

From qualitative states to propositional contents: the puzzle of experiential justification

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Abstract: It is generally agreed that our beliefs must have epistemic justification if they are to count as knowledge. It is also a commonplace thought that our beliefs can be either *inferentially justified* or *empirically justified*. However, while the theory of inferential reasoning provides a theoretical framework for understanding how a belief may get inferential justification, we lack a similar framework for empirical justification. Indeed, since inferential justification is transmitted only from propositional contents to propositional contents, experiences cannot figure as part of this process, unless their qualitative format are translated in a propositional format. This paper aims at clarifying the nature of empirical justification by focusing on the longstanding problem of how experiences get a propositional content. After a rebuttal of two popular naturalization strategies, I will argue that also the phenomenal intentionality research program suffers from a critical flaw. Indeed, although experiences have intrinsic phenomenal intentionality, this is not sufficient for experience to obtain propositional content.

Keywords: epistemic justification, propositional content, phenomenal intentionality, mental content, naturalism.

1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that we need epistemic justification if our beliefs are to count as knowledge. It is also agreed that a subject is epistemically justified in believing something when the propositional content of this belief is logically inferred from the conjunction of the propositional contents of a set of justified beliefs. Accordingly, the subject S is justified in believing B1 by the set of beliefs B2...Bn if the following conditions occur:

- 1) S believes B1, B2, Bn
- 2) B1 has the propositional content PC_{B1} ;
- 3) B2 has the propositional content PC_{B2} ;
- 4) Bn has the propositional content PC_{Bn}
- 5) PC_{B1} is inferred from the conjunction of $PC_{B2} \dots PC_{Bn}$
- 6) B2 and Bn are justified beliefs

According to this “inferential process”, if I’m justified in believing, for example, that “if it rains, then Giulio is at home”, and if I’m justified in believing that “it rains”, then I’m also justified in believing that “Giulio is at home”. Notably, it is in force of the propositional format of the contents of our beliefs that we can adopt an inferential process of epistemic justification. Indeed, since inferences are arguments that move from true premises to true conclusions, having a propositional format is a necessary requirement for a belief to be considered a premise or a conclusion of an inferential reasoning.

Interestingly, epistemic beliefs have propositional contents because they are usually conceived as *representational states* (e.g., Dretske 2003), that is, states that describe something in a certain way. Notably, it is a constitutive part of our view of epistemic beliefs as representational states that they have a *propositional content*, whereby having an epistemic belief is tantamount to having a propositional content to believe.

It is also commonly agreed that a subject can obtain a justification for an epistemic belief by means of a suitable relation between the content of the belief and his or her own conscious experience. Indeed, the subject S is justified in believing B1 by means of the conscious experience E1 if the following conditions occur:

- 1) S believes B1
- 2) S has the conscious experience E1
- 3) B1 has the propositional content PC_{B1}
- 4) a suitable relation between PC_{B1} and E1 occurs

But what is this “suitable relation” between propositional contents and conscious experiences that justifies our beliefs B1?

To clarify this concept, it could be tempting to assume that the propositional contents of our epistemic beliefs relate to our conscious experiences in the same way they relate to other propositional contents. According to this view, conscious experiences are conceived as possible premises of an inferential reasoning, whose conclusion is the propositional content of an epistemic belief. This is what we do when we think that given a certain conscious experience, say a visual experience, we are justified in believing something. For example, it is common to think that if I’m justified in believing that “if I have the visual experience of the Tour Eiffel, then I’m in Paris”, and if it is the case that I have the visual experience of the Tour Eiffel, then I’m justified in believing that “I’m in Paris”.

