

**PHENOMENAL EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS  
THAT WE MAY KNOW IT SO WELL?**

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It has often been thought that our knowledge of ourselves is *different* from, perhaps in some sense *better* than, our knowledge of things other than ourselves. Indeed, there is a thriving research area in epistemology dedicated to seeking an account of self-knowledge that would articulate and explain its difference from, and superiority over, other knowledge. Such an account would thus illuminate the descriptive and normative difference between self-knowledge and other knowledge.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, self-knowledge has also encountered its share of skeptics—philosophers who refuse to accord it any descriptive, let alone normative, distinction.

In this paper, we argue that there is at least one *species* of self-knowledge that is different from, and better than, other knowledge. It is a specific kind of knowledge of one's concurrent phenomenal experiences. Call knowledge of one's own phenomenal experiences *phenomenal knowledge*. Our claim is that some (though not all) phenomenal knowledge is different from, and better than, non-phenomenal knowledge. In other words, phenomenal knowledge is both descriptively and normatively different from non-phenomenal knowledge.

It is important to get clear, of course, on the way in which phenomenal knowledge is different from, and the sense in which it is better than, non-phenomenal knowledge. An account of phenomenal knowledge would seek to first *articulate* the putative (descriptive and normative) differences between phenomenal and non-phenomenal knowledge, then *explain* them. Accordingly, the paper is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the articulation task, the second the explanation task. In §1, we argue that phenomenal knowledge is different from non-phenomenal knowledge in that, in certain circumstances to be pinpointed in due course, the former is infallible. In §2, we develop a model of phenomenal knowledge acquisition that accounts for this circumstantial infallibility.

The paper as a whole engages in what we may call *phenomenal epistemology*—the study of knowledge about one’s present stream of phenomenal experiences. Phenomenal epistemology has been pursued, in effect, by a good number of philosophers over the past century, especially in discussions of the merits of foundationalism. Thus, there is a long tradition in epistemology of treating the contents of a cognitive agent’s current experience as epistemically special—as something immediately “given” cognitively, something involving an epistemically special form of “direct acquaintance.” That traditional idea was famously attacked by Sellars (1956) as what he called “the myth of the given.” And the idea has had well known advocates too, such as Chisholm (1982), Fumerton (1995, 2006), and the more recent BonJour (1999, 2001). The present paper weighs in anew on the affirmative side of this debate, by focusing specifically on a metaphysical issue that is very pertinent to it: the ontological structure of phenomenal consciousness.

Phenomenal epistemology can be pursued from two complementary angles. From one angle, the central question is, What is knowledge, that it may be so special about consciousness? From the other, it is, What is consciousness, that knowledge of it may be so special? In this paper, we pursue phenomenal epistemology from the latter angle. We use theses about the metaphysics of consciousness to shed light on the epistemology of consciousness. More specifically, we make certain claims about both the metaphysics and the epistemology of consciousness, and attempt to deploy the former in the explanation of the latter. The assumption here is that the specialness of phenomenal knowledge has to do less with the nature of the knowledge than with the nature of the known. Phenomenal experiences are such that they lend themselves to better knowing. This is the guiding hunch, if you will, of what follows.

## 1. Phenomenal Knowledge

Perhaps the best known epistemic status to have often been imputed to self-knowledge is infallibility. According to an unrestricted doctrine of infallibility, our beliefs about our own mental life are always true. We might formulate the thesis, to a first approximation, as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, for any mental state *M* of any subject *S*, if *S* believes that *M* is *F*, then *M* is *F*.

Note the modal operator. Claims of infallibility have a hidden modal force to them, which we make explicit by construing the thesis as necessary.<sup>2</sup>

It will be objected to (1) that our beliefs about our own Freudian sub-conscious states, for example, or our sub-personal cognitive states, are far from infallible. Thus, the explanation of Jim’s behavior may call for the

postulation of an Oedipal desire, or of a belief that persons of certain ethnicities are inferior, even though Jim believes whole-heartedly that he harbors no such desire and no such belief. False beliefs about our own suppressed desires or deep-seated prejudices are quite pedestrian.<sup>3</sup>

It would be clearly fallacious, however, to infer from the fact that not all beliefs about one's mental states are infallible that none is. Arguments by counter-example are helpless against the simple move of revising down the scope of one's thesis. In keeping with this observation we attempt, in this section, to formulate an increasingly restricted thesis of infallibility, ending with a thesis whose denial we take to defy credulity.

Repressed desires and sub-conscious beliefs are not phenomenally conscious. For all that has been hitherto said, then, beliefs about one's phenomenally conscious states may well be infallible.<sup>4</sup> A restricted version of the doctrine of infallibility might thus allow beliefs about one's non-conscious states to be false but insist that beliefs about one's phenomenally conscious experiences are always true:

- (2) Necessarily, for any phenomenally conscious experience E of a subject S, if S believes that E is F, then E is F.

A further restriction would be to *phenomenal properties* of phenomenal experiences. Compare my current visual experience's properties of (i) having a greenish phenomenology and (ii) occurring on a Tuesday. Both are properties of my experience, but while the former is a phenomenal property of it, the latter is not.<sup>5</sup> The view that phenomenal knowledge is special need not, and should not, be committed to the claim that beliefs about the non-phenomenal properties of phenomenal experiences are special.<sup>6</sup> A suitably restricted thesis would thus read:

- (3) Necessarily, for any phenomenal experience E of a subject S and phenomenal property P, if S believes that E is P, then E is P.

Here, it is clear that the thesis is restricted to beliefs about phenomenal experiences and their phenomenal properties.

