

## **Content and Perspective in the Making of Consciousness**

### **Summary**

In this paper, I argue that any view that neglects to discuss the role that embodiment plays in the constitution of the subjective character of experience will face insurmountable difficulties in explaining phenomenal intentionality. My argument is both historical and systematic. It is historical in that I will spend some time in this paper analyzing trends in consciousness theorizing that have developed in light of Nagel's important article on the subjective character of experience (1974). It is systematic in the sense that in going through the various views, I argue that none of them do an adequate job of thinking about some core features of phenomenality.

### **Introduction**

Here I argue that we need to distinguish between two important aspects of phenomenal consciousness. Following Uriah Kriegel (2009), I call the first aspect 'qualitative character' or 'content' and the second aspect 'subjective character' or 'perspective'.<sup>1</sup> Both aspects make up what I will call the 'phenomenal character' of conscious experience. The phenomenal character of experience comprises both the world's having a qualitative character, or the world's seeming to be a certain way, and the organism's perspective on the world from its embodied, subjective, first-personal point of view (Nagel 1974). Philosophical investigations of consciousness have tended to neglect subjectivity by focusing on the qualitative aspects of sensory experience (often called qualia). Therefore, I argue that philosophical discussions of consciousness need to pay more attention to subjectivity. More specifically, I argue that any view that neglects to discuss the role that embodiment plays in the constitution of subjective character will face insurmountable difficulties in explaining phenomenal intentionality.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'subjective character' originally comes from Thomas Nagel (1974), but my usage follows Kriegel's (2009), which is slightly different from Nagel's.

going through the various views, I argue that none of them do an adequate job of thinking about some core features of phenomenality. In §1, I analyze some concepts for thinking about consciousness that will serve as a foundation for what follows. I show that Nagel's conception of phenomenal consciousness can be thought of as a foundation for both approaches that I will explore in this paper, namely, approaches that focus on the subjective character and those that focus on qualitative character. In §2, I offer a reconstruction of Nagel's views about subjective character, focusing on the role that the embodiment of the organism plays in constituting the subjective character of experience. I call this view the 'embodied perspectival' view of subjective character (EP). In §3, I consider some important critical remarks that challenge the embodied perspectival view of subjective character. Following my reply to these initial criticisms of the embodied perspectival view, I argue that if my view is correct, then views of consciousness that focus only on qualitative character fail (§4).

### **1 Nagel on 'What It's Like' and the Subjective Character of Consciousness**

Nagel's approach to consciousness serves as a basis both for views of consciousness that focus on qualitative character and those that focus on subjective character. The main claim that defines Nagel's approach is that an organism is conscious if and only if there is something it is like to be that organism (Nagel 1974, 436). Nagel's main example is that of a bat using its capacities for sonar navigation to perceive its environment. There is something it is like to be a bat navigating its environment. Similarly, a human being is a conscious subject because there is something it is like to be a human getting along in the world with its own capacities for perception and action. For Nagel, to say that an experience has a subjective character means both that it has a qualitative character and that the experience is had from a unified first-person perspective.<sup>2</sup> Both the notion of qualitative character and the notion of subjectivity or the first-person perspective are built into Nagel's concept of subjective character. The world seems to be a certain way to a subject that has a first-personal perspective on it.

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<sup>2</sup> By 'unity' here, I mean that a first-person perspective is temporally unified, i.e. it stays relatively invariant across time (though, not necessarily completely unchanging), and that it has this unity partially in virtue of its sensory apparatus providing the subject with a modally-integrated perceptual point of view on the environment it is inhabiting.

I use 'subjective character' in a more precise and restricted sense than Nagel does. We need to distinguish between two aspects of phenomenal character: its qualitative character and its subjective character. The qualitative character of a phenomenally conscious experience is that aspect, quality, or property of an experience in virtue of which there is something concrete and particular that it is like to have that experience.<sup>3</sup> The qualitative character of an experience is the *whatness* of the *what-it's-like-ness* of the experience (Levine 2004, 7). One way of thinking about this aspect of phenomenal character is in terms of the various ways the world appears in perceptual experience. When we see a ripe tomato, it has a certain reddish quality to it; when you smell freshly baked apple pie, it smells of cinnamon and sweet cooked apples. Particular events occurring in and on the body are also experienced as having a qualitative character; the tense pain in my left baby toe has an *aching* quality to it. These examples all point to a kind of contentful aspect of experience that purports to tell us something about how the world is in virtue of our having the experience.

Subjective character is that aspect of a phenomenally conscious experience in virtue of which the world appears to and from a first-personal point of view. We have a specific and limited kind of access to the world when we experience it because of the configuration and processing limits of our sensory receptors. Because our experience is perspectival, the world shows up for us in a certain way. When philosophers talk about subjectivity or subjective character, it is this fact of the world showing up in a distinctive first-personal way for us that they are trying to explain. I will refer to the subjective, first-personal, perspectival aspect of phenomenal character as 'subjective character' (Kriegel 2009).<sup>4</sup> Together the qualitative and subjective characters constitute the phenomenal character of any given experience. Nagel's term 'subjective character' is equivalent to my term 'phenomenal character'.

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<sup>3</sup> In framing the problem in this way, it is not my intention to beg the question against those who endorse the transparency thesis, that is, the view that all there is to experience is the content of a representation.

<sup>4</sup> Some philosophers call this feature 'me-ishness' (Block 1995, 2007), 'for-me-ness' (Kriegel 2009; Zahavi and Kriegel 2015) or 'mineness' (Zahavi 2005).