However, since inferential processes are semantic relations between propositions, it is necessary that our conscious experiences *get propositional contents* to count as premises of an inferential process of justification. Therefore, the

subject S is inferentially justified in believing B1 by means of the conscious experience E1 if the following conditions occur:

- 1) S believes B1, B2, Bn
- 2) S has the conscious experience E1
- 3) B1 has the propositional content PC_{B1}
- 4) B2 has the propositional content PC_{B2}
- 5) Bn has the propositional content PC_{Bn}
- 6) E1 has the propositional content PC_{E1}
- 7) PC_{B1} can be inferred from the conjunction of PC_{E1} and $PC_{B2} \dots PC_{Bn}$
- 8) B2 and Bn are justified beliefs

According to this *inferential conception of justification*, conscious experiences are like beliefs, since both are characterized as having a propositional content. We have previously noted that an epistemic belief has a propositional content in virtue of being a representational state, that is, a state that describes something in a certain way. We have also noted that it is part of the very common notion of epistemic belief that it owns a propositional content, since having an epistemic belief is always having a propositional content to believe in. However, it is not so clear how a conscious experience receives its relationship with a propositional content. So the problem is: do conscious experiences represent something in a certain way as epistemic beliefs do?

It is another commonplace, though, to consider our conscious experiences as ways of relating us to something else. In conscious visual experiences, for example, things appear to us with visual properties. Differently, in conscious tactile experiences, something appears to us as endowed with tactile properties which are not the same as visual properties. In any case, conscious experiences are experiences of something that relates to the subject by means of a set of experiential properties. However, although conscious experiences are commonly conceived of as ways of relating to the description of something, as epistemic beliefs do, this is not enough to understand *whether* and *how* they gain propositional content. This is due to a distinctive feature of conscious experiences, that is, their being intrinsically related to a *qualitative format*.

According to a longstanding tradition, having a conscious experience is to have a subjective mental state in virtue of which there is something it is *like* for someone to undergo this state, that is, a *phenomenal character* that it has (e.g., Nagel 1974; Chalmers 1997; Tye 1986). The phenomenal character is precisely what makes a mental state the sort of conscious experience it is for a certain subject. Philosophers often use the term “qualia” to refer to the phenomenal character of our conscious experience, so that it is common to find the expression “qualitative state” in place of “conscious experience”. Most philosophers

agree that qualitative states are “non-propositional” in some sense, that is, they are not easily translatable into the subject’s natural language (e.g., Crane 1992; Peacocke 2001). Indeed, unlike beliefs, qualitative states can be thought independently of their descriptive value, so that one can have a conscious experience without having a description of something. More precisely, one may have qualitative states that are not related to any propositional content, since they do not refer to the description of any property of something. However, an important distinction between “wide” and “narrow” propositional content is possible.

In the debate on representational attitudes, starting with Putnam (1975), the content of a representational state is mostly thought to be “wide” when it can be related to the conditions of the subject’s environment. Therefore, qualitative states may have a *wide propositional content* when they are taken as representations concerning properties of some non-subjective bearer, that is, as true or false descriptions of external properties pertaining to the environmental objects (see also, Burge 1979). Differently, the propositional content of a qualitative state is thought to be *narrow* when it is determined only by the subject’s intrinsic properties. This view amounts to a form of internalism, since the propositional content of qualitative states is conceived as being independent from the conditions of the external environment and not referring to them (e.g., Chalmers 2003; Kriegel 2008; Loar 1988).

There are, furthermore, two relevant ways of considering the narrow content of qualitative states. One is to consider the propositional content of qualitative states as unrelated to the physical external conditions but related to the subject’s physical conditions upon which qualitative states supervene. This notion, call it *materialist narrow content*, is based on the intuition that two physically indistinguishable individuals could not have qualitative states with different contents. The other way to conceive of the narrow content of qualitative states is to relate it to the intrinsic phenomenality of consciousness. According to this view, call it *phenomenal narrow content*, qualitative states have a narrow content since they intrinsically relate to the phenomenal properties that characterize subjective consciousness. The phenomenal narrow content is today mainly related to the *phenomenal intentionality research program* (Kriegel 2013, 2015).