However, phenomenal experiences and their phenomenal properties can be picked out not only in phenomenal ways, but also in non-phenomenal ones. Black-and-white Mary can think about phenomenal reddishness, which is to say she has a concept with which to pick out this feature; but her concept uses a non-phenomenal mode of presenting what it picks out—e.g., a mode of presentation linguistically expressible as “the phenomenal character that will be instantiated by my visual experiences of red objects after I acquire color vision.” (She may or may not believe that this is a feature she already knows about scientifically, under some non-phenomenal mode of presentation. But, be that as it may, she cannot yet think about phenomenal

reddishness under a phenomenal mode of presentation, because deploying that mode of presentation is a matter of undergoing oneself (or at least imagining undergoing) an experience that actually *instantiates* phenomenal reddishness.) It is implausible to suppose that beliefs whose constituents pick out phenomenal experiences and their phenomenal properties in such a non-phenomenal way are also infallible. Thus our thesis must be further restricted to singular (logically atomic) beliefs whose singular and predicative constituents employ phenomenal modes of presentation—a singular phenomenal mode of presentation and a predicative phenomenal mode of presentation.

- (4) Necessarily, if a subject *S* has a singular phenomenal belief  $B[e, p]$  whose singular and predicative constituents use the phenomenal modes of presentation *e* and *p* respectively, then  $B[e, p]$  is true.

When Mary leaves her confined environment and has her first reddish experience, for instance, she can now form a singular phenomenal belief deploying a predicative phenomenal mode of presentation of reddishness, and deploying a singular phenomenal mode of presentation of a specific experience (the reddish one she is now having). According to thesis (4), such a belief is infallible.<sup>7</sup>

At this stage, let us introduce a terminological shorthand. We will call beliefs about the phenomenal properties of one's phenomenal experiences that employ phenomenal modes of presentation *phenomenal beliefs*. A more economical formulation of (4) would thus be:

- (5) Necessarily, all phenomenal beliefs are true.

Call (5) the thesis of *phenomenal infallibility*. We will not defend this thesis. But we will defend a suitably restricted version of it that would stand unthreatened by customary counter-examples, and whose denial would seem to verge on the absurd.<sup>8</sup>

An obvious restriction is to beliefs about *present* phenomenal experiences, as opposed to past or future ones. One's beliefs about future phenomenal experiences are fallible in an obvious way, and memory malfunction is liable to render any belief about past ones false.

It is not a trivial question what a "present" phenomenal experience is. One straightforward way to cash out such talk is in terms of exact simultaneity. Certainly if a belief about a phenomenal experience is simultaneous with the experience, the experience can be said to occur in the present relative to the belief (it may be said, that is, to occur "in the belief's present"). Let the notation ' $B_{\text{now}}$ ' express the idea that the belief is indexically temporally directed to the present moment, the very moment at which the belief is occurring. The straightforward construal of "present" would lead to the following restriction:

- (6) Necessarily, if a subject S has a singular phenomenal belief  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at a time  $t$  whose singular and predicative constituents are the phenomenal modes of presentation  $e$  and  $p$  respectively, then  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  is true at  $t$ .

This thesis has the virtue of precision, but an objector might complain that there *are* no present singular phenomenal beliefs in this sense (and hence that (6) is true only vacuously). After all, a phenomenal experience would normally play some causal role in the formation of the belief about it.<sup>9</sup> So to the extent that causes precede their effects, a phenomenal experience would normally precede a singular belief about it, rather than be exactly simultaneous with it.

The situation here is no different from that of external perception. A subject can be said to have perceived a car accident at the time the accident occurred (when else?), even though there is a speed-of-light time lag between the accident's occurrence and the arrival at the retinas of light emanating from the accident, plus a subsequent brief time-lag while the neural circuitry responds to the light-impingement at the retinas to generate the perceptual state. Just as it is reasonable to describe the perception as roughly simultaneous with the accident, so there may be many beliefs about phenomenal experiences that can be described as roughly simultaneous with those experiences.

Where the "rough" boundaries are drawn is a broadly empirical question. A reasonable suggestion inspired by cognitive psychology would advert to working memory as definitive of rough simultaneity. A suggestion from phenomenological psychology might advert to the so-called "specious present."<sup>10</sup> On these suggestions, a belief is about a "present" phenomenal experience E if it comes into being when E is still in the specious present. So we may modify (6) as follows (with the temporal scope of ' $B_{\text{now}}$ ' understood as being the specious present):

- (7) Necessarily, if a subject S has a singular phenomenal belief  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at a time  $t$  whose singular and predicative constituents are the phenomenal modes of presentation  $e$  and  $p$  respectively, and if there is a time  $t^*$  that (i) is roughly simultaneous with  $t$ , and (ii) is such that S has the belief  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at  $t^*$ , then  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  is true at  $t^*$ .

The worry regarding "present" phenomenal beliefs is thereby overcome. (Note: since the phenomenal beliefs we are interested in are concurrent with occurrent phenomenal experiences, they must themselves be *occurrent* beliefs, rather than *dispositional* ones.)

One might object to thesis (7) in the following way. Consider a phenomenal predicative concept like painfulness. (We here use 'painfulness' to pick out just the *phenomenal character* of pain, while leaving aside any aspects

of its functional role that might be thought both essential to it and non-phenomenal.) When a subject S forms the belief that a given experience is an instance of painfulness, S's belief is fallible despite the fact that it attributes a phenomenal property to the experience by deploying a phenomenal mode of presentation. For, the experience is not really an instance of painfulness unless it instantiates the phenomenal property that S *has classified on other occasions* as painfulness—and that S *would* classify as painfulness in various counterfactual situations, and (perhaps) that others in S's speech community would classify under the mode of presentation they express verbally as 'painful'.

We propose to accommodate this worry by narrowing our infallibility thesis still further. We will not contest the claim that some modes of presentation are genuinely phenomenal and yet also essentially incorporate certain fallible presuppositions—e.g., the presupposition that various other specific experiences that one has had, or might have, also fall under the presently-deployed predicative mode of presentation. (It might be claimed that a mode of presentation is not *purely* phenomenal insofar as it incorporates such presuppositions, but we will not press this idea.) Instead, let us introduce the idea of a *bracketing* mode of presentation of phenomenal character. Such a mode of presentation suspends any such presuppositions, so that their truth or falsity does not affect the content of the specific belief that employs such a mode of presentation. This is a mode of presentation that brackets out all relational information about the experience and its phenomenal character, including how experiences of this sort are classified by other subjects, how they are classified by oneself on other occasions, what their typical causes are, etc. It focuses (so to speak) on how the experience appears to the subject at that moment.

