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*The Problem of Phenomenal Consciousness and
Intentionality*

DOCTORAL THESIS

ABSTRACT

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Keywords

mental world, mind, intentionality, representation, phenomenal consciousness, qualia, experience, unconscious, epiphenomenalism, functionalism, naturalism, reduction, phenomenal intentionality

The Problem of Phenomenal Consciousness and Intentionality

Summary

My doctoral thesis is on the one hand about the relationship between intentionality and phenomenality and on the other hand about the function of phenomenal consciousness and its role in the mental world. The central issue of my thesis is concerned with the way the relationship between these two categories of mental life develops. I believe that if we establish some kind of theory about the relationship between intentionality and phenomenality this can affect the way we interpret the function of phenomenal consciousness. First I am analysing the relationship between representation and phenomenality and by using these results as starting points I am deducing the function of consciousness from them.

Phenomenal consciousness and intentionality refer to the two most general categories and the most significant aspects of mental life. While the first one refers to that qualitative experiential aspect of experience which is always *something it is like to have it* subjectively, the second one refers to those characteristics of mental acts that they are directed at something, they present or represent something and they aim at something.

In the first part of my thesis I delineate two different tendencies. On the one hand I argue against the so called *separatism* that basically refers to a methodological and tactical move according to which these two aspects of mental life are separable. Behind this disassociation there lies the assumption that between intentionality and phenomenal consciousness one can only imply a contingent relationship. This tendency relates in the same time to the hope that although phenomenal consciousness is truly a hard problem for reductive naturalism, if one separates intentionality from phenomenal consciousness, intentionality may not seem as hard as far as the explanation of the mental world is concerned. On the other hand I am also making an attempt at arguing against *reductive strategies* since they try to deduce or reduce and explain consciousness using intentionality as a frame.

Beyond the two theoretical options which constitute the object of my criticism I am committing myself on a third option according to which intentionality is rooted in phenomenality, or rather there is an *essential* relationship between the two. I argue for the idea that first of all, although in a different way, all conscious mental acts are intentional and secondly, that all conscious mental states are characterised by phenomenality and these two aspects do not only relate to each other in a contingent way. In virtue of this I am presenting my viewpoint in the second part of my thesis using as a starting point the strong dependence

between intentionality and phenomenality. In my opinion phenomenal experience cannot be epiphenomenal and in the same time we have strong reasons to consider it an adaptive ability thanks to the reasons mentioned above according to which it enables a distinctive intentionality.

In the introductory chapter of my thesis I am describing the fundamental questions of my thesis, I am giving an outline of the problems in question and of my hypotheses related to this, indicating my own viewpoint.

In my second chapter I am outlining the disciplinary context of my thesis and introduce some basic characteristics of those three trends and traditions which are relevant to my research. It is about the encounter of the *analytical philosophy of mind, phenomenology, psychology* and *cognitive sciences*. In this chapter I am not trying to plunge into detailed definitions and interpretations which are related to the issues and concepts introduced so far. Here I am strictly outlining a general frame where I am clarifying different ample epistemological, methodological and ontological issues connected to the three areas mentioned before. In my thesis I put emphasis especially on the literature of the last few decades and on contemporary analytical literature and I am drawing phenomenology into this in a rather restrained way. I would like to indicate that my thesis should not be considered an attempt at doing a monumental comparative work but it settles for building some descriptive characterisations from the field of phenomenology in my system of arguments.

In my third chapter I am specifying the terminological frame of my thesis and within this I am outlining, defining and interpreting the two basic categories of my thesis, namely phenomenal consciousness and intentionality. By leaning on the basic definitions of intentionality and phenomenality I argue for two general theses: a) though in a different sense, all conscious mental states have intentionality and b) all conscious states are qualitative.

Although the qualitative aspect is only one characteristic of consciousness (next to transcendence, unity, dynamical flow, minimal self-consciousness, etc.), it is a characteristic that is connected to experience in the following sense: we can talk about mental states that are not conscious but as long as there is consciousness this entails experientiality. When we talk about phenomenality we should not only think of sensations, feelings and emotions (for example the taste of dark coffee, the colour of bright green, the sensations of ice cold water or the surface of hard iron, the experience of stinging pain, the feeling of cheerfulness), but of higher cognitive processes as long as they are conscious. The experience of understanding can be considered an example of the latter. Misunderstanding something, understanding something well, vaguely understanding something or not understanding something at all is not

only a cognitive act that I am witnessing but also a qualitative-experiential experience. By virtue of this we can state that there is a specific *cognitive phenomenology* which would be wrong to think of as one that only refers to the mental images connected to thoughts, the phenomenality of imaginative or linguistic elements.

Furthermore, it is not enough to say that all conscious experience is qualitative, but also that in some way all conscious experience is intentional. Not only propositional attitudes, like beliefs and thoughts are aimed at something, but perception, sensation and the emotional world is also intentional. At this point we can argue in two ways. On the one hand, we could state that experiences such as pain are aimed at an object since in some way they represent the person's own body or are directed at some kind of abnormality in the body. On the other hand, we could also argue that those experiences or emotions that are not aimed at concrete objects (for example a depressive mood that does not have a specific object) do not enclose us within ourselves but influence the way we open up to the world. In both cases we are talking about some kind of intentionality. This thesis can be generalised in the following way: all conscious states, though in a different sense, are characterised by intentionality.