Returning to the assumption that qualitative states are “non-propositional” in some sense, we need to distinguish between the possibility of being non-propositional in a wide sense and being non-propositional in a narrow sense. It is generally agreed that to have either a wide content or a materialist narrow content, qualitative states must comply with naturalistic constraints that allow suitable interactions between the properties of the subject’s environment and body. Such constraints have been debated for decades and are now the object of theorizing of the naturalistic approaches to mental content (e.g., Millikan

2009). However, the cogency of such approaches is controversial, and there are good arguments today to resist the idea that qualitative states obtain wide propositional content by means of a naturalistic interaction with something.

Nevertheless, although it is possible that qualitative states are not about properties of the environment, it is difficult to think qualitative states are not about anything at all. Indeed, any qualitative state has a phenomenal property that makes it precisely the qualitative state it is. For example, perceptual qualitative states have visual, gustative, tactile, olfactory or auditory phenomenal properties; bodily sensations have phenomenal feelings, such as painfulness, hunger, or dizziness; passions have phenomenal feelings such as lovingness, hatefulness or quietude. Therefore, it seems necessary to conceive a qualitative state as something related to a specific phenomenal property. Like the case of beliefs, qualitative states are necessarily conceived of as states that are intrinsically about something, since there cannot be qualitative states that are not related to a phenomenal property. Accordingly, although qualitative states may not be in a *naturalistic relation* (e.g., a causal relation) with something, they are nonetheless about something and always have intrinsic phenomenal narrow content.

In the remainder of the paper, I will show that naturalistic approaches to conscious experiences find serious troubles, and they are unsuitable for explaining how qualitative states obtain their contents (Sections 2-3). Then, I will argue that a non-naturalistic approach to conscious experience can secure the narrow content of qualitative states, but that it is not enough to make our experiences suitable for the epistemic justification of our beliefs (Sections 3-4). Indeed, although qualitative states have an intrinsic phenomenal narrow content, the epistemic justification of our beliefs requires wide propositional contents.

Interestingly, the problem of the origin of propositional content is relevant not only for attributing epistemic justification to humans, but also for attributing an epistemic status to artificial systems. Indeed, a relevant issue in artificial intelligence is to understand whether and how non-natural systems can acquire information from the environment as natural systems commonly do. A shared prejudice is that while artificial systems have not intrinsic informational states, natural systems like humans are endowed with states characterized by intrinsic information since they are intentional systems for their very nature. According to this view, the only way to attribute the ability to acquire information from the environment to an artificial system is to “interpret” its behavior from an external point of view, that is, from the point of view of a human agent who is intrinsically equipped with intentionality.

2. *Does experience track the environment?*

Over the last few decades, research on the origin of the content of mental states has been dominated by what has been commonly referred as the “tracking theories” (hereafter TTs) (e.g., Dretske 1988; Fodor 1987; Millikan 2009; Papineau 1987). When applied to the problem of conscious experience, the main goal of this view has been to naturalize the content of qualitative states by reducing it to tracking relations holding between the phenomenality of consciousness and the physical properties of the environment. The underlining assumption of this view is that experience is nowise a special mental state, whereby its content, if it has one, should be conceived as nothing but the by-product of a natural interaction with the environment. Accordingly, since TTs aim to establish a relation between mental content and the environment, they support the view that the content of our conscious mental states is dependent on external objective properties. Although this line of research is plagued by various problems, many scholars endorse it with the hope they will be solved sooner or later, so it arguably remains the most popular approach to the content of qualitative states today.

The tracking approach states that the content of experiential qualitative states is primarily a tracking relation, where tracking is conceived as a function of corresponding with the environment, detecting information about the surrounding conditions. According to this view, qualitative states are conceived of as “transparent representations” of the objects’ properties (Tye 2000), whereby the phenomenality that characterizes the what it’s like of an experience is presented to the subject as delivering information about something else. In other words, phenomenal properties are not presented to the subject as properties of the experience itself; rather, having an experience is like “seeing through it” towards the bearers of the phenomenal properties that are presented to the subject. Although phenomenal properties only show up within someone’s conscious experience, they are about something external to the subjectivity of consciousness, such that they can be considered as delivering true or false information of an objective state of affairs (Dretske 1995).