Henceforth, unlike Nagel, I use ‘subjective character’ to refer only to the perspectival component of phenomenal character in contrast to the qualitative aspect.<sup>5</sup>

Views that focus more on qualitative character than on subjective character in their analyses of consciousness can confidently trace their ancestry to Nagel’s view for two reasons. First, according to Nagel, part of what makes it the case that there is something it is like to be a bat is that there is a unique qualitative character to the bat’s perception. When the bat perceives the world through echolocation, the world shows up in a particular way to the bat (1974, 438). Second, Nagel also argues for the logical and conceptual possibility of conscious states being absent despite the presence of their proposed physical and functional correlates (436-7). This ‘absent qualia’ scenario lies at the heart of much discussion of the so-called ‘hard problem’ of consciousness (Chalmers 1996), a discussion that is focused on qualitative character at the expense of subjective character.

The neglect of subjective character is problematic. The bat’s capacity to perceive the world requires not only particular instances of perception via echolocation but also a unified perspective from which the bat can perceive anything at all (Nagel 1974, 437). This is why Nagel talks about organisms as a whole, and not just their mental states, when he talks about the connection between consciousness and there being something it’s like to be a conscious subject. All conscious experiences are constituted by the point of view of the organism having them.

## **2 A Perspectival View of Subjective Character**

Here I articulate a reading of Nagel’s (1974) position that focuses on subjective character and the embodied perspective of the organism. Call this the embodied perspectival view of subjective character:

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<sup>5</sup> An immediate worry arises. Might it be sufficient to talk of perspective only in terms of the limits of information processing imposed by the geometrical structure of a system’s embodiment? If that is right, then a television camera would count as having a perspective. But I want to assume that there is nothing it is like to be a television camera. To this I would reply that a television camera does not have a perspective, it has informational processing limits. A perspective amounts to something more. A perspective is something one *has* in virtue of experiencing the world as *seeming* to be a certain way to one. The world does not seem to be one way or the other to a television camera. I deal with this question in more detail in §4.

**EP:** The subjective character of an organism's phenomenally conscious states is at least partially constituted<sup>6</sup> by the organization of its embodied perspective on the world.

Below is a reconstruction of some of the central claims of Nagel's argument that tie his analysis of consciousness to subjectivity (HB=Humans versus Bats):

**HB1.** Humans and bats have different kinds of perceptual systems.

This difference in organization determines the differences in the types of experiences we have. Our primary sense is vision; for bats it is echolocation. Because of this difference in primary sense, there are profound differences in how the world shows up for each of us. The bat's perspective is different from our human perspective because its perceptual system is different from ours.

**HB2.** The nature and function of a perceptual system constitutes an organism's point of view on the world.

The idiosyncratic configuration of the bat's sensory apparatus constitutes a particular perspective on the world, one that makes it the case that there is something it is like to be a bat.<sup>7</sup> What it's like to be a bat depends on its unique sensory system. Because the sensory system has evolved to process information about the environment in a certain way, the organism experiences the environment as

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<sup>6</sup> I hedge here in order to make room for the view that the subjective character of experience might be constituted by a plurality of factors, perhaps those pertaining to our capacities for cognition. My aim is to develop a minimal view, one that applies to a wide variety of organisms.

<sup>7</sup> There is a small puzzle here about the extent to which Nagel is concerned with types of perspectives or just token perspectives. Christoph Hoerl (2015, 191) points out that at times Nagel frames the problem in terms of a connection between 'phenomenological features' of experience and an individual point of view. Indeed, the reason physicalism seems impossible is because, "...every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view..." (Nagel 1974, 427). By contrast, in other places in the paper he is clearly talking about types of points of view, for example in his contrastive analysis of bat and human perception. I think this problem is easily resolved. It is differences at the level of types that mark the distinction between the first-person and third-person perspectives. However, types of experiences are embodied in particular organisms. Types of things are types precisely because there are tokens of those very types in the world. It is the fact that there are concrete individual experiences had by individual organisms that modulate any and all conscious access to the world that make an exhaustively third-personal analysis of those very perspectives impossible. However, the fact that an organism is a member of a species, and thus enjoys a type of perspective in virtue of that membership, accounts for the particular way that any given organism enjoys its own first-personal perspective.

seeming a certain way to it. Similarly, what it's like to be a human being depends on our unique sensory systems.

We can now derive the following conclusion:

**HB-C1.** Humans and bats have different points of view on the world.

This conclusion follows from the constitutive connection between types of perceptual systems (HB1) and first-person perspectives (HB2).

**HB3.** If two organisms have different perceptual systems, then any perceptual states enjoyed by those organisms will differ in their phenomenal characters because of the physical and organizational differences in their perceptual systems.

In Nagel's words, "...an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism" (436). His motivation for using the bat example is to compare a foreign mode of perception to our own in order to draw out the connection between phenomenal character and a point of view (437-8). Our concrete individual experience is at least partially constituted by the fact that we are an organism of a particular sort. Membership in a species entails that we experience the world through a particular perceptual apparatus. The world shows up for us in perception in the particular way that it does because of the nature and function of our perceptual apparatus. The world would not appear the way it does if we were an organism of a different sort, with a differently evolved perceptual apparatus.

**HB-C2.** Any perceptual states enjoyed by organisms of different species will differ in their phenomenal character because of the organizational differences in their perceptual systems.

Further, because of (HB-C1) we can also conclude that,

**HB-C3.** Having different points of view makes a phenomenal difference in the mental states had by the respective organisms.

It is in virtue of having a perceptual system of a certain sort that an individual organism enjoys a particular, concrete perspective on the world, a perspective that there is something it is like to enjoy (Hoerl 2015). Thus, the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience includes there being a subjective character (in my sense) that makes it the case that there is something it is like to be a creature of a certain sort (Nagel 1974, 436).

