss of the situation, provocatively spurring the troops to action, as it were. For it could very well be that the difficulties which accompany inquiries into the “what it’s like” side of consciousness are *epistemological*. If this is so, then it seems more reasonable to hope that the difficulties can indeed be overcome—if only through an arduous re-conceptualization of our basic assumptions.

As Nagel cleverly points out, we would likely scoff at a Martian race’s contention that their (supposedly exhaustive) reductionist account of our species shows our conscious experiences to be illusory: “We know they would be wrong to draw such a skeptical conclusion because we know what it is like to be us” ([1974] 1997, p. 521). Truth be told, we generally scoff at humans too

when they make that remarkable claim. In any event, such a privileged insight provides the theorist with a point of entry to exploit; thereby reviving hopes that a rigorous solution to the difficulties at hand, no matter how elusive, might be in the offing. In fact, Nagel underscored that while this qualitative aspect of our cognitive lives “includes an enormous amount of variation and complexity, and while we do not possess the vocabulary to describe it adequately, its subjective character is *highly specific*, and in some respects *describable* in terms that can be understood only by creatures like us” (ibid.; our emphasis).

Nagel’s work thus left subsequent Anglo-American philosophizing in a peculiar situation. On the one hand, it contributed to a revival of interest in the question of “what it’s like” to be conscious, adding enough of a biological-*cum*-cognitive twist to the standard mind-body problem to make it palatable again. But while Nagel refused to neatly segregate the two aspects into incommensurate domains, he vividly underscored the epistemological difficulties that await any attempt at bridging the apparent divide, stressing that while “[p]erhaps a theoretical form can be devised for the purpose, . . . such a solution, if it exists, lies in the distant intellectual future” (Nagel [1974] 1997, p. 519). This prompts McGinn to remark that “[d]espite his reputation for pessimism over the mind-body problem, a careful reading of Nagel reveals an optimistic strain in his thought” ([1989] 1997, p. 540 n. 9). While Nagel himself was reticent to speculate about what an adequate account of consciousness would look like, there was indeed something prophetic in the way he chose to conclude his classic paper:

At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination—without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. *This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination.* (Nagel [1974] 1997, p. 525; our emphasis)

What we want to do now is try and show that one need not look to the “distant intellectual future” to find the “objective phenomenology” Nagel called for. Specifically, we believe the materials needed to assemble such a robust perspective already exist in semiotics. As we shall see shortly, not only does that tradition benefit from theoretical foundations that *pre-date* the quagmire Descartes bequeathed philosophical modernity, but its quasi-logical organon is perfectly suited to answer Nagel’s central desideratum, namely to “think about the subjective character of experience . . . without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject” (ibid.). Granted, one must be on guard against falling prey to a facile nostalgia which “holds that all major problems have already been solved—or, at least, that a framework for the solution has been provided—by some great philosopher of the past” (Gutting 1998, pp. 12 n. 5ff). But when the facts indeed speak to the availability of pre-existing materials, one must be careful not to turn a blind eye to such resources. Let us then go

back further in time than the contemporary starting point we provisionally adopted.

2. Recovering a discarded patrimony

The day a rebellious young René Descartes walked out the door of the Jesuit college of La Flèche for the last time, we all did. Given that the Frenchman's once-eccentric grievances with scholastic philosophy went on to shape the landscape of discursive acceptability for centuries to come, it is something of an irony that the thinker who would go on to challenge *that* orthodoxy would also turn out to be a freethinking iconoclast. Indeed, some time in the second half of the nineteenth century, a scientist and mathematician by the name of Charles Sanders Peirce, gripped as he was by an unshakeable conviction in the powers of logic ever since he read Richard Whatley's *Elements of Logic* in his youth, took it upon himself to engage in a detailed study of that discipline's underpinnings (see Brent 1998, p. 48). That lifelong project would eventually lead him to breach the methodological imperative that had basically defined the modern mindset since Descartes: "Thou shalt not learn from the Latins"—to borrow John Deely's acerbic but telling characterization in his monumental *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001, p. 613). As Deely recounts:

From Scotus in particular, but also from Fonseca and the Conimbricenses, [Peirce] picked up the trail of the sign. He was never able to follow it as far as the text of Poinset.... Nonetheless, what he picked up from the later Latins was more than enough to convince him that the way of signs, however buried in the underbrush it had become since the moderns made the mistake of going the way of ideas instead, was the road to the future. (ibid.)

Just as Paul Churchland (1988) wants his own brand of "eliminativism" to be distinguished from the more subdued "reductionism" advocated by other scientifically-minded naturalists, so it is more accurate to say that the semiotic inquiry taken up by Peirce is not "anti-Cartesian" but rather *non*-Cartesian. Such a characterization would seem to hold not only theoretically but historically as well. Historically, the most succinct definition of the sign is the scholastic "*Aliquid stat pro aliquo*"—literally "Something stands for something else;" a definition which, as stated, does not prejudge whether the relation at hand is conventional or natural. Although the neutrality implicit in this definition went on to find its most explicit expression only in the seventeenth century with John Poinset's *Tractatus de Signis* ([1632] 2009),⁴ the generic medieval formula dates back to Augustine, a pivotal figure whose synoptic sensitivities led "to the first construction in the history of Western thought that deserves to be called semiotic" (Todorov 1992, pp. 56-57).⁵

Striving to further develop these radically non-Cartesian conceptions, Peirce took the Latin notion of *signum* to a new level of theoretical sophistication. In the course of his studies, Peirce came to hold in particularly high regard the

writings of John Duns Scotus (see Boler 1963), a Franciscan philosopher and theologian whose nuanced doctrines merited him the moniker “the Subtle Doctor.” As he explained,

The works of Duns Scotus have strongly influenced me. If his logic and metaphysics, not slavishly worshipped, but torn away from its medievalism, be adapted to modern culture, under continual wholesome reminders of nominalistic criticisms, I am convinced that it will go far toward supplying the philosophy which is best to harmonize with physical science. (Peirce 1931-58, vol. 1, para. 6)

Central to Scotus’ position was a specific sort of separation which—as the scholastic catchphrase goes—is “more than nominal but less than real.” Peter King handily summarizes the notion as follows: “The core intuition behind Scotus’s formal distinction is, roughly, that *existential inseparability does not entail identity in definition*, backed up by the conviction that this is a fact about the way things are rather than how we conceive of them” (in Williams 2003, p. 22; our emphasis). The intellectual setting that spawned this distinction by Scotus was originally theological, being part of a concerted argumentative defence (from early-Christian times onward) against accusations of polytheism:

How can one reconcile the doctrine of the Trinity with a belief in the unity and simplicity of God? . . . The problems posed by the Trinity supplied the impetus for the development of the distinction. . . . Of course, it was not the *only* field of application, and the formal distinction came to be invoked in solving a host of purely philosophical problems. (Jordan 1984, p. 1)

As it turns out, religious controversies begot a technical arsenal perfectly suited to tackle the study of signs. Indeed, one of Peirce’s most important contributions to semiotic theory was his Scotus-inspired realization that, if one wants to rigorously and systematically unpack all that is implied by the misleadingly obvious notion of “sign,” then one must recognize that every sign manifests both an unbreakable *unity* (as a sign whose significance is transparently given “in a flash,” as it were) and a *multiplicity* (as a “step-by-step” passage from a sign-vehicle to that which it re-presents). Construing any of the components that go into making representation possible as things somehow capable of existing without the collaboration of the others may not obliterate them metaphysically, but it *eo ipso* robs them all of the very significance that allows them to serve useful cognitive functions. Thus, if we dissect a sign any further and start reifying the various parts we have uncovered, we effectively destroy what we wanted to study in the first place, and ensure that these no longer have any representational value. *Mutatis mutandis*, construing the sign as some airtight atom which reflective thought cannot penetrate would drain all the properties that make it a sign.

Peirce first presented his crucial thesis to the *American Academy of Arts and Sciences* in 1867, in a paper titled “On a New List of Categories.” By no means the most mature of his papers (there is for instance a lingering commitment to “substance” that will be pruned soon thereafter), that curt text nevertheless announced to the modern world a rich but forgotten way of approaching some perennial questions of philosophy.

Exclusive attention consists in a definite conception or supposition of one part of an object, without any supposition of the other. Abstraction or *prescission*⁶ ought to be carefully distinguished from two other modes of mental separation, which may be termed discrimination and dissociation. Discrimination has to do merely with the essences of terms, and only draws a distinction in meaning. Dissociation is that separation which, in the absence of a constant association, is permitted by the law of association of images. It is the consciousness of one thing, without the necessary simultaneous consciousness of the other. *Abstraction or prescission, therefore, supposes a greater separation than discrimination, but a less separation than dissociation.* (Peirce 1992, pp. 2-3, our emphasis; see also 1931-58, vol. 1, para. 353; as well as vol. 2, para. 428)

Cary Spinks notes that “prescission is a difficult concept, but it is one of the most powerful developed by Peirce and also one of the few which he keeps throughout his life work” (1991, p. 23).

At the time though, Peirce did not conceive of his endeavours as semiotic per se, instead nursing an ill-fated hope that his discoveries would be adopted by mainstream philosophy. Be that as it may, the notion of tone he would eventually develop is intricately tied to the categorial framework uncovered by prescission. A good way to explain this would be to liken semiotics to geometry. While one would be hard-pressed to find in the natural world a line with no girth or a point with no extension whatever, we nevertheless have the ability to rigorously decompose any three-dimensional space and manipulate the dimensions it subsumes. The organization in such a case is not cardinal, but *ordinal*: nothing in a singular point entails a line or a volume, but the very notion of volume logically implies the line and the point. The geometrical dimensions, we could say, do not lie next to each other, but are instead like Russian dolls nested in one another. Semiotics is articulated around a similar insight. As Peirce showed, any representation perforce involves a genuinely *triadic* relation that cannot be sundered; that is, one which cannot be reduced to the dyadic or the monadic on pain of no longer representing. In order to be meaningful, something (monadic quality) must stand for (dyadic relation) something else and be taken (triadic interpretation) as so standing.⁷ Nevertheless, we can break these three dimensions down and recognize the specific role of each in any bona fide representation.