TTs have traditionally been framed in terms of *causal relations* among mental states and the environment. This is not because the concept of causality is well understood nor because there is a consensus among scholars concerning the nature of causal relations. However, since the relation of causality seems to underlie our way of characterizing much of what goes on in our natural environment, it has generally been considered the best candidate in the attempt to render a naturalistic account of mental content. Stampe (1977), for example, has offered an influential development of a tracking theory of content suitable

for application to mental states. According to Stampe, if an object having certain properties is to be represented, that object *must cause* the representational vehicle to have several of its properties. In particular, Stampe has held a theory of tracking based on the causal preservation of *isomorphic* structures through the represented target and the representational vehicle. This means that for there to be an instance of representation, the relationships among elements in the representing structure should mirror the relationships among elements in the represented target.

After Stampe, Dretske (1981) developed what may today be the most influential tracking theory of content. He approached the issue by relying on Shannon's information theory concepts (Shannon 1948) concerning generation and transmission of data by causal chains. This view assumes that the state of the system receiving that signal may reveal something about the source. Notably, a mental state may be conceived of as equipped for carrying information about the environment in virtue of a causal chain linking the former to the latter. According to what is generally known as the "crude causal theory of content", indeed, the state M tracks the environmental condition E just in case the occurrence of M-type states is nomically dependent upon the occurrence of E-type conditions, where this means that the content of M-type states is about E-type states, since it is brought about by E-type states.

Although the crude causal theory of content is highly intuitive, the attribution of informational content so constructed may prove problematic when dealing with ambiguous contexts. Indeed, one may be unable to identify the causal information carried by a signal, because a signal may have more than one causal source. For example, my present experience of a horse on the top of the hill in front of my window can be caused by the actual presence of a horse or by the presence of a cow that looks like a horse from afar. Accordingly, in order for my experience to have a specific content, a more specific criterion of discrimination is needed.

To escape this problem, Dretske (1981) developed a more sophisticated theory on which mental states are about whatever causes or would cause them during a specified *learning period*. Accordingly, since cows from afar can cause an experience of "horse" in a subject, during the learning period, a teacher instructs the subject to attribute the right content to the right causal relation. Nevertheless, even with Dretske's hypothesis of a learning period, we need to characterize this period without relying on the function of others' intentional states. This, of course, is one of the principle assumptions of naturalistic approaches to representation. However, as Fodor suggests, this solution relies precisely on an appeal to a teacher's intention in shaping reference ascription (Fodor 1984), resulting in nothing but a circular explanation.

On Fodor's view, differently, a state M carries the content C about the object O, just in case the presence of Os in the environment cause the occurrence of Ms in normal circumstances; and for any other object Qs that may cause Ms, the connection between Q and M is *asymmetrically dependent* on the connection between O and M. The asymmetry of the dependence of mental states on environmental states is cashed out counterfactually, so that the causal connection between Q and M depends on the causal connection between O and M just in case if the latter were to break, the former would also break. For example, on this view, a mental state, call it "horse", is about the occurrence of a horse if there is a robust causal connection between the mental state "horse" and the occurrence of a horse, such that, even if the alleged connection between a cow and "horse" were to break, the connection between the horse and "horse" would remain intact (Fodor, 1984, 1987).

One basic problem with this proposal, however, is that *asymmetric dependencies* do not help in providing a general criterion for content ascription. Indeed, using Fodor's asymmetric theory of content determination, one may say that there is an asymmetry between representing a horse as a "horse" and representing a cow as a "horse", inasmuch as a cow can be represented as a "horse" if a horse can be represented as a "horse". This would make the cases of a cow represented as a "horse" dependent on the case of a horse represented as a "horse", giving the latter a primacy over the former. But why should we assume that someone's mental state naturally represents a horse as a "horse"? Indeed, it is always possible that, even if the subject has represented a cow as a "horse", the subject has never represented a horse as a "horse", because, for instance, he or she has never seen a horse. Accordingly, the asymmetric causal dependence of one content over another is made relative to the subject's story of interaction with the environment and, therefore, cannot be used as a general criterion for content ascription.

