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THE CONSCIOUS AND PHENOMENAL CHARACTER OF THOUGHT: REFLECTIONS ON THEIR POSSIBLE DISSOCIATION

abstract

In this paper I focus on what we can call “the obvious assumption” in the debate between defenders and deniers (of the reductionist sort) of cognitive phenomenology: conscious thought is phenomenal and phenomenal thought is conscious. This assumption can be refused if “conscious” and “phenomenal” are not co-extensive in the case of thought. I discuss some prominent ways to argue for their dissociation and I argue that we have reasons to resist such moves, and thus, that the “obvious assumption” can be transformed into a grounded claim one can explicitly believe and defend.

keywords

cognitive phenomenology, phenomenal character, cognitive access, co-extension, higher-order theory

1. The “obvious assumption” in the cognitive phenomenology debate

The recent literature on cognitive phenomenology has revolved around the question of the existence of a kind of phenomenal character specific to thought, thinking or cognitive states and processes (Bayne and Montague 2011). Defenders of cognitive phenomenology believe, while deniers do not, that there is at least specific or proprietary phenomenal character of thought¹. Arguments in the debate have put forward topics such as the temporality of thought, inner speech, intentionality, categorical perception, or value (see Jorba and Moran 2016 for a review) and the question has also included approaches from the phenomenological tradition in philosophy (Breyer and Gutland 2016). Importantly, there is one shared assumption among both defenders and one kind of deniers of cognitive phenomenology, namely, the idea that conscious thought is phenomenal in the first place. By this I mean phenomenal in general, not specifically *sensory* or *cognitive* phenomenal – on pain of begging the question. It is by assuming this claim that the parties that have mainly engaged in the discussion start arguing against each other. On the side of defenders of cognitive phenomenology, it is clear that they assume that conscious thought is phenomenal *simpliciter* – as the basis of afterwards arguing that it is cognitive-phenomenal. But this is also the case on the side of some deniers of cognitive phenomenology. Tye and Wright, for instance, claim that “we are not opposing the following thesis: For any conscious thought *t* and any subject *s*, there is something that it is like for *s* when she thinks *t*” (2011, p. 328). Or Prinz, who thinks all phenomenal consciousness is perceptual phenomenal consciousness, presents the debate as follows: “the debate I’m interested in is not about whether conceptual activity can feel like something to a subject, but whether it feels different than sensory activity” (Prinz 2011, p. 177). We can see that these deniers of cognitive phenomenology state (and assume) that conscious thought “feels” like something, and thus it has a certain phenomenal character; what they disagree with defenders of cognitive phenomenology is on the nature of such phenomenality – they see such phenomenal character as not specifically cognitive but rather sensory or emotional, for instance (we can thus call these views “*reductionists*”). However, the assumption that conscious thought is phenomenal *simpliciter* might be doubted to begin with. This is the case of another view within deniers of cognitive phenomenology,

1 Stronger claims of defenders of cognitive phenomenology include a distinctive and individuating phenomenal character for thought, or the claim that thought content is grounded in phenomenal character (see Pitt 2004, Strawson 2008, among others).

namely, *eliminativists* regarding the phenomenal character of thought or cognition (of whatever kind). In this sense, Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson state that “cognitive states are prime examples of states for which there is not something it is like to be in them, of states that lack a phenomenology” (Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson 2007, p. 129). If this line of argumentation succeeds, the cognitive phenomenology view can be debunked, and also the debate between defenders of cognitive phenomenology and deniers of the reductionist sort would not even get off the ground.

