

Consciousness, Phenomenal Concepts, and Acquaintance

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Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts, by MICHAEL TYE, CAMBRIDGE, MA., THE MIT PRESS, 2009, pp. 256, \$37.00/£27.95.

Michael Tye's *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts* [Tye (2009)] is a fascinating and provocative book. Tye provides an exhaustive discussion and criticism of the main current theories of consciousness, and the main solutions to the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness [Chalmers (1996)], including a critique of his own previous account [Tye (2000)]; and he presents and develops a new and original line of response to the most influential arguments against physicalism regarding conscious experience. Along the way, he discusses many other related issues, such as the nature of phenomenal concepts, the contents of visual experience, the connection between seeing and knowing, the nature of non-conceptual content, change-blindness, and privileged access, and arguments for and against disjunctivism and phenomenal externalism, offering new insights on each of them.

In this critical notice, my main aim is to examine some of the main arguments and ideas in the book, focusing especially on his criticisms of recent theories of consciousness and recent responses to anti-physicalist arguments, and his defence of his new view, which, he argues, is more satisfactory than any of the contemporary solutions to the puzzles raised by conscious experience. I will argue, on the contrary, that some of the objections to the accounts he examines can be solved, and that some of the new solutions to the puzzles that he proposes are problematic.

In the first chapter of the book, Tye introduces the notion of consciousness that he will focus on – phenomenal consciousness – and discusses two influential theories of phenomenal consciousness currently on the market: higher-order thought theories and self-representational theories of consciousness. As it is customary, he focuses on the *phenomenal character* of conscious experiences – what it is like to undergo them – as the most problematic aspect in need of explanation. In order to make this notion vivid, he appeals to the fa-

mous “absent qualia” and “inverted spectrum” hypotheses, according to which it is possible to duplicate the external features of an experience (the causal relations the experience stands in, the cognitive response the experience generates, the informational links between the experience and other things outside it, and so on), without thereby having duplicated the experience. Tye claims that according to many philosophers, “the informational aspect of experiences is something... entirely separable from their phenomenal character, as indeed is anything external to the experiences themselves” [p. 2]. However, I think that this claim is probably too strong, and in any case does not follow from the familiar hypotheses above: one could accept that the external relations an experience stands in do not necessitate the phenomenal character of the experience, without accepting the claim that it is possible for the same phenomenal character to be instantiated without any of those external or informational properties being instantiated as well.

Tye seems to agree with those philosophers who reject the higher-order theory of consciousness: “Phenomenal consciousness... according to many philosophers, is conceptually separable from higher-order consciousness. We are sometimes conscious of our phenomenally conscious states, or at least we are sometimes conscious that they are occurring. But there is no conceptual barrier to phenomenally conscious states’ occurring without higher-order consciousness” [p. 3]. He also discusses the increasingly popular self-representational theories of consciousness [Kriegel and Williford (2006)]. According to this view, experiences represent their objects, but also themselves. This view usually appeals to the distinction between focal and peripheral awareness: when I undergo a visual experience, say, I am focally aware of things outside and their features, and only peripherally aware of the experience itself, but I can shift my attention so that I am focally aware of the experience instead of the external things [p. 4]. This view also provides an interesting answer to the question of how introspection can give us access to our own phenomenal states: this is not by means of internal perception, nor the formation of higher-order beliefs, but rather in terms of a shift in attention [p. 5].

Tye’s main objections to the self-representational view are the following: first, the theory does not fit our phenomenology, since, he argues, we cannot shift our attention from the external objects of experience to the experience itself in the way in which we shift attention from one external object to the other; and secondly, the theory cannot explain the intuitive difference between an attentive and a distracted driver [pp. 5-6]. Regarding the first objection, I would agree that phenomenologically, shifting attention from one external object to another *does not feel like* shifting attention from one external object to the experience itself, but I am not sure why the self-representational view has to be committed to that strong claim: all it says is that we can explain our awareness of the experience in terms of the familiar distinction between focal and peripheral awareness. Regarding the second ob-

jection, I also agree that the phenomenology of the attentive driver, focally focusing on the road ahead, and peripherally focusing on the trees and houses she passes by, is different from the phenomenology of the distracted driver, who is focally aware of her own thoughts on, say, some obtuse philosophical problem, whereas only peripherally aware of both the road ahead and the trees and houses he passes by. The problem for Tye is that, according to the self-representational view, the driver is also peripherally aware of her own experiences in both cases, but intuitively, he argues, the phenomenologies of all those supposedly peripheral experiences are very different. Once again, I am not sure why the self-representational theory is committed to the view that all those peripheral experiences have to have identical phenomenologies: we can explain all of them in terms of the same general phenomenon (peripheral awareness) without having to say that they all *feel the same*.