### **3 Do Bats Have Points of View?**

Kathleen Akins (1993) argues that bats do not have points of view and that any phenomenology they might have has nothing to do with their non-existent perspectives. If she's right, then my view is wrong, because I have argued that the embodied perspective of the organism is at least partially constitutive of the subjective character of its phenomenally conscious experience. I interpret Akins's criticisms as an argument against premise (HB2) of my above reconstruction of Nagel's position. Recall that premise states that:

**HB2.** The nature and function of a perceptual system constitutes an organism's point of view on the world.

By engaging in a careful analysis of the bat's behavior profile and neurophysiological organization, Akins thinks she has a way of using the objective point of view to tell us something important about the bat's subjective point of view, namely, that it doesn't have one. If the bat does not have a point of view, then any experience it might have cannot be constituted by a point of view.

Why might one think that the bat has no point of view? Akins's position rests on the following claims. First, the bat is capable of little or no cortical integration of sensory information. According to Akins, the cortex of the bat, "...encodes only highly filtered information about specific properties of the prey: its relative velocity, size, range, location and 'edibility'" (Akins 1993, 149). Because of this, it is reasonable to think that unlike a human brain, for example, the bat's brain lacks the capacity to encode 'complex spatial representations' that represent objects as stable mind-independent particulars in a world separate from the bat. That is, the bat's nervous system is not designed to represent the world

as a stable container of particulars: “[T]here is little reason to suppose that the bat’s sonar system is designed for the large-scale *integration* of information over time.” (ibid. 150). For Akins, if there is no cortical integration sufficient to encode perceptual representations of object permanence, then it makes no sense to ascribe to the bat a phenomenal point of view. If the bat has no point of view, then if it does have experience, that experience cannot be constituted by something which it lacks.

There are a few replies to this line of argument. One might accept this analysis and deny that bats have experience but still preserve the connection between experience and a point of view. I don’t want to take that road. Instead, my response will be twofold. The first is a relatively surface level response about the dialectical position the bat example plays in Nagel’s argument. The second is that I will deny the presupposition of Akins’s argument, namely, that if the bat’s cortical functions are insufficient to encode perceptual representations of a stable mind-independent world, then we should avoid ascribing a phenomenal point of view to the organism.

The purpose of Nagel’s discussion of the bat is not to analyze the particular case of the bat, but to provide us with a contrast class for thinking about our own experience. It serves the same function that medieval and early modern philosophers had in mind in comparing our minds to those of God and angels. Even if the bat’s experiences are radically different from our own, this does no damage to Nagel’s overall purpose of emphasizing that our experience of the world is tied to a point of view, even if it turns out that other organisms have a point of view that is very different from our own. Thus, even if it turns out the bat doesn’t work as a relevant contrast class because it lacks either experience or a point of view, this doesn’t undermine Nagel’s point.

More importantly, however, I see no reason to endorse the claim that the bat’s incapacity to represent the world as being a stable set of mind-independent objects means that the bat does not have a point of view on the world. As Akins points out, because the bat’s primary perceptual response to the world is auditory rather than visual, the information it receives is highly dependent on the signals it sends out (ibid. 131-2). Moreover, the space of sound does not provide an ambient surround for perception the same way that light does. The boundaries of the space of sound are constantly shifting and re-organizing themselves depending on what is heard and what is said, where ‘said’ refers to the

bat's ability to send out signals into its environment. It makes more sense to think of the bat's perception as a field of availability, or an affordance landscape (Walsh 2011). What is perceived is not mind-independent spatiotemporal objects but opportunities for satisfying the organisms needs (Gibson 1986; Chemero 2003). Phenomenologically speaking, there is reason to think that this kind of dynamic affordance-based model of perception is not only operating in nonhuman animals but also in humans as well (cf. Heidegger 1926/1996; Merleau-Ponty 1962/2012). When one takes this kind of view on board, the tight connection between a cortically integrated object representation is no longer necessary for an organism to be counted as having a phenomenal point of view. Therefore, I do not find this objection convincing. It is perfectly consistent to maintain that the boundaries of the bat's world are ambiguous and shifting in accordance with the bat's probing of the environment and that the bat has a point of view.

#### **4 Content-based Approaches to Consciousness**

In this section, I consider approaches to consciousness that I call 'content views' or approaches that focus exclusively on qualitative character. Given my commitment to the centrality of subjective character to an account of phenomenal consciousness, it is necessary for me to argue that all approaches that neglect it are inadequate. Such will be my task in the present section.

In referring to 'content views' of consciousness, I am using the term 'content' in a specific way that requires some explanation. My notion of content has a certain degree of generality in its reference. I will specify the nature of this generality in three ways.

First, my usage of the notion of 'content' in the context of thinking about phenomenal consciousness is intended to cut across different metaphysical conceptions of how perception works. A representationalist can think of content in terms of the properties of mental states, a direct realist can think of content in terms of actual objects and their properties in the world (Siegel 2010). Thus, in referring to the content of phenomenally conscious experiences, I make no commitment to a theory of perception.

Secondly, my discussion of content here is meant to include conceptions of consciousness that may or may not hold that consciousness essentially involves intentionality. By ‘intentionality’ I mean that some mental states are directed to things outside of themselves. An example is my olfactory experience of freshly baked apple pie. This experience is intentional because in virtue of my having it I am perceptually acquainted with a subsection of the world that seems a certain way to me. If there is an apple pie on the table over there, then my experience is veridical. If there is no apple pie, then my experience is not veridical. However, in virtue of having such an experience, the world seems a certain way to me, olfactorily speaking. Insofar as my experience of the world puts me in a position to be right or wrong about what the world is like, that experience is intentional (Siewert 1997). It is *about* the world and it has veridicality conditions that might or might not be satisfied by the world actually (or not) being the way my experience tells me it seems.

