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THE DYNAMIC PHENOMENOLOGY OF OCCURRENT THINKING

abstract

In this paper I argue that there is something missing from the account of occurrent thinking as typically presented in the cognitive phenomenology debate. The missing element is what I call the "dynamic" phenomenology of thought. Cognitive states are not just static states, they are also dynamic states that unfold in time. My main thesis is that this is an important aspect of the phenomenology of thought that has a significant bearing on the question of what it is like to think. The evidence I offer in support of this claim is drawn from descriptions of two instances of occurrent thinking. Using the descriptions as a reference point, I propose that thinking experiences possess a three stage dynamic structure that begins with a "productive" stage, progresses to a "receptive" stage and ends in a "reflective" stage. I offer a tentative analysis of this structure and I briefly consider some of the implications and objections.

keywords

cognitive phenomenology, phenomenology, mental agency, introspection

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1. Introduction

This paper is prompted by the observation that there is something missing from the experience of occurrent thinking as this is typically presented in the cognitive phenomenology debate. The missing element I am referring to has to do with the way that thinking experiences *occur*. While thinking experiences can be analysed and understood in terms of what they consist of[1], they can also be analysed in terms of how they unfold dynamically in time. I will call this the "dynamic" phenomenology of thought, and my aim in this paper is to consider thinking from this perspective.

My approach is as follows: I start with a consideration of what cognitive phenomenology in its "inclusivist" form means in terms of actual experience, and I propose an answer to this. I then describe two cases of conscious occurrent thought from the "dynamic" perspective. My aim in describing these cases is that readers will be able to understand in concrete terms what I mean by the dynamic phenomenology of thought, and will also be able to evaluate the observations I make with reference to their own experience. Having presented the two cases and my thesis, I then consider in a provisional way some of the implications within the context of the cognitive phenomenology debate, and I also briefly consider some objections.

1.1. Cognitive phenomenology and the experience of occurrent conscious thought

Cognitive phenomenology can be understood as the claim that there is something it is like to think just as there is something it is like to see, hear or touch. In its more "liberal", "strong" or "inclusivist" forms, it can also be understood as the claim that what it is like to think is a constitutive element of what thought essentially is[2]. But what does the cognitive phenomenology thesis mean in terms of actual concrete experience? This might seem like an odd question but the answer is not necessarily obvious. Might it mean, for example, that there is some kind of additional cognitive phenomenal "something" going on when we think? Something that might perhaps normally escape our attention but that we can become conscious of if we attend in the right way?

When one considers the cognitive phenomenology thesis then it is clear that this is generally not what is meant. Cognitive phenomenology is not something that one needs to notice *in addition* to what one already notices about thought. Rather, it is a kind of re-interpretation of

1 This might be, for example, an analysis in terms of intentional content and intentional attitude.

2 For overviews of the cognitive phenomenology debate see Bayne & Montague (2011b); Smithies (2013). Recent collections of papers include Bayne & Montague (2011a) and Breyer & Gutland (2016).

something that is already fully noticed and taken into account. When I think, I am occurrently aware of the meaning of the thought, which means that I am aware of the thought's content (i.e., I am aware of what the thought is *about*). This capacity to be aware of thought content is uncontroversial, but it would traditionally be accounted for in non-phenomenal terms. What the cognitive phenomenology thesis proposes is that this awareness of thought content is *itself* phenomenal. In other words, to the extent that one is occurrently aware of the meaning of a thought, one is also consciously experiencing cognitive phenomenology.

Pitt appears to be making this point when he says that by "immediate" and non-inferential conscious introspection "one is able to identify each of one's occurrent conscious thoughts as the thought it is (i.e., as having the content it does)" (Pitt 2004, p. 7). I also take him to be articulating the same point when he says "the cognitive phenomenal character of an occurrent conscious thought *is* its intentional content" (Pitt 2011, p. 141, original emphasis). Charles Siewert also seems to be saying something similar when he says:

> [...] the inclusivist does *not* require that, *in addition* to the on-going differences in ways of thinking and understanding that you already discriminate in first-person reflection, there is phenomenally *something more* we should look for. Rather what we are asked to consider is that some such reflectively recognised variations in one's manner of thought and understanding *are themselves phenomenal differences,* whether or not you think of them *as such* (Siewert 2011, p. 249, original emphasis).