In chapter 2, Tye surveys the main arguments against physicalism (the zombie argument, the knowledge argument, the explanatory gap argument, and the hard problem argument), and he also discusses characterizations of, and the main motivations for, the thesis of physicalism. In chapter 3, Tye examines and criticizes one of the most influential strategies against the anti-physicalist arguments discussed in the previous chapter, namely, the *phenomenal concept strategy* [defended by, among others, Balog (2009), Loar (1997), Papineau (2002), Sturgeon (2000), Tye (2000), Perry (2001)]. He says: “the purpose of this chapter is to lay out how the phenomenal-concept strategy... is supposed to go and to argue that it encounters some serious difficulties. My diagnosis for these difficulties is that in a sense to be explained here there are no phenomenal concepts. Physicalists have thought that they were wedded to such concepts since without them, physicalism is false” [p. 39]. Tye puts forward two kinds of objections against the PCS: first, he argues that the different accounts of phenomenal concepts that have been proposed are all problematic, for different reasons, and secondly, that there are general reasons for being sceptical about the very notion of a phenomenal concept. In what follows, I will briefly explain both lines of argument in turn, and I will make some critical comments.

One of the accounts of phenomenal concepts that he discusses is the *quotational* account [defended by Balog (2009) and Papineau (2002), among others]. The main idea of this account is that phenomenal concepts involve a copy or image of the phenomenal state they refer to, and the concept will refer to the phenomenal state-type instantiated by that phenomenal state-token. Tye argues, successfully in my view, that this account of the reference-fixing of phenomenal concepts is inadequate, given that a phenomenal token will instantiate not one but many phenomenal types. For instance, an experience of seeing a specific shade of red will instantiate the property of seeing that particular shade of red, but also the phenomenal properties of seeing red and seeing a color, and therefore, a single phenomenal token cannot determine

which phenomenal type the corresponding phenomenal concept refers to. Tye discusses a reply to this objection by Ned Block (2006), who argues that what makes it the case that a token phenomenal state in a phenomenal concept serves as a token of one phenomenal type rather than another is the subject's disposition to treat other experiences as falling under the same concept. If only experiences of the more specific type will count as being experiences of the same type, then the concept refers to the more specific property, but if all experiences of red will count as experiences of the same type, then the concept will refer to the more general type. Tye argues that this reply does not work because it is viciously circular:

Counting or treating another experience *E* as one of those – that is, as being of the same type as the experience *F* tokened in the use of a given phenomenal concept – involves judging or being prepared (or disposed) to judge that *E* is of the same type as *F*. The relevant typing here is phenomenal. Block's suggestion is that the phenomenal concept I am exercising in my thought as I look at a color chip picks out the experience as of Green_{126,731} if I am only prepared to accept that another experience as of Green_{126,731} is of the same phenomenal type. But this acceptance requires subsumption of the two experiences under the concept *having the same phenomenal character*... But this now is patently circular [p. 46].

In short, Tye argues that the dispositionalist account that Block suggests needs to appeal to descriptions involving other phenomenal concepts, in order to fix the referent of a phenomenal concept, and this is clearly circular. My response to this objection is that the dispositionalist account does not need to appeal to descriptions involving other phenomenal concepts. Indeed, a dispositionalist account understood along the lines of Brian Loar's recognitional account of phenomenal concepts [Loar (1997)] does not need to appeal to any descriptions whatsoever in order to fix the referents of phenomenal concepts. According to Loar, phenomenal concepts refer *directly* to their referents, that is, not by means of descriptions. One way of understanding this idea of direct reference is to postulate the following mechanism of reference: a phenomenal concept will refer to that phenomenal type shared by the phenomenal tokens that *trigger* the instantiation of the phenomenal concept, where triggering is understood as a causal-teleological mechanism, which does not require the presence of associated descriptions. In this way, we can solve the worry about circularity.