The mentioned assumption can be seen as part of a larger argument, that states the following: (i) If a mental state is conscious, then it has phenomenal character; (ii) Conscious thoughts are conscious mental states; (Conclusion) Conscious thoughts have phenomenal character. A version of this argument was proposed by Pitt (2004), who labelled it “the obvious argument”. The name of this argument comes from the possible objection of seeing it as trivially true. That is, if we consider one sense of “conscious” that just means phenomenal (Block 1995) or analytically entails phenomenal, then the argument is trivially true. But this in fact cannot be so, as there are many who are inclined to deny (i) – then the argument does not seem that obvious. Moreover, (C) is not necessarily true if consciousness and phenomenal character come apart in the case of conscious thought. That is, the possibility of conscious thought without phenomenal character would go against (i) and would allow one to deny (C). The possibility of “conscious” meaning phenomenal or entailing phenomenal does not seem conceptually necessary because the two concepts are distinct (Burge 1997; Lormand 1996; Kim 1996). I have so far presented the idea that conscious thoughts are phenomenal as a shared assumption between defenders of cognitive phenomenology and deniers of the reductionist sort, but notice also that the claim that unconscious thoughts do not have phenomenal character is also somehow assumed in the debate. In this respect, Bayne and Montague state: “we start with a point that is common ground among all parties to the debate: dispositional or unconscious states have no phenomenological character” (2011, p. 11). Also, Kriegel talks about “phenomenally unconscious states” in the following way: “by ‘phenomenally unconscious’ states I mean states that are unconscious in the phenomenal sense of ‘conscious’; I do not mean to refer to, or *even suggest the existence of*, states that are *unconscious but nonetheless have a phenomenal character*” (Kriegel 2011, p. 79, my emphasis). Levine, who denies cognitive phenomenology, also claims: “mental states that lack phenomenal character are all those states, including non-occurrent beliefs and desires, that are classified as unconscious” (Levine 2011, p. 103). From these quotes we can see that phenomenality (as far as the cognitive domain is concerned) is normally assumed by both parties to be associated with conscious thought and not with unconscious thought (or states, more generally).

In this paper I focus on these two mentioned aspects, which we can call “the obvious assumption” in the debate between defenders and deniers (of the reductionist sort) of cognitive phenomenology: conscious thought is phenomenal and phenomenal thought is conscious. This assumption can be refused if “conscious” and “phenomenal” are not co-extensive in the case of thought, and so the following possibilities are open: (a) non-phenomenal conscious thoughts and (b) phenomenal unconscious thoughts. In the next two sections, I discuss some prominent ways to argue for (a) and (b) and I argue that we have reasons to resist such moves, and thus, that the “obvious assumption” can be transformed into a grounded claim one can explicitly believe and defend².

² Note that by arguing against such possibilities, one still remains neutral regarding the debate between defenders of cognitive phenomenology and deniers of the reductionist sort, as the aim is just preserving the idea that “conscious” and “phenomenal” are co-extensive terms when applied to thought.

2. Non-phenomenal conscious thought

There are several accounts defending the view that we have conscious thought but that it is non-phenomenal. One could think that reductionists do present a prominent example, given that the sense in which conscious thought is not phenomenal is that it is not *specifically cognitive* – phenomenal, namely, that it does not enjoy a specific phenomenal character. Thus, what reductionists deny is not that there is phenomenally conscious thought, but just that there is cognitive-specific phenomenal conscious thought. They argue that conscious thought is phenomenal but its phenomenal character can be explained by appealing to familiar kinds of phenomenal character such as sensory, perceptual, emotional or bodily phenomenal character. I have argued elsewhere against two main reductionist views (Jorba 2015), and it is not my purpose to enter in such discussion here. Nothing I say here depends on whether these views succeed or, in contrast, if cognitive phenomenology views are correct; as I have said, both parties as described assume the claims I am concerned with here that can be understood as the idea of the co-extensiveness of the conscious and the phenomenal character of thought. Notice, however, that the assumption that conscious thought is phenomenal is indeed simply denied by the above mentioned eliminativists, such as Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson (2007). The following section is an attempt to examine in which ways one can substantiate the eliminativist idea that conscious thought is not phenomenal, besides merely stating it.

2.1. An example of definitional restriction

In Kim (1996) there is a way of arguing that *phenomenal* and *conscious* may come apart. After leaving aside unconscious states as possible bearers of phenomenal character (another instance of one aspect of the “obvious assumption”, treated below) Kim asks whether *occurrent conscious instances* of belief³ are characterized by a “special qualitative character unique to beliefs” with a certain content. And his answer is “no”, given that a belief about George Washington, for example, may have a mental image of him or the words “George Washington” passing through one’s mind, etc., or “no particular mental image or any other sort of phenomenal occurrence at all” (Kim 1996, p. 158). In this answer we see that Kim is using what can be called *definitional restriction* of “phenomenal character”. Phenomenal character is understood as just *sensory* phenomenal character, and given that beliefs can be accompanied by images or words or any of these elements, there is no specific qualitative character of conscious belief. It is worth noting that if one construes “phenomenal character” as just sensory phenomenal character, the debate on cognitive phenomenology is biased from the start and reductionist positions are right. This definitional restriction of the notion is certainly not an isolated use in the literature, but rather a common way of talking in philosophy of mind during most of the second half of the XXth century.