Peirce died in 1914, his failure to secure a place within the academic establishment during his lifetime (see Brent 1998) effectively bequeathing to future

generations the laborious task of understanding his massive body of unpublished writings. Thus, outside of a handful of influential papers on pragmatism written mainly in the 1870s (which he eventually repudiated),⁸ his later thought remained largely unknown. Peircean scholar Joseph Ransdell recounts that,

As regards Peirce's semiotic in particular, hardly anybody had paid any attention to it at all—it is clear from something Dewey says in his correspondence with Bentley that, prior to the publication of Morris's [1938] article on the foundations of the theory of signs, not even he had previously paid any real attention to that aspect of Peirce's thought.... At most, the term "semiotic" was thought of as referring to a crackpot scheme for classifying things called "signs" which nobody in philosophy had any interest in to begin with.... (in Deledalle 2001, p. 220)

This unfortunate ignorance is the more lamentable for the fact that many of Peirce's mature ideas were in principle available shortly after the First World War. His extensive correspondence with Victoria Lady Welby (Hardwick 1977; see also Peirce 1998, pp. 477-491), which dealt chiefly with semiotics, was circulated in Europe and sent to prominent intellectual figures (including Bertrand Russell). His letters eventually reached C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, who published choice excerpts of them in a trailblazing appendix to their classic *The Meaning of Meaning* ([1923] 1989, pp. 279-290). The philosopher of mathematics Frank Ramsey, who collaborated with Ogden in translating Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, came to know of Peirce's ideas through this transitive connection. By 1923, we find Ramsey arguing in a review that the Viennese thinker would have benefited greatly from a familiarity with "two words used by C. S. Peirce," namely "type" and "token" (Ramsey 1923, p. 468). Through a precarious chain of iterated interpretations, some of Peirce's most important semiotic notions had found their way out of the secluded Pennsylvania home whence they were spawned. More than that, they were being broadcast in a very prominent forum, by a respected (if still emerging) Cambridge scholar, during the formative years of the analytic movement, in discussing what was to become one of its most important founding texts. People took notice.

Regrettably, what could have been a momentous occasion to connect with key non-modern conceptions was reduced in the twentieth century to no more than a newfangled jargon in which to reprise some rather stale schemes. Such is the importance of the number three in semiotics that Peirce once wondered whether he was not in the grips of some gratuitous fascination with triadic conceptions.⁹ It should have been apparent, then, that something had gone seriously wrong when the Peircean notions of "type" and "token" surfaced with growing frequency in the philosophic literature. The climax of this tale is somewhat anti-climactic: by the time anybody realized that this famous notional duo was in fact supposed to be a *trio*, the error had been fully committed.

3. Tone-deaf no more

The absence we want to call attention to is effectively compounded by the prominent visibility of its counterparts. For instance, we find D. M. Armstrong, a well-known adherent to the materialist wing of the reductionist program in philosophy of mind, framing the problem of universals in terms of the type/token distinction developed by “the great U.S. nineteenth-century philosopher, C. S. Peirce” (Armstrong 1989, p. 1).¹⁰ As part of his introduction, Armstrong produces a box within which one finds the word “THE” inscribed twice, and continues: “Peirce would have said that there were two tokens of the one type” (*ibid.*, p. 2). This characterization, though not inaccurate, is grossly incomplete. If Peirce’s name is to be invoked and his nomenclature employed, then it should be remembered that the distinction he developed is in fact *tripartite*, the neglected party being the *tone*.

Peirce did not discover the type/token distinction in the sense in which it is currently used. Plato did that. So the terms “type” and “token” aren’t fancy ways to restate the age-old distinction between universals and particulars, respectively. Given such a hasty reading, it is only normal that the tone should have fallen by the wayside. For the thinker intimately familiar with the long-standing debate between realism and nominalism, Peirce’s talk of the tone can appear as something of a conceptual anomaly, a quirk that can be all-too-easily dismissed. John Boler notes that quality is “certainly the least clear of the categories, and the one that receives the least attention” (1963, p. 123). It is the latter part of this statement which accounts for the former.

Peirce’s type/token/tone trichotomy—resting as it does on a fine-grained distinction of distinctions—was ostensibly too subtle. As a result, it has basically been denatured in the last century to bring it into conformity with reigning (dualist) expectations. However, the foundations which underpin these notions are not beholden to any standard metaphysical outlook. “How far are the basic categories of Peirce’s phenomenology either particulars or universals? In describing Firstnesses as qualities of feeling Peirce never makes their status plain in terms of this disjunction. All he requests is the disregard of the question of reality and of connections with other phenomena” (Spiegelberg 1981, pp. 35-36). Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that the complete tripartition is not arrived at by speculation over “what there is.” The distinction is through and through logical: “In Peirce’s semiotic the type/token/tone (legisign/sinsign/qualisign)¹¹ trichotomy is based on the idea that a given entity, assumed to be a sign, can be regarded in respect to any or all of three types of properties it has—monadic, dyadic, triadic (i.e., one-term, two-term, three-term)—depending upon the analytical needs in some concrete semiotic inquiry” (Sebeok 1994, p. 1130).

Prescission is a particularly crucial tool for semiotics, given that a sign is essentially characterized not by any specific material status but by a general relational structure.

A *Sign*, or *Representamen*, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its *Object*, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its *Interpretant*, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object. The triadic relation is *genuine*, that is its three members are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations. (Peirce 1998, pp. 272-273; see also Posner, Robering and Sebeok 1997, p. 4)

If what we have in view is the whole interaction, then we are at the level of what Peirce called Thirdness, because we are considering all three parties involved. In such a case, we have a relation between two relata grasped *as* a relation by some third thing beyond it. This is usually the level of interest, especially when one is studying some particular cultural or natural instance of sign-use. But if our goal is a philosophical analysis of the representational structure itself, we may want to go further. If we now suppose this relation between two relata as it would be without any further recognition of it as a relation, we are dealing with Secondness. Two and only two things are involved, so we've effectively left the realm of intelligibility and entered that of brute contiguity (see Champagne forthcoming b). Prescinding still further, we may also want to suppose one of the relata without its entering into any relation with another. Peirce writes: "[T]he idea of a quality is the idea of a phenomenon or partial phenomenon considered as a monad, without reference to its parts or components and without reference to anything else" (1931-58, vol. 1, para. 424). If we do this, we eliminate whatever alterity allowed that unary relata (the term now becomes a misnomer) to have a "contour." Thus, when we prescind relation away so as to consider only that which is related, we may no longer think of the resultant tone as we do a token, since doing so would require us to delimit it in some fashion and ascend back to Secondness. It isn't that what we began studying suddenly vanishes from existence proper; the analysis is one in thought and leaves our initial object of study untouched. But if we choose to prescind all the way, Firstness is as far as we can go, and we obtain a pure quality that *could* be actualized but isn't.¹²

In order to give an overview of the sorts of distinctions afforded by prescission, let us consider a fairly straightforward example (taken from Sebeok 1994, p. 1130; adapted from Peirce 1931-58, vol. 2, para. 230):

Because of his long *fast*, he was too weak to stand *fast* or hold *fast* or even to run *fast*.

Through the lens of prescission, the word "fast" appears three times as type, four times as token, and once as tone. The idea of token is perhaps the easiest to compass. To be a token is to be an occurrence, something that has a discrete spatial and temporal location. In contrast, neither the type nor the tone is bound by such immanence. The tone is a quality—considered prior to its occurrence as token. If we prescind, we can isolate the qualitative feature that is common

to the tokens “fast” and “fast.” To be sure, this quality—in this case a configuration of marks—is very much *there* as constitutive of each token, and there is no way for us to get to a “suchness” except through a “thisness.” But the tone itself enjoys a priority which enables us to logically isolate it while disregarding its numerically distinct manifestations. It is, Peirce would say, a First. The tone may be the qualitative commonality which runs beneath various tokens, but its position in the triadic order prevents it from accounting for the specific manner in which such tokens appear *de facto*. This last task belongs to the type. Like the tone, the type manifests a certain transcendence—albeit in virtue of a very different rationale. To be a type is to be a generality that legislates the occurrence of tokens. One type of “fast” applies the adjective to objects that are quick in motion, whereas another type pertains to things that are firmly fixed.¹³

A handy summary of these tenets would be this well-known but often truncated¹⁴ passage from Peirce:

There will ordinarily be about twenty *the*'s on a page, and of course they count as twenty words. In another sense of the word “word,” however, there is but one word “the” in the English language; and it is impossible that this word should lie visibly on a page or be heard in any voice, for the reason that it is not a Single thing or Single event. It does not exist; it only determines things that do exist. Such a definitely significant Form, I propose to term a *Type*. A Single event which happens once and whose identity is limited to that one happening . . . such as this or that word on a single line of a single page of a single copy of a book, I will venture to call a *Token*. *An indefinite significant character such as a tone of voice can neither be called a Type nor a Token*. I propose to call such a Sign a *Tone*. (Peirce 1931-58, vol. 4, para. 537; our emphasis)

Returning to our example, we can say that “fast” is there three times when we consider it as a law-like regularity, four times when we consider it as a singular occurrence, and once when we consider it as pure quality. As an ordinal First, “fast” is merely a potentiality, a “something” that *could* be employed to stand for something else (but doesn’t have to be). In sharp contrast with the type, it is very much possible that a word qua tone “should lie visibly on a page or be heard in any voice” (*ibid.*). If and when such a quality *occurs*, “fast” is a Second. To the extent that such an occurrence is not a singleton, but appears repeatedly in accordance with some sort of rationale that is not merely haphazard (e.g., a habit), “fast” is a Third. And even if it makes little sense to think of “fast” as existing in only one of these respects, be it a quality that never occurs or a law that never manifests itself, *prescission* allows us to carefully distinguish anything that is intelligible along these three axes.

