

This is the author version of the following article: Podlaskowski, A. (2012). "Phenomenal Concepts And Incomplete Understanding." *Southwest Philosophy Review*, July, 28 (2), pp. 15-17. The final publication is available at: https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=swphilreview&id=swphilreview_2012_0028_0002_0015_0017

Phenomenal concepts and incomplete understanding

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It is often thought that acquiring a phenomenal concept requires having the relevant sort of experience. In "Are Phenomenal Concepts Perspectival?", Andreas Elpidorou (2012) defends this position from an objection raised by Michael Tye (2009). Here, I argue that Elpidorou's case proves unconvincing, as he fails to attend to important supporting materials introduced by Tye.

Tye challenges the view that phenomenal concepts are *perspectival*, where the possession of such a concept requires having the relevant experience. His case begins with the observation that phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended, in that they can be mistakenly applied to a narrower set of objects than that which comprises the extension of the concept, or they can be mistakenly applied to a set of objects larger than that falling under its extension. Elpidorou (2012) reconstructs Tye's argument thusly:

- P1. If a subject under- or over-extends any given concept *C*, then the subject only partially understands *C*.
- P2. A subject can partially understand (and therefore possess and deploy) *C* even if one has not experienced that to which *C* refers.
- P3. If *C* can be possessed by a subject without the subject having experienced that to which *C* refers, then *C* is not a perspectival concept.
- P4. Any given phenomenal concept *C* can be under- or over-extended.
- C1. Therefore, phenomenal concepts can be partially understood by a subject.
- C2. Therefore, any given phenomenal concept *C* is not perspectival.

Elpidorou's principal contention is that (P2) proceeds from the presumption that all concepts possess the same possession or acquisition conditions. But those who take phenomenal concepts to be perspectival maintain that such concepts do, in fact, differ in significant respects from non-phenomenal concepts. So,

without further argumentative support, (P2) begs the question against those who regard phenomenal concepts as perspectival.

Elpidorou entertains several possible lines of support for (P2), finding each of them to be inadequate—in each case, they fail to provide a convincing account of how one could possibly *acquire* a phenomenal concept in a non-experiential fashion. Despite the great care with which he handles the topic, though, Elpidorou fails to consider the argument that Tye *actually* provides in support of (P2). Tye's argument begins by citing cases where one can deploy the concept *red* without obviously requiring having experienced red. For example, one might know that someone who has experienced red is better acquainted with what it is like to experience red than someone who has not; or that red things such as apples normally cause the experience of red; or that, whatever the phenomenal character of the states of which the speaker is aware, those are not what it is like to experience red. Tye suggests that each of these cases should be understood as employing the same concept of *red* as is associated with the experience of red. The reason for this conclusion is that disputes over any of topics cited by Tye can be reasonably held between parties who have and parties who have not experienced red; and that there stands the possibility of engaging in a genuine dispute requires that all parties involved share the same concept of *red* (Tye, 2009, pp. 66-7).

Tye acknowledges that it is tempting to respond to his argument that the examples cited merely support the conclusion that one might possess a non-phenomenal concept of red as well as a distinctly phenomenal concept of red (so that all of the possible disputes are over applications of non-phenomenal concepts). Elpidorou draws a similar distinction, when he entertains the option that the under- and over-extension argument is plausible when coupled with other considerations, such as those provided by Burge (1979) and Putnam (1975). As Elpidorou frames the matter, (P2) is really the conjunction of two distinct premises:

P2_{NP}. A subject can partially understand (and therefore possess and deploy) a non-phenomenal concept C_{NP} even if one has not experienced that to which C_{NP} refers.

P2_P. A subject can partially understand (and therefore possess and deploy) a phenomenal C_P even if one has not experienced that to which C_P refers.

Elpidorou's concern is that only (P2_{NP}) follows from any such arguments—after all, nowhere has an account been provided for how a phenomenal concept could be acquired non-experientially.

Tye anticipates this sort of problem when he argues that attempting to strike a distinction such as found between (P2_{NP}) and (P2_P) produces the wrong judgments in a number of cases. Due to space constraints,

only one will be mentioned here. Tye considers an episode involving Mary, the star of Frank Jackson's *knowledge argument* against physicalism. In Jackson's thought experiment, Mary the color scientist has spent her life held captive in a black-and-white room. Eventually, she is released and, upon seeing red for the first time, we should expect that Mary has learned something new. Tye invites us to contrast two episodes featuring Mary. The first takes place while Mary is still in captivity and in a rather pessimistic mood, when she believes that she will never know what it is like to experience red. The second episode occurs upon Mary's seeing red for the first time, when she believes that now she knows what it is like to see red. *Prima facie*, the contents of these beliefs are contradictory. The problem, of course, is that if Mary's belief formed while in captivity employs a non-phenomenal concept and her belief formed shortly after her release employs a phenomenal concept, then (contrary to appearances) those beliefs do not lead to a contradiction. These and additional considerations place doubt on the prospects for relying on the distinction that Elpidorou strikes between (P2_{NP}) and (P2_P) (Tye, 2009, pp. 67-70). To be sure, it is worth putting pressure on this portion of Tye's case; but Elpidorou fails to do so.

Even if Tye's argument proves persuasive, it is well worth pointing out that Elpidorou is very explicit that his thesis is that the argument from under- and over-extended concepts cannot—on its own—undermine the thesis that phenomenal concepts are perspectival. Strictly speaking, he is correct. However, Tye's argument includes materials missing from Elpidorou's reconstruction. So, while I do not question Elpidorou's handling of the reconstructed argument, the same cannot be said for whether that reconstruction is faithful (in important respects) to the case originally made by Tye.

References

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