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Aspects of Phenomenal Unity

Editorial Introduction

This symposium is about the unity of conscious experience. To get a sense of the topic, consider the richness of everyday experiential life. For example: as you go for an autumn walk in the forest you feel the slight bite of the wind but enjoy the patchy warmth on your face as sunlight filters through the branches. You hear the clear calls of birds, the rustling of leaves, the squishy sound of your boots on the wet ground, and in the distance a chainsaw working. You see the gentle light play over the forest scene, feel tension and anxiety melt away, and your headache easing.

There is *something it is like* to feel the slight sting of the wind on your skin, something (else) it is like to hear a (certain) bird calling, and something (else again) it is like to have a headache. Each *feels* a certain particular way. We capture this by saying that the experience of feeling wind on one's skin has a certain *phenomenal character*.

However, not only is there something it is like to have a headache and feel wind on one's skin, there is something it is like to experience these and all the other things *together*: your global experience also has a phenomenal character. The phenomenal character of your global experience somehow reflects the characters of each of the local experiences you are enjoying at the time, without being exhausted by any of them. The local experiences you are enjoying are *unified* in the sense that each of them contributes to the phenomenal character of an overall, global experience.

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This is the *phenomenal* sense in which conscious experience is unified. It stands in contrast to the unity that arises when different experiences are as of one and the same object (object unity), that which arises between experiences that represent objects as occupying the same space (spatial unity), and other varieties besides (Bayne and Chalmers, 2003; Bayne, 2010, §1.2). These other senses of unity are not at issue here.

Why should we care about the phenomenal unity of conscious experience? Some of us need little persuasion. We care about the nature of reality. Minds occupy a particularly interesting corner of reality. Consciousness is a central phenomenon of the mind. So we want to know what the nature of conscious experience is, and that includes understanding its structure. Whether conscious experience is unified, and, if it is, how it is, in what the unity consists, and so on, are all questions of immediate interest.

But the unity of consciousness ought also be of interest to those who do not find the structure of experience intrinsically captivating, since it bears relatively directly on other important theories about the mind, knowledge, and more besides.

To illustrate, consider representationalism about conscious experience. Employing Chalmers' (2004) useful characterization of this view, we note that experiences have both phenomenal and non-phenomenal properties. An example of a non-phenomenal property of an experience is its duration. The phenomenal properties of an experience characterize what it is like to undergo it. Many mental states also have intentional properties: the properties of representing that things are certain ways. Representationalism about a class of phenomenal properties is on this characterization the view that 'for every phenomenal property (in that class), there is some representational property such that necessarily, a mental state... has that representational property if and only if it has that phenomenal property' (*ibid.*, p. 156). Assuming that equivalence suffices for identity here, we get that every phenomenal property (in a class) is identical to a representational one.

Representationalism is a popular view, and its popularity is, I think, in no small part due to its strong intuitive plausibility in simple cases. For example, suppose that an X-shaped object in front of a vast white expanse is before me, my eyes are open, and my perceptual system is operating normally. It is very plausible that anyone who had a visual perceptual experience exactly like the one I am now having in all phenomenal respects would represent that there is an X-shaped object before her: her experience would be *inaccurate* if there weren't (Siewert, 1998, chapter 7). It is also plausible that anyone who

represents just exactly what I represent in just exactly the way that I represent it — *viz.* the visual phenomenal way (see Chalmers, 2004) — would have a visual perceptual experience that felt exactly like mine feels now, one with exactly the same phenomenal properties. So representationalism is very plausible for simple cases.

Now, one can coherently be a representationalist about some but not all phenomenal properties. In practice, however, most representationalists accept what we might call *global* representationalism: the claim that the theory holds for *all* phenomenal properties. (Witness the production of replies to cases where the view is alleged to fall short, as opposed to the restriction of the theory to other domains.) This is partly because the theory is intended to capture *the nature* of conscious experience, *what it is for something to be* a conscious experience. Perhaps one could say that representationalism captures what it is to be, say, a visual perceptual experience but not what it is to be an emotional or bodily experience. But this is an unattractive stance, since these experiences seem to share a deep common nature. Global representationalism is the view that for *any* phenomenal property whatever there is some representational property with which it is identical.

We can now see one way in which representationalism and the unity of consciousness are linked. If conscious experiences are phenomenally unified, not only is there something it is like to feel a slight sting of wind on your skin, something it is like to hear a bellbird calling, and something it is like to have a headache. There is, moreover, something it is like *overall* when all these things (and the many others) occur together. Your overall experience has a certain phenomenal property. Global representationalism is committed to the claim that there is some representational property with which *this* phenomenal property is identical, too.

This already shows the relevance of the phenomenal unity claim to the wider theory of mind, since it is far less intuitively plausible (than for simple cases) that some representational property could adequately capture the richness and complexity of what it is like *overall* at that moment, and thus be identical to the phenomenal property. To move from being a promissory note to being a properly evaluable theory, representationalism must provide some recipe for generating a representational property to be a candidate for identity with this very rich and complex phenomenal one. And this demand arises directly out of the phenomenal unity of consciousness. Moreover, the nature of the phenomenal property in question — *what* it is like overall — will set the conditions by which representational properties are judged

as adequate or inadequate contenders for identity. So, in addition to the relevance of the general phenomenal unity claim, the *specific* answers to questions about the structure of unified phenomenal experience will also be relevant here. (There are other ways, too, in which phenomenal unity holds wider theoretical relevance, see, for example, Bayne, 2010, Part III, but the implications sketched here should suffice to make the point.)