Kim then addresses the question of whether there is something like a “belief-like phenomenal character” in conscious occurrent beliefs, that is, in beliefs we are actively entertaining. He claims that some people think that in occurrent beliefs there is a certain feel of assertoric or affirmative judging, something like an “Oh, yes!” feeling (Brown 2007 presents the feeling of conviction as that associated with belief). Similarly, an occurrent disbelief can be accompanied by an experience of denial and remembering is accompanied by a feeling of *déjàvu*. Wants and desires could be accompanied by a sense of yearning or longing combined with a sense of *present deprivation*. All these experiences *could* count as specific to the cognitive state but, in fact, Kim describes them as the “coming to be aware that we believe a certain proposition” (Kim 1996, p. 159), where this coming to be aware is not accompanied by any

³ One might doubt that the category of “occurrent belief” is appropriate, as beliefs are normally construed as being dispositional states. But I will follow Kim’s terminology here, and skeptics of occurrent beliefs can apply the reasoning to instances of occurrent judgments or thoughts.

kind of *sensory quality*: “When you are unsure whether you really believe some proposition, say, that euthanasia is morally permissible, that Mozart is a greater composer than Beethoven, or that Clinton will win in 1996, you do not look for a sensory quale of a special type” (Kim 1996, p. 159). This contrasts with what happens when you are asked if you feel pain in the elbow, in which case you presumably look for a sensory *quale* of a special type. One first thing to note with respect to Kim’s position is that the definitional restriction he operates with (phenomenal as sensory in kind) precludes the possibility of a belief-like phenomenal character, but this certainly by itself does not preclude specific “feelings” for conscious thought. But what does indeed preclude this last option is what this phenomenal character is supposed to be able to do, that is, to type identify the kind of state we are talking about⁴. In this section we have used Kim’s view as paradigmatic of a particular perspective that has been very common in the field, namely, to use “phenomenal character” with the definitional restriction to sensory states or sensory elements. This is of particular interest here insofar it allows one to envisage a possible dissociation between phenomenal and conscious character in thought (belief, in Kim’s case). However, the definitional restriction does not really present a viable position in the cognitive phenomenology debate because it directly amounts to a denial of cognitive phenomenology without further argument.

A more promising way to reject the claim that a mental state is conscious if and only if it has phenomenal character is by presenting the case of access conscious thought without phenomenal consciousness. Block’s famous distinction between *access consciousness* (A-consciousness) and *phenomenal consciousness* (P-consciousness) is relevant here. The idea would be to equate phenomenal consciousness to experience and contrast it with access consciousness. A mental state is phenomenally conscious if there is something it is like to be in it, and it is access conscious if its content is available for reasoning and the rational control of action (Block 1995). Block provides sensory states as the paradigm example of phenomenal and propositional attitudes as the paradigm example of access conscious states. By distinguishing between the two notions in this way, Block *encourages* the view that propositional attitudes are not phenomenally conscious, and thus thoughts would not have phenomenal character. This seems to be a very influential assumption in the field.

However, as he introduces both terms, he does not deny that thoughts have phenomenal character (or analogously, that sensations can be access conscious). In fact, he claims that it is unclear what the phenomenal character of thought involves: “One possibility is that it is just a series of mental images or subvocalizations that make thoughts P-conscious. Another possibility is that the contents themselves have a P-conscious aspect independent of their vehicles” (Block 1995, p. 24 footnote 3). The two possibilities Block sees for the phenomenal character of thought phenomenology are, thus, non-specific cognitive phenomenology, for which mental images and sensory elements make the thought phenomenally conscious, and phenomenal cognitive *content*, which will not be identified with the sensory vehicles. In fact, these are not the only possibilities, given that there could be phenomenal character associated with different cognitive attitudes (in addition to, or instead of, content phenomenology – see Klausen 2008; Jorba 2016).