We may further restrict our infallibility thesis to such fundamental phenomenal beliefs. Call singular phenomenal beliefs that employ bracketed phenomenal modes of presentation *bracketed phenomenal beliefs*. The restricted infallibility thesis that emerges from our discussion is this:

- (8) Necessarily, if a subject S has a singular phenomenal belief  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at a time  $t$  whose singular and predicative constituents are the bracketed phenomenal modes of presentation  $e$  and  $p$  respectively, and if there is a time  $t^*$  that (i) is roughly simultaneous with  $t$ , and (ii) is such that S has the belief  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at  $t^*$ , then  $B_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  is true at  $t^*$ .

So the upshot of our discussion thus far is a thesis of phenomenal infallibility restricted to phenomenal beliefs that are singular, present, phenomenal in mode of presentation, and bracketed.<sup>11</sup> Let us label such beliefs *SPPB phenomenal beliefs*. The restricted infallibility thesis is simply this:

- (9) Necessarily, all SPPB phenomenal beliefs are true.

Call (9) the thesis of *limited phenomenal infallibility*. This is the thesis we wish to put forward as elucidating the epistemic distinction of phenomenal knowledge. For our part, we cannot envisage a counter-example to it. That is to say, we cannot conjure up a case involving a false SPPB phenomenal belief.<sup>12</sup>

How one would express bracketed phenomenal beliefs in public language is a delicate matter. Almost all words of public language carry presuppositions of the kind that get suspended by bracketed phenomenal modes of presentation—e.g., presuppositions to the effect that one's present use of a given word is semantically in accord with standard uses of that word in one's linguistic community. Perhaps the best one could do, in expressing a bracketed belief, would be the double use of an indexical term, as in "This experience has *this* feature"—where 'this experience' expresses one's singular mode of presentation, and 'this feature' expresses one's predicative mode of presentation.

It might be objected that this sort of exercise involves a trivial infallibility that is not indicative of any cognitive achievement. Compare beliefs with the content "I am here." Such beliefs are necessarily true, not in virtue of any notable cognitive achievement, however, but in virtue of a certain emptiness in their content (Evans 1982). Call this *E-emptiness*, for "Evans-emptiness." Likewise, the objection continues, beliefs with the content "This experience has this feature" are trivially infallible in virtue of a comparable E-emptiness. The indexical "this" in the latter functions like the indexical "here" in the former.<sup>13</sup>

The cases are *not* analogous, however. When one thinks "I am here" in a way that makes one's belief trivially infallible, one does not have an independent conception of what "here" stands for.<sup>14</sup> One thinks of "here" as simply "the place in which this thought occurs, whatever it may be." But when one thinks "This experience has this feature," one *does* have an independent conception of the referents of one's indexical expressions. One thinks of "this feature" not simply as "the phenomenal character of this experience, whatever it may be," but as the distinctive phenomenal character with which one is presented; and one thinks of "this experience" as a specific current experience with that very character.

Because one's SPPB phenomenal belief deploys *bracketed* modes of presentation of the experience and its feature, one must use indexical language to verbalize the belief; the singular and predicative modes of presentation thereby expressed do not readily admit of descriptive articulation.<sup>15</sup> But the belief itself is not an E-empty indexical belief. In other words, "I am here" not only expresses a belief indexically, but also expresses an E-empty indexical belief. It expresses a belief that employs an E-empty indexical mode of presenting the subject's location. By contrast, "This experience has this feature" expresses a belief indexically, but does not express an E-empty indexical belief. The belief it expresses does not use an indexical mode of

presenting the experience's phenomenal character. Rather, it uses a rich and non-empty mode of presenting that phenomenal character, which happens to be a *bracketing* mode of presentation.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most potent putative counter-example to infallibility theses is the "fraternity initiation" story (see, e.g., Shoemaker 1996). Suppose that, blindfolded, you are told that a particular spot on your neck is about to be cut with a razor (this is part of your fraternity initiation); then an ice cube is placed on that spot. At the very first instant, you are likely to be under the impression that you are having a pain sensation—when in reality you are having a coldness sensation. That is, at that instant, you have a present singular phenomenal belief to the effect that you are having a pain experience. The belief is false, however: you are not in fact having a pain experience.

Suppose one grants, at least for argument's sake, that the case is rightly described as involving a phenomenal experience of cold accompanied by a belief that one undergoes a phenomenal experience of pain.<sup>17</sup> The case nonetheless fails as a putative counter-example to thesis (9), because of the restriction in (9) to beliefs with *bracketed* phenomenal modes of presentation. Even if one is mistaken in how one initially classifies the experience under an unbracketed phenomenal mode of presentation—e.g., as an instance of painfulness, when allegedly it is actually an instance of coldness—one is not mistaken in judging that it *feels like this*. (And again, the word 'this' does not here function as a mere indexical, but rather as a linguistic stand-in for a very rich, albeit bracketed, predicative phenomenal mode of presentation.)

It may be objected that there are in fact familiar counter-examples to (8) from our reflective emotional life. Sometimes you may wonder whether your current emotional experience is one of anger or disgust, shame or guilt, disappointment or regret. Focusing hard on the phenomenal feel of a present, prototypical emotional experience, you may nonetheless form the belief that it is regret, when in reality it is disappointment.

Some might reply that these cases involve complex mental states that are not *purely* phenomenal. Recall that (3)-(9) apply to beliefs about phenomenal properties exclusively. But it is widely agreed that an emotion such as regret or disgust involves certain cognitive and conative elements.<sup>18</sup> So, if these latter elements are not phenomenal, then the property of being regret, or disgust, is not strictly speaking a phenomenal property. Beliefs about whether a mental state instantiates the property would thus fall outside the scopes of (3)-(9).

But we ourselves are not sanguine about the claim that the cognitive and conative aspects of emotional experiences are non-phenomenal.<sup>19</sup> In any case, we think that there is a deeper reason why it leaves a certain kind of infallibility unthreatened. When one believes of one's current experience that it is regret, one may be wrong. But when one believes of it that it *is like this*—where "this" expresses the bracketed phenomenal mode of presentation of the phenomenal type one takes one's experience to fall under—it is hard to see how one can be wrong. It is this latter exercise, the formation of a *bracketed*

phenomenal belief that one's current experience falls under such-and-such a phenomenal type, that we claim is infallible.