Clearly, our chosen illustration, no matter how didactic, has its limitations: one is not likely going to make much of a dent on any problem regarding consciousness if one persists in obtusely equating the tone with “a sound or configuration of marks”—a legitimate but by no means exhaustive case.¹⁵ The

moral, in sum, is that one should impose no more restrictions on the tone than on the token and type—a popular pair also explained by an appeal to “words” (see Guttenplan 1995, pp. 596-597) yet routinely mobilized with great profit in non-linguistic domains. In this respect, however novel our proposal may be, it capitalizes on an already respectable move.

While much more could be said about the interrelation which binds together Peirce’s full semiotic trichotomy,¹⁶ the main thing which concerns us is the fact that *prescission* can be deployed without assuming that anything it uncovers could truly stand on its own, that is, without the involvement of those other aspects deliberately disregarded. As David Savan explains,

The *occurrence* of a quality in space and time renders the quality at least in some measure a *sinsign* [i.e., token].... Similarly, the *sinsign* is always, to some degree, a replica of a *legisign* [i.e., type].... And a *legisign*, like a *qualisign* [i.e., tone], can not be encountered as such in experience.... What this means is that the empirical student of semiotics must use Peirce’s trichotomy (if he uses it at all) as an analytical tool, by means of which to distinguish three different aspects of semiosis.... Empirically, no sign belongs exclusively to one of these classes. This is not to deny the value of the distinction, or the potential value for empirical research. It is only a caution against a threatening misunderstanding. (1987, pp. 23-24)

When we commit ourselves to carefully distinguishing what can and cannot be supposed independently of other suppositions, we engage in an exercise of epistemological hairsplitting that can go still deeper than the level of particular individuals. Just as “P” implies “possible that P” but not the other way round, the token asymmetrically implies the tone. As Peirce states: “*Prescission* is not a reciprocal process” (1992, p. 3). Yet, strictly speaking, a merely “possible that P” without any kind of actuality would be ineffable. To the extent we consider something (anything) absolutely *in itself* without regard to its actual occurrence, we have willingly robbed ourselves of any basis that could have allowed the situation to be more than a mere potentiality. So it becomes a fallacy of sorts to lose sight of this and construe the resultant quality as some distinct token. Since the error consists in taking a “doctored” product of our thinking to be a “discovered” fact independent of that intervention, it is apt to call it a *reification*.

Peirce himself did not address the mind-body problem directly—at least not in the sense in which it is currently understood.¹⁷ Nevertheless, we believe *prescission* and the notion of tone he left us points the way to a more satisfactory theoretical account of “what it’s like” to enjoy conscious experience. Let us now explore that possibility.

4. A fork in the road

Twentieth-century philosophy ignored not only a full third of Peirce’s trichotomy, but—perhaps more importantly—its very rationale. Nevertheless, as a

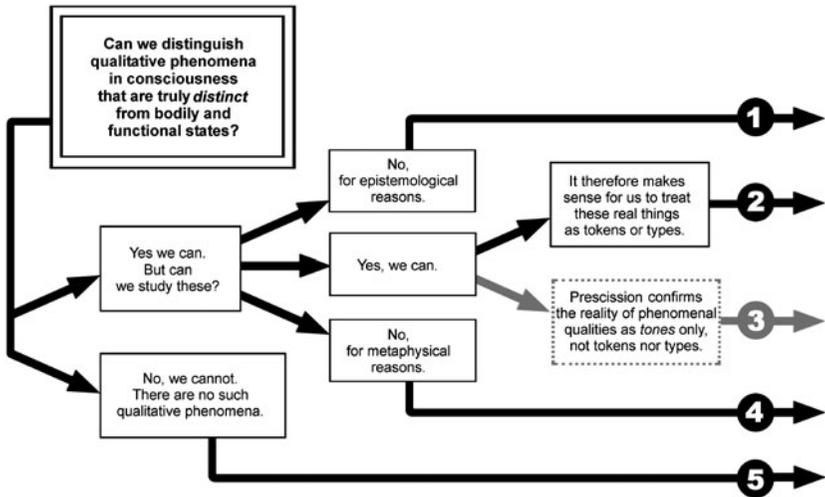
result of those semiotic notions that *did* manage to seep through (albeit in distorted form), today's philosophers of mind are unlikely to make a more onerous ontological commitment without explicitly recognizing that they are doing as much—it's rather hard, for instance, to endorse "type-type identity" without also being recognized as doing so and being given the appropriate label. Crucial avenues are routinely lost, however, due to the fact that, in this climate, reification of the *tone* can happen without anybody even noticing the move. We submit that this is exactly what has happened in the case of phenomenal qualia.

There are many thought-experiments on the market which attempt, with various degrees of success, to prove that consciousness indeed comprises an irreducibly qualitative dimension. Although he has since sought to distance himself from the claims he once made, Frank Jackson's "knowledge argument" remains one of the more vivid examples. Jackson ([1986] 1997) invites us to consider a neuroscientist who, upon being raised in a strictly black and white setting since birth, is allowed for the first time to emerge from her isolated confines and step into a fully-coloured environment. Even if she had mastered a comprehensive physical and functional account of colour prior to that virgin exposure, her new experiences would likely give her an *additional* insight—a visceral acquaintance, if you will—into "what it's like" to actually see *red*. This is by no means the only way to bring out the qualitative dimension of consciousness. Kripke ([1980] 1997), for instance, offers another, more technical, argument which turns on considerations of modality. In any case, whoever acquiesces to the common distinction such arguments are intended to convey is eventually faced with the following question: What might this phenomenal experience be which seems to escape conventional explanations?¹⁸ Whatever the terminology, an all-important decision must therefore be made: what sort of ontological status should be ascribed to the qualitative features that are experienced in consciousness?

Given a generic commitment to phenomenal qualia, we believe the core alternative is whether one shall *reify* or *prescind*. Admittedly, even if one has no clue what the second disjunct consists in, raising the spectre of reification is enough to scare most thinkers into denying that the distinction had any basis to begin with. Such a retreat notwithstanding, those who stand fast by their philosophical conviction that there is indeed something "more" to consciousness are faced with a crucial fork in the road: 1) does the reality at hand warrant our engaging in some measure of "thing-making," or 2) is the distinction—no matter how objective—nevertheless insufficient to sanction such a reification? Our central contention is that, wittingly or not, *the pervasive type/token distinction compels one to adopt the first of these disjuncts, whereas semiotics provides one with the technical tools needed to comprehensively follow the latter path.*

At the risk of oversimplifying (we shall here focus on the most essential features of the problem), those who think mental life has a qualitative dimension usually gloss the situation in the following terms: there are *token* brain

states on one side, there are *token* qualia on another side, and the task is to find something that would correlate these two seemingly disparate relata. This is what has come to be known, appropriately enough, as the “explanatory gap.”¹⁹ Sometimes the two parties in want of a union are grouped into their respective *types*. Yet this way of viewing the situation unquestioningly treats qualities like pain and red as tokens and/or types. Given the omission we outlined, the idea of tone—*construed as something irreducible to tokens or types*—simply doesn’t come up. With no visible alternative, the accepted roster of options thus misses a potentially fruitful exit (this situation is summarized in the diagram below).



Although the schema seeks to relate various programmatic commitments in an explicit and informative way, it is by no means intended as an exhaustive survey of all that could be said (or *not* said) on the topic of consciousness. Moreover, the diagram ends where most theoretical inquiries begin. Indeed, the five tracts it takes pains to separate each lead to prolific research programs that rarely attend to their founding suppositions. The bulk of the literature on consciousness—including the explanatory gap—lies to the “East” of the right-hand arrowheads. Each basic combination of commitments carves out a space of intellectual possibilities within which further discussion unfolds. In keeping with the mantra that *precession* is less than real and more than nominal, we could have filled the final box leading to the third tract with “Yes, for *epistemological* reasons.” Likewise, the spirit of the second tract can be encapsulated by the answer “Yes, for *metaphysical* reasons.” This characterization is somewhat crude, but it does capture the essence of what’s at stake.

In any case, however one wants to describe the basic idea, what matters is that, given the current climate, the bifurcation or “fork in the road” which leads

to either reification (path 2) or prescission (path 3) goes pretty much unnoticed. As such, thinkers who acquiesce to the thesis that we can indeed hope to study qualitative phenomena typically proceed directly from this to a treatment of qualia as tokens and/or types. And of course, once this much has been granted, the problem of “relating” the disparate classes surfaces with particular inevitability. This is where Peirce’s complete trichotomy has much to offer. The theorist working with a dichotomous palette of types and tokens is inadvertently strong-armed by her tacit commitments into the inference that if phenomenal qualities are real enough to be *discerned*, then they must exist in their own right as something genuinely *distinct*. But if we accept that prescission allows us to robustly differentiate the layers subsumed in triadic relations, the fact that we can consider the tone to be logically prior to the token is taken to mean no more than that, ontology-wise.