We could first notice that, contrary to what it might have seemed, the notion of A-consciousness is not really a form of *consciousness*. With respect to this, it is symptomatic

2.2. Access consciousness or cognitive accessibility

⁴ The issue of type identification is certainly important and worth taking into account in the cognitive phenomenology debate, but in Kim’s account this question is parasitic on the definitional restriction of phenomenality.

that Block (2007) gives up the notion of *access consciousness* and talks about *cognitive accessibility*, which is a functional property that underlies reporting. This change of terminology indicates that there are not two fundamental kinds of consciousness, as the initial terms suggest, but just one kind, whereas the other notion is meant to capture a purely functional property. Although this might always have been the case from the beginning when he introduces the distinction, talk of access-consciousness has confused the issue. As Montague notes, “Block originally introduced the notion of A-consciousness precisely as an attempt to see how close a state could get to being a genuinely conscious state, i.e. a phenomenally conscious state, without actually being a conscious state at all” (Montague 2016, p. 171). Thus, one first source of caution goes against considering access consciousness as a form of consciousness at all, so that the possibility of non-phenomenal access conscious thoughts would not amount to a form of consciousness but to a functional property that makes the content of the thought available for reasoning and rational control of action. What has to be shown in any case is that the existence of this functional property in thought *precludes* the existence of phenomenal conscious thought. The only thing the existence of a cognitive accessible thought shows is that the content of this thought is available for reasoning and rational control, but there is no implication from there to thought’s contents being not able to be P-conscious. However, even if access consciousness is not really a form of consciousness, one could argue that independently of how we characterize the notion, it suffices to explain what needs to be accounted for in relation to thought, so there is no further need to appeal to phenomenality. Let us now present the main line of argument against this possibility of the dissociation of the conscious and the phenomenal character. That we can have access to the content so four thoughts is something that should be uncontroversial, because otherwise, how could we explain the conscious control that we have over our own actions? And normally, one is A-conscious of the same thing (same kind of content) one is P-conscious of. Block seems to illustrate this, when he is discussing the possibility of P-consciousness without A-consciousness:

Suppose that you are engaged in intense conversation when suddenly at noon you realize that right outside your window, there is – and has been for sometime – a pneumatic drill digging up the street. You were aware of the noise all along, one might say, but only at noon are you consciously aware of it. That is, you were P-conscious of the noise all along, but at noon you are both P-conscious and A-conscious of it (Block 1995, p. 234).

This way of presenting the distinction suggests that the distinction has nothing to do with different kinds of contents, so it seems reasonable to assume that we are P- and A-conscious of the same contents. Moreover, the example suggests that A-consciousness consists in being aware of what is already P-conscious – at least in this and analogous cases. One could try to deny this by appealing to the overflow argument, which leads Block to conclude that P-consciousness overflows A-consciousness. He refers to this issue as follows:

One of the most important issues concerning the foundations of conscious perception centers on the question of whether perceptual consciousness is rich or sparse. The overflow argument uses a form of “iconic memory” to argue that perceptual consciousness is richer (i.e., has a higher capacity) than cognitive access: when observing a complex scene we are conscious of more than we can report or think about (Block 2011a, p. 1).