Tye also puts forward an objection against Loar's recognitional account of phenomenal concepts (which is essentially a dispositionalist account as we have seen). He argues that this account cannot explain the so-called *intuition of distinctness*, that is, the intuition that phenomenal states just *cannot* be identical to physical states [Papineau (2002)]. In my view, it is not clear why the PCS has to offer a solution to the problem of the intuition of distinctness, even if we in fact do have such an intuition. The PCS is mainly concerned

with blocking the standard anti-physicalist arguments mentioned before, and the starting point of all these arguments is the existence of an epistemic gap between the physical and the phenomenal, which consists in the fact that we can conceive of a physical duplicate without consciousness, or the fact that Mary would learn something new after being released from her black-and-white room. The problem here relies on the fact that we can imagine physicalism being false, and this is what is supposed to pose a problem for physicalism, not that it is hard to imagine that physicalism is true. The PCS has a response to the arguments based on the former set of intuitions, namely, an alternative explanation of the epistemic gap in terms of the especial features of phenomenal concepts, which does not need to involve an ontological gap. Tye's objections to the recognitional account do not pose any obstacle to the coherence of such an alternative explanation of the epistemic gap.

Tye also devotes an entire section of chapter 3 to examining and criticizing his previous account of phenomenal concepts, which he now finds wanting. In previous work [Tye (2000), (2003)] he defended an account of phenomenal concepts according to which they refer directly, without any associated descriptions, which is similar to the dispositionalist account sketched above. He agrees that this kind of account would not be viciously circular, but he argues that it suffers from other serious problems. First, he argues that since phenomenal concepts refer directly, they do not have fine-grained individuation conditions, and, he argues, fine-grained individuation conditions are necessary for a mental representation to be a *concept*. (That is, concepts are partly characterized for having fine-grained individuation conditions: for instance, the concepts *coriander* and *cilantro* have the same referent, but different modes of presentation: the concepts play different conceptual roles in rationalizing explanations and so on, which makes them different concepts.) Tye concludes that phenomenal concepts are not really concepts at all, given that they refer directly, and therefore, do not have fine-grained individuation conditions.

I agree that all concepts must have fine-grained individuation conditions, but I do not see why the fact that phenomenal concepts refer directly entails that they do not have fine-grained individuation conditions. The crucial aspect of fine-grained individuation is that there can be two concepts with the same referent but different individuation conditions, and this still holds in the case of phenomenal concepts. That is, for each phenomenal concept, there may be other concepts that refer to the same phenomenal state (demonstrative concepts, physical-theoretical concepts, etc.) but play different conceptual roles and therefore have different individuation conditions. The fact that a phenomenal concept refers directly does not mean that we cannot talk about *phenomenal modes of presentation* (although we cannot identify modes of presentations with associated descriptions, given that we are assuming that phenomenal concepts do not have any associated descriptions). Phe-

nominal concepts still present their referents in unique ways, so that we cannot know *a priori* that a phenomenal concept and a co-referential demonstrative or physical concept are in fact co-referential. Phenomenal concepts can be individuated in terms of the especial conceptual roles that they play, and their role in rationalizing explanations, which will be different from those of both demonstrative and physical concepts also referring to phenomenal states.

In any case, considerations of this sort, having to do with the mode of presentation of phenomenal concepts, might constitute an argument for going back to Loar's recognitional account of phenomenal concepts, along the lines explained above, that is, in terms of a directly referential account of reference-fixing, rather than in terms of a descriptivist account. In this way, we can solve the circularity worry, given that the account is directly referential, but we can still say that phenomenal concepts are associated with individuating recognitional abilities, which provide unique modes of presentation for each phenomenal concept. I don't think that this view is incoherent, but Tye seems to assume that you have to opt for either modes of presentation in terms of descriptions, which will make the account circular, or a directly referential reference-fixing mechanism, which will not be circular but will deprive phenomenal concepts of modes of presentation. As we have seen, I think this dilemma is spurious.

Tye presents another objection to his previous account: he argues that it cannot provide a successful solution to the famous case of Mary, the colour-scientist raised in a black-and-white room. The PCS argues that Mary, after being released, does not gain any knowledge of new facts, but just knowledge of old facts under new concepts, which she didn't possess before. Tye argues that this does not provide a satisfactory explanation of the strong intuition that Mary gains new knowledge in a more *robust* sense. According to him, if the PCS is correct, then Mary doesn't learn any new content, the only thing that is new is the *way* in which she thinks *what* she was already thinking before. In response, I believe that to insist that the PCS needs to offer an explanation of the new knowledge gained by Mary in that robust sense is question-begging. Of course, if the PCS is right, Mary doesn't gain knowledge of any new subject-matter: she was already capable of giving an exhaustive description of all physical facts before being released, in terms of physical concepts. What she gains when she is released is just the possession of new concepts (e.g. the phenomenal concept of seeing red), and therefore the ability to form new thoughts that she wasn't able to entertain before. If we individuate knowledge and thoughts in terms of the modes of presentation involved, then Mary gains new knowledge.