In order to elaborate on this alternative way of viewing the situation, we want to examine the position defended by Ned Block. His contention that the literature on consciousness routinely conflates the “accessible” and the “phenomenal” has stimulated quite a bit of debate, be it among those who think he misconstrues the distinction or among those who think there is simply no distinction there to conflate. Not only is Block’s controversial proposal interesting in its own right, it provides us with a template whence to better comprehend the manner in which “what it’s like” comes to be regarded as “what there is.” As we shall see, the insight behind Block’s distinction is basically right-headed, but runs into all sorts of problems because it construes qualia as tokens.

5. Carving consciousness at the joints too deeply

Rehearsing the widely held sentiment that the notion of consciousness is a “mongrel” which clumps together various objects that in fact are (and should be conceived as being) distinct, Block has challenged a seemingly innocuous inference he deems fundamentally mistaken. Psychological research contains a vast array of studies which detail abnormal cases where, for all intents and purposes, an afflicted person is missing one or more of the aspect(s) and/or faculty(ies) we typically expect consciousness to have (e.g., anything discussed in cognitive science that ends with “syndrome”). Faced with these puzzling cases, the stock assumption has been that this want of one or more aspect(s) and/or faculty(ies) is truly a *want* (in kind and not just degree), medical exceptions effectively confirming our starting intuitions about what constitutes a fully healthy consciousness. As an upshot, it is held that ascertaining the specifics of an abnormal dearth can better our understanding of consciousness in its normal state. This apparently benign line of thought is the “target reasoning” Block aims to undermine.²⁰ With its underlying inference explicitly identified, he contends that “[t]hough some variants of this sort of reasoning have merit, they are often given more weight than they deserve because of a persistent fallacy involving a conflation of two very different concepts of consciousness” ([1995] 1997, p. 376). In sum, Block believes that while certain mental faculties

and thought-processes can be found wanting in afflicted patients, this does not provide a sufficient basis to infer that the *phenomenal* aspect of their conscious lives is correspondingly missing (ibid., pp. 397, 407).

At the heart of this claim lies a distinction Block thinks is routinely neglected. In fact, as Block explains, “[n]early every article I read on the subject by philosophers and psychologists involves some confusion” of the difference in question ([1995] 1997, p. 392). In order to put an end to this widespread conflation (or at least make sure it does not go unrecognized), he gives this distinction a semi-technical gloss, the functional side being designated “*access-consciousness*” and the qualitative side “*phenomenal-consciousness*.” Block spends quite a bit of time trying to illustrate this proposal, and the specifics of his many and colourful examples could be debated at length. But the hope seems to be that the distinction would be retroactively vindicated by a subsequent contention that the aspects distinguished are very likely *mutually-independent*, in the demanding sense of the term. Indeed, Block thinks empirical data and thought-experiments alike suggest that there can be access without phenomenon ([1995] 1997, pp. 385-386) and phenomenon without access (ibid., pp. 386-389).

Let us consider the first of these situations, where agents would process information without actually enjoying any phenomenal episode. Block believes there is some empirical support for this in the case of “blindsighted” persons who cannot see things before them, yet supposedly can have reliable responses to these when pressed by an examiner to venture an answer.²¹ Referring to the information-processing model developed by Daniel Schacter (1989), Block ([1995] 1997, pp. 377-380) suggests that the generally correct judgements (about unseen things) which these afflicted patients perform is made possible because they somehow *bypass* their “phenomenal-consciousness module” and proceed straight to the executive system whose end-product is overt behaviour (e.g., decisions, actions, and utterances). That, as it stands, is a very provocative suggestion. Above and beyond agreeing with our introspective intuitions, phenomenal qualia are typically introduced into one’s theoretical picture of the mind for the explanatory virtues they offer. Advocates of this dimension usually hold that physical and functional processes are by themselves unable to account for certain classes of events and behaviour patterns which call into play phenomenal episodes. On this view, the “what it’s like” side of consciousness alluded to by Nagel is more than just intrinsically fascinating; it actually has some theoretical usefulness and, as such, cannot be discarded simply on account of its falling short of physicalist expectations. What Block is saying, in effect, is that qualia are very real—and that we should think of them as such—even though it is possible for an agent without access to them to meet the demands of functionalism.

The temptation to invoke parsimony is never far behind, and given this apparently self-defeating proposal, most philosophers would likely shave off Block’s phenomenal-consciousness altogether. Seeing how the case for

phenomenal experience is already problematic when such subjective episodes are held to be a potent aid in cognition, the urge to run one's account on access-consciousness only is all the more felt when one sees a prominent defender of "phenomenal realism"²² insist that correct decision-making can obtain even when experimental settings confirm that no such qualitative episodes are available to a patient. David Chalmers, for instance, voiced such worries:

[T]here is something very strange about the idea of an "epiphenomenal" P-consciousness module.... The main motivation for epiphenomenalism is surely that experience seems superfluous to any information-processing; but Block's idea suggests an implausible epiphenomenalism *within* the information-processing story. Indeed, if the module has no effect on other processes, then we could lesion it with no external change (same reports, even), and no empirical evidence could support the hypothesis. (1997, p. 423)

As if this wasn't inflammatory enough, Block enjoins us to fathom a *superblindsighted* person who would declare that "Now I know that there is a horizontal line in my blind field even though I don't actually see it" and for whom visual information "simply pops into his thoughts in the way that solutions to problems we've been worrying about pop into our thoughts" ([1995] 1997, p. 385). These fantastic suggestions are ostensibly meant to be taken with a grain of salt (see for example the caveat, *ibid.*, p. 380). But while Block readily states that he doesn't know "whether there are any actual cases of A-consciousness without P-consciousness," he hopes his speculative ruminations will have illustrated the "conceptual possibility" of such cases (*ibid.*, p. 386).²³

What we have here, in effect, is the garden-variety "zombie" discussed in the cognitive sciences, the hypothetical creature that performs all that we humans do without enjoying any of the relevant qualitative experiences. But Block's mutual-independence of access and phenomenon has him countenance yet another sort of zombie, one who would have the phenomena without having access to them—as in the case of a busy person who "hears" but does not "notice" the loud drilling noise that has been present near her during an engaging conversation (Block [1995] 1997, pp. 386-387). In terms of Schacter's model, this would mean an activation of the phenomenal module that has no repercussion upon anything beyond itself, be it access-consciousness (of the sort that would prompt the more overt realization that "Wow, that noise is really loud and/or bothersome") or the executive system which could trigger reactionary behavioural outputs (say, covering one's ears or moving the conversation to another location). Staying true to his distinction, Block argues that no matter how inaccessible they may be from the standpoint of information-processing, qualia could in fact be present in such a zombie's phenomenal-consciousness module.²⁴

It is usually sound methodology to think that if a posited object does not manifest itself in any overt way, this gives us good grounds to conclude that the

posit in question does not in fact obtain. Indeed, it seems reasonable to say that a rare beast cannot be so rare that no one ever witnesses it; and that one must first establish the actual reality of a species before labelling it endangered and adopting legislative measures. This, however, is the (purportedly hasty) reasoning Block seeks to assail. Although one typically determines the absence of an aspect and/or faculty of consciousness by way of a contrast with its manifest presence in healthy persons, Block claims that the evidence adduced to sanction such a move is inconclusive, as it does not fully exclude the possibility that the aspect and/or faculty in question might still lurk in an afflicted patient's mind.

To be sure, Block recognizes that his distinction makes for some very strange and onerous consequences, notably the two zombies just sketched. But before we raise the razor of parsimony, he asks us to consider whether the view of consciousness we adopt takes due consideration of experiments that supposedly show patients reliably executing various cognitive tasks without recourse to the sort of phenomenal resources healthy persons would typically marshal.²⁵ As Levine rightfully says: “[T]o the extent that there is an element in our concept of qualitative character that is not captured by features of its causal role, to that extent it will escape the explanatory net of a physicalistic reduction” ([1993] 1997, p. 553). The question of course is whether this is actually the case—that is, if and to what extent qualia indeed merit explanatory attention in their own right.

Convinced by the sorts of arguments presented by Block, Nagel, Jackson, and others, some have proceeded to develop positive theories that try to account for this elusive feature of mind. Other thinkers, unimpressed by Block's distinction or uncomfortable with the thorny methodological issues that are raised when one countenances a (potentially inaccessible) phenomenal-consciousness “module,” have simply followed through with the reductionist program, unabated. Still others have tried to make sense of the fairly strong intuitions Block appeals to by recasting them in a more reductionist-friendly mould. In the final tally, although Block has not garnered many outspoken adherents, his proposed distinction has come to be seen as “very useful,” and most theorists would likely agree with Chalmers that, at the very least, “[t]here is clearly a *conceptual* distinction here” (1997, p. 421; emphasis in original). The ensuing dilemma, then, is how best to handle a “conceptual” distinction which does not seem to latch onto things that are real in the demanding sense, but which is nevertheless convincing enough to sustain a fairly stable set of descriptions. Barring an outright denial, we can recognize that something tangible is animating those who think the qualitative dimension of consciousness is distinct enough to escape standard accounts.

Some elaborate theories have suggested, however, that there might be nothing more to it all than this sociological convergence. As one of the most vocal (and eclectic) opponents of qualia, Daniel Dennett (1991) has famously maintained that human consciousness is best understood as a cultural construct of

sorts; inasmuch as one would never claim to possess consciousness unless one did not acquire the very concept from one's societal surroundings. Objecting to this view, Block states: "Now I hope it is obvious that P-consciousness is not a cultural construction. Remember, we are talking about P-consciousness itself, not the concept of P-consciousness" ([1995] 1997, p. 394). There are many ways to read this statement.²⁶ For our purposes, we should like to draw attention to the specious character of Block's laconic reply. What it amounts to, in effect, is the declaration that a certain thing (in this case phenomenal-consciousness) has a full-fledged existence apart from discourse, since we can talk of "the-thing" itself in abstraction from "discourse-on-the-thing." In our view, this sort of reasoning betokens a clear reification—one which runs counter to the Scotist insight that we can accurately identify (and intelligibly discuss) a feature without it thereby becoming a supplementary "something" existing in its own right.

