**Conscious Occurrent Thought**

Abstract. In this paper, I begin with the question 'What does conscious occurrent thought consist in?' I first argue that the notion of 'access-consciousness' cannot provide a satisfactory answer and that we need to appeal to phenomenological properties. If this right, a further question arises about what kind of phenomenological features are required. Can conscious occurrent thought be accounted for solely in terms of sensory phenomenology, including both verbal and non-verbal imagery? I will argue that the answer is 'no', and that we must appeal to what is now often called 'cognitive phenomenology' in order to say what conscious occurrent thought consists in**.**

## 1 Consciously perceiving & consciously thinking

It is generally accepted that the difference between consciously occurrenlty seeing a red rose and any subpersonal or non-conscious occurrent processing that may take place during this visual episode is accounted for partly in terms of phenomenology. Consciously seeing a red rose involves color phenomenology and color-shape phenomenology, whereas non-conscious visual processes do not. [1]

What about conscious thought? Consider a subject who occurrently and consciously thinking that grass is green or occurrently or consciously entertaining the possibility of Sarah Palin being the next US president.[2] Conscious occurrent thoughts also need to be distinguished from various kinds of occurrent non-conscious mental processing. When a subject reads a sentence of a language she understands, for example, there may be a lot of subpersonal occurrent processing involving the rules of syntax. At this point, I only want to note that there is a difference between conscious occurrent thought and non-conscious but occurrent mental processing.

Suppose we allow, as I think we can, that non-conscious occurrent mental processing can count as thought. Then the question is, what is distinctive of conscious thought? Allowing that there is non-conscious occurrent thought, we get the question 'What makes occurrent thought conscious thought?' So—I'm going to focus on conscious occurrent thought and ask 'What (exactly) does it consist in?'[3]

I will argue that neither stories about the neural machinery involved in conscious thinking, nor stories about the functional properties conscious thoughts typically have, can account for what a conscious occurrent thought consists in. Rather, we need to appeal to phenomenological features to say what a conscious occurrent thought consists in. If this right, a further question arises about what kind of phenomenological features are required. Can conscious occurrent thought be accounted for solely in terms of sensory phenomenology, including both verbal and non-verbal imagery? I will argue that the answer is 'no', and that we must appeal to what is now often called 'cognitive phenomenology' in order to say what conscious occurrent thought consists in**.**

I understand cognitive phenomenology to be a kind of phenomenology associated paradigmatically with conscious thought, but also with conscious perception and emotion, that is something essentially over and above sensory phenomenology. For example, there is

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something it is like to think that 2+2=4, or that temperance is a virtue, something that is *irreducible* to any sensory phenomenology that may be associated with these thoughts. This is the standard use of the term 'cognitive phenomenology' and should be distinguished from certain 'deflationary' uses.

Levine (2011) offers one such deflationary use in allowing that there might be such a thing as what he calls 'impure cognitive phenomenology.'[4] He considers the phenomenon of sensory experience being 'cognitively inflected'. The idea is that although all phenomenology is sensory phenomenology, cognitive states can influence the way the "sensory manifold" is experienced in such a way that two distinct thoughts can result in the same set of sensible features being experienced differently. (An x-ray scan looks different to a radiologist from the way it looks to a non-expert; if you know bananas are yellow an achromatic banana may look yellow.)[5]

One of the key issues here, which I will come back to later, is whether or not the content of

Block added the notion of being 'broadcast in the global workspace' to capture the idea that A-consciousness is an occurrent phenomenon.[8] So, there seem to be the following central elements to a state's being A-conscious:

[i] that it be poised to play a certain causal role in the overall cognitive system;

and

[ii] that it be broadcast.

[ii], I take it, implies

[iii] that it is occurrent.

In subsequent writings, Block has (temporarily?) given up the phrase 'access consciousness' in favour of the phrase 'cognitive accessibility'. Block 2007 says, "Access-consciousness was my term for approximately what I am calling "cognitive accessibility" here." (p. 486).[9] In his 2007 BBS paper Block argues that phenomenal consciousness overflows cognitive accessibility, understood as that which underlies reporting.

The notion of 'action' in Block's phrase 'direct "rational" control of action' denotes 'intentional action', and should include bodily action, mental action involving relations between mental states, and responses to requests to perform certain mental actions.

The reference to 'rational' is meant to rule out the kind of automatic behaviour that occurs in blindsight. In the ordinary blindsight case, mental states that guide behaviour are not under the control of the subject. They are responses to either verbal prompts asking the blindsighter to guess what's in her "blind" visual field, or physical objects the blindsighter can successfully navigate around.[10] In the case of verbal prompts, the fact that the blindsighter guesses means that, from her own perspective, she does not have a reason for answering as she does. In the case of physical prompts, the blindsighter does not from her own perspective have a reason to move as she does. The blindsighter is completely amazed that she is able to successfully navigate around physical objects.

We have, then, the notion of access consciousness or cognitive accessibility. What makes a cognitively accessible state accessible? It's plausible that

[a] if a thought T is conscious and occurrent at time t1, then T is cognitively accessible at time t1, (barring various f

broadcast (presumably it is poised for global control *because* it is being broadcast) does after all secure the requirement of occurrency.