But notice that what Block argues is that P-consciousness has a higher capacity, but he does not deny that we are P- and A-conscious of the same contents. So it seems that normally we are P- and A-conscious of the same kind of content and that what is A-conscious is also P-conscious. With respect to this, Kriegel (2006) presents the view that P-consciousness is the basis of A-consciousness, that is, the for-me-ness aspect of P-conscious states (that they are self-consciously entertained) is what makes those states available for cognitive control. This view draws on the distinction between qualitative (what-it-is-likeness) and subjective character (for-me-ness) and also shows, importantly for my purposes here, that the distinction between A- and P-consciousness has nothing to do with the contents or with the things we are conscious of⁵. One could resist the claim that what is A-conscious is also P-conscious by appealing to the imaginary case of the superblindsighter, which is introduced as a case of A-consciousness without P-consciousness: the superblindsight patient is a person that can guess what is in the blind portion of her visual field without being told to guess, that is, without prompting (this is the main difference with the blind sight patient). She spontaneously says that she knows that there is an X in her visual field although she cannot see it. As Block notes, the thought of the superblindsighter is both A-conscious and P-conscious but what he is talking about is the state of the perceptual system, which is A-conscious without being P-conscious⁶. The superblindsighter case shows that what is A-conscious is not necessarily P-conscious. However, this is an extreme case and normally in all other cases it is true that what is A-conscious is also P-conscious, or at least this seems to be assumed in the literature. In any case, for our present purposes, in order to claim that A-consciousness is not P-consciousness in thought, one would have to show that the normal case of conscious thought is as atypical as is the superblindsighter case in perceptual experience. My contention is, thus, that one would have to show that in conscious thought we are normally conscious in the *atypical* way in which the superblindsighter is perceptually conscious. To my knowledge, the case for this has not been made and the prospects for doing it do not appear *prima facie* very plausible. To recapitulate: firstly, the notion of A-consciousness or cognitive accessibility (if it is a notion of consciousness at all) does not preclude conscious thought from also being phenomenal. In fact, the implication from A- to P-consciousness seems to be what is assumed in the discussion of the distinction in the perceptual case. This implication is just what is questioned by the superblindsighter case, which does not seem to pose a problem for conscious thought. Drawing on the discussion of Block's distinction and examples, we have reasons to believe that what is A-conscious is normally also P-conscious⁷.

Let us turn to a second different movement to deny the co-extensiveness of the conscious and the phenomenal character: cases of non-conscious phenomenal thought⁸. As I already mentioned in the first section, it is worth noting that a commonly held assumption among

3. Non-conscious phenomenal thought

⁵ See also Clément and Malerstein (2003) for an ontogenetic account of consciousness according to which P-consciousness is a *precondition* for A-consciousness: they present empirical evidence in developmental psychology for the claim that P-consciousness is present at a very early age and is what makes A-consciousness possible.

⁶ "Of course, the superblind sighter has a thought that there is an 'X' in his blindfield 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" (Block 1995, p. 233).

⁷ See Jorba and Vicente (2014) for the argument that defenders of cognitive phenomenology are in an advantageous position than deniers when it comes to explaining how we can have access to the contents of our thoughts.

⁸ These cases are different from putative cases of phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness or cognitive accessibility – discussed with reference to the overflow argument, Block (2011a) – in that the ones presented in this section do not involve any *conscious* character, whereas in the overflow cases it is argued that we have phenomenal *consciousness* without cognitive access.

most parties in the cognitive phenomenology debate is that non-conscious or unconscious states have no phenomenal character (Kim 1996; Pitt 2004; Levine 2011; Prinz 2011; Tye and Wright 2011). In what follows I will consider two ways in which one could argue for the existence of non-conscious phenomenal thought, and I will argue that they do not in fact provide good reasons to believe in this kind of phenomenon.

3.1. A conceptual distinction: phenomenality and (phenomenal) consciousness

The conceivability of non-conscious phenomenal states has been explored by Burge (1997) through his distinction between “phenomenality” and “phenomenal consciousness”. The idea here is not to separate phenomenality from another form of consciousness but rather phenomenality (what-it-is-likeness) from phenomenal consciousness (what it is occurrently like for the individual):

although phenomenal qualities are individuated in terms of what it is like to feel or to be conscious of them, one may have phenomenal states or events with phenomenal qualities that one is unconscious of. Thus, phenomenal qualities themselves do not guarantee phenomenal consciousness. To be phenomenally conscious, phenomenal states, or their phenomenal qualities, must be sensed or felt by the individual subject (Burge 2007, p. 383).

Pains that are not felt because of some distraction or obstruction are an example. These may remain pains even though they are not conscious for the subject at certain points. Similarly and applied to our case, thoughts would also retain their phenomenality in cases in which they are not conscious. This would open the door to the idea that phenomenality is not enough for phenomenal consciousness and, thus, it would be absurd to maintain that an occurrent episode of thinking with some phenomenal character is a form of phenomenal consciousness.