Sensing the tensions at hand, Güzeldere makes an insightful remark that encapsulates with astonishing clarity the predicament we sought to diagnose in the fourth section:

[C]ould it be that the particular way Block's distinction carves out phenomenal consciousness, separating it *completely* from its causal and functional aspects in accord with the 'segregationist intuition,' renders its investigation by means of scientific methods theoretically impossible? Put differently, *could we be painting ourselves into a corner by a conceptual commitment to Block's distinction* such that we end up with a number of straightforward problems about A-consciousness and a conjured-up "hard problem" of P-consciousness that in principle admits no solution? (1997, p. 29; our emphasis)

Given that considerable difficulties confront Block's "phenomenal realist" position (and Dennett's instrumentalism²⁷), we think it would be worthwhile for current philosophy to explore an unheeded tract which explicitly centres on a separation that is less than real yet more than nominal. Such a framework would have the potential of doing justice to Block's intuitive appeals whilst resisting an all-out "segregation" of the mind's qualitative dimension. Let us then return to the fork in the road identified earlier and venture down a new path.

6. What it could be like

As we saw earlier, one of the central tenets of Peircean semiotics is that the very idea of representation, carefully unpacked, presupposes a three-place relation that cannot be sundered; that is, one which cannot be reduced to the dyadic or the monadic on pain of no longer representing (see Peirce 1998, pp. 272-273, 411). This does not, however, mean that qualia are representational. Semiotics does not say that a quale represents, but rather that representation perforce involves a quale—there is no reciprocity (i.e., no monad is a triad). This is the crucial feature that is so difficult to make sense of when one

follows the path of reification, as witnessed by Block's rather awkward suggestion that access-consciousness is what allows phenomenal-consciousness to be "poised" for use ([1995] 1997, p. 387). Addressing this problematic idea, Denise Gamble writes: "An ontology of representations is a powerful tool for explaining some types of content. But not every internal stimulation or activation in mentality need be a representation. Is there no other conceptual framework for understanding phenomenology?" (1997, p. 150). There is indeed.

Although Peirce draws on a distinct phenomenology (Spiegelberg 1981, pp. 27-50), the notion of the "phenomenal" suggests a "phenomenalism" which he as a scientific realist found repugnant (see Ransdell 1978). "Representations," from a semiotic point of view, are not a special class of objects such that certain (typically *mental*) things inherently *have to* represent while others can never do so. Much the opposite: the tone emphatically does not have to be the ground upon which interpretation pole-vaults to an object. If and when it is, then of course it has; and there is no question here of denying that all-important service (known as "*renvoi*" in French). But the whole point of precession is that we can recognize quality as an ordinal First in such a relation, thereby incorporating into our theoretical picture the idea that a tone *can* stand for something else *but need not do so*. Thus, despite the unbreakable (triadic) bond which characterizes any representation, whatever is burdened with the logical duty of standing for something else—no matter what it may consist in—can be precluded in such a way as to disregard its employment in that capacity.

This means that, *pace* Block (1995, pp. 33-34), orgasms don't have to be "about" anything. But it also means that if one is led to infer from this "that something very pleasing is happening down *there*" (Tye 1995), then, to that extent, the orgasm is acting as a sign. From a semiotic standpoint, however, there is nothing about bodily feelings or sensations that make them more apt to serve as bearers of meaning, nor is there anything that bars a particular class from doing so. Block's talk of "mental pain" (1995, pp. 27-29), though couched in a mentalistic idiom, at times comes very close to the notion of tone. But it always founders because of its assumption (inscribed in the very name) that the issue of whether something is or is not a vehicle of representation—of whether it stands for something else to something—can somehow be answered by studying the nature of the candidate in question. According to the view we recommend, that is a thoroughly misguided endeavour.

[T]he *being* of the sign is the triadic relation itself, not the elements related or structured according to their respective roles.... The representative element within this triadic structure, which we loosely call a "sign," "in itself" is *not a sign at all*, but one of the three elements *necessary to the being of a sign*, one of the three legs on which the sign walks in working its way through the world, and, indeed, the "foremost" leg, insofar as it is the leg which takes the direct representative step in carrying a semiosis. (Deely 2005, pp. 176, 178) ²⁸

Although the cardinal layers (of which potential quality is the simplest) at the heart of Peircean semiotics can provide the philosopher with a substantial source of inspiration whence to develop a coherent metaphysical outlook (see Champagne 2006), our ability to prescind certain features need not entail any corresponding profligacy. The *Dictionnaire de la langue philosophique* cites the definition of “la précision” given by J. B. Bossuet as “l’action que fait notre esprit en séparant par la pensée des choses en effet inséparables”—“the act which our mind does when it separates by means of thought things that are in point of fact inseparable” (*Logique*, I, xxii; quoted in Foulquié and Saint-Jean 1962, p. 562; our translation). It is fully consistent, therefore, for one to acquiesce to the above distinctions while steadfastly denying that there are 8 *fast*’s in our earlier example (obtained from adding 3 types + 4 tokens + 1 tone).

Block, in contrast, suggests that the fact that we can conceive of a quality not accessed in any overt state of consciousness is a strong indication that a distinct phenomenal-consciousness module might truly exist. Let’s go back to an example mentioned earlier and see how he describes the qualia involved:

[W]e have P-conscious states when we see, hear, smell, taste, and have pains.... Here is another reason to believe in P-consciousness without A-consciousness: Suppose that you are engaged in intense conversation when suddenly at noon you realize that right outside your window, there is—and has been for some time—a pneumatic drill digging up the street. You were aware of the noise all along, one might say, but only at noon are you *consciously aware* of it. That is, you were P-conscious of the noise all along, but at noon you are both P-conscious *and* A-conscious of it.... Only at noon is the content of your representation of the drill *poised* for use in rational control of action and speech.... The example shows the conceptual distinctness of P-consciousness from A-consciousness and it also puts the burden of proof on anyone who would argue that as a matter of empirical fact they come to the same thing. ([1995] 1997, pp. 380, 386-387)

Stripped to its bare essentials, Block’s argument can be summarized as follows: 1) Phenomenal-consciousness is conceivable without access-consciousness (i.e., the passage above). 2) Access-consciousness is conceivable without phenomenal-consciousness (i.e., the projected case of “super-blindsight”). *Ergo*: 3) We are entitled to distinguish phenomenal-consciousness from access-consciousness. The theorist working with the incomplete type/token distinction needs both premises to proceed to the conclusion—which is then glossed as proof that qualia exist as tokens.²⁹ But if we heed the insight that triadic relations can be decomposed without their involving a multiplicity of distinct objects, we can proceed straight to the conclusion after the first premise.

Since the mutual-independence upheld by Block is logically posterior to the distinction on which it is deployed, one can buy into the distinction without endorsing the onerous relational thesis which would have them be mutually independent. The debt to Duns Scotus here is readily apparent: existential

inseparability indeed does not entail identity in definition. Of course, Scotus was not the only philosopher to have grasped this crucial fact. As Joseph Levine writes in discussing the problematic entanglements that accompany arguments for the full reality of qualia in consciousness: “One cannot infer from a variety of modes of access to a variety of facts being accessed” ([1993] 1997, p. 546). Semiotics helps to theoretically articulate this stance. The fact that we can rigorously prescind a tone from a token is not a sufficient reason to think that it exists in its own right.

In short, just as Ramsey suggested that Wittgenstein would have profited from distinguishing between the type and the token, so we hold that carefully heeding the token/tone distinction can lend support to Block’s insightful but embattled propositions. Consider for instance the following passage by Peirce:

Among phanerons [Peirce’s name for phenomena] there are certain qualities of feeling, such as the color of magenta, the odor of attar, the sound of a railway whistle, the taste of quinine.... I do not mean the sense of actually experiencing these feelings, whether primarily or in any memory or imagination. That is something that involves these qualities as an element of it. But I mean the qualities themselves which, in themselves, are mere may-bes, not necessarily realized.... *A quality of feeling can be imagined to be without any occurrence, as it seems to me. Its mere may-being gets along without any realization at all....* I suppose you will tell me that no such thing could be alone in the universe.... But I point out to you that these things are only known to us by extraneous experience; *none of them are either seen in the color, heard in the sound, or felt in the visceral sensation. Consequently, there can be no logical difficulty in supposing them to be absent,* and for my part, I encounter not the slightest psychological difficulty in doing so, either. (1931-58, vol. 1, para. 304-305; our emphasis. See also Peirce 1998, p. 150)

Prescission teaches us that underneath all the hubbub of thought and discourse (and that general “action of signs” which Peirce called “semiosis”), there is the tone: a monadic dimension that has the *power* to be the qualitative vehicle of representation but which in virtue of its ordinal primacy remains serenely ignorant of whether it is *actually* employed in so raucous an activity (see Peirce 1931-58, vol. 1, para. 422-426).

The kinship between Block’s intuitive illustrations and Peirce’s analysis is striking. Yet with these two interpretations now in plain sight, would it not be preferable to keep intact their common contention that a legitimate distinction is at play—all while recognizing that it owes to our ability to “peel off” occurrences and glance in an abstract fashion at the qualities they presuppose? By refusing to reify the features it prescinds, such an approach would allow us to respect the distinct character of phenomenal experience without turning it into a chimera. Going back to the Russian doll metaphor, prescission shows us that the distinctness of qualia does not put them *besides* mental states, but *in* them.