To summarise, we could say that occurrent awareness of thought content is *itself* the cognitive phenomenal character of thought, and cognitive phenomenology *is* that, it is not something in addition to that. There are clearly other ways that cognitive phenomenology could be interpreted, but this is how I will understand it for the purposes of this paper. It is a kind of "immediate" experience where phenomenal character and intentional content are one and the same. Note that this is different to sensory phenomenal experience, in that with sensory experience, phenomenal character and intentional content are clearly distinct (e.g., the phenomenal character of redness is not the same as the red tomato). Chudnoff refers to the kind of awareness where phenomenal character and intentional content are combined as *self-presentational* (Chudnoff 2015, p. 40), and I will adopt the same term here. Self-presentational awareness, then, is what characterises the experience of occurrent conscious thought[3].

With this brief preamble in place, I am now ready to turn to the main topic of this paper, which, as already stated, is the dynamic phenomenology of thought. I have said what I take cognitive phenomenology to mean in terms of actual experience, however, this still says nothing about how cognitive phenomenal experiences occur. It is interesting that although cognitive phenomenology is exclusively a thesis about *occurrent* thought, there is almost nothing said in the literature about how it occurs. In the next section I will address this aspect of cognitive phenomenology by considering two cases of occurrent thinking. My aim is to describe the cases as accurately as possible as I experience them, and then to use this to throw light on the question of how cognitive phenomenology occurs.

3 Please note that by "self-presentational" I do not necessarily mean "self-representational" (e.g., Kriegel & Williford, 2006). Self-representational means that a state represents itself in some way, but with self-presentational I mean that a state is fully and immediately presented as what it is.

2. Two cases of conscious occurrent thinking

The first case I will consider is that of thinking the meaning of a single abstract word, and the second case is that of relating two abstract concepts[4]. The aim in both cases is not a description of what the word or concepts mean, but a description of how conscious awareness of meaning occurs or arises. As I have said, readers are invited to carry out these exercises and compare their own experience against my descriptions. Readers can also experiment with other exercises of their own that perhaps achieve the same result more effectively. The aim is to find simple thought tasks that begin with an experience of not understanding and then lead to an experience of understanding. It is particularly this transition that I am interested in.

2.1. Case 1. Understanding the meaning of a single abstract word

In this exercise the task is to think the meaning of single abstract word. The word is "although".

1. I begin by bringing thinking to a stop for a few moments. I then say the word "although" to myself silently, while maintaining a state of not thinking. As I hear (or feel?) the word being spoken, I do not know what it means. I say it to myself a few times but all I am aware of is the more or less meaningless saying of the word.
2. I also have a sense that if I am to understand the word, then I have to become active, i.e., I have to activate myself in a way that is over and above the mere saying. I do not know what it is I have to do in order to do this, but it seems to involve bringing "myself" into movement at some level.
3. When I try to carry out this movement, it is initially experienced as a kind of resistance. It is as if I have to push through to an experience of the meaning, i.e., as if there is a kind of barrier or veil between myself and the meaning. To overcome this resistance I feel as if have to move or refocus myself, perhaps as if I am moving or refocusing my attention.
4. As I do this, I discover that the movement is experienced as a kind of "imagining" of what the word means, i.e., it is a kind of "inventing" or "making-up" activity. This is also experienced as momentarily immersive, as if I have to let go of what I am trying to do in order to do it. For a moment it is as if I disappear into the doing of it.
5. Within (and perhaps as a result of) this "imagining" activity, I am for a moment directly aware of some aspect of the meaning of the word. It is as if something that was obscuring my view is momentarily lifted and I now directly "see" or "behold" something of what the word means. However, it is just a fleeting glimpse. There is also no image or picture associated with this. I.e., there is nothing in addition to what I behold other than the meaning I momentarily behold.
6. This moment of "beholding" is qualitatively different to the "imaginative" activity that preceded it, in that it is experienced as a kind of "receptivity" or "receiving" whereas the previous experience was one of active "producing" or "doing".
7. This moment of direct awareness of meaning shifts quickly into a kind of reflective judgement that forms almost simultaneously into words. I say to myself: "*although prepares the way for an approaching statement by acknowledging the existence of a previous statement that is in some sense contradictory*". On reflection I find this formulation in some way lacking, and I try again to access a direct experience of what the word means so that I can adjust my formulation.

