

Comments on Declan Smithies' *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness*¹

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Declan Smithies' *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness* argues for “phenomenal mentalism,” according to which justification is determined synchronically and solely by phenomenally individuated mental states. Moreover, Part I of the book argues for a few specific epistemic principles about perception, cognition, as well as introspection. My comments focus on the discussion of these specific principles, and raises worries about the consistency with other ideas in the book, and about the arguments for these principles.

First, with respect to perceptual justification, Smithies argues for *the content principle*:

“Every experience that represents that p with presentational force thereby provides immediate, defeasible justification to believe that p .” (92)

Smithies explains that “presentational force” is a distinctive kind of phenomenal character of perceptual experience, in which you feel as if that the relevant object is present.

Whereas Smithies argues for the sufficiency of presentational force for justification, he denies that intellectual experiences, such as the feeling of rationality, are sufficient for justification in chapter 12. Smithies considers a case in which you conduct an inference through affirming the consequent, but nonetheless enjoy a feeling of rationality. He argues that your feeling of rationality does not give you immediate justification for believing that the inference is valid (401-403).

I think that there is some potential inconsistency between Smithies' different views toward presentational force and the feeling of rationality. There is abundant evidence that various feelings that accompany memory, inference, and imagining are generated by metacognitive mechanisms that monitor these first-order mental processes and states. These feelings are

¹ An earlier version of this commentary was posted on the Brains Blog: <https://philosophyofbrains.com/2021/04/27/book-symposium-declan-smithies-the-epistemic-role-of-consciousness-2.aspx>

called *epistemic feelings*, which include the feeling of familiarity (Westermann et al. 2002; Whittlesea et al. 1990), the feeling of rationality (Ackerman and Thompson 2017), and also presentational force (or a very similar phenomenal character) that occurs in the auditory-verbal hallucinations of subjects with schizophrenia (Bentall and Varese 2013; Dijkstra et al. 2021; Simons et al. 2017). If presentational force and the feeling of rationality are both epistemic feelings, and are generated by similar metacognitive mechanisms, then naturally presentational force is on a par with the feeling of rationality in justificatory power. Smithies' different treatments look suspicious; his skepticism toward the feeling of rationality might even backfire.

Second, Smithies argues for *doxastic conservatism*:

“Necessarily, if you believe that p , then you thereby have defeasible justification to believe that p .” (117)

In defending this principle, Smithies considers an objection that unjustified beliefs should not provide justification; otherwise, this leads to bootstrapping. Smithies replies that such beliefs still justify, but the justification is defeated by whatever makes them unjustified (120).

Suppose that your belief “It is raining in Shanghai” is due to wishful thinking, and your total evidence is entirely neutral with respect to this matter. Also, suppose that you are unaware of the epistemically inappropriate etiology of your belief. Given your total evidence, it could either be true or false that it is raining in Shanghai. Your belief coheres with the rest of your belief system. However, intuitively, your belief is unjustified, and does not provide you with any justification for believing that it is raining in Shanghai. In such a case, there seems to be no defeater that could help eliminate the threat of bootstrapping.

Third, with respect to introspective justification, Smithies defends *the simple theory*:

“Necessarily, if you have an experience that e , then you thereby have immediate, indefeasible justification to believe that you have e .” (218)

Smithies extends this theory to belief, and further defends *the extended simple theory*:

“Necessarily, if you believe that p , then you thereby have immediate, indefeasible justification to believe that you believe that p .” (218)

Here I examine Smithies’ argument for the experience version, although I think that his argument for the belief version faces a similar problem.

Smithies points out that rejecting the simple theory implies that epistemic akrasia is sometimes rational, which is unacceptable. Suppose that you experience that there is a white cube, but it is nonetheless rational for you to believe that you do not experience that there is a white cube. The first half of the supposition, Smithies maintains, implies that it is rational for you to believe that there is a white cube, whereas the second half implies that it is rational for you to believe that it is irrational to believe that there is a white cube.

Together, it is rational for you to be epistemically akratic—that is, to believe “There is a white cube, but it is irrational for you to believe that there is a white cube.” Smithies argues that we should reject the initial supposition and adopt the simple theory (168).

Smithies’ argument seems to assume the content principle; otherwise, he would not be able to reason from the experience that there is a white cube to the conclusion that it is rational to believe that there is a white cube. But one may accept the simple theory while rejecting the content principle.² Moreover, in chapter 6, Smithies argues that phenomenal mentalism together with the four epistemic principles mentioned above explains our intuitions about various cases, and therefore there is an argument for phenomenal mentalism “from below” (218-219). As I understand Smithies’ argument, the support for phenomenal mentalism is in fact from both the intuitive considerations about cases and the justification for accepting the epistemic principles. However, if Smithies’ argument for the simple theory assumes the content principle, then the support for phenomenal mentalism is weaker than when we get independent arguments for each epistemic principle.

² I think that Smithies’ argument for the extended simple theory (172) assumes doxastic conservatism. Again, a problem is that one might accept the former theory while rejecting the latter.

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