Consider the case of the speckled hen. According to Chisholm (1957), when one perceives a hen with 49 speckles on it, one has a 49-speckle percept but may readily confuse it for a 48-speckle percept. It seems to us, however, that this fact nowise undermines one's ability to form a belief that one's percept has *this* feature, where 'this feature' bracketingly denotes the phenomenology one is presented with, however bespeckled.

A confused objection would be that (9) is counter-exemplified by cases of absent-minded perception. Imagine that you are engrossed in a heated argument with your conversational partner, and therefore do not notice the refrigerator's hum. You nonetheless have a dim auditory experience of the hum, but are simply not in a position to form true beliefs about your auditory experience.

This objection is confused because it counter-exemplifies not the thesis of phenomenal infallibility, but its converse, which we may call the thesis of *phenomenal self-intimation*. Consider the converse of (3):

- (10) Necessarily, for any phenomenal experience E of a subject S and phenomenal property P, if E is P, then S believes that E is P.

This thesis may be falsified by your dim auditory experience of the refrigerator hum. But (3) is not, and certainly (9) is not. Theses of self-intimation have been closely associated, historically, with theses of infallibility. But they are logically distinct, and cases of absent-minded perception, while plausibly effective against the former, constitute a non sequitur against the latter.

We conclude that, once an appropriately nuanced thesis of infallibility is formulated, and distinguished from other theses, it becomes impossible to conjure up compelling counter-examples to it. In particular, we cannot see how a counter-example to (9) might proceed. More generally, it is our impression that argumentation against any form of phenomenal infallibility has tended to be too quick, and (as noted) has often involved the relatively naïve fallacy of inferring negative universals from the denial of positive universals. Once the temptation to do so is resisted, it becomes clear that some sort of limited infallibility may well characterize phenomenal knowledge.

## **2. The Acquisition of Phenomenal Knowledge**

If some phenomenal knowledge is infallible, it remains to be understood why. In this section, we propose an explanation of this infallibility. Our account belongs to a family of accounts according to which, for certain phenomenal beliefs but not for non-phenomenal beliefs, there is a distinctive constitutive relation between the belief and that which it is about (Shoemaker

1996, Levine 2001, Chalmers 2003). The idea is that while in the case of beliefs about (say) cats, the cat and the belief are independent entities, in the case of some beliefs about phenomenal experiences, the experience and the belief are *not* independent. Our own account will differ from other accounts in this family in explaining the constitutive connection between phenomenal beliefs and phenomenal experiences not in terms of a special feature of the beliefs, but in terms of a special feature of the experiences.

Our account has two parts. The first identifies the relevant special feature of phenomenal experiences, the second shows that having this feature ensures that some phenomenal beliefs are infallible. Accordingly, this section is divided into two subsections. In §2.1, we present a view of phenomenal experiences that identifies a special feature common and peculiar to them. In §2.2, we argue that that view explains limited phenomenal infallibility.

Note: in this paper we do not offer a defense of our preferred view of phenomenal experiences. To that extent, our thesis in this section may be best construed as a conditional: *if* one embraces our view of phenomenal experiences, *then* one obtains an explanation of limited phenomenal infallibility. Each of us has argued for the antecedent elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> Here we present the antecedent without defense, and argue only for the conditional.

### 2.1. *What Are Phenomenal Experiences...?*

On our view, phenomenal experiences are always self-presenting, or self-representing.<sup>21</sup> Many mental states—perhaps all—represent something. But phenomenally conscious states, whatever else they represent, also represent themselves. Thus, your perceptual experience of this page represents both the page and itself.

When a phenomenally conscious state represents something, it makes the subject aware of what it represents. To say that your perceptual experience represents both the page and itself is therefore to say that it makes you aware not only of the page, but also of your experience of the page. Let us call your awareness of the page *outer awareness* and your awareness of the experience *inner awareness*. There are three important features of inner awareness that we wish to highlight. It is (i) inbuilt, (ii) peripheral, and (iii) constitutive.

*"Inbuilt."* Inner awareness is built into, or inherent in, the experience it is an awareness of. In the ordinary go of things, one does not become aware of one's ongoing experience through an extra mental step that results in the formation of a numerically distinct state of awareness. Rather, the awareness of the experience is a component of the experience itself, not a further mental event or state.<sup>22</sup>

In this, our view differs from so-called Higher-Order theories of conscious states (e.g., Rosenthal 1997). Higher-Order theories maintain that conscious states are accompanied by higher-order representations of them,

in virtue of which the subject is aware of her conscious state. Higher-Order Perception theories maintain that the subject is aware of her conscious state in a quasi-perceptual way, whereas Higher-Order Thought theories maintain that she is aware of it in a more doxastic way, i.e., by harboring a thought or belief about it. But both kinds of theory hold that the experience and the awareness of it are numerically distinct states. Our view, by contrast, is that the awareness is inherent in, or built into, the experience. The experience and the awareness are the same token state, albeit falling under two distinct types. That is, we do not posit higher-order representation, but self-representation.

It is worth emphasizing that what is important for our view is that the inner awareness be inbuilt *at the personal level*. We are open to the possibility that, at the sub-personal level, the mechanism underlying phenomenal experiences involves numerically distinct representations. But we insist that, through whatever processes of functional and informational integration, these distinct sub-personal representations give rise, at the personal level, to a single, unified, self-presenting experience.

An expression of this is the fact that, on our view, the inner awareness of which we speak is part of the phenomenology of the experience. It is not a posit called for only by theoretical considerations. Rather, it is phenomenally present in our ongoing consciousness. To be sure, it is not phenomenologically overwhelming in the way that, say, color qualia are. It is more subtle and less imposing than that. But it is phenomenologically present nonetheless. The main reason inner awareness is phenomenologically subtle in this way has to do with its second important feature.