3. *Tracking theories and the teleological issue*

It should be noted that the real issue of a tracking theory of content is that of defining the right causes without running into the instances of the wrong ones. Indeed, a mental state, say an experience, cannot be about horses unless non-horses (including cows) are left out of the extension of its content. Accordingly, finding a criterion for content ascription and finding a theory of *misrepresentation* are two sides of the same coin.

A possible way out of this dilemma could be to ascribe the *purpose* of carrying an informational content to a representational system. Such a strategy

may explain how misrepresentations are possible by citing cases in which the alleged purposes of a representational system turn out to be disregarded. This is precisely the path followed by the program that has come to be known the *teleological theory of semantics*, or simply *teleosemantics* (Millikan 2009). Teleosemantics endorses a naturalistic worldview and aims to show how representational states have a place in nature, borrowing concepts from the framework of the theory of evolution. To this aim, teleosemantics relies on evolutionary conditions that underlie the explanation of an organism's behavior. To be precise, teleosemantics differs from other causal TTs of content in its reliance on the notion of *function*. Indeed, teleosemantics aims to explain the truth conditions of representational states not only in terms of causal functions but precisely in terms of the *evolutionary functions* of those states.

Evolutionary functions entered the debate about the nature of mental content during the eighties with the ground-breaking works by Millikan (1984), Papineau (1984) and, later, Dretske (1995). Much of the allurements usually ascribed to this view concerns its ability to borrow basic notions from biology to deal with the problem of content ascription. Particularly, the notion of *proper function* has been used to address the problem of misrepresentation that plagues standard tracking approaches to content ascription. Interestingly, proper functions are kinds of purposes that biologists usually assign to organisms, or parts of them, in order to indicate what *things are for*. More precisely, the proper function of a trait is the function ascribed to it in a functional analysis of its capacity to survive and perpetuate itself because it possesses precisely that trait. Accordingly, a trait will have a proper function only if it has been selected because it performs an adaptive biological role.

On Millikan's view (Millikan 1989), for example, proper functions are explicitly cashed out within the framework of evolutionary theory, so that a system's proper function is the function it performed in the system's ancestors and that allowed them to be selected for. According to teleosemantics, indeed, the content of a mental state can be conceived about whatever environmental condition the system needs to be in place in order to perform its proper function. For example, the experience of a certain subject is about horses, rather than cows, if being about horses played an evolutive role in making it possible for the subject's ancestors to be selected for reproduction.

However, teleosemantics does not escape from the same problem that plagues standard TTs of content, since the reference to an evolutionary context is inadequate to delete a certain degree of indeterminateness about the content that a mental state conveys. The trouble is that although one can have a good hypothesis about the evolutionary function of an organism's trait, many other well-supported hypotheses ascribing an evolutionary plausible function

to the same trait may be formulated. In other words, biological functions are *empirically underdetermined*, such that for any evolutionary justification supporting the attribution of a specific content to a mental state, there are many other equivalent evolutionary justifications for the attribution of many different contents.

There are also possible counterexamples that make the teleological approach problematic. For instance, the fanciful case of swamp-persons is an effective counterexample to teleological TTs (Davidson 1987). It seems at least conceivable that a physical duplicate of a subject could emerge from a swamp by pure chance having the same mental state of the original subject but without sharing his or her evolutionary history. Accordingly, on the teleological view, the experiences of this swamp-person would not have any determined content, since it would lack a determinate evolutionary history. However, it seems counterintuitive to think that it is necessary that a person like this has no experiences or mental states at all (Pietroski 1992).