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This symposium contains contributions on several important aspects of phenomenal unity: *diachronic* phenomenal unity, the role of *attention* in phenomenally unified experience, and on the relationship between the phenomenal characters of local and global conscious experiences. (In what follows I usually leave the restriction to *phenomenal* unity implicit.)

Diachronic unity refers to the fact that not only are experiences unified *at a time* as discussed above, they are also unified *over time*, as when we experience a physical body moving through space, or when we experience a melody. In both instances, not only is there something it is like to experience a ‘snapshot’, there is also something it is like to have the extended experience. The first two papers of the symposium are concerned with diachronic unity.

Enrico Grube’s ‘Atomism and the Contents of Experience’ is about *diachronic perceptual atomism*; the view that the contents of conscious experiences contain only non-temporal properties and events. A *realist* version of such a view holds that successions of temporally atomic experiences (instantiations of contents too short to themselves represent motion and the like) can constitute experiences of temporally extended events, such as motion. The view is often summarily rejected on the strength of William James’s (1890) dictum that a succession of experiences does not equal an experience of succession. Grube argues, however, that objections in this style (for example due to Dainton, 2008) fail. The crucial question for the atomist is therefore, he argues, whether our (temporally extended) experience is composed out of such atoms. Grube concludes by arguing that this question hinges on whether such atoms invariably allow us to form *de re* beliefs about them.

Theories of diachronic unity of consciousness which reject atomism often take one of two main forms, which we may call *retentional* and *extensional* (Dainton, 2008). Views of the former type hold that an interval may be experienced *at an instant*; those of the latter type

hold that experiences of successions last as long as the successions are represented to last. In ‘Diachronic Unity and Temporal Transparency’, Akiko Frischhut defends retentionalist views against a certain type of challenge. Retentionalism, she notes, is committed to *divergence*, the view that ‘[i]n order to have experiences as of temporally extended items at all, the duration of experience in which an item X is represented must diverge from the duration that X is represented as occupying’. Frischhut defends divergence against a range of objections, most especially an objection by Ian Phillips based on the *transparency* of conscious experience. This is the alleged feature of experience whereby one cannot focus on intrinsic features of experiences themselves, but only on features of that which experience represents (see, for example, Tye, 1995, p. 30; for critique see, for example, Koksvik, 2011, §5.4.3). Frischhut argues that Phillips’ argument requires that we both have and lack introspective access to certain facts about experience, and that it therefore fails. She ends by offering considerations in favour of the view that we have *no* introspective access to the duration of our experiences.

The third and fourth papers of the symposium focus centrally on the role of attention in unified conscious experience. In ‘Attentional Organization and the Unity of Consciousness’, Sebastian Watzl considers how attentional organization of conscious experience bears on phenomenal unity. Local conscious experiences are, he argues, organized by the *peripherality* relation, which holds when one experience is ‘in the background’ of another with respect to attention. A set of experiences form an attention *system* when the experiences are all somehow connected by this relation. Watzl argues that local experiences forming an attention system suffices for their being phenomenally unified, but rejects the claim that attentional organization shows that the existence of local experiences is grounded in the existence of the global one. Reflection on the fact that global experience has a point of view or perspective reveals instead, Watzl argues, that attentional organization of a global experience is *what it is* for that whole to be an *experience*: attentional organization is the *principle of unity* for experience.

In ‘What are the Dimensions of the Conscious Field?’, Luke Roelofs discusses the idea that conscious experience has the structure of a *field*. While intuitively attractive the idea has not been sufficiently developed, he argues, and the accounts of conscious experience which the idea often accompanies also do not immediately yield an account of how such a field might be structured. The paper considers two ways to develop this idea further.

The first says that the field is structured by *attentional* relations. Roelofs argues that even the most developed extant accounts of attention must be supplemented to yield the kind of structure a field entails. The second way generalizes, and holds that the conscious field is structured by causal proximity relations, which includes but is not exhausted by attentional proximity. Since the causal relations that hold between conscious experiences can plausibly also hold between an experience, on the one hand, and a non-conscious mental state (such as a standing belief), on the other, this view has the potential to accommodate the intriguing though perhaps ultimately incoherent idea that non-conscious states can ‘occupy positions’ in the conscious field. Roelofs concludes with a discussion of the distinction between non-deforming and deforming fields, and argues that if conscious experience is a field, it is best understood as a deforming one.

When two local conscious experiences are unified, there is *something* it is like to experience them together. Not much attention has so far been given to *what* it is like. What is the relationship between the phenomenal characters of local conscious experiences and the phenomenal character of the global conscious experience to which they contribute? My own contribution to the symposium explores this *Combination Question* about conscious experience.

I outline three models of how combination might take place. Given how familiar we are with conscious experience, and given how different the models are, one might have thought that we could easily decide between them. I argue, however, that all three models can account for central facts about conscious experience, and that each is a serious contender for truth. This means, I argue, that our concepts of local and global conscious experiences, and of the relationship between them, are surprisingly permissive: for all these concepts say, such experiences can turn out to be a range of very different kinds of things.

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