*“Peripheral.”* Inner awareness is not normally a very focused or attentive awareness. In the ordinary go of things, we attend primarily to the external environment around us. Only on relatively infrequent occasions, when we are in a particularly reflective mood, do we explicitly turn our attention inward and examine our ongoing conscious experience. Consider your perceptual experience of this page. It makes you aware primarily of the page, not of itself. This is because your attention is absorbed with the page. Yet, we maintain, you are also aware, though much more dimly, of having that very experience.

Compare visual awareness. As you look at this page, you are visually aware of it. But it may well be that you are also visually aware, albeit more dimly, of a pen at the far end of your desk. The pen may be 70 degrees to your left, and in the ordinary go of things, we are not aware very acutely of objects at a 70 degree angle. Indeed, in many cases we cannot tell what objects they are. In this and other respects, peripheral vision is much more phenomenologically subtle than focal (foveal) vision. Clearly, however, peripheral vision exists, and it modifies one's overall phenomenology. We can imagine a subject just like you placed in pen-less but otherwise identical circumstances; this subject's overall phenomenology would be ever so subtly different from yours.

The distinction between focal and peripheral awareness applies to other perceptual modalities. As you look at this page, you may be hearing distant car engines—*hearing* without *listening*. If so, you have peripheral auditory awareness of the car engines' sound that is built into your overall phenomenal experience. Again, we can readily imagine a subject just like you placed in car-less but otherwise identical circumstances; and again, their overall phenomenology would be just a little bit different from yours.

Our claim is that the focal/peripheral distinction applies not only to such outer awareness, but also to inner awareness, and that the inner awareness built into phenomenal experiences is normally peripheral. It may be focal on occasion. Thus peripherality is not a necessary feature of inner awareness. It merely characterizes the inner awareness implicated in normal phenomenal experiences. But we stress the fact that inner awareness is normally peripheral because it accounts for the phenomenological subtlety of inner awareness.<sup>23</sup> However, in this case we cannot imagine a subject just like you who lacks any inner awareness of her current experience, since on our view, in the absence of any inner awareness there is no experience. This is because of the third important feature of inner awareness.

“*Constitutive.*” The third key feature is that the inner awareness of one’s phenomenal experience is a constitutive aspect of the experience’s phenomenal character. Thus it seems all but incoherent to suppose that one could have a phenomenal experience which was greenish, but of which one was aware as reddish. For, what it is like *for the subject* to have the experience is determined by the way the subject is aware of her experience. If the subject is aware of the experience as reddish, then what the experience is like *for the subject* is reddish. (In the ordinary case, the subject is focally aware of an external object as red, via an experience deploying a reddish mode of representation of that red object; the subject thereby is peripherally aware of the experience itself as reddish, since the reddish experience represents both the red external object and itself.)

Phenomenal experiences type-individuate in terms of their phenomenal character. So if phenomenal character is constituted by inner awareness, phenomenal experiences type-individuate in terms of the inner awareness they involve. Two token-experiences E1 and E2 are phenomenally type-identical just in case E1 makes the subject aware of herself differently from how E2 makes the subject aware of herself. In this way, the inner awareness involved in a phenomenal experience E determines the phenomenal type E falls under.

To summarize, our view is that undergoing a phenomenal experience involves having awareness of that experience that is constitutive, normally peripheral, and inbuilt. This view is certainly controversial.<sup>24</sup> Our primary concern here is not to defend the view, but to use it to sketch an explanation of the specialness of phenomenal knowledge.

## 2.2. . . . That We May Know Them so Well?

The basic idea behind our approach to phenomenal infallibility is that, because the occurrence of a phenomenal experience already involves the subject's awareness of it, for the subject to acquire a belief about the experience may involve little more than an act of shifting or redirecting attention. In what follows, we develop this idea in more detail.

When discussing representational states, it is customary to distinguish between the *content* and *attitude* of representation. The distinction is clear for propositional attitudes: a hope that  $p$  and a hope that  $q$  share attitude, but differ in content (unless  $p = q$ ); a hope that  $p$  and a belief that  $p$  share content, but differ in attitude. It is often held that the distinction applies to perceptual states as well: hearing a car engine and hearing a bagpipe share attitude (in the relevant sense of the term), but differ in content; seeing a bagpipe and hearing a bagpipe share (at least some of their) content, but differ in attitude. In these terms, your perceptual experience of this page has a visual "attitude" toward representing the page. But what is the attitude with which it represents itself?

The first model we want to consider is one according to which all phenomenal experiences use a belief attitude in representing themselves. Thus, your perceptual experience of this page represents the page *visually*, but represents itself *belief-wise*. When you undergo this experience, then, you have a mental state that constitutes both a visual perception and a belief. It is a single token state that falls under two representational types: (i) the visual-perception-of-page type and (ii) the belief-about-experience type.

If phenomenal experiences are like that, then as soon as we have a phenomenal experience, we already have a belief about it. There is no additional epistemic work that goes into *acquiring* the belief. Undergoing the experience *is* acquiring the belief.

It is fairly clear how this model would explain phenomenal infallibility. We said above that an experience's inner awareness constitutes its phenomenal character. If the inner awareness is a belief, then the experience's phenomenal character is constituted by the content of that belief. When the belief is that one undergoes a greenish experience, the experience's phenomenal character is greenish, and therefore is the way it is believed to be. Inasmuch as it is a belief just about the phenomenal type under which the experience falls, it is infallible.<sup>25</sup>

Plausibly, the beliefs that constitute inner awareness on this model are SPPB phenomenal beliefs. If a phenomenal experience represents itself by way of belief, the belief is clearly singular and present. It is natural, moreover, to suppose that it employs a phenomenal, and indeed bracketed, mode of presentation. The result would be an explanation not only of why some phenomenal knowledge is infallible, but also of why the infallibility is limited the way it is.

