

Distinguishing phenomenal & non-phenomenal relations

PHIL 93507
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As noted above, it is quite plausible that there are non-phenomenal states which can have contents in common with phenomenal states. Here let's focus on two: non-phenomenal sensory states (like subpersonal processing states, and the states of blindsighters), and cognitive states, like judgements and beliefs. The proponent of our reductive program owes an account of the distinction between these state types and, for example, perceptual representation.

The most well-developed strategy for handling this problem is due to Michael Tye, who suggests the following two part solution:

- (a) Phenomenal states are *poised* "to make a direct impact on beliefs and/or desires".
- (b) The contents of phenomenal states are *nonconceptual*.

The "poisedness" condition (a) is intended to handle the cases of subpersonal representations and blindsighters, but it plainly won't help to distinguish phenomenal states from judgements and beliefs, since these are typically poised to have a direct impact on desires and (other) beliefs.

This is where (b) — the nonconceptual condition — is supposed to come in. First, what does it mean? Tye explicates the condition as follows:

"to say that a mental content is nonconceptual is to say that its subject need not possess any of the concepts that we, as theorists, exercise when we state the correctness conditions for that content."

This raises a further question: what does it mean to "possess a concept"? A natural idea is that to possess a concept is to be able to have beliefs and other thoughts involving a content. (And this is really what possessing a concept *must* be if the notion is to play the required role. If possessing a concept required some stronger condition, then judgements would be nonconceptual, which, for Tye, would make them phenomenal states. If it were a weaker condition, then its not at all obvious that perceptual states would qualify as nonconceptual.)

Put in these terms, Tye's condition might be rephrased as follows:

a mental content is nonconceptual iff its subject need not be able to have thoughts or beliefs with that content

So described, this is not (as others have noticed) a condition on types of contents at all, but rather a condition on types of mental state — after all, contents themselves don't have “subjects” — mental states do. So better to say:

a mental state type M is nonconceptual iff its subject need not be able to have thoughts or beliefs with its content

Then we can understand Tye's condition (b) as saying that phenomenal states must be nonconceptual, in this sense.

This is progress. But we still need to do some more unpacking, because we need to make the role of the modal locution — “need not” — clear. The intended interpretation seems to be something like this:

$\forall M$ M is nonconceptual iff $\forall s [(s \text{ is in } M) \rightarrow \Diamond (s \text{ is in a state of type } M \text{ with content } p \ \& \ s \text{ is not able to have beliefs or thoughts with content } p)]$

It's worth emphasizing that the modal aspect of this definition of nonconceptual content is not dispensable. If we were to remove the possibility operator from the above, this would lead to an immediate problem with the theory. For even if *sometimes* I perceptually represent the world in ways which I can't also represent in thought, this is not true of *all* of my perceptual experiences — it is not, for example, true of my perceptual experience when I'm looking at an otherwise featureless solid white expanse. But this fact does not rob my experience of its phenomenal character — as it would, were the “unmodal” version of the above correct.

Given the role which the notion of nonconceptual content is supposed to play — namely, as part of the reduction base for facts about phenomenal character — this explication of the notion should, I think, strike you as very weird. It is very weird because it is an attempt to explain the phenomenal character of my experience right now in terms, not of my actual properties, but in terms of the relationship between my experience and my thoughts in some merely possible world.

There's also another worry here, which is quite distinct from the weirdness of relying on modal facts in this context. This is that the above explanation of what “nonconceptual content” means builds in facts about sameness of mental state type across possible worlds; it explains what it means for a state to be nonconceptual in terms of what is possible when a subject is in a state *of that type*. But this raises circularity worries — worries which are even more fundamental than the worries that one might have in this context about relying on facts about what it is for a state to be a thought or belief.

After all, the whole point of the discussion of nonconceptual content is to provide a naturalistically acceptable account of a type of mental state — namely, the phenomenal ones. But we can no more do this in terms of facts about what is possible for people in states of *that type* than we can explain facts about personal identity in terms of facts about what properties it is possible for *that person* to have. One might surmount this worry by appending to Tye’s account an independent theory of sameness of mental state types — but the worry is that it is hard to see how to do this without just giving a theory of the relevant state types, which is what Tye’s theory was supposed to be doing.

If Tye’s theory is false, how should it be modified?