Burge suggests that there are phenomenal properties or qualities that are not felt by the subject. An element that would make this position understandable would be to appeal to *attention*. If the subject does not pay attention to the pain, for example, “she does not feel it”, but the pain could exist with its phenomenal properties. According to this possibility, attention would be responsible for making a state phenomenally conscious. But it would be wrong to attribute to Burge the association (or equivalence) of attention and phenomenal consciousness: “In entertaining such a distinction I am not merely supposing that the individual does not attend to the pain. I mean that the individual does not feel it. It is not phenomenally conscious for the individual. Yet the individual still has it. The pain is individuated partly in terms of how it consciously feels” (Burge 2007, p. 415). And also:

Phenomenal consciousness is not attention. The states that I have listed can be phenomenally conscious whether or not they are attended to, and whether or not things sensed through them are attended to. When they are not the objects of attention, and when attention does not operate through them, however, the consciousness is commonly less intense or robust (Burge 2007, p. 399)¹⁰.

⁹ A development of this idea is precisely Prinz’s theory of consciousness (2012).

¹⁰ The states he lists are felt pains, felt tickles, felt hunger pangs; qualitative elements in conscious vision, hearing, smell, or taste; feelings of tiredness or strain from effort; the feels associated with touch, phenomenal blur and phenomenal static (Burge 2007, p. 398).

There has to be another element, then, that is responsible for the distinction between phenomenality and phenomenal consciousness. This turns out to be the *effective occurrence* of the state regarding the constitutive possibility of becoming conscious:

The conceptual distinction is this. On the view I am exploring, *an occurrent phenomenal quality is constitutively individuated in terms of how it would be felt if it were to become conscious*. Its nature is constitutively, not just causally or dispositionally, related to occurrently conscious ways of feeling. This constitutive point is what makes the quality phenomenal even when it is not actually conscious. On this view, the unfelt pain is still a pain – not just a neural state or a dispositional state that happens to be capable of producing pain under the right conditions – even though it is not occurrently felt and is not conscious for the individual (Burge 2007, p. 415, my emphasis).

Burge thus proposes that phenomenal qualities are constitutively capable of becoming occurrently conscious, even if they are not always phenomenally conscious. This is a distinction between a *phenomenal quality* and a *conscious phenomenal quality* and it is what allows Burge to claim that there are states that are non-conscious but still have phenomenal properties. Both properties are normally co-extensive if there is no obstruction or interference. The distinction, though, is a *conceptual* one, and Burge leaves open the possibility of its empirical soundness. If there is no such empirical distinction, he would assume that these states do not exist and he would therefore have to accept that every phenomenal quality is also conscious¹¹.

Even if this conceptual distinction is merely exploratory, I have some reservations about its use. First, and as a minor point, it is not very clear why the phenomenal occurrent property that is not conscious is called “phenomenal” at all if it is not felt in any way. But we could grant this stipulation. However, secondly, and contrary to what Burge suggests, it does not seem possible to empirically test this distinction: what would confirm or refute this conceptual possibility? It seems difficult to establish any criteria for testing it. All the methods to empirically test the presence of phenomenal consciousness rely, in one way or another, on the reports of the subject, even when there are fMRI methods involved: the neural activation is measured when the subject is asked a question or is required to do a task. Therefore, it is not clear how we could know that a state has phenomenal character if it is not conscious or the subject is somehow aware of it, because first-person reports would be of no use. Another way to put the point would be to say that when the presence of phenomenal consciousness is manifested, this would thereby also show that a phenomenal quality is also present. No empirical way to distinguish among these notions seems to be available. Thirdly, continuing to entertain this distinction would have as a consequence the proliferation of “hard problems” of consciousness, as Pitt (2004, p. 3, footnote 4) notes, as there would be the hard problem of phenomenality and the hard problem of consciousness itself, on pain of defining “phenomenality” in a way totally alien to the puzzles of phenomenal consciousness. This is not a *prima facie* reason to abandon the distinction, but a consequence whose characterization seems difficult even to conceptualize: what would it mean to say that there is a problem explaining an occurrent phenomenal property that is not conscious? All these doubts put some pressure on the adequacy of the conceptual possibility of dissociating the phenomenal character from the conscious one in the way open by Burge’s suggestion.

¹¹ It should be noted that this is an exploratory distinction and not his main point about phenomenal consciousness.