On this view, *it is not that access-consciousness and phenomenal-consciousness are tokens of different types; rather, the latter is the tone of the former's tokens*. This explains why “A-consciousness and P-consciousness are almost always present or absent together” (Block [1995] 1997, p. 401). But given that tones are not themselves occurrences, this steadfast accompaniment in no way means that the qualities at hand somehow “supervene” on the corresponding tokens (although we are reluctant to adopt a facile “-ism” for fear that the crucial semiotic interrelation we have striven to explicate might be forgotten, it could be said that the situation involves a species of *subsumption*).

Try as one might, we believe it is impossible to reproduce or mimic the relation provided by tract 3 in our earlier diagram with the more onerous resources of tract 2. To the extent this is true, then incorporating the full trichotomy creates a seismic shift in the topography of the debate—a change which might spell promise for an inquiry that, by its own admission, has been deadlocked before a seemingly unbridgeable chasm. Attentively considering the advantages and disadvantages that come with Block’s influential distinction, Chalmers summarizes the issue in three points: “(1) one can imagine access without experience and vice versa; (2) access can be observed straightforwardly, whereas experience cannot; and, most important, (3) access consciousness seems clearly amenable to cognitive explanation, whereas phenomenal consciousness is quite perplexing in this regard” (1997, p. 421). To layer a summary of our own, we can say that the outlook we advocate gives good grounds to be wary of the symmetrical “vice versa” of (1), agrees with the gist of (2), and marshals tools which—when properly understood—allow (3) to appear less foreign from the standpoint of explicit understanding.³⁰

Prescission is a means of explanation which we can in turn explain—an unmysterious technical notion we can share amongst ourselves and apply with constancy. Alluding to this mode of distinction, Peirce wrote: “It may be noticed that, throughout this process, *introspection* is not resorted to. Nothing is assumed respecting the subjective elements of consciousness which cannot be securely inferred from the objective elements” (1992, pp. 3-4). Indeed, it should be emphasized that our discussion of the qualitative dimension of consciousness relegated the (inescapable) frame of reference of lived experience to the background and at no point appealed to the idiosyncratic history of the reader in order to make its technical proposal intelligible and/or persuasive. The semiotic account of phenomenal qualia we have tendered would thus seem to meet the desideratum laid down by Dennett, who encouragingly stressed that “[t]he third-person approach is not antithetical to, or eager to ignore, the subjective nuances of experience; it simply insists on anchoring those subjective nuances to *something*—anything, really—that can be detected and confirmed in replicable experiments” (2001, p. 231).³¹

Semiotic inquiry can satisfy this because, as we have seen, it is patently *non-Cartesian* from the start. As Thomas Short explains: “[S]ince the human mind, according to Peirce, is constituted by semeiotic processes of a special type, it

should be possible to use the concept of semeiosis to analyze consciousness, and that precludes using the concept of consciousness to analyze semeiosis” (1986, p. 105).

7. Tentative excursus in ontology

We have described precession as a distinction “less than real yet more than nominal.” That Scotist slogan, however, will not be very helpful if it is taken to entail some mid-way “subsistence” or other disingenuous “quasi-reality.” That’s why Peirce, in spite of his admiration, emphasized that for Duns Scotus’ logic to fruitfully contribute to a scientific worldview, it would have to be “torn away from its medievalism” and kept under guard by “continual wholesome reminders of nominalistic criticisms” (1931-58, vol. 1, para. 6).³² In his well-documented study of Peirce’s intellectual relation to Scotus, Boler (1963, p. 102) suggests that Peirce objected to the notion of a dispositional “substantial form”—perhaps the closest scholastic analogue to his qualitative “may-being”—on account of its failure to elucidate the monadic structure (or lack thereof) involved.

In this sense, the framework we have urged, though largely continuous with a scholastic past, supplies a tangible advance. Centuries of semiotic reflection have produced some hard-earned results which we can now distil to a handful of secure tenets.³³ Using the evocative terminology employed by Armstrong (1989), we know that representations necessarily have to be “layer-cakes” (and cannot be unitary “blobs”) on pain of no longer representing, and that this irreducible complexity in turn allows us to prescind—i.e., distinguish without extinguishing—the constituents that make up a whole greater than its parts. Moreover (and this is of special importance to the “extended mind” conception in cognitive science), the previous holds true regardless of whether the triadic representation that pole-vaults on a qualitative vehicle to reach its object does so on the basis of a correlation that is subjective or objective, conventionally recognized or truly bound to its object. Yet the irreducibly triadic nature Peirce called attention to is not a blunt verdict about “what there is,” but a temperate conclusion about what any representation must be. Only with the additional premise of pansemiotism, the idea that everything is a sign (Nöth 1995, p. 81), can such layering be read as a properly metaphysical thesis. And of course, that tendentious supplement can be resisted.

Thus, without countenancing anything overly dubious, the construal of representation as a triadic relation of “standing for” (“*stare pro*”) nevertheless manages to show that there is a “glut”—to borrow a particularly apt term from multi-valued logic—between the extremes exemplified by Block’s realism and Dennett’s instrumentalism. Minimally, we have to be able to wedge some sort of distinction in a sign to even realize that it isn’t its object—that the word “dog” doesn’t bite or that the smoke-from-the-fire is also just plain smoke. Still, the partitioning of a sign’s three components is not the product of fiat, in spite of the fact that no quality is by itself significant and that the meaning we

ascribe a vehicle can be wholly conventional (although it need not be). However one wants to describe all of this, Peirce was probably on the right track when he characterized semiotics as “the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs” (1931-58, vol. 2, para. 227).

As was seen in the previous section, Peirce’s semiotic conception can help elucidate the intuitive appeal of many thought-experiments that are *pro*-qualia. The proponent of phenomenal-consciousness may thus be inclined to think that precission affords her a means of further articulating her thesis that consciousness includes an irreducible qualitative dimension. As Frank Jackson insists, “Physicalism is not the noncontroversial thesis that the actual world is largely physical, but the challenging thesis that it is *entirely* physical” ([1986] 1997, p. 567; our emphasis). Accordingly, if it can be shown that the tone simply cannot be reduced to the token or the type, then this should lend appreciable support to the (for some, recondite) contention that there is “more” to consciousness than purely physical occurrences. Despite having reprimanded the reification that made this qualitative dimension some separate “thing” existing in its own right, it seems correct to say that we have vindicated Block to a certain extent by showing that, this important flaw aside, he had a point after all.

Interestingly, precission also lends credence to ontological outlooks which were more prosaic to begin with. In surveying various positions on the subject, Paul Churchland points out for example that “[t]he identity theorist can admit a duality, or even a plurality, of different *types of knowledge* without thereby committing himself to a duality of *types of things known*” (1988, p. 34; see also [1989] 1997). This clearly harks back to the Scotist insight we have reiterated throughout this paper. But according to this interpretation, it should *silence*—not embolden—the phenomenal realist. All we have done is tell a convincing story about how we discern features, but since these are in fact bound together, our account gives us no grounds to think qualia in the typical sense exist in their own right. So it seems we have criticized Block; and indeed we have.

Unless one is prepared to hold the line that qualia are something *entirely* distinct or the (equally improbable) view that there is absolutely *no* way to even *notionally* seize upon the qualitative dimension subsumed in a given representation, then we think our semiotic account can be used pretty much to everyone’s benefit. The categorial interrelations we outlined clearly allow those who initially countenanced qualia to continue doing so—albeit in a modified, less provocative, way. On this reading, the type/token/tone trichotomy exonerates their chief contention. *Mutatis mutandis*, theorists who didn’t countenance qualia can cite precission to plausibly explain why the topic of qualia has captured with a remarkable consensus the inter-subjective attention of theorists. They can, that is, emphasize our critique of Block and read the glass so that it becomes half empty.

Granted, our declared goal was to tug at the *realist* side of this dialectic so as to prevent the grasp of a qualitative dimension from turning on the hardboiled existence of some “thing” capable of being wholly independent. In keeping

with this critique, we have tried to show how precission rescues sundry intuitions about conscious life from castigation without appealing to any kind of reification. Nevertheless, a welcomed by-product of this amendment is that it makes the tone more palatable to the theorist who had rejected the queer ontology standardly promulgated alongside phenomenal qualia. Taken together, we think these changes have the power to dislodge a long-standing clog in the flow of inquiry.

Conclusion

It is our considered belief that the notion of tone must recover its rightful place alongside the type and the token if contemporary thought is to consummate its aspiration of escaping the centripetal pull of Cartesian dualism. Although we could at best *invite* a concerted rectification of this neglect, we hope we have shown that resisting facile interpretations is not only sound from the standpoint of exegetic fidelity, it offers substantial philosophic benefits. For want of historical sensitivity, however, philosophy butchered an important distinction which involved a rationale completely foreign to the canons of post-Latin discourse. Indeed, the vocabulary of the parties to the present controversy over qualia and Peirce's triadic vocabulary do not easily match up. A crucial question for the former debate is: should we quantify over qualia? Block (and Nagel) think that we should, Dennett (and others) that we should not. That discussion becomes totally warped when it is considered from the framework (in the Carnapian sense) of Peircean semiotics. And of course, that's not a failing—it's the whole point.

Pursuant with this aim (and our diagram), we have not proposed a solution to a problem as it stands. We have instead proposed a set of tools that allow us to rethink certain fundamental assumptions so that that problem does not surface as it does in the first place. Admittedly, the means elected to achieve this are in many ways deceptively humble. But like bending a tree in its infancy, it doesn't require much if the positioning is right.