We can now turn to Tye's more general objections to the PCS. He argues that "no one has yet managed to produce a plausible account of phenomenal concepts that gives them the features they must have in order to do the work needed to defend physicalism" [p. 56]. The relevant question, then, is what features phenomenal concepts must have in order to defend physicalism.

First, Tye argues, phenomenal concepts must be distinct from physical concepts, in order to explain the conceivability of zombies. But this is problematic, he continues, because there is no clear sense in which phenomenal concepts are distinct from physical concepts. As he argues in section 3.5, if the claim is that what makes phenomenal concepts especial is that phenomenal truths are not a priori entailed by microphysical truths, then that cannot be correct because most ordinary, non-phenomenal macroscopic truths are not a priori entailed by microphysical truths either. In response, I believe that the PCS does not really need to be committed to the claim that phenomenal concepts are radically distinct from physical concepts: the crucial idea is that phenomenal concepts are not a priori connected with physical concepts, which explains why microphysical truths do not entail phenomenal truths a priori, which explains why zombies are conceivable. This is what the PCS aims to show, and so far Tye has not posed any serious objection to this kind of explanation.

Secondly, Tye argues, phenomenal concepts must be *perspectival*, in order to explain why Mary in her room does not possess phenomenal concepts (that is, because possessing phenomenal concepts always requires having had the corresponding experience, and Mary has not had the corresponding experiences). In response, I do not think that the PCS needs to be committed to the claim that *all* phenomenal concepts are perspectival. Most basic phenomenal concepts will probably turn out to be perspectival, and surely the phenomenal concept of seeing red is perspectival, but we can also allow room for some complex phenomenal concepts, such as the concept of the experience of tasting a pretzel with ketchup, for which it is not necessary to have had that particular experience in order to possess the concept: we can also possess the concept just by combining the basic phenomenal concepts that constitute it. So there is no serious problem for the PCS here either.

It is time now to examine Tye's new solution to the puzzles of consciousness. This new solution makes use of his notion of *knowledge by acquaintance*, which he explains as follows. It is common to assume that we can see an entity O even if there is no property P such that we see that O has P. That is, I see an entity O when O looks some way to me, but this experience could be illusory, and maybe O is not really the way it looks to me. If so, I still see object O, even if I don't *see that* O is that way (because seeing-that is factive). Likewise, Tye argues, it is possible to know an object O without knowing any fact about it: when we are *conscious* of an object O, we are thereby in a position to know O, although this does not always entail that there is a property P such that we *know that* O has P. This is the notion of knowledge by acquaintance that he is concerned with: *knowledge of an object in virtue of being conscious of it*. But, why should we assume that being conscious of an object yields knowledge of that object? Tye answers that consciousness is epistemically enabling: "via consciousness of a thing, one is put in a position to know facts about the thing" [p. 98]. However, this is not suf-

ficient to motivate the view that being conscious of an object yields knowledge by acquaintance, which is supposed to be independent of knowing facts about the object. We can accept that being conscious of an object typically puts one in a position to know facts about the object, and therefore to know the object, but Tye still has to argue that it is possible to know an object *without* knowing any fact about it. He also says that “it is simply incoherent to suppose that one might be genuinely (non-inferentially) conscious of an entity and yet not know it at all” [p. 98]. Again, we can grant this, but this does not suffice to show that it is possible to know an object without knowing any facts about it. What Tye should do to motivate this view is to show that there are cases where it is clear that we are conscious of a certain object, and therefore we know it, but we are not in a position to know any fact about that object.

It is important to get clearer on what being conscious of an object entails. According to Tye, in order to be conscious of an object, one must be able to bring that object under a concept: the conscious state must enable one to ask “what is that?” with respect to the entity, but it is not necessary that one actually brings the entity under the concept. When we are not able to bring the entity under a concept, we are not conscious of the entity [p. 100].