4 The reason for choosing relatively abstract thinking is that in my view it better exposes the particular phenomenology I am interested in. However, the same phenomenology is observable in a much wider range of thinking experiences.

2.2. Case 2. Relating two abstract concepts

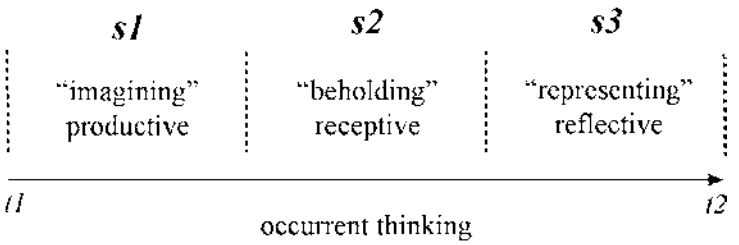
In this exercise the task is to think the relation between two abstract concepts. The two concepts are "continuity" and "permanence".

1. I begin by bringing thinking to a standstill for a few moments. I then say both words silently to myself while maintaining a state of relative inner stillness (i.e., I try not to "think"). As I say the words to myself, I am not aware of what the concepts mean or how they are related.
2. I then begin to try to think the meaning of one of the concepts. I say "continuity" and try to think what this means. This is first experienced as a kind of resistance or barrier, but as I begin to think, I carry out what I can best describe as a kind of creative activity. I.e., It is as if I am "inventing" or "making up" what the word means. This is also experienced as becoming inwardly active or mobile at some level.
3. Out of this I experience moments of direct awareness of the meaning of "continuity", or some aspect of it. What I experience when I experience these moments is a direct and immediate "knowing", but there is no image or picture associated with this. The meaning I momentarily behold is fully presented as what it is in the moment of beholding it. This experience also has a certain "receptive" or "sensitive" quality in contrast to the "productive" activity that preceded it.
4. With this awareness of meaning still present, I think the second concept in the same way as the first, and try to relate the two. In doing this I realise that thinking the relation between the concepts is quite different from thinking the individual concepts. For when thinking the individual concepts, I start from the saying of the word ("continuity", "permanence") but in thinking the relation between them there is no word from which to start. The task is therefore perhaps harder.
5. In "imagining" the connection between the two concepts, it is as if I am already in some sense guided by the relation that I am not yet aware of. In other words, in my activity of "imagining" I am already sensitive or receptive to the meaning that will come, and it is this that in some sense already guides my "imagining".
6. Out of this creative activity emerge moments of directly or immediately experiencing some aspect of the relation between the two concepts. This is experienced as if a barrier or veil is momentarily lifted, revealing a "scene". But there is no image-like content connected with this, i.e., nothing that I "see", only an immediate awareness of meaning that quickly disappears again.
7. Each moment of awareness of meaning forms almost immediately and more or less spontaneously into a verbal formulation. I experience this also as a loss of the immediate "beholding" of meaning. I now have a specific and defined verbal content that more or less represents the meaning.
8. There is also a kind of residue of the direct awareness of meaning that seems to remain for a short while (perhaps one or two seconds) after the direct awareness itself has ended. This residual awareness helps in arriving at an accurate verbal formulation in that I can check my formulation against it, at least for as long as it lasts.
9. The following formulations arise in this way. Each one is formulated out of a different moment of "beholding" and the sequence is given in the same order in which it arose. (Note to reader: As you read these formulations, try to observe what you inwardly do in order to grasp and understand them. The point is not whether or not the formulations are right, the point is what you do in order to "think" them.)
    a. Whereas permanence emphasises the unchanging, continuity emphasises something maintained and carried over within a context of change.
    b. Permanence does not necessarily have continuity because continuity implies change, and permanence has little (or no?) room for change.

c. Permanence can be an aspect of continuity, though it does not have to be. Something could still have continuity with nothing in it being permanent.
d. If something had the attribute of permanence, this attribute would not be that which gives it continuity.
e. Continuity is not given by the presence of an element within it that remains unchanging. Rather, continuity is given by the presence of a particular kind of change.