Upon having looked at what has been historically and what should be logically, we have previewed what could be; forecasting in a programmatic way the fruitful impact precission can have on at least one aspect of the mind-body problem. If most of our theories have heretofore been unable to adequately fathom the phenomenal dimension proper to conscious life without running into all sorts of implausible consequences, perhaps this is because these theories have been trying to capture that object of study with a dichotomy fundamentally ill-suited to the task. So at any rate we argue.

This still leaves much work to be done. Given our concern with elucidating the problematic status of "phenomenal-consciousness," we have confined ourselves mainly to Firstness, and have disregarded—as one can in precission—the more developed categorial grades in contradistinction with which that qualitative dimension finds its meaning. As Peirce wrote: "Experience is the course of life. The world is that which experience inculcates. Quality is the

monadic element of the world.... But in saying this, we are straying from the domain of the monad into that of the dyad” (1931-58, vol. 1, para. 426).³⁴ Indeed, we prescind from the fabric of representation elementary vehicles we do not (and would not want to) encounter in isolation. The tone may be a good fit for P-consciousness, but it is by no means an explanatory panacea for consciousness altogether. Accordingly, it is legitimate to try and elaborate a semiotic account of consciousness far less static than the one we have presented (see Champagne forthcoming a). That said, it would be a mistake to conceive such an approach as rival and not complementary—a warning-post wisely planted by Umberto Eco: “[T]he sign is the origin of the semiotic processes, and there is no opposition between the ‘nomadism’ of semiosis (and of interpretive activity) and the alleged stiffness and immobility of the sign” (1986, p. 1).

Just as nothing prevents us from folding our representational apparatus onto itself so as to inspect its incipient substructure, so can we scrutinize from the vantage point of the present the historical developments that have led us to where we are. Obviously, we could not exhaustively chart in a single article the landscape of possibilities which ensues when one decides to backtrack and incorporate the less heavy-handed method of prescission. But should the gist of our suspicions vis-à-vis the deep insufficiency of the type/token distinction prove correct, then adopting the complete trichotomy might go a long way towards remedying some of the more stubborn problems that have beset contemporary inquiries into consciousness. A first step down this promising avenue would be to connect with the notional framework that has come of age under semiotics’ trust. If we can narrow a disciplinary gap, maybe we can narrow an explanatory gap.³⁵

Notes

- 1 Many of the philosophical essays about consciousness we allude to have been anthologized (sometimes in augmented form) in Block, Flanagan, and Güzelde (1997). For the sake of simplicity and accessibility, we have referred to this collection wherever possible (original sources are provided in the references). Similarly, in any instance where there was overlap, we have used the two *Essential Peirce* volumes over the less-reliable *Collected Papers*.
- 2 In many ways, McGinn’s pessimistic gloss places the “mind-body” problem within the larger context of global scepticism. However, the present contribution, which can be read as broadly naturalist in gait and destination, does not aspire to the practice of addressing the sceptic’s worries.
- 3 There are good reasons why we should be wary of such renunciation. As Nagel points out, “In discovering sound to be, in reality, a wave phenomenon in air or other media, we leave behind one viewpoint to take up another, and the auditory, human, or animal viewpoint that we leave behind remains unreduced” ([1974] 1997, p. 523).
- 4 It can be argued that the most thoroughgoing form of externalism currently available in analytic philosophy of mind—“vehicle externalism” (Rowlands 2003,

pp. 155-182)—already had a full theoretical treatment in Poinset (see Deely 2001; as well as Rasmussen 1994). Unfortunately, that watershed contribution took place in what is arguably the least known strand in Western thought, namely scholastic philosophy after Descartes pretty much took historiography along with him. To appreciate the extent of the neglect, we may note that although Blackwell's recent *Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages* states in no uncertain terms that "it is clear that both Augustine (b. 354; d. 430) and John of St. Thomas [a.k.a. Poinset] (b. 1589; d. 1644) were engaged in the same intellectual program and therefore belong together" (Gracia and Noone 2006, p. 1), the latter does not figure among the 138 entries (some of them about quite minor thinkers) that comprise the book. It is highly unlikely, however, that Poinset's *Tractatus*—"a difficult work even for medievalists trained in late Latin Aristotelian thought" (Irvine 1988, p. 707)—will be claimed by a similar "companion" to modernity.

- 5 It may be surprising to find Augustine credited with inaugurating a model that will in time blossom into a sophisticated theory of representation. We may recall, for example, Wittgenstein's paragraphs at the outset of the *Philosophical Investigations* (not a work known for its historical scholarship) that depict Augustine as using names to merely "label" cognitively complete concepts. All the same, in Todorov's estimate, Augustine "affirms more strongly than earlier writers have done that words are merely one type of sign; this affirmation, which stands out with increasing sharpness in his later writings, is the cornerstone of the semiotic perspective" (1992, p. 36; see also Eco and Marmo 1989, pp. 4-5). It is important to keep in mind, however, that "[Augustine] introduced to the Latins and to philosophy the sign as a theme, but he himself was never to thematize it" (Deely 2001, p. 218). The covering model of the sign put forward in his pregnant reflections will be discussed by a long succession of thinkers, like a silent undercurrent beneath the better-known disputes of medieval philosophy.
- 6 For details on the etymology and alternative spellings of the term, see Peirce (1998, p. 352).
- 7 These labels describe formal relations merely, and do not prejudge what might fill the placeholders.
- 8 John Deely is in all likelihood correct to suggest that seeing "[t]he greatest American philosopher disowning the most famous American development" in philosophy was (is?) for many "a considerable embarrassment" (2001, p. 616). Peirce's grievance with his previous pragmatist maxim, in a nutshell, was that the meaning of a sign is not determined by its immediate "practical bearings," but by those it would have if interpreted in the long run. It is impossible, however, to make sense of this thesis without engaging in earnest with his semiotic doctrine, in particular his notion of an "interpretant." For his mature views on the subject—which he by then preferred to call "pragmatism"—see Peirce (1998, pp. 331-433).
- 9 See his 1901 short text entitled "Triadomany," which he subtitled "The author's response to the anticipated suspicion that he attaches a superstitious or fanciful importance to the number three, and forces divisions to a Procrustean bed of trichotomy" (Peirce 1931-58, vol. 1, para. 568-572).

- 10 While he basically misappropriates the type/token/tone distinction and describes it as pertaining to “semantics,” Armstrong correctly insists that we are dealing here with “a perfectly general distinction applicable to any subject whatever” (1989, p. 1). Ironically, the generality of Peirce’s notions owes precisely to the fact that his project was *not* semantic, in that semiotics is an all-encompassing enterprise which has nothing to do with the “glottocentrist” dogma that takes intentionally emitted and conventionally coded expressions to be the paradigm exemplars of the sign. For more on the assumptions that set language-centred approaches to the study of signs (like the “semiology” championed by Saussure) apart from semiotics proper, see Deledalle (2000, pp. 100-113), as well as Deely (2001, pp. 669-688).
- 11 Peirce formulated the type/token/tone distinction under a variety of nomenclatures throughout his life. Moreover, the distinction itself is imbedded in a set of three trichotomies which together produce (not by multiplication) a tenfold semiotic declension, cataloguing the modal steps by which representation passes from possibility to actuality to generality. To fully understand the tone, one must apply precission twice over. Strictly speaking, then, the tone is the First element of the sign (the sign-vehicle or “representamen”) considered in its Firstness as a not-yet-occurrent quality (see Peirce 1998, pp. 289-299). For the record, we find the less familiar terminology of “qualisign/sinsign/legisign” more conceptually appropriate, and recognize that the full import of Peirce’s distinctions is best brought out when they collaborate as an interwoven whole. That said, in the interest of letting our historical-*cum*-logical restoration latch onto those terms that already enjoy wide currency, we have elected to stay with the better-known appellations. There is some exegetical justification for this choice of terminology, since as late as December 1908 Peirce wrote in a letter to Lady Welby that “For a ‘possible’ Sign I have no better designation than a *Tone*” (1998, p. 480)—although he still juggled with alternative names.
- 12 If we avoid the fallacy of elevating the sign-vehicle into a sufficient condition of representation, we see that the tone is emphatically *not* a sign. “Phonemes, for example, are not signs since they mean nothing” (Nöth 1995, p. 80). To be sure, the tone is at the heart of any and all signs, since anything triadic perforce subsumes the dyadic and monadic. But it is a contradiction in terms to approach a quality as if it were alone in the universe yet maintain that it stands for something *else*. Although this in no way means there is only one thing in the universe, it does show that a single quality would by itself be insufficient to re-present.
- 13 From a semiotic point of view, it makes no difference whether the regularity which governs the appearance of a set of tokens owes to natural laws or grammatical conventions.
- 14 The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s online entry on “Types and Tokens” (originally posted April 2006, consulted August 2008) alludes to *this very passage* yet completely neglects to mention the tone, stating instead: “C. S. Peirce (1931-58, sec. 4.537) called words in the first sense ‘types’ and words in the second sense ‘tokens’” (section 1.1). Much further down (in section 4.1.3), the entry avows that

“It wouldn’t do to ignore what the coiner of the type-token distinction had to say about types,” only to add immediately after that “Unfortunately it cannot be adequately unpacked without an in-depth explication of Peirce’s semiotics, which cannot be embarked upon here.” It is nevertheless remarked in passing: “(It should be mentioned that for Peirce there is actually a trichotomy among types, tokens and *tones*, or qualisigns, which are ‘the mere quality of appearance’)” (ibid., parentheses in original; see Peirce 1931-58, vol. 8, para. 334). Given that the entry is concerned mainly with recapping the realism-nominalism debate in metaphysics, we fail to see why the traditional notions of “universal” and “particular” should have been clad in labels which—it is openly admitted—belong to a framework *foreign* to that topic.