It should be noted, moreover, that it is a common constraint of a naturalistic view to assume that natural evolution operates only through ecological variables such as organisms' traits and environmental features. This, and only this, makes it possible to theorize that environmental stimuli exert a selective pressure on individuals of a certain population via causal interaction. In particular, since evolution cannot operate in the absence of genuine causal events, arguments involving hypothetical reasoning and non-actual scenarios prove ineffective in explaining the expression of a trait. Assuming that the emergence of traits and functions relies on the counterfactual assessment of an evolutive story means crediting natural selection with the ability to abstract from actual situations, and then to forecast future scenarios. In other words, a counterfactual account of an evolutionary history resolves in ascribing capacities typical of a mindful caregiver to natural selection, and this, of course, lies beyond the boundaries of a naturalistic worldview.

To sum up, although TTs of content aim to account for the wide content of mental states in terms of causal relations with the environment, it seems difficult to specify causal relations that are able to univocally connect our mental states to the relevant properties of the environment.

4. *The phenomenal grounding of content*

Over the last few decades, we have assisted in the arrival of consensus for a kind of theory that radically differs from the tracking theory of qualitative states content, namely, the phenomenal intentionality theory (PIT). According

to PIT, intentionality is basically a matter of phenomenal consciousness and does not involve naturalistic relations with other things, such as environmental objects or bodily constituents. Among the early proponents of PIT are philosophers such as Loar, Searle and Strawson (e.g., Loar 1987; Searle 1991; Strawson 1994). More recently, a number of scholars such as Horgan, Tienson, Graham, Farkas, Bourget, Mendelovici, and Kriegel (Bourget 2010; Farkas 2008; Horgan & Tienson 2002; Kriegel 2013; Mendelovici & Bourget 2014) have carried on the paradigm, injecting new ideas into the debate.

The guiding idea behind PIT is that the source of the content of our experience lies within our consciousness, since it is precisely when the relevant phenomenal character of consciousness shows up that a relation with something makes its appearance on the scene. PIT assumes that the key ingredient giving rise to contentful experiential states is grounded in the subjective phenomenal consciousness (Pautz 2013) and that it is the phenomenality of our qualitative states that “injects” contentfulness into the world (Kriegel 2013). In other words, the content of experience emerges together with its phenomenal character, so that phenomenality and contentfulness have to be conceived as two inextricable properties of the qualitative consciousness.

Interestingly, PIT has the resources to avoid the worries with the tracking theory described in the previous section. For example, by assuming that the content of experience is determined by what goes on in the subjective consciousness, the hypothesis that a molecule-for-molecule duplicate of the subject suddenly showing up does not cause any worry. Indeed, conceded that identical bodies have identical phenomenal states, there would be no problem in assuming that a copy of me has also a copy of my phenomenal properties, since no teleological arguments are involved in PIT. For similar reasons, PIT avoids falling into the misrepresentation problem. Indeed, according to PIT, what experiences represent are just the phenomenal properties that we token when we have an experience. In the case of colors, for example, they might be primitive properties because they qualitatively appear to be so to the subject of the experience (for example, what Chalmers 2006 calls “edenic colors”). If this is what we represent when we have the visual experience of colors, it seems there is no room for misrepresentation cases.

Advocates of PIT claim that there are qualitative states, that is, conscious states with a phenomenal character, which content is either identical to or directly grounded in their phenomenality. Accordingly, the content of our experience can be conceived of as something that arises directly from the subjective consciousness, without requiring a commitment with any naturalistic assumption about the environment. The most common example of phenomenal intentional states is represented by perceptual experience. In perceptual experi-

ence, indeed, the subject's qualitative consciousness is entirely constituted by the occurrence of phenomenal states such as colors, sounds, tastes and smells, together with their countless qualities and differences. Accordingly, once one has a visual experience characterized by a reddish phenomenal state, it is also necessary that he or she has an experience with a shade of red, since a perceptual experience of a color is always something constituted by a specific shade. This makes it possible to think of visual experiences as something endowed with an exemplar of a qualitative state, whether it be a specific nuance of red or a different one. It is precisely this characterization that makes it possible to think about the phenomenality of visual consciousness as something endowed with the intrinsic richness that characterizes the qualitative spectrum of our visual experiences. Indeed, the richness of the visual qualitative spectrum is strictly dependent on the possibility of differentiating between states with a different quality.