One major problem with this model concerns the fact that inner awareness is normally peripheral. This commits the proponent of this model to three initially implausible claims. Arguably, an occurrent belief cannot be peripheral. The subject may harbor a peripheral doxastic state, but such a state does not qualify as full-fledged belief, because qualifying as belief requires that the state be focal. Moreover, even if we admitted peripheral beliefs, it would seem that such peripheral beliefs are not the kinds of thing that can constitute knowledge. Finally, even if they could, it may well be that once the distinction between focal and peripheral belief is countenanced, knowledge is better thought of as Gettier-proof justified true *focal* belief. The proponent of the model under consideration must hold that (i) there can be peripheral beliefs, that (ii) such beliefs can be justified and Gettier-proof, and (iii) that knowledge does not require focal belief. All three claims strike us as implausible. If so, the present model cannot provide for infallible knowledge.

Let us consider a different model, then, one which acknowledges that knowledge requires a focal doxastic state. On this second model, the acquisition of phenomenal knowledge does implicate a cognitive process beyond undergoing the experience it is knowledge of. What it requires is the process of redirecting one's attention. In the normal go of things, a phenomenal experience involves focal or attentive awareness of an outer object (event, state of affairs) and a merely peripheral or inattentive awareness of itself. However, this distribution of attention resources (if you will) can be readily altered by the subject. In a relatively undemanding cognitive act, the subject can direct her attention to her experience itself. As you look at this page, you can readily direct your attention to your visual experience itself, just as you can direct your attention (without redirecting your visual focal focus) to the pen you are peripherally visually aware of. The result of such an act is that instead of being focally aware visually of the page and peripherally aware belief-wise of the experience, you are focally aware belief-wise of your experience itself, while still attending visually to the page.<sup>26</sup>

This model can also account for phenomenal infallibility, though less straightforwardly than the first model. In the first model, the content of the belief is identical to the content of inner awareness, which in turn is identical to the phenomenal character of the experience—making the content of the belief identical to the phenomenal character of the experience. In the present model, however, the content of the focal belief is not necessarily identical to the content of inner awareness. We might imagine that something went wrong in the process of shifting attention, so that while the content of inner awareness was that *p*, the content of the focal belief it produces is that *q*.

But this does not undermine claim (9), the limited infallibility thesis. As in the previous model, here too the relevant belief is plausibly construed as an SPPB phenomenal belief. Recall that an SPPB phenomenal belief is a present and bracketing belief. It is about the experience that is (roughly) simultaneous

with it and brackets away all relational information about the experience. Given this, even if there was a breakdown in the process of attention shift, with the result that the experience changed during the process, the belief in question is about the phenomenal character of the *now focal* experience, and cannot get *that* wrong. The important thing is that the SPPB belief is not a belief about what the phenomenal character of the experience *was* before the attention shift. Such beliefs are indeed fallible on our view. But SPPB beliefs are not.<sup>27</sup>

The model is also phenomenologically adequate. The act of forming a phenomenal belief about one's current phenomenal experience does seem, from the first person perspective, like a phenomenological "light" directed inward. It seems to resemble the act of directing one's attention to the cellos when listening to a piano concerto. When listening to a piano concerto, one is normally focally aware (auditorily) of the piano and only peripherally aware (auditorily) of the cellos. But of course one can direct one's attention piano to the cellos, becoming aware focally of the latter.<sup>28</sup> The cognitive act involved in this is neither cognitively demanding nor phenomenologically impressive. In this sense it is very different from a more "dramatic" perceptual act that produces a completely new representation of some object. Thus the model under consideration makes phenomenal belief formation analogous to—indeed, a special case of—the kind of phenomenologically undemanding redeployment of attention that such belief formation seems first-personally to be.

To ensure that inner awareness is not construed in this model as too cognitively sophisticated, we would like to construe the attitude with which phenomenal experiences represent themselves not as belief proper, but as a somewhat less sophisticated doxastic attitude, which we might call *proto-belief*. A proto-belief is a peripheral doxastic state that becomes a belief as soon as it becomes focal. Thus, in the ordinary go of things your perceptual experience of this page involves focal visual awareness of the page and peripheral proto-beliefish awareness of itself. When you shift your attention from the page to your experience of it, you become focally aware belief-wise of your experience and peripherally aware visually of the page.<sup>29</sup>

One might worry that construing phenomenal experiences as proto-beliefs would cast them as more cognitively sophisticated than they are. This sort of intellectualism about conscious experiences might exclude many animals and infants from the conscious community. However, a creature could have such proto-beliefs even if it lacked the capacity to bring their peripheral content into focal attention, and thereby lacked the capacity to undergo beliefs about the phenomenal character of its own experiences.

Note that the emerging account is not inherently incompatible with a naturalistic approach to knowledge and knowledge acquisition. This is important, because one of the traditional motivations for denying any form of infallibility is the thought that such infallibility is in tension with a naturalist

approach to knowledge and knowledge acquisition. Our model, however, accounts for limited infallibility purely in terms of natural elements in the cognitive system of normal agents.<sup>30</sup>

It is easy to see how our account belongs to the family of accounts that focus on an alleged constitutive connection between the phenomenal beliefs and the experiences they are about. It is also easy to see how our account is distinctive. In a way, while on the other accounts in the family there is something about (some) phenomenal beliefs that makes them “take up” the very experiences they are about, on our account there is something about phenomenal experiences that makes them “go into” (some) beliefs about them. An advantage of our account is that while it is not always clear in this literature what is involved in the relevant constitutive connection, our account makes that connection transparent.

The constitutive connection cannot be just a matter of the experience being a component of the belief’s content. For, plausibly, *de re* beliefs about the Eiffel Tower—which are fallible—also have the Eiffel Tower as a component of their content. Chalmers (2003) suggests that, unlike such beliefs, (some) phenomenal beliefs are “epistemically rigid,” by which he means that phenomenal experiences are components of their *narrow*, or locally supervenient, content. On our account, the connection is even closer: the experiences are constituents of the very *vehicles* of the relevant phenomenal beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

How does this work? We cannot go into this issue in much depth here, but let us offer a sketch of a possible story. Suppose you peacefully drive onto a bridge, when you suddenly see the words “under construction” painted on the road. Most likely, when you read these words, a *complete* thought occurs to you—the thought that the bridge is under construction. It is the same thought as would occur to you if you heard an officer shout “This bridge is under construction.” But how could the words “under construction” vehicle a full-blown proposition if they did not constitute a full-blown sentence?<sup>32</sup> The answer is that they could not. Rather, it is the combination of the words and the bridge whereupon they are painted that vehicles the full-blown proposition. This suggests that there *is* before you a full-blown sentence, albeit with an unusual ontology.<sup>33</sup> In this sentence, non-linguistic items function as the subject term and the copula. What functions as the subject term appears to be the bridge itself. What functions as the copula appears to be the spatial relation between the inscription “under construction” and the bridge, that is, the fact that the inscription is painted on the surface of the bridge.

