

Comments on Joost Ziff's "Finding the Agent in Thinking"

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In the first section of his essay, Ziff reviews some considerations in favor of cognitive phenomenology and seems initially concerned with the issue of whether cognitive states have what David Pitt (2004) and Jesse Prinz (2004) call a proprietary phenomenology.¹ To say the phenomenology of thought is *proprietary* is to say that it is "different from that of any other type of *conscious mental state*" (Pitt 2004, 7); that is, not exhausted by the phenomenology of, e.g., verbal or sensory imagery. However, after considering two arguments for the existence of cognitive phenomenology (viz., the TOT and SR arguments), Ziff's concern shifts to the issue of whether cognitive states have an individuating (or "distinct") phenomenology. To say the phenomenology of thought is *individuating* is to say that "in virtue of [it] having the phenomenal properties it has, it's a thought ... with a specific content" (Pitt 2011, 142). Ziff ends the section by concluding that the arguments considered do not support cognitive phenomenology as individuating, though it's unclear whether he thinks they support one that's proprietary.

In the second section, the Nietzschean skeptical scenario is introduced which raises doubts about our role *as agents* in conscious thinking. As note 4 suggests, the Nietzschean challenge runs parallel to the fundamental problem in the philosophy of action. Here's how David Velleman (1992) puts it. Since "our scientific view of the world regards all events and states of affairs as caused, and hence explained, by other events and states", it would seem to "leave no room for agents" in the production and explanation of our actions (ibid., 467). Likewise, if our conscious thoughts are caused by sub-personal events and processes, how can we find room for *agents* in the production and explanation of our conscious thinking? The Nietzschean scenario undermines my role *as author* of my conscious thoughts, relegating me to being nothing more than their "host". My thinking isn't something that *I do*, but something that *happens to me*.

In section three, Ziff presents his main argument which, very roughly, seems to be that the effort expended in activities that express and clarify our thoughts make them "distinctly phenomenally conscious" (p. 212). Examples of these effort-expending activities are things such as talking, drawing, and writing a poem or a philosophy paper (ibid.). From this, he infers that the Nietzschean skeptical scenario can be "defused". On Ziff's proposal, what makes us *the author* of

¹ For a recent anthology on cognitive phenomenology, see Bayne and Montague (2011).

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our thoughts is our capacity to engage in effort-expending activities to express and clarify them such that they become *individually* phenomenally conscious.

Although Ziff makes clear that his primary focus is identifying, as he puts it, the agent's role in conscious thinking, my first concern is whether an agent's effort-expending activities can, indeed, *fix* the content of their thoughts, as (I believe) Ziff's proposal implies. If the effort-expending activities used to express our thoughts grants them an individuated phenomenology and having an individuated phenomenology fixes their content, then the effort-expending activities used to express our thoughts should fix their content. Thus, the content of a thought cannot vary independently of the effort-expending activities used to express it.

But consider a standard Twin Earth scenario. Oscar and Twin-Oscar are perfect intrinsic duplicates: they have all the same abilities, dispositions, internal brain states, and both are habituated to engage in the same effort-expending activities to express their thoughts about, say, the thirst-quenching stuff in their environment. Their poems, philosophy papers, and utterances involve the same *sentence-forms* such as 'water is a clear, potable, tasteless liquid, it falls from the sky when it rains, is found in lakes, rivers, and oceans, and used to cook, clean, shower', etc. Nonetheless, Oscar lives on Earth where the thirst-quenching stuff in his environment is water (H₂O), while Twin-Oscar lives on Twin-Earth where there is no water but only stuff superficially similar to water, twin-water, with a different chemical structure (XYZ). Oscar has thoughts about water, but Twin-Oscar has thoughts about twin-water despite the fact that both engage in the same effort-expending activities to express those thoughts. Thus, the content of a thought can vary independently of the effort-expending activities used to express it, contrary to Ziff.

My second concern deals directly with Ziff's main focus, identifying the agent's role in conscious thinking. To articulate my issue, let me start with Harry Frankfurt's (1988) example of the unwilling addict.² Suppose an unwilling addict's first-order desire moves them to continue with their drug use. Frankfurt claims this is a case where it is clear the agent's distinctive

² For a more detailed analysis of this case, see Frankfurt (1988), specifically his "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", "Three Concepts of Free Action", "Identification and Externality", "The Problem of Action", and "Identification and Wholeheartedness".

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contribution to action is absent. The unwilling addict is *alienated from* the motive that moves them because they do not identify with or fully endorse it. Frankfurt reasons that the distinctive contribution made by an agent in the production of their action must consist in their *identifying with* or *endorsing* the first-order motive that moves them. As Velleman (1992) puts it, the agent's contribution consists in "throwing their weight" behind one of their first-order motives. Frankfurt goes on to propose we understand this identification or endorsement as the formation of the right kind of second-order motive. However, as Gary Watson (1982) has pointed out, it is possible for an agent to be alienated from their second-order motives in the same way as their first-order motives. If alienation from one's first-order motive implies the agent's contribution to action is missing, then alienation from a second-order motive should imply the same thing. Frankfurt's account fails to identify the agent's distinctive contribution to action.

I wonder whether Ziff's proposal fails for an analogous reason. Can an agent be *alienated* from the effort-expending activities of thought expression that Ziff identifies as the agent's distinctive contribution to conscious thinking? Conscious thinking is supposedly something that we *do* (rather than something that merely *happens to us*) in virtue of engaging in the right kind of activities to express our thoughts; that is, when we engage in *actions* of the right sort. But if an agent can be alienated from those actions, then – echoing Watson's objection to Frankfurt – the agent's distinctive contribution to conscious thinking hasn't yet been found. For my part, I don't find it too difficult to imagine an unwilling *speaker*, an unwilling *illustrator*, an unwilling *poet*, or an unwilling *paper writer*. In other words, it isn't hard to imagine someone whose motivational structure mirrors Frankfurt's unwilling addict except that the action which is the eventual causal output of that motivational structure is the kind of effortful activity of thought expression characterized by Ziff. If alienation from these kinds of activities is possible, then Ziff's response to the Nietzschean skeptical scenario is incomplete.

Let me end with a brief diagnosis as to why the proposal faces this problem. The parallels between the fundamental problem in the philosophy of action and the challenge issued by the Nietzschean skeptical scenario are perhaps more than mere parallels. These may just be the very same problem, namely the problem of identifying the agent's contribution to *the doing* of

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something – whether that doing is action or conscious thinking. Both things, after all, are supposed to be things we *do*. If this is right, then Ziff's proposal was bound to be incomplete. For, making room for the agent in the production of conscious thinking cannot be fully explained in terms of the agent's *doing of something else* unless, of course, we have already made room for the agent in the production of *the doing of that something else*.

(Word Count: 1287)

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