By contrast, other phenomenally conscious experiences have been thought to be non-intentional because such experiences seem to make no claim about the world being configured in one way or the other. Ned Block’s (2003) favorite example is an orgasm. One might take issue with this example and argue that an orgasm represents the body as being a certain way. A better example might be affective states such as moods (Searle 2000), which do not seem to be directed toward an object. One could argue, however, following Heidegger (1927/1966), that although moods are not object-directed, they are intentional, because they present the world as being a certain way. The question here boils down to whether or not a mental state’s being intentional requires that mental state to represent the properties of an object. If yes, then moods are not intentional. If, on the other hand, it is possible for the world as a whole to seem a certain way to one — as if everything was dreary, perhaps — then moods are intentional. Insofar as moods and other non-object directed experiences are construed as non-intentional, some philosophers have thought that they do not purport to represent the world outside of the subject as being one way or the other. My notion of content is meant to apply to both intentional and non-intentional experiences. On my view, an experience can have content even if it doesn’t tell you anything about what the world is like. A good example of that would be the way Ryle

(2000) and Smart (1959) use the notion of ‘sensation’ to talk about consciousness.<sup>8</sup> A sensation is an internal raw feel that doesn’t tell you anything about what the world is like. But it still counts as content for me because it is something I am able to be phenomenally aware of.

Third, ‘content’ also refers to anything one can be aware of. ‘Aware of’ here refers to a basic dyadic structure of subject and object that tends to obtain in many conscious states, excluding, for the moment, atypical states where the subject/object duality might not be present (e.g. Lutz et al. 2007). Thus, I use ‘aware of’ in a way that excludes subconscious or unconscious information processing or otherwise, non-phenomenal notions of awareness (Chalmers 1996). On one side, there is a meaningful world, a limited portion of which, is disclosed in a conscious experience. On the other, there is the phenomenal awareness for, in, or to which some subsection of the world is disclosed or represented. Content views analyze consciousness in terms of the first part of this dyad by focusing on what is disclosed in a conscious experience. By focusing exclusively on what is disclosed, such views neglect that aspect of experience which becomes acquainted with or phenomenally aware of that which is disclosed. Only views that take subjective character seriously are in a position to explain this latter feature of consciousness.

Another way of putting this point is as follows. By focusing exclusively on qualitative character in discussing consciousness, consciousness is analyzed only in terms of what it is *about*, where ‘aboutness’ here refers to any phenomenal event or content that is disclosed to a subject of experience, regardless of whether that event or content tells the subject anything about how the world is configured. While we might endorse the view that intentionality is essential to any analysis of consciousness, this is not the same as claiming that we can understand the nature of consciousness by talking only about what we are conscious of (Husserl 1913/2008). Philosophers who endorse the content view use different terms to describe what we are aware of, but ultimately such views amount to the claim that we can exhaustively analyse consciousness in terms of that which is beheld, apprehended, or known in experience rather than that which beholds, apprehends, or knows in experience. This seems like a category mistake, or at best, an incomplete sort of analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> A point to which I will return in §4.1.1

In what follows I distinguish two different approaches to the content view of consciousness, one non-representational, one representational. I argue that while the representational version of the content view is better equipped to deal with certain difficulties facing the non-representational view – namely, the problem of phenomenal intentionality – both suffer from the problem of being unable to do justice to the phenomenology of subjective character.

#### *4.1 Sensations, Qualia, and Mental Paint: Non-Representational Versions of the Content View*

Here I distinguish between three different approaches to non-representational versions of the content view and explain why none are sufficient to adequately explain the phenomenal character of experience.

##### 4.1.1 Sensations

Philosophers like Gilbert Ryle (2000) and J.C.C. Smart (1959) have used the term ‘sensations’ to talk of phenomenal events. This notion refers to the idea that consciousness is composed of private mental events that have an ineffable ‘raw feel’. The main difficulty with this approach is that it does not allow for an explanation of how being conscious puts us in touch with a world. Consider Smart’s response to some important objections to his own version of identity theory (whereby phenomenal consciousness is type-identical with some relevant type of neural goings-on). Smart thinks that, "It might seem that this property [of being a yellow flash] lies inevitably outside the physicalist framework within which I am trying to work (either by 'yellow' being an objective emergent property of physical objects, or else by being a power to produce yellow sense-data, where 'yellow'...refers to a purely phenomenal or introspectible quality" (Smart, 1959; 148). The logical space wherein consciousness is situated on this view is divided quite cleanly between consciousness being either an introspectible sense-datum or an emergent property of a physical object. Consciousness is either something entirely within the subject to the exclusion of the world or something entirely in the world of objects.

This view is also espoused by Gilbert Ryle whose quasi-behavioristic account of mind is partially inspired by an identification of sensations with the content of the stream of consciousness

and an exiling of the latter from mental discourse. According to Charles Siewert, “Ryle helped implant a lasting tendency to quarantine consciousness (in the ‘stream sense) off in some theoretical ghetto of ‘sensations’ or ‘feels’, where it could be segregated from intelligence and understanding...” (Siewert 2014, 201). The passage that Siewert is referring to is the following:

Whatever series of sensations an intelligent person may have, it is always conceivable that a merely sentient creature might have had a precisely similar series; and if by ‘stream of consciousness’ were meant a ‘series of sensations’, then from a mere inventory of the contents of such a stream there would be no possibility of deciding whether the creature that had these sensations was an animal or a human being; an idiot, a lunatic or a sane [person]; much less whether [they were] an ambitious argumentative philologist or a slow-witted but industrious magistrates’ clerk.

(Ryle 1949/2002, 204-5)<sup>9</sup>

Once you take on the conception of consciousness as a raw-feel or private sensation, your options narrow considerably when trying to provide a philosophical analysis of its significance. This is why philosophers like Smart work so hard to argue for type-identity between sensations and brain states and why philosophers like Ryle try to excise discussion of sensations completely from mental discourse. Both strategies eliminate the need to say anything about what consciousness does for the organism that has it.