However, a second way of interpreting Strawson's example is that when a thought is explicit+, 'near at hand in the mind' in Strawson's sense, it is in fact *occurrent*, although it is not conscious. For example—it may perhaps be occurrent in some state of activation of working memory. The point is that broadcasting on its own does not seem to distinguish non-conscious or subpersonal occurrent dissemination from conscious occurrent dissemination. In the case under discussion, the belief about action X can be seen as being broadcast and thus occurrent, yet still below the threshold of consciousness.

In fact, Block's superblindsight case seems to provide an example of a content's being access-conscious, broadcast and occurrent, and yet subpersonal or non-conscious. (His superblindsighter is introduced as an example of A-consciousness without P-consciousness.) Although a blindsight patient can only guess what's in his visual field upon prompting, a superblindsighter can be trained to prompt himself to guess what's in his blindfield without being told to guess. He spontaneously offers that he knows that there is an 'X' in his visual field although he can't see it. Visual information about his blindfield just pops into his thoughts. The perceptual content that there is an 'X' in his visual field is A-conscious but not P-conscious. Block goes on to characterize the case as follows:

> Of course, the superblindsighter has a thought that there is an 'X' in his blind field that is both A-conscious and P-conscious. But I am not talking about the thought. Rather, I am talking about the state of his perceptual system that gives rise to the thought. It is this state that is A-conscious without being P-conscious.[12]

In order for this A-conscious state of his perceptual system to give rise to a thought it seems it must be occurrent, and it's broadcast by definition of 'A-consciousness', but it's also subpersonal or non-conscious by definition of blindsight.

One immediate puzzle is then why Block is calling a subpersonal state conscious. It's confusing. But if we switch back to the term 'cognitively accessibile', we can simply and clearly say that the state of the superblindsighter that gives rise to the thought that there is an X is his visual field is cognitively accessible and occurrent but not conscious.

If this is right it seems that we can make sense of a state—e.g. a thought being broadcast and poised for global control independently of the idea that it is conscious. What is missing?

**3 What does a conscious occurrent thought consist in?**

It seems plain that it is a necessary condition on a thought's being conscious that it is occurrent. And it also seems plain that there is a difference between conscious occurrent thought and occurrent thought that is not conscious. So, what makes this difference?

The conclusion of the last section was that

[i]* optimally poised for global control

and

[ii] broadcast in the global workspace

[12] 1995/2002, p. 211.

[iv] t4: Now suppose that John has an image of a red dragon while thinking that grass is green, and that's all he imagines. So, the claim is that John's conscious occurrent thought that grass is green essentially involves his imagining a red dragon.

On the face of it, it seems we can imagine the same sort of cases for verbal imagery.

[v] t5: John has the conscious occurrent thought that grass is green while having the verbal image of the word 'green'. So, John's conscious occurrent thought that grass is green essentially involves his having verbal image of 'green'.

[vi] t6: Let's suppose that John understands German as well as English. At T6 when he has the conscious occurrent thought that grass is green he has a verbal image of the word 'grun', thus the conscious occurrency of his thought essentially involves his having the verbal image 'grun'.

[vii] t7: Let's again suppose that John has mowed a lot of lawns. At T7 when he has the conscious occurrent thought that grass is green he has the verbal image of the word 'lawnmower', and so the conscious occurrency of his thought essentially involves his having the verbal image 'lawnmower'.

Once the occurrence of the verbal image of the word 'lawnmower' is seen as plausible explanation of what the conscious occurrency of his thought consists in, any number of tokened word-images seem equally possible.

What do these cases show?

[1] If conscious occurrent thought simply consisted in having only verbal or non-verbal sensory imagery, there would be no restriction on what that imagery could be. John, in the above example, could be imagining green patches, patches of green grass, lawnmowers, the word 'lawnmower', the word 'dragon' and so on.

However,

[2] If no restriction applies on the kind of sensory phenomenology the subject can have when thinking that grass is green, then it seems completely fluky and arbitrary which kind of sensory phenomenology makes which thoughts consciously occurrent.

One is bound to wonder how having an image of a red dragon explains what the conscious occurrency of the thought that grass is green consists in. There seems to be no connection. If this is right, it seems that we can conclude that

[3] the simple assertion that sensory phenomenology explains (at least in part) what is essential for a thought's being consciously occurrent cannot be right.

What is needed is some sort of connection between the phenomenology that explains what makes a conscious occurrent thought conscious and the thought itself. So,

the content of that thought. And I now propose that the only plausible way to explain the conscious occurrence of the content is to simply claim that there is cognitive phenomenology associated with thinking thoughts with particular contents. On this view then

[7] associated with each content are cognitive phenomenological properties that account for what it is like to think a thought with that content.

Moreover,

[8] If and in so far as we always have direct access to the contents of our conscious thoughts, we do so via their cognitive phenomenological properties.[14]

In conclusion, I began with the question 'what does conscious occurrent thought consist in?'. I first argued that the notion of 'access consciousness' cannot satisfactorily answer this question. We need to appeal to phenomenological properties, and I argued that those phenomenological properties must be cognitive-phenomenological properties.

REFERENCES

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