Tye argues that in cases where we are conscious of a shade of red, we know that shade of red even if we don’t have the concept *shade*, and therefore we don’t have the concept *shade of red*. Perhaps we don’t need to have that particular concept in order to have a conscious experience with that quality, but the main question here is: can we have a conscious experience with, say, the content $\text{Red}_{123,456}$ without possessing the phenomenal concept $\text{Red}_{123,456}$? Here it is crucial to distinguish between having a conscious experience with the *phenomenal property* $\text{Red}_{123,456}$ and having a conscious experience with the *content* $\text{Red}_{123,456}$. It is perfectly possible to have phenomenal experiences that are more fine-grained than our concepts: the phenomenal qualities of our experiences surely outstrip our conceptual and linguistic abilities, but those experiences still feel like something to us, even if we cannot describe them with words. According to Tye’s account, we can still be conscious of $\text{Red}_{123,456}$, even if we are not able to bring it under the corresponding phenomenal concept (given that we don’t possess it), because we can still bring it under a demonstrative concept: the conscious state enables us to ask “what is that?”. My worry here is the following: I am happy to accept that the corresponding experience has the phenomenal property $\text{Red}_{123,456}$. But why should we assume that we are *conscious of* that phenomenal property $\text{Red}_{123,456}$?

We can formulate Tye’s argument as follows:

1. When we are conscious of an object, we know the object.

2. There are cases where we are conscious of a phenomenal quality but we do not possess any specific concept for that phenomenal quality, other than demonstrative concepts.
3. Therefore, there are cases where we know an entity but we do not know any facts about the entity (because we lack the corresponding concepts).

My point is that this argument commits the fallacy of equivocation. The reading of “being conscious of an object” that makes 1 plausible is different from the one that makes 2 plausible. As we have seen, the sense of “being conscious of an object” that is relevant in premise 2 is given by Tye’s characterization above: I am conscious of an object when my conscious state enables me to bring it under a demonstrative concept. According to this reading, 2 is plausible, but why should we assume that 1 is plausible under that reading? Premise 1 is clearly plausible under a reading of “being conscious of an object” according to which we are conscious of an entity when we have a conscious experience about it and we have the ability to represent that entity by means of concepts other than demonstrative concepts. Otherwise, how could we know the object, if we do not possess any concepts to entertain thoughts about it? Tye would respond that we can have representations of a *non-conceptual* sort, which are enough to put us in a position to know the object, but do not thereby entail us to know facts about the object. Again, I think this is unclear: why should we assume that the conscious state enables us to know that entity in particular, if we lack the conceptual resources to refer to that object in particular?

Therefore, it is not clear what Tye’s notion of knowledge by acquaintance really amounts to. We can agree that the following three cases are coherent cases: we can have conscious experiences with phenomenal qualities for which we do not possess phenomenal concepts, but this does not mean that we can know those qualities; second, we can have conscious experiences that enable us to know their corresponding phenomenal qualities, in virtue of possessing the corresponding concepts, but then this knowledge is not independent of knowing facts; and third, we can have conscious experiences with non-conceptual contents, but it is not clear why they would enable us to know certain qualities so represented, if we do not possess the relevant conceptual resources. In all three cases, the notion of knowledge by acquaintance that Tye suggests is not well supported. And without this notion, Tye’s new solution to the puzzle of consciousness would collapse.

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RESUMEN

Michael Tye ha sido uno de los principales defensores de la *estrategia de los conceptos fenoménicos*. Pero en su reciente libro, *Consciousness Revisited*, cambia de idea: en este libro se ofrecen nuevos argumentos y desafíos en contra de las principales versiones de dicha estrategia, y se defiende una nueva solución al problema de la experiencia consciente, basada en la noción de conocimiento "por contacto directo". En esta nota crítica se resumen algunos de estos argumentos y se intenta demostrar, primero, que algunas de sus objeciones en contra de la estrategia de los conceptos fenoménicos no son decisivas, y segundo, que su nueva solución, y la noción de conocimiento por contacto directo en que se basa, también tienen problemas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Michael Tye, conciencia fenoménica, conceptos fenoménicos, conocimiento, conocimiento directo.*

ABSTRACT

Michael Tye used to be one of the main advocates of the *phenomenal concept strategy*. However, in his recent book, *Consciousness Revisited*, he changed his mind: there he provides new arguments and challenges against most versions of the phe-

nominal concept strategy, and he offers a new solution to the puzzles of conscious experience in terms of the notion of *knowledge by acquaintance*. In this note, I will review some of these arguments and I will argue, first, that some of his objections against the phenomenal concept strategy are not decisive, and secondly, that his new solution, and the notion of acquaintance on which it relies, are problematic.

KEYWORDS: *Michael Tye, Phenomenal Consciousness, Phenomenal Concepts, Knowledge, Acquaintance.*