However, there are reasons to think that we should conceive of consciousness as doing things for the organism, in particular, putting it in touch with its environment in a way that facilitates knowledge that the organism would not be able to acquire in the absence of such experience. Consider, for example, the robust literature in the philosophy of perception that rejects the sensationalist view on the grounds that perceptual states with phenomenal character play an irreducible explanatory role in providing demonstrative thoughts with their justification (Campbell 2002; Roessler 2009; Smithies 2011). On this view, it seems utterly mysterious how we could come to think of an object as ‘this’ or ‘that’ object without experiencing that object as being perceptually present to us. Just in virtue of the

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<sup>9</sup> It is wrong to think that there being a layer of consciousness that is common to human beings as well as ‘merely sentient’ forms of life entails that such sensations do not contribute to our intelligent commerce in the world.

apple pie smelling delicious I know something about how the world might be. I could be wrong that the world is in fact that way,<sup>10</sup> but just by there being something it is like for me to smell the aroma of the apple pie, I know that it could be the case that there is a freshly baked apple pie in the vicinity. In order for me to know this, the phenomenal character of my olfactory experience as of a freshly baked apple pie needs to tell me something about how the world seems and my position with respect to it. A private sensation can hardly do this relational work, lacking as it does, any intentional structure. There is a certain kind of structural minimalism embodied in the sensational view that makes it unsuitable to fully account for the intentional structure of the phenomenal character of experience.

#### 4.1.2 Mental Paint

Gilbert Harman's (1990) initial use of this term referred to a comparison between attending to a picture of a unicorn and attending to a tree. In the former case, one can also attend to the features of the painting that make it the case that the painting is a painting of a unicorn. One does this by attending to the texture of the paint rather than to the form of the unicorn the paint depicts. However, "...in the case of [a] visual experience of a tree...[one] is not aware of, as it were, the mental paint by virtue of which [one's] experience is an experience of seeing a tree" (Harman 1990, 39). Harman does think one can be aware of relational properties in virtue of which one's experience is about a tree, but not those intrinsic experiential properties in virtue of which one's experience is an experience at all. Harman denies we can be aware of the latter because he does not think they exist.

Ned Block (1990; 2003) disagrees. He thinks that the intentional properties of mental states are different from their qualitative properties. The latter are what he calls 'mental paint'. It is worth noting that Block tends to identify mental paint with qualia (Block 2003). I differentiate the two for the following reasons. I use 'qualia' to refer to any property that makes it the case that there is a mental state that there is something it is like to have but where a specification of that state's phenomenal character will involve a description of an intentional object, that is, a description of how the world

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<sup>10</sup> Such intentionality can be explicated without taking a stance on the extent to which the content of our perceptual experiences might figure in a justification for our demonstrative beliefs about the nature of an object we are perceiving.

seems to the subject having the experience. Some examples would be my experience of a red apple, the painfulness of my scraped knee, etc. By contrast, I use 'mental paint' to refer to properties of mental states that might contribute to their phenomenal character without making a difference to our representations of what the world is like.<sup>11</sup>

Mental paint is interesting because it is a concept that strongly resembles the concept of sensations in that mental paint is contrasted with those aspects of mental states that make them intentional (Block 1990, 1995, 2003). However, Block, the main contemporary proponent of this view, also acknowledges that phenomenal differences often do make representational differences (Block 1995, Siewert 1997). Thus, these properties are paint-like insofar as they do not necessarily tell us anything about how the world is but *can* sometimes do so if they are painted or projected outwards onto the external world.

The main difficulty with the notion of mental paint is that it is mysterious. The concept of mental paint is an improvement over the notion of sensations in that it acknowledges the possibility of phenomenal intentionality, the notion that differences in how the world seems can make a difference to what it is like for a subject who is conscious of those changes. However, the notion of mental paint is mysterious because it is defined in contrast with any and all of the aspects of phenomenal character I have discussed so far. First, mental paint is defined in contrast with (phenomenal) representational content about how the world is. However, intentional differences can be phenomenal differences in experience. Thus, mental paint can be defined both in terms of intentional and non-intentional properties of mental states. Mental paint can also be both phenomenally internal (e.g. orgasm), and phenomenally external (e.g. cross modal differences in phenomenal character that don't change representational content) (Block 1995). The fact that this notion cuts across such important distinctions in how we think of the structure of mental states starts

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<sup>11</sup> Block (2003) makes an interesting distinction here between 'mental paint' and 'mental oil'. The first of these refers to the intrinsic properties of mental states that make it the case that there is something it is like to be in that mental state *and* that objects we represent seem a certain way, e.g. the apple seems red. Mental oil, by contrast, is an intrinsic property of a mental state that contributes to its phenomenal character but only those phenomenal characters that have no intentional structure whatsoever.

to make it look too general to be informative. Further, Block also defines mental pain in contrast with subjective character. A phenomenal event that has no essential connection to the subject of experience or the world that the subject of experience is conscious of seems uninformative at best and at worst, quite confused. This is not a knock-down argument. However, I believe I have given reasons sufficient to focus theoretical attention elsewhere.