Zemach (1985) calls sentences of this sort “display sentences.” In a display sentence, the subject term is constituted by, or perhaps is identical to, the referent. To be sure, such sentences are extremely rare. But they exist nonetheless. Someone sympathetic to the idea of a language of thought might take our account to construe SPPB phenomenal beliefs as display sentences in the language of thought. The constitutive connection between these beliefs

and the phenomenal experiences they are about is evident, and its nature clear.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

If the argument of the previous section is correct, then the self-representational view of phenomenal experience delivers an explanation of the fact that phenomenal knowledge is special, indeed infallible. We have not argued, however, that no *other* explanation could be offered, not even that no other *equally good* one could. Nor have we defended the existence of the explanandum entirely to our satisfaction. If we had, we would have the makings of an argument to the best explanation for the self-representational view of phenomenal experiences.

Observe that, on our account, it is the metaphysics of conscious experiences that explains the special features of their epistemology, rather than the other way around. There is something about phenomenal experiences that makes them amenable to safer, and ultimately under some conditions infallible, knowing. This “something” is the fact that they involve a constitutive peripheral inbuilt awareness of themselves.

Our account of phenomenal knowledge may have important implications for central debates in epistemology, such as those surrounding foundationalism and coherentism, internalism and externalism, skepticism, empiricism, contextualism, and more.<sup>35</sup> We plan to explore these implications, as well as firm up the case for our account of phenomenal infallibility, in future work. In the present paper, we have laid the foundations. We have argued, first, that a certain restricted form of infallibility survives common counter-examples and is highly plausible, and second, that the existence of such infallibility can be explained by appeal to a certain view of phenomenally conscious states as self-representing.<sup>36</sup>

### Notes

1. The normativity mentioned here is epistemic normativity, of course. To say that there is a(n epistemically) normative difference between types of knowledge K1 and K2 is to say that K1 is better knowledge than K2 or the other way round.
2. There is a question as to the modal force of necessity. One view might be that the necessity is nomological, another that it is metaphysical. We will not address this issue here.
3. Likewise, we have false beliefs aplenty about our own visual representations, as empirical research has demonstrated time and again. For example, we believe that we were presented with a Nine of Diamonds at a 30 degree angle from our eyes, we would be able to tell (while still looking straight ahead) that this is the card we are presented with. But we cannot.

4. Unless noted otherwise, we use “phenomenal experience,” “phenomenally conscious experience,” “phenomenally conscious state” “conscious state,” “phenomenal state,” and “conscious experience” interchangeably. We are talking about states that are *phenomenally* conscious, not states (if there are any) that are “access conscious” (cf. Block 1995) without being phenomenally conscious.
5. What makes the former a phenomenal property and the latter a non-phenomenal one is an important question which we will not address with any seriousness. One natural thought is that having a greenish phenomenology is a phenomenal property in that it can be instantiated *only* by phenomenal states and events, whereas occurring on a Tuesday is a non-phenomenal property in that it can just as easily be instantiated by non-phenomenal states and events.
6. Clearly, beliefs about the days of the week on which one’s phenomenal experiences occur are fallible.
7. Needless to say, it is an important philosophical task to get clear about the nature of the belief-constituents that we are here calling “phenomenal modes of presentation”—often called phenomenal concepts. There is a burgeoning literature on this topic in recent philosophy of mind, encompassing a range of competing accounts. But we take it that the idea of phenomenal modes of presentation (both singular and predicative) is fairly clear intuitively and pre-theoretically—which suffices for our purposes in this paper.
8. The thesis of phenomenal infallibility comments on the *truth* of phenomenal beliefs. A parallel thesis would comment on their (epistemic) *justification*. The thesis would be: (5\*) Necessarily, all phenomenal beliefs are justified. We may, without too much injustice to traditional terminology, call this the doctrine of *phenomenal incorrigibility*. (The traditional notion of incorrigibility is one of a subject who *cannot be corrected*—cannot be corrected, that is, by another subject.) Against the background of the tripartite analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, the conjunction of (5) and (5\*) entails: (5\*\*) Necessarily, all phenomenal beliefs constitute knowledge. It is widely agreed that the tripartite analysis has been refuted by Gettier (1963). But a “quadripartite” analysis of knowledge as justified, true, and Gettier-proof belief is highly plausible. (5\*\*) is therefore entailed by the conjunction of (5), (5\*), and the thesis that all phenomenal beliefs are Gettier-proof. We do not wish to take a stand on the veracity of this last thesis, and therefore on that of (5\*\*). We mention them mainly by way of clarifying the logical geography within phenomenal epistemology.
9. A causal connection might reasonably be claimed to be not just normal, but constitutive of genuinely singular thoughts, or of epistemic justification (see Goldman 1967). But these stronger claims are unnecessary to get the objection going.
10. The phrase “specious present” was coined by the nineteenth-century psychologist E.R. Clay, but was put into wide usage by William James (1890), and has been thoroughly discussed more recently by Dainton (2000) and others. It refers to the temporally thick present of the flow of experience. A conscious experience is not a durationless instant, but an *episode* in which 2–3 seconds’ worth of content, as it were, are present before consciousness.
11. Need a cognitive subject *consciously* bracket out fallible presuppositions in order to be deploying a bracketed phenomenal mode of presentation? We suspect not. Insofar as the subject thinks of the experience as one whose phenomenal character