Concerning the qualitative richness that accompanies our visual experience, it should be noted that the multitude of available visual qualities is a precondition for us to have visual experiences that are different from each other. Indeed, without any possible variability in the qualitative spectrum, our experience would be completely devoid of differences, so much as it would be quite meaningless to think about experiences with different identities. Moreover, since our visual experience is constituted by nothing other than qualitative states, having no differences in the qualitative spectrum precludes any interesting possibility to describe it by means of propositional assertions.

To sum up, we have seen that endorsing PIT provides resources to overcome problems with common naturalistic approaches based on tracking theories. Indeed, on the one hand, PIT has no trouble with the possibility that different subjects with radically different tracking histories – or no histories at all – share the same qualitative states and contents. On the other hand, PIT does not encounter misrepresentation issues, since according to this view, what an experience represents is not something allegedly ambiguous, like a natural property of the environment. Rather, for PIT, what experiences represent are just the phenomenal properties that manifest themselves with their differences when having the experience of something. Finally, it has been stated that it is precisely in virtue of this richness of phenomenal properties that it is possible to think about different experiences with different propositional contents. Indeed, if the qualitative spectrum of our experiences were not characterized by a plurality of phenomenal properties, there would not be differences to describe by means of contents with a propositional format. Accordingly, the possibility of an experience to have a propositional content is related to having a plurality of phenomenal properties as a constituent of the experience itself.

5. *Phenomenality and the Issue of Categorical Predicates*

PIT faces its own challenges. To be a suitable answer to the question of how experience obtains propositional content, it has to provide a treatment of the phenomenality that is referred to as the proper source of the experiential justification. It might be tempting, indeed, to argue that the phenomenal properties that constitute the qualitative consciousness have a *determinate* propositional content and, therefore, are true or false regarding something. This amounts to the challenge of explaining how qualitative states can correctly or incorrectly be about something, yielding truth and accuracy. This is, of course, what is required for an experience to be relevant in the epistemic justification of our beliefs.

The problem is that the phenomenality of the qualitative consciousness is something that directly manifests itself only from within, that is, from the first-person perspective on the world. The qualities of phenomena are something one is acquainted with only within the boundaries of one's own consciousness. This, of course, takes for granted that the content of qualitative states is constitutively narrow, since it is inherently related to the phenomenality of the subjective consciousness. According to PIT, therefore, qualitative states intrinsically possess only a phenomenal narrow content, wherein aboutness does not overcome the boundaries of the subjective immanence.

The main trouble with subjective immanentism in our case is that it is difficult to understand how to secure the correct application of the categories that are required to form a propositional content. According to a general definition, propositional contents are true or false descriptions whose accuracy depends on the correct or incorrect application of a categorical predicate to a target subject. It is a platitude, moreover, that to apply a categorical predicate to a target we need to be able to discriminate such a target from something else. Accordingly, in order for a qualitative state to be the target of a categorical predicate, it should be possible to discriminate it from something else. However, it is difficult to understand how it is possible to discriminate something from something else by means of nothing but the resources of the subjective immanence.

For example, suppose you have a visual experience with a particular reddish phenomenal character. Now suppose also that this reddish experience ends without being instantly replaced by another visual experience. This may happen if the reddish experience is the last experience just before you fall into a dreamless sleep. When you wake up, the first experience you have is something you would be disposed to consider the same reddish experience you had before falling asleep. Of course, this is something we do frequently in our everyday life, for example, when, after having blinked the eyes, we assume

that the phenomenal properties of our experience have not changed before and after the blink.