#### 4.1.3 Qualia

Debates about the status of phenomenal consciousness have moved on a bit since Ryle and Smart, but not that far. Indeed, their influence is quite palpable in some of the most central discussions that have dominated the contemporary literature. The discussion is no longer centered on sensations. Part of the reason that talk of ‘sensations’ has become less prevalent is because philosophers have thought it productive to jettison any terminological association with indirect realism about perception. Nevertheless, *qualia* abound in the current back and forth about phenomenal consciousness and as far as I can tell, *qualia* are just *sensations* with another name insofar as they still contribute nothing to the functional life of the organism that has them. Like sensations, qualia are functionally redundant intrinsic properties of a token mental states or a form of representational content that resists reductive explanation amidst the smooth and seamless causal operations of an otherwise mindless cosmos. Thus, like sensations, qualia either need to be eliminated (Dennett 1991) or identified — either at the level of types or tokens — with brain states (Smart 1959).<sup>12</sup> For example, Jaegwon Kim (2007) argues for a strong distinction between mental causation and consciousness whereby all the relevant causal explanations of mental events can be explained while qualia continue to dangle as functionally redundant hangers on in the minds economy. In Chalmers (1996; 11),<sup>13</sup> there is the distinction between

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<sup>12</sup> Qualia do not have to be associated with sensory properties, though they often are. Some philosophers are concerned with cognitive phenomenology and for those who think that this is a genuine phenomenon, there would be cognitive qualia.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Eilan (2000; 36).

phenomenal concepts and psychological concepts as well as the easy and hard problems of consciousness (Chalmers 2010; ch. 1).<sup>14</sup>

I have been emphasizing the fact that qualia views inherit some of the problems of sensationalist views. However, there are some important differences between them. Notably, qualia seem to hang mostly on the 'emergent properties of objects' side of Smart's (1959) parsing of possible ways to think about phenomenal consciousness. My analysis of sensations focused on the problematic claim that what is interesting or special about phenomenal consciousness is that we have private, ineffable sensations that contribute nothing to an account of how our experience acquaints us with an environment through perception. In changing my focus to more contemporary discussions of qualia, I focus on the opposing tendency to describe phenomenal character exclusively in terms of the properties of objects we perceive.

Consider Frank Jackson's (1982) knowledge argument. When we think about what the chromatically cloistered colour scientist Mary comes to know once she is able to escape the confines of her laboratory, her knowledge is put in terms of how the world appears (Jackson 1982; 1986). It is the redness of the red that she discovers for the first time upon seeing an apple. When we conceive of spectrum inversion, we hold the physical and functional information that pertains to coloured particulars invariant and posit two different perceivers with that same information available to them seeing different colours. All is dark inside for the philosophical zombie but its deficiency is defined in terms of a lack of perceptible properties in the face of undisturbed physical and behavioral states and capacities (Chalmers 1996).

It is vital to note that what ends up *explaining* the differences between the various cases in these thought experiments will certainly involve something going on inside the subjects having the experiences. More often than not, what a conscious subject will be said to have that its zombie duplicate lacks are intrinsic properties that inhere in token mental states had by the subject. Yet, our way of specifying the phenomenal character in the examples in these thought experiments involves

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<sup>14</sup> Chalmers' book *The Character of Consciousness* (2010) is more or less a collection of the essays he wrote following the upheaval that surrounded his first book *The Conscious Mind* (1996). Most of the essays in the subsequent volume were published first elsewhere. I will cite from the (2010) volume for ease of reference.

talking about what the world is like. Even for a phenomenal internalist, who tries to explain qualitative character in terms of the intrinsic properties of mental states, the manner of specifying the what-it's-like-ness of a phenomenally conscious experience adverts to the properties that seem to inhere in the objects that we perceive. Thus, even though phenomenal character is functionally redundant, it still purports to tell us something about how the world seems (Siewert 1997).

The main limitation with the notion of qualia in this discussion is that they do not account for the contribution that complex spatiotemporal structure makes to the phenomenal character of experience. When we represent the world as being a certain way, the phenomenal character of such states is constituted by a relationship that an embodied observer has to a spatiotemporal world in which that subject and its perceptual objects are embedded. When something looks to a subject as if it were shaped in a certain way, the object's appearing so is always embedded in a spatial context (Siewert 1997; 224). When we are visually aware of the shape of an object *o* in our visual field we are aware of *o* as the foreground over and against a background. The particular object to which we are attending can be seen in sharper relief over and against that background; the attended object is more salient than the unattended background. This structure is present both intra- and inter-modally. Within vision, something is seen as being in the foreground against a less salient visible background. Between different senses, some senses are phenomenally foregrounded against other senses. For example, if I am listening to a melody on my headphones, the nuances of the musical movement will be more salient than the tactile sensations in my posterior against the chair in which I am sitting.

If the perceptual background against which we are foregrounding a selected object of attention *o* in situation *S*<sub>1</sub> is different from that of situation *S*<sub>2</sub> while the object of attention *o* remains the same across the two contexts, then *o* will appear differently to a perceiving subject in *S*<sub>1</sub> and *S*<sub>2</sub>. In each case we will have a different phenomenal appearance. This is because the foregrounded object's properties are put into relief for us by conscious attention against different backgrounds in each case (Watzl 2011). What it is like to see *o* will vary according to the way it is foregrounded with respect to a phenomenally salient background. There are, of course, aspects of the background of one's experience that are not phenomenally salient. For example, there is nothing it is like to perceive the space behind

my head. However, a phenomenally salient background is one that is related to the focus of one's attention such that were the background to change, the phenomenal character of one's perception of the foreground would also change, even if the only specifiable changes across S1 and S2 were happening in the background while the foreground stays invariant.

This process of shifting between foregrounding and backgrounding in perceptual attention invokes another structural aspect of appearances in phenomenally conscious experience, namely, time. The process of attentional capture is diachronic in nature. A phenomenally conscious experience of *o* appearing thus and so is always going to be temporally extended to some extent (Siewert 1997; 225). For things to appear thus and so in phenomenally conscious experience, we must invoke a phenomenal field structured by both space and time. The structure of phenomenal consciousness is far more complex than the non-representational versions of the content view allow. Its nature can only be specified by adverting to the complex relations that obtain between the perceiving subject and the spatiotemporal field in which they are embedded. I conclude that our understanding of phenomenal consciousness must move beyond the threshold of an introspectable sensation or qualia (be it internal to the subject as a raw sensation or the emergent property of an object). As long as the non-representational versions of the content view analyze qualitative character only in terms of private events of the subject and properties of objects such views will fail. They fail because they cannot do justice to the contribution made to our phenomenal character by our embodied first-personal perspective on the spatiotemporal world in which we live.