3.2. Non-conscious phenomenal qualities: HOT theories

There is another way of understanding consciousness in which a state may be phenomenal without being conscious. This can be so within higher-order theories (HOT) of consciousness, for which the qualitative or phenomenal character and consciousness can dissociate or come apart. Higher-order approaches to consciousness can be divided into those that think that the higher-order state is a perceptual state (Armstrong 1968; Lycan 2004) or a thought (Rosenthal 2005). According to the latter, a phenomenally conscious mental state is a state of a certain sort that is the object of a (unconscious) higher-order thought, and which causes that thought non-inferentially. The object of the thought, namely, the first-order state, can possess qualitative character without being conscious:

since states with mental quality occur both consciously and not, mental qualities can occur without appearing in one's stream of consciousness. So one's being in a state with qualitative character is independent of one's being in a conscious state, and we need different theories to explain the two. A theory of consciousness will explain one's mental life subjectively appearing a particular way; a distinct theory must address what mental qualities are, independently of whether they occur consciously (Rosenthal 2011, p. 435).

Rosenthal's motivation for dissociating phenomenal qualities and conscious character comes from evidence from blind sight patients, presumably described as instantiating phenomenal qualities without being conscious or aware of them and subliminal perceiving: "states with mental qualities sometimes occur subliminally, that is, when one subjectively takes oneself not to be in any such state. And it is quixotic to regard as conscious a state that one subjectively takes oneself not to be in" (Rosenthal 2011, p. 434).

If there is the possibility of dissociation of the phenomenal and the conscious character for the first-order state at which the higher-order thought is directed, one could think that the theory predicts the same when a thought is itself the first-order state and can thus be the target of another higher-order state. The idea would then be that we can have phenomenal thoughts that are not conscious because there is not a higher-order thought directed at them that makes them conscious.

I think there are different possible responses to that possibility of dissociation. First, as Block (2011b) argues, this kind of theory has two possible versions: a modest and an ambitious one. The first just aims to give an explanation of *one kind* of consciousness or consciousness in one sense of the term, namely, higher-order consciousness, and reserves the name "quality" to the first-order state, without pretending to explain the what-it-is-likeness of this state (precisely the question of phenomenal consciousness). The second aims to be an ambitious theory that explains phenomenal consciousness or what-it-is-likeness of the first-order mental state. Regarding the modest version, we can see that it uses a notion of "quality" that is different from phenomenal character as what-it-is-likeness, and so it is of no interest as a possible case of phenomenal character without consciousness. The issue would here turn to a terminological one without positing a real threat to the co-extensive character of conscious and phenomenal character.

In the ambitious version, though, the issue is not terminological because it aims to be a theory of phenomenal consciousness, not just of a kind of consciousness that is precisely the higher-order one. However, in this case we do not find a dissociation of the conscious and the phenomenal character anymore with respect to the first-order state, given that according to the theory, the first-order state is phenomenally conscious in virtue of the relation to a higher-order thought. What happens with the higher-order thought itself, though? When this thought is responsible for making conscious a first-order one, this thought is certainly

unconscious. This is made clear by the acceptance of the HOT theories of the problem they have to respond to regarding the question of how it is that the relation between an unconscious thought and an unconscious pain, for example, can make the latter conscious (Neander 1998; Zahavi 2006). But when this thought is itself the target of another higher-order thought, we cannot say it is phenomenal and unconscious anymore, as it will precisely become conscious in virtue of such a relation (when this thought is phenomenal but not conscious we come back to the case of the modest version of the theory). The upshot may be, then, that under the ambitious reading of the HOT theory, the dissociation between phenomenal and conscious character is not found, as the target state is a case with both phenomenal and conscious character (phenomenal consciousness) precisely when it is the target of another thought. Moreover, one can think of the ambitious version of the HOT theory as an attempt at dispensing with phenomenal character in its equating it with a second-order unconscious thought, more than a theory that precisely explains such a phenomenal character. In summary, the possibility of unconscious phenomenal states is undermined by a use of “quality” or “phenomenal” in a different way than “phenomenal character” as what-it-is-likeness (in the modest version of HOT theory) and by the fact that when the theory wants to explain phenomenal consciousness (the ambitious version), the dissociation between phenomenal and conscious character somehow vanishes^{12,13}.

