

My research interests centre on the intersection between phenomenal consciousness and cognition. I am especially interested in alleged types of phenomenal consciousness outside the widely accepted sensory-perceptual cases. The study of perceptual consciousness has dominated treatment of these issues in recent philosophy of mind, and I believe it is time for the relationship between phenomenal consciousness and other areas of mental life—such as thought, memory, agency, and the emotions—to receive commensurate attention.

I have organized my research into two main areas below.

1. Past & Present Questions

The guiding question of my research to date is this: What is the relation between conscious experience and thought? This question is closely connected to a second one: What is the relation between the phenomenal character of a conscious state (i.e. what it is like for the subject) and its intentional content (i.e. what it is about)?

Thoughts and other cognitive states are paradigmatic intentional states. And it is commonsensical to suppose that thoughts can be conscious. But only relatively recently has the claim that thoughts have their own distinctive phenomenal character gained momentum among analytic philosophers. My doctoral thesis was my attempt to contribute to this debate by defending the existence of a very modest sort of so-called “cognitive phenomenology”.

But I have always been less interested in whether or not there exists something that might fairly be labelled “cognitive phenomenology”, and more interested in how exactly conscious thought is supposed to work. How is it that in an instant we seem to be able to become directly aware of the complex, determinate conceptual content of an entire thought? Supposing that reductive representationalist and functionalist theories of mental content and “cognitive access” fail to adequately account for this phenomenon (Pitt 2004), can appeals to phenomenal character do much better?

One promising approach posits “phenomenal intentionality”: many philosophers maintain that phenomenology is essentially and intrinsically intentional (Chalmers 2004; Kriegel 2013; Crane 2014). And it is noteworthy that many prominent defenders of cognitive phenomenology also think of it as being intertwined with the intentional contents of thoughts (Horgan and Tienson 2002; Siewert 2011; Kriegel 2015). But we still must strive for an *explanation* of phenomenal intentionality, rather than merely positing it. How might the phenomenology of conscious states explanatorily ground

their intentionality? And can the same basic account of how this happens apply to all phenomenal-intentional states; or must our explanation differ significantly depending on the kind of conscious state (e.g. perceptual, cognitive, motor, affective) at issue?

I think it is doubtful that the standard motivations for accepting the phenomenal intentionality view generalize from sensory-perceptual experience (for which they have typically been given) to conscious thoughts. In a series of papers, I have laid out what I take to be a decisive case against this kind of “cognitive-phenomenal intentionality” (2016, 2020, forthcoming). I have also applied this same reasoning against higher-level phenomenal content in the debate about the admissible contents of perception (2020).

One takeaway from this work is that the contents of sensory and cognitive states must relate to phenomenal consciousness in two fundamentally different ways. While both may rely on phenomenal consciousness to be conscious, only sensory contents are directly fixed and presented by phenomenal character. In future work I plan to argue that cognitive contents are (partly) determined by non-phenomenal factors, but can become conscious through the subject’s using them to “interpret” or “grasp” what is phenomenally presented to her. A further task is to determine whether, e.g., emotions and affective states are more like sensory states or cognitive states in this regard.

2. Present & Future Questions

Attempts to answer the above questions currently face a serious problem: it is unclear, beyond perception, how to characterize phenomenology, or what it takes for something to be part of the phenomenal character of an experience. E.g., the apparent intractability of the recent debate about the existence of *sui generis* cognitive phenomenology strongly suggests that the parties to that debate are not working with a single, unified understanding of phenomenal consciousness (Bayne and Montague 2011a, b). Indeed, to the extent that philosophers even attempt to clarify their notion of phenomenology, the attempts typically do not reach beyond appealing to the phrase “what it is like,” introducing technical terms such as ‘qualia’, and suggesting that phenomenology is what gives rise to the “explanatory gap” or “hard problem of consciousness.” The first two moves are largely uninformative, and it is questionable whether the third move includes all and only instances of the phenomenon at issue.

This challenge sets the context for my primary current research area, concerning the “distinguishing marks” of phenomenal character. At present, I am writing two papers on whether the familiar characterization of phenomenology in terms of the

“explanatory gap” adequately captures what is distinctive about it, and if not, what alternative account might do a better job. In hopes of developing an alternative, I am focused on three ideas about the phenomenology of perceptual experience that can be found in the literature: perceptual phenomenology is held to be *qualitative*; it is held to be *presentational*; and it is held to be *imagistic*. My aim, in the short-to-medium term, is to consider each of these ways of characterizing phenomenology in turn, and to ask how far it generalizes to experiences of other kinds. (I have one published article on this topic: on whether all phenomenology is presentational (forthcoming). I plan to write one paper for each of the other two features.) Zeroing in on these “marks of the phenomenal” could not only give us crucial guidance on the question of how phenomenal character is related to conscious intentional content, but also would provide the foundations for a more accurate, illuminating, and durable understanding of what we mean when we talk about phenomenology in the first place.

My work is also closely related to a number of other contemporary debates, e.g. on the perception-cognition divide and the difference between discursive and iconic representational formats in philosophy of cognitive science; and on the nature of understanding in epistemology and philosophy of science. Recently, I have developed additional interests in the meta-problem of consciousness; and the nature and content of pain and other affective experiences.

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Research Statement

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