- 15 The proposal we are articulating is far more fundamental, and is logically anterior to the sociological-*cum*-cultural assumptions that are part and parcel of a linguistic approach. Such a limited construal appeared prominently in the analytic literature, for instance, with H. P. Grice’s introduction of “conversational tone.” Although Grice was aware of Peirce’s work, he ostensibly did not have a full sense of how semiotics involves a categorial matrix that has genuine repercussions for issues far outside the philosophy of language. Without this understanding, it could perhaps be feared that, to the degree one develops the idea of quality as tone, one is merely retreading an already familiar path. Yet for that to be the case, one would have first to group linguistic items as a privileged class—the very dogma semiotics has sought to overcome since its inception. For a discussion of how Peirce’s mature writings “sketched a theory of natural language and communication, which offers a new perspective on the heavily debated Semantics-Pragmatics-Interface,” see Rellstab (2008; especially part 3).
- 16 Although they often read more like rough personal notes, selected portions of Deledalle (2000, pp. 5-20, 37-62, 67-75) provide a nice bridge from mainstream analytic philosophy to Peircean semiotics. For a more systematic exploration of the topic, we recommend Savan (1987) and Deely (1990). Peirce (1998) is a must (it should perhaps be unnecessary to say so, but let us note that, the above sources notwithstanding, mass-market introductory textbooks are generally no more reliable in semiotics than they are in philosophy when it comes to advanced technical issues—the type/token/tone distinction being a case in point).
- 17 Strictly speaking, Peirce was what we would today call a “panpsychist,” arguing that “matter is effete mind” (1931-58, vol. 6, para. 25). This stance in turn rests on the thesis that the universe is “perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (Peirce 1998, p. 394; for recent support of this view in the philosophy of physics, see Ladyman, Ross, Spurrett, and Collier 2007, pp. 210-220). That said, Peirce was fully aware of the problematic rifts that were starting to appear in the study of consciousness: “Matters of brain-physiology and matters of consciousness elbow one another in unsympathetic juxtaposition, in a way which can only be transitional, and is a sign for us, as well as we can look forward to conceptions not yet attained, that psychologists do not yet understand what mind is, nor what it does. I am not at all prepared to clear the matter up; but I dimly discern, I think, that

- the physiological view has not sufficiently affected the introspective aspect; and possibly the converse is true, also" (1931-58, vol. 2, para. 42).
- 18 Of course, the idea that standard reductionist/eliminativist accounts are not exhaustive is tendentious. But if the "non-exhausted" party is dead wrong, then there is really no problem left for us to address, and our proposed reconceptualization cannot even get off the ground. We shall therefore take due note of this profound dissension and continue with the (in our assessment, correct) assumption that the perplexing realization that something is "left out" is not totally ill-founded.
 - 19 Interestingly, the original coining cited Nagel's paper as an influence (see Levine 1983, p. 361 n. 3).
 - 20 A notable proponent of this view, according to Block, would be Searle (1992, pp. 107-108), who argues that if epileptics in the grip of a seizure do not display any flexibility and creativity in their behaviour, then we can conclude that flexibility and creativity are important traits of consciousness.
 - 21 For an overview of what is involved, see Bornstein and Pittman (1992), Milner and Rugg (1992); as well as the more philosophical treatment in Nelkin (1996).
 - 22 The label is Block's own (see his 2002).
 - 23 For his part, Owen Flanagan believes this situation is more than a mere conceptual possibility, and that "the case of blindsight shows its actuality" ([1992] 1997, p. 371).
 - 24 Block (2007) stresses the need to search for such a phenomenal module without expecting the episodes enjoyed by a subject to be in any wise reportable. He argues that if we make reportability a non-negotiable desideratum of our explanation, we will see no need to investigate the qualitative experiences themselves. However, "access" in Block's sense is thinner than a verbal report: "Reportability is a legacy of behaviorism that is less interesting than it has seemed. The more interesting issue in the vicinity is not the relation between the phenomenal and the reportable, but rather the relation between the phenomenal and the cognitively accessible" (2007, p. 484). So presumably, one could have access and still not be able to express this in any overt act of communication.
 - 25 Although assorted empirical findings are often quoted in support of various positions, the debate largely hinges on which party should assume the burden of (dis)proof. Block ([1992] 1997) has explicitly accused theorists of harbouring a *petitio* against phenomenal-consciousness, and has recently reiterated this claim in greater detail (2007). For a further discussion of Block's stance and the inference he deems inconclusive, see Tye (1996, pp. 291-295).
 - 26 For one thing, it could be argued that Block does not fully appreciate the substantial point Dennett is trying to make when he asserts that the *ontology* of consciousness is essentially cultural (to affirm that we have cultural constructs for those things we talk about is a truism, and would make Dennett's thesis a mere platitude).
 - 27 For a handy survey of Dennett's critical reception, see Dahlbom (1993).
 - 28 Block states that he does "not want to claim that there are non-representational phenomenal features of every experience or that when there are, these non-representational features form support for the representational features in the manner of a 'base'" (1995, p. 28). That is exactly what semiotics claims, the tone being the ultimate ground one can reach. Having said this, one must keep in mind that

“[w]hat is sign-vehicle one time can be significate [i.e., object] another time; and what is interpretant one time can be sign-vehicle the next time; and so on, in an unending spiral of (as Peirce liked to say) abductions, deductions, and retroductions through which symbols grow” (Deely 2005, p. 178).

- 29 Block has made his ontological commitments in this regard crystal clear: “Whether we use ‘consciousness’ or ‘phenomenal consciousness,’ ‘awareness’ or ‘access-consciousness,’ the point is that there are two different concepts of the phenomenon or phenomena of interest. We have to acknowledge the possibility in principle that *these two concepts pick out different phenomena. Two vs. one: that is not a verbal issue*” (2000, p. 133; our emphasis).
- 30 Block compares the contribution of phenomena in conscious functions to that of water in a hydraulic machine ([1995] 1997, p. 379). This is a fair analogy, especially since any token perforce implies a tone. But precission reminds us that water without hydraulic machinery would be just a puddle. Since such a lack of access would entail a tone without any token, talk of “qualia” in the plural would be inaccurate: such a mind would be an unbounded expanse filled with a unique “what it’s like” that would literally be “I know not what.” We already have a name for such a “zombie”: we call it a vegetable (see Brandt 2007, pp. 61-62).
- 31 Tracts 2 and 3 in our diagram both agree that qualia are amenable to some sort of description and/or analysis. In light of this shared commitment, what sort of methodological rigour can one expect? Although his ontological allegiances leave no room for ambiguity, Block’s own answer on this front is a qualified optimism. While he thinks there is no reason to be embarrassed by the fact that no non-circular definition of phenomenal-consciousness can be formulated (Block [1995] 1997, p. 380), he has acknowledged that a realistic stance vis-à-vis this slippery aspect of consciousness and an endorsement of scientific naturalism do not fit comfortably together (see his 2002). That appraisal seems right. However, the semiotic framework we have offered as a substitute allows one to account for the fact that we can discern qualia—without making promises it cannot keep. Precission suffices to establish that a tone is not a token. On this “quasi-logical” reading, one is not led to onerously postulate a separate “module” the actual presence of which researchers would subsequently have to empirically vindicate. The researcher who seeks to confirm that $1 + 1 = 2$ by adding drops of water basically invites the objection that two drops joined yield but one; whereas the thinker who stays firmly grounded in the theoretical idiom best suited to the study of that truth wisely obviates such criticisms.
- 32 For instance, Duns Scotus defended the ideas of the Persian philosopher and Aristotelian commentator Ibn Sina (known to Latin Europe as “Avicenna”), who had argued that, though the human intellect groups concrete instances into various natural kinds, the “essence” which makes each individual item what it is must in some sense be *prior* to its “existence” (see Williams 2003, pp. 104-105; Jordan 1984, pp. 143-147). In a way, this resembles Peirce’s contention that there is “no logical difficulty” in “supposing” a quality “without any occurrence” (1931-58, vol. 1, para. 304-305). An informative parallel can thus be drawn between the type/token/tone distinction and the medieval tripartition of natures as *post rem*, *in rebus*, and

ante rem (see Gracia and Noone 2006, p. 199). As interesting as such a gloss is, however, it presents severe limitations one would do well to keep in mind. In a full-blown reification that makes Block's activated-but-inaccessible module pale by comparison, the idea of the *ante rem* was usually taken as what the Divine Mind would be (was?) contemplating prior to the mysterious "contraction" of inchoate commonality into individualities; whereas from a (more humble) semiotic standpoint, the apprehension of the tone's priority comes simply by way of a cognitive operation directed at a specific subclass of things ("signs") which allow for such splitting to begin with. According to Peirce's categorial architecture, representation entails relation and relation entails quality. But in establishing this, we always work our way down from a stock of representations, and thus never really encounter a quality that isn't actualized.

- 33 A store of achievements nicely summarized in the otherwise eclectic Nöth (1995, pp. 79-80).
- 34 This is certainly not unrelated to the celebrated "belief-doubt-inquiry-belief" sequence central to the pragmatist theory of knowledge (of which Peirce was indisputably a fountainhead). Pursuing this connection further, however, will force one to confront *normative* questions downstream that, strictly speaking, fall outside the purview of semiotics and philosophy of mind. That's not necessarily a bad thing; epistemology is a worthwhile endeavour. It's just not something we set out to accomplish.
- 35 We would like to thank Verena Gottschling, Matthew Ivanowich, Ryan Tonkens, and anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier drafts (the usual caveats apply). We would also like to acknowledge the Department of Philosophy at York for its support.

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