3. Discussion

The two thinking experiences described above show a similar structure. The descriptions begin with the saying of a word but the saying itself is not enough to "understand" what the word means. The additional something that is required is a kind of productive or imaginative activity, out of which arise moments where some aspect of what the word means is immediately and momentarily "beheld". This is a receptive kind of experience in that it is as if something is "sensed" or "felt". This turns almost immediately into a kind of evaluating or judging of what is beheld. There is now a new content of some sort that can be doubted, believed, etc. The shift from a direct "beholding" experience to a more reflective "evaluating" experience can be characterised by saying that in the first instance there is an immediate experience of something actually being a certain way, whereas in the second instance something is represented as being (or understood to be) a certain way.
Summarising this, the three stages (abbreviated to *s1*, *s2*, *s3*) can be schematically represented as follows:



Note that the three stages extend in the temporal sense (*t1* to *t2*)[5], but the duration is typically very brief (perhaps a couple of seconds in total from *t1* to *t2*)[6]. Also, the three stages do not necessarily have to occur in just this order. For example, it seems possible for *s1* and *s2* to alternate rapidly before leading to *s3*. (e.g.: *s1* | *s2* | *s1* | *s2* | *s3*). It also seems possible that *s1* can occur without leading to *s2* or *s3* at all[7]. However, according to my experience, *s2* can only occur if it is preceded by *s1,* and *s3* can only occur if it is preceded by *s2,* though in the latter case there is an important qualification that I will return to below.
Let us assume for the moment that there is such a dynamic phenomenology of occurrent thought, and that it is broadly along the lines I have articulated. I will call this the dynamic phenomenology of thought thesis, or DPT. Put simply, DPT is the claim that instances of occurrent thinking have a certain dynamic structure in time. Thought begins with a *productive*

5 I do not necessarily mean by this that each stage has temporal extension. One or other of the stages may not have temporal extension and have more the character of an instantaneous event. However, the whole sequence taken together (t1 to t2) clearly seems to have temporal extension.
6 Some occurrent thinking experiences can also be much longer and some perhaps also much shorter.
7 An example of this might be trying to think the meaning of a word in an unfamiliar language. The activity of "imagining" can still be carried out but it does not progress to an actual awareness of meaning, i.e., it does not progress to *s2*.

activity, shifts to a moment of *receptivity* and ends with a state of *reflective representation*. In what follows I will try to explore this thesis in a very provisional way with reference to some familiar theory. My aim is not to try to prove DPT, but simply to open up some of the possible lines of inquiry that follow from it, particularly in relation to the cognitive phenomenology debate.

In section 1.1., I made the claim that cognitive phenomenology can be understood as a kind of "self-presentational" experience in which phenomenal character and intentional content are one and the same. However, from the above description, this only characterises one aspect of occurrent thought, namely, the second stage (*s2*). The second stage is described as a moment of immediate awareness or "beholding", and this fits well with the idea of self-presentational awareness. However, *s2* arises out of *s1,* which is quite different. Here there is an immersive "imagining" or "creative" activity that is not necessarily self-presentational, seeing as an awareness of the content of thought has not yet arisen. This suggests that *s1* may not involve cognitive phenomenology at all, but may involve some other kind of phenomenology, such as agentive phenomenology[8].