As a general reflection for the whole section, it seems that we have reasons to doubt the dissociation between phenomenal and conscious character in thought in the form of non-conscious phenomenal thought presented in this section. It appears more reasonable to think that the phenomenal character of a certain state implies the conscious appearance of that state, and if the state is unconscious, namely, if it has no presence at all, then we can say that it has no phenomenal character. I take this idea to be also a common assumption within the phenomenological tradition in philosophy starting with Brentano and Husserl, even if we can also find different uses of “consciousness” that could perhaps cast doubt on this assumption (see Siewert 2011 for an overview of the term in the phenomenological tradition). In general, then, I think we can say the experiential or qualitative features that comprise the phenomenal character of a mental state are conscious and qualitative just because they are consciously felt. Block summarizes this idea in the following way: “Lacking consciousness requires lacking what-it-is-like-ness and so a state of what-it-is-like-ness is a state of consciousness” (Block 2011b, p. 424).

In this paper I have focused on an important assumption in the debate between defenders of cognitive phenomenology and deniers of the reductionist sort, which I have labelled the

4. Conclusive remarks

12 As a side reflection on HOT theories, it is worth mentioning that it has been argued by Brown and Mandik (2012) that, as theories of phenomenal character, HOT theories are indeed committed to the existence of cognitive phenomenology: “It is also easy to see why the view is committed to distinct phenomenology for distinct conscious thoughts...This is because what it is like for one, on the higher-order thought theory of consciousness, is determined by the exact contents of the higher-order state. So if one represents oneself as thinking that P as opposed to Q we should expect that one’s conscious thought will be like thinking that P whereas the other will be like thinking that Q for the subject of these thoughts” (Brown and Mandik 2012, p. 7).

13 A similar reflection applies to self-representationalist accounts of consciousness. For Kriegel (2009), there are two components to phenomenal consciousness: qualitative (color-ish component, for instance) and subjective character (for-me component). However, this theory does not really present a real case of dissociation between phenomenal and conscious character, and would present, if any, an orthogonal dissociation of qualitative and subjective character: “a phenomenally conscious state’s qualitative character is what makes it the phenomenally conscious state it is, while its subjective character is what makes it a phenomenally conscious state at all (Kriegel 2009, p. 1). Both qualitative and subjective character jointly make a state phenomenally conscious.

“obvious assumption”: the co-extensiveness of the conscious and the phenomenal character in thought or, what is the same, the idea that conscious thought is phenomenal and phenomenal thought is conscious. It is important to examine this co-extensiveness claim because it can be undermined in several ways and this would imply shaking the ground on which the cognitive phenomenology debate as presented is set. I have examined some ways to cast doubt on the assumption: possible cases of conscious non-phenomenal thought and possible cases of unconscious phenomenal thought.

Regarding the first, I have considered Kim’s view for the dissociation and have shown that his reasoning was based on a definitional restriction of “phenomenal character”. Another way of arguing for cases of conscious but non-phenomenal forms of thought is by considering the kind of consciousness involved in thought as just access consciousness. I have argued that the notion of access consciousness should not be seen as a form of consciousness but as a functional notion that, *per se*, does not preclude conscious thought from being phenomenal. Indeed, we have reasons to believe that A-conscious states are also normally P-conscious ones; its denial would imply attributing a surprising level of atypical character to conscious thought. Regarding the second possibility of dissociation, namely, cases of unconscious phenomenal thought, I considered Burge’s conceptual distinction and higher-order thought theories. I have shown my reservations about Burge’s distinction and have proposed to understand HOT theories as either not talking about phenomenal character (by employing “quality” in another sense) or as not presenting real cases of dissociation (when accounting for phenomenal consciousness). I should say that I do not have the pretension to exhaust all the logical possibilities one might find as proposals of dissociation between the conscious and the phenomenal character in thought, but just to examine the most prominent ones and those that *prima facie* present some plausibility. Thus, this paper does not present a knock down argument for the co-extensiveness claim, but I hope that it at least casts doubt on the dissociation and presents reasons to transform a shared assumption in the cognitive phenomenology debate into an explicit claim one can confidently believe in and defend¹⁴.

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