#### *4.2 Representational Content*

Representational approaches to phenomenal character that focus exclusively on qualitative character but not subjective character do not have the same kinds of problems as their non-representational counterparts. We have mental states that represent the way the world is and the content of these representations can be as complex as required. Some of that content can be explained in physical/functional terms; some of it cannot (cf. Chalmers 2010, ch. 12). If the qualitative character of

the content of our representations has irreducible spatiotemporal properties, this is no problem for the representationalist.

#### 4.2.1 Representationalism and the Elimination of Phenomenal Character

The critical points against phenomenal character offered by the reductive representationalist are embodied with particular force by Jay Garfield (2016). There are two ways in which one might use a representationalist picture to explain away phenomenal consciousness. The first is reduction, which would be the view that what phenomenal consciousness is, and what phenomenal concepts refer to, is just the representational content of a perceptual state. A second, more dramatic strategy is elimination. Garfield (2016) is an eliminativist about phenomenal consciousness. According to him, "...phenomenal consciousness is an illusion" (Garfield 2015, 73). Because of this, "...there is nothing that it is like to experience something, nothing that it is like to have qualitative experience" (ibid). The difference between these two approaches is that the former is happy to admit that there is something it is like to have experience, but denies that there is anything it is like to have a phenomenally conscious experience over and above representing the perceptible properties of objects in perception. When we refer to experience with phenomenal concepts, we *de facto* refer to the representational content of our perceptual states. By contrast, the eliminative position endorsed by Garfield commits to the further claim that because all there is to experience is representing perceptible properties of objects, there is *nothing* it is like to perceive and all purported reference that might happen with phenomenal concepts is a cognitive illusion.

Garfield's argument is to claim that we make a kind of category mistake by conflating a non-experiential instrument of perception for that which is perceived. There is something that a perceptual object is like, but there is nothing it is like to perceive an object (Garfield 2016). There are no experiential properties like qualitative characters over and above the perceptible properties of objects that we might perceive. This is the transparency thesis. If the transparency thesis is true, then there is also no subjective character.

This inference functions under the assumption that for there to be a subjective character to experience, there must be private qualitative characters that we have access to. According to Garfield, “...it is almost irresistible to think of our experience as a constituting an inner domain populated by inner particulars that constitute the immediate objects of our experience, and contrasting with an outer domain of objects we know only indirectly” (Garfield 2015, 75). We are prone to making this mistake of conflating the instrument of perception with the object of perception on account of our falsely believing that we have an internal world of consciousness that mediates our access to mind-independent particulars in perception. Thus, there are no qualitative characters; there are just the perceptible qualities of objects. And there is no subjective character, because there is no first-personal access to qualitative characters.<sup>15</sup>

Garfield argues that our fallible access to objects of perception is mirrored in our capacity for introspective access to the mental world. If that is right, then the so-called ‘stream of consciousness’ is not given to itself in any primitive way. Rather, our access to any mental processes is itself mediated by our conceptual schemes, motivating a kind of scepticism about the reliability of introspection. In the absence of any reliable, non-constructed mode of access to the mental, our motivation for positing a primitive self-disclosing layer of mental processing becomes untenable. Additionally, Garfield also attributes to the Buddhists a view that consciousness is thoroughly relational, that is, that it is always consciousness *of* something and that consciousness is nothing more over and above the causal processes that realize the organism’s perceptual and cognitive commerce with its environment (Garfield 2015, 124). As Garfield says, “Consciousness is always a relation between a sensory faculty and its object” (131). If Garfield’s picture is to be believed, then not only are we to reduce phenomenal consciousness to the representational content of token perceptual states. We are also actually confused. Phenomenal concepts are empty. They don’t refer to anything. There is nothing it is like to be a subject of experience. There are no qualitative characters and no subjective character.

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<sup>15</sup> On the assumption that the above account is correct, it turns out that we are zombies. A zombie is a physical and functional duplicate of a person that lacks phenomenal consciousness. Philosophers have used the conceivability of a zombie to argue that consciousness cannot be given a physical or functional explanation (Chalmers 1996). However, if it turns out that there is nothing it is like to be a normal person, then there is no real difference between normal persons and philosophical zombies. Therefore, we are zombies.

#### 4.2.2 Recovering Subjective Character

Garfield (2016) takes everyone he opposes to subscribe to a kind of internalism about qualitative characters. This assessment is unwarranted. There are plenty of philosophers who are phenomenal realists and externalists about qualitative characters (e.g. Campbell 1993). On this latter view, what makes it the case that there are qualitative characters is not that I have introspective access to the intrinsic properties of my token mental states that mediate my perceptual access to the objects to which they correspond. Rather, what makes it the case that there are qualitative characters is that they appear to the first-personal perspective of the organism. It is perfectly plausible to explain the first-personal access to the qualitative characters in terms of an organism having an embodied perspective on its environment rather than in terms of its having a private access to an internal world of qualia. Furthermore, whatever our metaphysics of perception might tell us about *how* we come to perceive the world, at the level of phenomenal character, the reddish quality that constitutes the qualitative character of my visual perception of an apple *appears* nowhere else but on the apple. So to construe the phenomenal realist as being committed to an internal Cartesian theatre populated by qualitative characters is uncharitable.