But what guarantees that you are correct in categorizing the experience you are currently having as the same experience you already had, even though you are not having that former experience now? The two reddish experiences could be different, and you could continue to consider them as the same reddish experience, without any fear of being disproved (this phenomenon is called “change blindness”). The immanence of the subjective consciousness, indeed, does not have enough resources to discriminate between the phenomenal character of an occurrent experience and a non-occurrent one. This means that a purely immanent analysis does not provide, by itself, the sufficient conditions to secure the correctness of the discrimination of one qualitative state from another (Wittgenstein noted this point in his elegant example of the sensation diary, 1953, §258).

The consequences for PIT of the impossibility of proceeding with a purely immanent discrimination of our qualitative states should not be underestimated here. Indeed, the impossibility of performing a purely immanent discrimination between phenomenal properties prevents us from considering experience as the subject target of categorical predicates. Accordingly, since being the subject target of categorical predicates is a necessary condition for being the subject target of a propositional content, it seems that a purely immanent analysis leaves us without sufficient resources to establish how experiences can be the subject target of propositional contents. This unless, contrary to PIT, we rely on something that goes beyond the boundaries of the mere phenomenal immanence.

To sum up, although PIT has the resources to overcome many classical problems affecting the naturalistic approach, since it endorses a purely immanent approach, it not has enough resources to establish how the phenomenality of consciousness could be able to discriminate qualitative states with different contents. This amount to recognizing the inability of PIT to explain how conscious experiences obtain their propositional contents.

6. *Conclusions*

Most of our knowledge about objects and events has to do with our conscious experience. The problem of how our conscious experience of objects justifies our beliefs is among the most intriguing puzzles in contemporary epistemology. Since beliefs and experience have been traditionally conceived as conveyed by, respectively, a propositional format and a qualitative format,

it is difficult to understand how they can interact with each other. However, it is common to conceive of some of our beliefs as inferentially justified from experience. Notably, since non-propositional states cannot be part of an act of inferential reasoning, the problem of empirical justification of beliefs is to understand how conscious experiences may obtain a propositional format and refer to the objects of knowledge.

A traditional attempt to solve this puzzle is to consider conscious experiences as beliefs, in that both can track something. According to this approach, the content of conscious experience is the consequence of an asymmetric nomological interaction with its object, so that it can be conceived of as the effect of something else. However, this crude causal theory of content is unable to explain why and how conscious experiences misrepresent their objects, and therefore, it cannot be used as a suitable criterion for content determination. The teleological theory of mental content aims to save tracking theories from the misrepresentation issue by assuming that conscious experience has a determinate content because it has been selected to have precisely this content. However, teleological views suffer from the problem of not being able to account for counterfactual conditions, such as those in which subjects with a different evolutive path have conscious states with the same contents.

A different view on the origin of experiential justification is based on the idea that conscious qualitative states obtain their contents in virtue of the phenomenal character of experience. According to this view, in a conscious experience, a rich spectrum of qualities is given to the subject, so that all conscious experiences are always experiences about a spectrum of qualities. Interestingly, it is precisely because experiential conscious states can be about a rich spectrum of qualities that a variety of experiences are possible. However, although this view secures the intrinsic aboutness of conscious states, it does not have the resources to secure the propositional format that is needed for conscious experiences to be a justification of our beliefs. The main problem is that the phenomenal intentionality approach is bounded within the subjective consciousness, and a purely immanent approach to mental content prevents us to apply stable criteria for discriminating one quality from another. Indeed, the lack of a purely immanent way to discriminate among qualitative states does not allow for establishing how to attribute categorical predicates to experience.

To sum up, the aim of this paper has been to show that neither a purely naturalistic nor a purely phenomenic approach can account for the way experience obtains a propositional content. This opens the door to an interpretivist approach to conscious experience, according to which more-pragmatic

considerations take the place of foundational ones. Interestingly, this conclusion also questions the shared prejudice according to which humans, but not artificial systems are equipped with some intrinsic intentionality.

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