In the fourth chapter I am first dealing with the question of what the criterion of *mental* is, meaning what factors make it possible to talk about an entity or a system as a minded being. My answers reveal that here we are faced with many uncertainties. Following this I point out that the Cartesian viewpoint, according to which mental states are exclusively conscious states, is an untenable viewpoint. I am trying to separate the different meanings of the unconscious or not conscious mentality (cognitive subconscious, Freudian unconscious, etc.) with the aim of introducing the possible meanings of differentiating intentionality from phenomenal experience. By doing this I am trying to prove that it is too radical to argue for the idea that intentionality is exclusively possible with phenomenal experience using as a starting point the close relationship between phenomenality and intentionality. In other words: we can talk about unconscious representations in several different senses.

In my fifth chapter I am trying to sum up David Chalmers' viewpoint on the relationship between consciousness and intentionality based on his book *The Conscious Mind*. For the time being I disregard the question in what way the author's point of view has changed over the years. I am not giving a full and concise summary of his book, but I am putting emphasis on ideas which are relevant to my thesis and which provide the basis for the system of arguments of the following chapters. Chalmers' philosophy constitutes in this work a specific form of separatism regarding the relationship between intentionality and phenomenality and this is what I question throughout my thesis.

In my sixth chapter I am reflecting on one possible important consequence of Chalmers' train of thought, namely the doctrine of *epiphenomenalism*. In connection with this I am analysing two related ideas, according to which consciousness is inessential in the mental life, being a side product of evolution. In this chapter I am only defining these similar thoughts and analysing the relationships between them. The ninth chapter can be seen as a continuation of this part and deals with the counterarguments and the dissolving of these issues.

My aim in the seventh chapter is to interpret *functionalism* and the *computational theory of mind*. This is a rather important step in my critique aimed at Chalmers' train of thought, since the assumption of Chalmers' separatism is his belief that intentionality is not only independent of phenomenality but the former can be merely explained by referring to the causal mechanism of a system. Chalmers is of the opinion that cognitive sciences and functionalism are capable of explaining the intentional processes of the mind and so intentionality can be regarded as a relatively *easy* problem. Although Chalmers agrees with those who criticise functionalism because these views forget about the subjectivity of experience, he believes that this barrier refers only to the phenomenality of experience but not to the representational ability of the mind. We have to be careful though not to fall into the trap of Chalmers' train of thought which can easily lead in the direction of the reductionist approach of cognition. Even if we separated phenomenal consciousness from intentionality and cognition – although this would be an elementary mistake- it would be impossible to give a suitable reductive naturalistic explanation of the two latter by referring to the functional neurological and computational processes. To demonstrate the latter idea is the aim of my seventh chapter which can be considered an important stage of my whole system of arguments.

In my eighth chapter I argue for the idea that the *hard* problem implies not only phenomenal consciousness but intentionality as well, since intentionality is in some way dependent on consciousness. The experiential characteristic of our conscious mental life cannot be separated from the intentional character of mental acts. In my subjective perception the characteristic ways through which my environment or my body etc. seems to me the way it is can be considered intentional phases. Consequently, in conscious experience qualia and representation do not link in a merely contingent way and that is why they cannot be treated separately from each other. There are two sides of a coin. What experience *is about* and what experience *is like* are inseparably connected. According to one radical strategy it is all the same whether intentionality is present in a conscious or an unconscious medium. One counter argument of this idea leads to another extreme, according to which it makes no sense to talk

about intentionality outside consciousness. Between these two extreme viewpoints I would place the middle ground I will then unfold and accept in this chapter. I believe we cannot get rid of the widespread viewpoint according to which many of our mental-intentional states do not exist in the light of experience, but this does not mean that representation that has its roots and is well founded in phenomenality does not have its own distinctive characteristics. Since we can talk about nonconscious mental processes in many senses, in some respect we have to allow the existence of nonconscious intentionality. This latter idea requires further clarification and the thesis which states that there is such a thing as nonconscious form of intentionality has its limits.

In my opinion it would be wrong to complete the idea of the close connection between the two highlighted phenomena of my thesis with the following strategy: since phenomenal consciousness is intentional and intentionality can be dealt with in a reductive way within some kind of causal or functional frame, a *reductive* explanation of consciousness is also possible. From the close relationship between phenomenality and intentionality follows the *irreducible* character of both in the sense that both of them refer to the hard problem which also resists the explanations based on natural mechanisms.

As I have already pointed out in my sixth chapter the question of epiphenomenalism, that of the function of consciousness and of conscious inessentialism refer to one another in a circular way and are related to the same topic, though with certain distinctions. My last chapter is the direct continuation and critique of the train of thought defined in the sixth chapter. Using as a starting point the idea of the close relationship between phenomenality and intentionality my aim here is to argue for the idea that phenomenal consciousness has an essential role in mental life and in representation and although we do not yet scientifically understand how this can be causally effective, we have good reasons to presume that phenomenal consciousness has a rather important role in shaping one's mental world and behaviour.

My thesis ends with the *conclusion* according to which we do not value our experiences just for the reason that they enable us certain abilities. Even if we managed to accomplish the same behavioural patterns without having phenomenal consciousness, we would still miss something: we would miss the wonder through which it is possible to have a rich and diverse subjective world of experiences. In my point of view it is clear that this qualitative dimension has a value that goes beyond the importance of phenomenal consciousness in the explanation of behaviour, the realization of representations or the importance of experiences in the question of mental causality, mind-body problem or the technical puzzles of epistemology etc.

The reality of the subjective world of experiences points beyond these issues and I think it has a basic importance not just in ethics, aesthetics or axiology, but firstly in the existential questions of our human life.

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