A further unwarranted commitment that Garfield saddles the phenomenal realist with is the view that philosophical zombies are conceivable. A phenomenal realist need not accept this commitment. As Evan Thompson points out, "...many perceptual and motor abilities evidently depend on that body's being a subjectively lived body" (Thompson 2007, 231). The idea that being able to feel the living body might be constitutive of some forms of behavior is a rejection of the zombie hypothesis because it denies that there might be a physical and functional duplicate whose behavioral capabilities are the same as a phenomenally conscious subject. Yet in denying this scenario, one need not be an anti-realist about phenomenal character. Indeed, on Thompson's view, and here I follow him, "Without proprioceptive and kinesthetic experience, for example, many kinds of normal perception and motor actions cannot happen" (ibid). Therefore, it is not fair to saddle the phenomenal realist with a commitment to the zombie-hypothesis. One might deny the latter, while endorsing the former position.

Further, it is open to the phenomenal realist to affirm intentionalism, the view that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. Garfield wrongly assumes that to affirm the reality of phenomenal character is to be committed to the view that consciousness is a monadic property with no relation to anything outside of itself. It is perfectly consistent to affirm that consciousness is always intentional while also maintaining that in being directed towards an object intentionally, the object is intended from within a phenomenal field, one that there is something it is like for the organism to inhabit first-personally.<sup>16</sup>

Further, it is worth noting that there are perceptual states that essentially represent the world as being a certain way along with the subject who is having that experience. For example, in having certain active perceptions of the world (e.g. someone throwing a ball at me), I experience both the ball and myself as a subject of experience as constitutive elements of the perception (Peacocke 2014). It seems that representationalism about phenomenal character doesn't say anything about the subjectivity because its entire strategy is to analyse phenomenal character in terms of content. But the representationalist is free to insist that any and all seemingly subjective aspects of phenomenal character are actually just qualitative contents. Therefore, I conclude this section with some considerations on how the embodied perspective of the organism is an essential ingredient for understanding the phenomenal character of experience.

The centrality of the organism's perspective in accounting for phenomenal character falls right out of Nagel's considerations of how points of view fundamentally contribute to there being something it is like for an organism to perceive the world. What else would account for the perspectival factors of phenomenal consciousness but the organization of the body's sensory receptors? It is in virtue of being a limited sensory being that the world shows up to us as available from a point of view. It is by being

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<sup>16</sup> Another way of putting this point is to say that in affirming the reality of subjective character, we are not committed to denying that consciousness is essentially related to things outside of itself. Indeed, those phenomenologists who affirm subjective character in terms of the reflexivity of pre-reflective consciousness, do so by affirming the view that mental acts like perception and imagination reveal themselves in disclosing their objects to the subject who is having them. This reconciles the idea that there is a subjective character to experience with the idea that consciousness is always relational. Phenomenal realism does not necessarily fall afoul of intentionalism.

situated in the world through embodiment that things appear thus and so. Here's Charles Siewert's statement of the idea (1997; 225):

It is far from clear that it could seem to some [subject] just the way it does to us for it to look as if things are shaped and situated in certain ways over time, though it did not seem to [that subject] as it does to us for us to *feel where our bodies are*, amidst what visually appears shaped and situated, or though it never seemed to [that subject] as it does to us for it to *feel as if something is where it looks to us as if it is...*the way it visually seems to us as if things are situated cannot ultimately be divorced entirely from the way it kinesthetically and tactually seems to us as if our bodies and other things are situated, so that our visual experience cannot be ripped out of its phenomenal context and reinserted into a radically different one while entirely preserving its phenomenal character.

What it is like for an object to seem thus and so to an organism recruits a robust array of structural features beyond the perceivable properties of the object. Those include a phenomenal field of space and time in which the organism feels itself to be situated as an embodied perceiver and agent. Without these structural features, it is unclear how we could claim that features of the world *appear* thus and so and that in so appearing are phenomenally conscious experiences. What it means for there to be something it is like for an organism is for such an organism to have an embodied perspective on the spatiotemporal world.

There is a relationship between subject and world—the subject's first-personal point of view on the world—which not only grants it access to the world but also limits that access in various ways, thus opening up the possibility of error. Consciousness is that particular form of access to the world that we inhabit by being the types of organisms that we are (Nagel 1974; Hoerl 2015). All content views agree that consciousness can be analyzed in terms of things that we are conscious *of*. By talking about consciousness *of* in this instance my intention is to point out that all of these accounts share a commitment to the view that through perception or introspection, we can become aware of qualitative characters. In this way, all these views try to talk of consciousness as a content that is apprehended when a subject is in a certain mental state. What they disagree about is how to type-identify this content and whether in so doing there are any prospects for reductive analysis.

Thus, my main problem with Garfield's (2015; 2016) attempt to eliminate phenomenal character from mental discourse is that he saddles the phenomenal realist with commitments they do not need to take on. More generally, my complaint against content views per se is that they are incomplete. When I behold the world, or introspect the contents of my own thoughts and perceptions, it is true that I encounter a rich phenomenal field of qualitative contents. However, when I say 'I encounter' I mean that the world is qualitatively encoded *for me* precisely because I encounter it by living through a first-person perspective. I have a finite point of view — constructed by the biological organization of the living body I inhabit — that grants me a kind of phenomenal access to the world. When theorists try to explain consciousness only in terms of its content, they conflate the observed with the observer, the apprehended with that which apprehends. In order to understand consciousness fully, we must develop an account that explains not just the qualitatively encoded world but also the subjectivity that apprehends that world by living through an embodied first-person perspective.

## **Conclusion**

I began by making an important distinction between two components of the phenomenal character of phenomenally conscious experiences. Phenomenally conscious experiences have both qualitative and subjective characters. I argued that Nagel's (1974) influential account of consciousness can motivate views that focus on either qualitative or subjective character. My argument is that too much philosophizing on consciousness has focused on the qualitative aspects at the expense of subjectivity. None of the approaches to consciousness that focus only on qualitative character are sufficient to account for the subjective character of experience. Thus, I have reconstructed a reading of Nagel that puts this aspect of phenomenal character at the forefront of the discussion. I call this the embodied perspectival view of subjective character.

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