S3 is a different state again, and perhaps best understood as a propositional state analysable in content/attitude terms. Here the meaning of what has been grasped is accessible but is not directly and immediately experienced. So perhaps *s3* is best understood as a kind of access conscious state (Block 1997) or perhaps as a kind of higher-order state (Rosenthal 1986) rather than a kind of cognitive phenomenal state. I will not try to decide these details here. The general point I would like to make is that occurrent thinking is not just one kind of state with one kind of phenomenology, rather, it is a dynamic movement that involves internal shifts and transitions of a structured kind[9].

One obvious objection to the DPT thesis is that if there really is a dynamic phenomenology of thought as described then why is it not more commonly recognised? One response to this is that not all cognitive states are dynamic states in the DPT sense. For example, it seems quite possible to enter into an *s3* type state but where the corresponding *s1* and *s2* stages have occurred at some time in the past. Or, put another way: it is possible to recall the result (i.e., *s3*) of a past thinking experience that originally included *s1*, *s2* and *s3*, but without actually again re-experiencing *s1* and *s2* in the occurrent sense. I suggested earlier that the *s2* stage of "beholding" can only occur if preceded by *s1*, and also that the *s3* stage can only occur if preceded by *s2*. The qualification I mentioned is that once an *s3* stage has arisen (as a result of *s1* and *s2*), it can be recalled without a new occurrent instance of *s1* and *s2*. The upshot of this is that many broadly "cognitive" states that arise in day-to-day experience do not involve *s1* and *s2* in the occurrent sense. This makes the possibility of overlooking the role of *s1* and *s2* that much easier. What is needed, I would suggest, is that occurrent intentional states of the *s3* kind need to be clearly distinguished from thinking experiences of the full "dynamic" kind (i.e., involving *s1*, *s2* and *s3*). If this distinction is not made, then it is much easier to take the end result of an occurrent thinking experience (i.e. *s3*) as the complete experience. It is also much easier to overlook the existence of *s1* and *s2* by attending to *s3* type states that genuinely lack *s1* and *s2* in the occurrent sense.

However, this still does not explain why occurrent instances of thinking where all three stages are involved (*s1, s2 ,s3*) are not commonly recognised as such. Here I would point to the fact that *s1* and *s2* are *active* in a way that *s3* is not. Because *s1* involves an "imaginative" and

8 The notion of agentive phenomenology is controversial, and I won't go into a discussion of it here. For overviews see Bayne (2008) and Soteriou (2009a). For a discussion specifically in the context of mental agency see Soteriou (2009b).

9 It is possible that by differentiating the dynamic structure of thought some of the competing theories about the nature of occurrent thought could be found to be complementary parts of the same dynamic picture.

"creative" activity of the subject, and because *s2* is closely connected to this, it means that both stages are experienced in a much more pre-reflective way than *s3*. In other words, *s1* and *s2* are conscious states but not *reflectively* conscious states[10], and therefore they are overlooked. Only with *s3* does a fully reflective awareness of content emerge and therefore this state is what is primarily noticed. One could therefore say that much of what is commonly taken to be occurrent thought in the literature (for example propositional attitudes involving that-clauses) is actually only one aspect of occurrent thought, namely, the final "representational" stage *s3*.

There is a further factor connected with this. One of the reasons why sensory states and cognitive states have traditionally been seen as radically separate[11] is that there is an obvious qualitative difference between them. Whereas sensory states clearly have phenomenal character, cognitive states do not, or at least not in the same obvious way. The question that this raises for the cognitive phenomenology thesis is why there is such a qualitative difference, given that both kinds of states are phenomenal[12]? The DPT thesis can answer this as follows: Cognitive phenomenology has the phenomenal character it does (i.e., of seeming to entirely lack phenomenal character) because the subject is intimately involved in *producing* the content of the state. In other words, what is "created" in *s1* is intimately linked to what is "beheld" in *s2*. One might say that thinking must first create something in order for a cognitive state to arise at all. The reason why sensory phenomenology is so concretely present and substantial for our awareness is that we play a less intimate role in bringing about our awareness of it. For this reason also, thought is almost entirely insubstantial and as having almost no phenomenal character at all, while at the same time being intimately and immediately meaningful. This qualitative difference between cognitive phenomenology and sensory phenomenology perhaps becomes more understandable when the dynamic stages of thought (*s1, s2, s3*) are taken into account.