- is “given” in a way that is immune to error, in effect the subject thereby brackets out those presuppositions—perhaps without noticing them at all.
12. For that matter, we cannot envisage a counter-example to such beliefs’ incorrigibility, when that term is used as in footnote 8.
  13. Thanks to Jordi Fernández for pressing this objection.
  14. There may be beliefs that are naturally expressed as “I am here” that do involve an independent conception of the subject’s location. But such beliefs are not infallible (let alone trivially).
  15. Is an SPPB phenomenal belief communicable? Well, not by saying “This experience is like this.” *That* language will not communicate the content of the experiencer’s belief to anyone else. But the experiencer might say, for instance, “I am now undergoing a bracketed-greenish experience.” This will successfully communicate the content of the speaker’s belief to those hearers who have the phenomenal concept expressed by ‘greenish’—*provided* that the presuppositions governing the unbracketed phenomenal concept expressed by ‘greenish’ are true of the bracketed mode of presentation that the speaker is now expressing with the locution ‘bracketed-greenish’. The speaker is justified in believing that this is so (and the hearers are too), but this belief is fallible—for the same reasons that the belief expressible by saying “I am now undergoing a greenish experience” is fallible.
  16. On these matters, see also Chalmers 2003. As Chalmers notes, a clear expression of the difference between thinking “I am here” and “my current experience feels like *this*” is that the former is a priori whereas the latter is a posteriori.
  17. We ourselves would maintain that this is a misdescription. Rather, (1) the phenomenal experience is not a simple cold-experience, and (2) most likely you are too puzzled by what is going on in the first moment you have your experience to form any clear belief about it. (Space limitations preclude elaboration.)
  18. Some (e.g., Gordon 1986) have maintained that emotions involve *nothing but* such cognitive and conative elements, a view we do not endorse in the least. But this stronger claim should not be confused with the weaker claim, to which we subscribe, that emotions involve partly cognitive and conative elements.
  19. We are both on record claiming otherwise. See, for instance, Horgan and Tienson 2002, Horgan, Tienson, and Graham 2006, Kriegel 2003b.
  20. See Horgan, Tienson, and Graham 2006 and Kriegel 2003a, 2004, 2005.
  21. There may or may not be an important difference between the notions of self-presentation and self-representation. We will not take up the issue here, and will treat the two expressions as though they were synonymous.
  22. It is *possible*, of course, to be aware of one’s experience by virtue of performing an additional mental act—but it is not *necessary*, and is not how things work in the normal go of things.
  23. For sustained argumentation to the effect that the awareness of our conscious experiences is part of these experiences’ phenomenology, see Horgan, Tienson, and Graham 2006 and Kriegel 2003a, 2004.
  24. Dretske (1993), among others, denies that phenomenal experiences involve any awareness whatsoever. Smith (1986) accepts the existence of inner awareness in most experiences, but denies that it is constitutive of their status as experiences. Rosenthal (1997) accepts that there is inner awareness in all conscious experiences,

and that it is constitutive of a mental episode's being conscious, but denies that inner awareness is built into the episodes themselves.

25. Being "just about the phenomenal type under which the experience falls" means, *inter alia*, that the belief deploys *bracketed* phenomenal modes of presentation, singular and predicative—whether the subject consciously realizes this or not. Cf. note 11 above.
26. Although such redirection of attention might sometimes render peripheral what one was originally attending to, it is not at all clear that this must inevitably happen. For, in some cases it seems that one can simultaneously attend fairly focally both to the external item(s) and to one's own current experience of those items.
27. It should be acknowledged that sometimes the specious present, for a given SPPB belief, will extend backward in time long enough to include times at which the experiencer was only peripherally aware of the given experience and its phenomenal character. But the limited fallibility thesis does not include a belief one might have to the effect that the phenomenal character has not changed since before it became focal—not even if it was still peripheral at some moment within the specious present. Although such a belief presumably can be very strongly justified, it is not infallible.
28. One can direct one's attention to the cellos while still attending fairly focally to the piano too; cf. note 26 above. Likewise, a phenomenological attentional "light" can be inwardly "pointed" at one's current experience while continuing to "point" an attentional "light" at the external items represented by that experience.
29. It might be objected that it would be more plausible to construe phenomenal experiences not as beliefs or proto-beliefs about themselves, but as quasi-perceptual representations of themselves. But the reason we do not construe the self-representation as quasi-perceptual is that such a construal considerably complicates the process that would produce phenomenal knowledge. Shifting attention from the world to the experience would not suffice, since it would result in a quasi-perceptual, hence sub-doxastic, representation that is not eligible yet for the status of knowledge. A further step would have to be taken, in which the subject *endorses* the contents of inner awareness. But the existence of an act of endorsement in the formation of phenomenal beliefs is not borne by the phenomenological evidence. We noted above that, phenomenologically speaking, phenomenal belief formation seems to accord with the attention shift model. It does not seem to accord as well with the attending-cum-endorsing model.
30. This depends, of course, on the naturalizability of self-representation. On this, see Kriegel 2005.
31. In Horgan, Tienson, and Graham (2006), this idea is expressed in neo-Fregean terminology: phenomenal states figure, within phenomenal beliefs about those states, as *self-presenting modes of presentation*.
32. Note that if you only heard or saw "construction," no complete thought would occur to you; instead, only an "idea" or "concept" of construction would. But the paint on the road somehow succeeds to vehicle a whole proposition.
33. Whereas the sentence shouted by the officer is made up of the concatenation of sound symbols the<sup>bridge</sup>is<sup>under</sup>construction, the sentence you are confronted with is made up of the state of affairs comprising the bridge itself together

with the presence on the bridge of a sign on which is the concatenation of ink marks under construction.

34. For a similar account of mental self-representation, see Ismael 2006.
35. Thus, there is a historical (and quite natural) association between self-intimation views and foundationalism. This epistemological “combo” has fallen out favor in the past half-century, but our impression is that this has been partly due to the crudeness of traditional self-intimation views. As noted above, we reject phenomenal self-intimation, but we embrace a complicated approximation to it in the form of the inner-awareness conception.
36. Thanks to David Chalmers, Jordi Fernández, John Pollock, and an audience at the Consciousness Center at the University of Arizona for helpful comments and discussion.

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