Another objection that could be brought against DPT is that it mistakenly takes thought to involve a creative act. For example, Galen Strawson (2003) claims that:

> No actual natural thinking of a thought, no actual having of a particular thought-content, is ever itself an action. Mental action in thinking is restricted to the fostering of conditions hospitable to contents' coming to mind. The coming to mind itself – the actual occurrence of thoughts, conscious or non-conscious – is not a matter of action (Strawson 2003, p. 234).

I will not go into the details of Strawson's argument here, or some of the counter arguments[13]. I will only briefly make the point that Strawson's position is not necessarily at odds with the one I have presented. Strawson argues that thoughts "just happen", i.e., there is no agency involved in the conscious occurring of thought content. However, he acknowledges that there may well be agency involved in the "prefatory" or "catalytic" actions that foster this occurring (Strawson 2003, p. 231). But why should these "prefatory" or "catalytic" actions be considered

10 See Gallagher & Zahavi for a discussion of pre-reflectivity.

11 See Horgan & Tiensen (2002) for an overview of the traditional tendency to "separatism" in philosophy of mind.

12 The answer that is often given to this is that cognitive phenomenal states are as different to sensory phenomenal states as the different sensory modalities are different to each other. In other words, there's nothing special about cognitive phenomenology in this regard. However, this still does not explain why cognitive phenomenology has the unique characteristic of appearing to lack phenomenal character. In this it is different to all kinds of sensory phenomenology.

13 For example: Peakocke (2007); Proust (2001).

as not also integral to thought? It seems strange that there are actions that are necessary in order for thoughts to occur, but that these actions have absolutely nothing to do with thought itself. Put in terms of the DPT thesis, *s1* can be considered as just such a prefatory or catalytic agentive aspect of thought, whereas *s2* can be seen as a non-agentive or "receptive" aspect. There is therefore not necessarily a contradiction with Strawon's argument on this point, as long as one extends the notion of what can properly belong to thought.
A further objection to the DPT thesis might be the following: *S1* has been described as a creative act that produces something that is then immediately "beheld" in *s2*. This raises the problem of how thought can be about something beyond itself. If thought "produces" what it "beholds", then it is entirely solipsistic, i.e., it never gets outside its own closed circle. However, to make this objection misinterprets the relationship between *s1* and *s2,* as I understand it. What is produced in *s1* through a creative act is not then what becomes the content of "beholding" in *s2*. Rather, what is produced in *s1* is what makes the beholding possible. To put this another way, one could say that what is produced in *s1* is comparable in its function to a sense organ. I.e., there is a productive or creative act that produces something to see *with*. Though here of course what is "beheld" is not some sensory phenomenal something but the content of the thought, and this "content" needs to be understood in the self-presentational sense. The point is that even though the "creative" act in *s1* does enable the beholding of *s2*, the relationship is not one where the former creates the content for the latter.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a tentative thesis regarding the dynamic phenomenology of occurrent thought, and I have done this primarily by using two examples of occurent thinking. I have also offered some provisional analysis of how the dynamic phenomenology of thought might be understood. Admittedly there is much that would need to be addressed in order to give the DPT thesis more substance, and what I have presented is only a very first step towards this. No doubt some will see my reliance on first-person "introspective" evidence as a serious weakness, and I have not tried to address these concerns. There are legitimate worries about the validity of introspection within the cognitive phenomenology debate[14], however, I think it also has its place, particularly when combined with other methods[15]. Obviously more than introspective observations would be needed in order to substantiate the DPT thesis, but this does not mean that introspective reports are not a valid starting point. I take what I have presented here as just such a starting point[16].

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14 See for example: Bayne & Spener (2010); Spener (2011); Chudnoff (2015).
15 Here I agree with Chudnoff (2015, p. 42).
16 I would like to thank Marcelo da Veiga, Charlotte von Bülow and the two anonymous reviewers for very helpful suggestions in the writing of this paper.

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