Seeing through Transparency

Davide Bordini
Department of Philosophy
University of Fribourg
davide.bordini@gmail.com

Abstract. Since the 1990s the so-called transparency of experience has played a crucial role in core debates in philosophy of mind. However, recent developments in the literature have made transparency itself quite opaque. The very idea of *transparent experience* has become quite fuzzy, due to the articulation of many different notions of transparency and transparency theses. Absent a unified logical space where these notions and theses can be mapped and confronted, we are left with an overall impression of conceptual chaos. This is a problem, given the constant and ubiquitous references to transparency in the literature and its prominent position in the contemporary philosophy of mind. My goal in this paper is to restore clarity through proper analysis of the mutual relations between the different transparency theses. This allows me to uncover a unitary multidimensional logical space where existing (as well as possible) views can be properly singled out and located.

***

1 Introduction

Drawing on some well-known remarks by G.E. Moore (1903),[1] in the 1990s Gilbert Harman (1990) and Michael Tye (1995, 2000) famously claimed that experience is transparent: in introspecting what it's like for you to undergo an experience, the only things you are aware of are the (apparently) worldly objects your experience is of and their properties, and nothing else—in particular, no property of your experience itself is revealed to you by introspection.

This claim has crucially impinged on core debates in the contemporary philosophy of mind, notably concerning perceptual experience and consciousness more generally. Standardly, transparency has been appealed to as twofold evidence in favor of *externalist accounts* of experience—roughly, views according to which the conscious aspects of experience are determined by one's being in the appropriate relation with things in the external environment and their properties (e.g., Harman 1990; Tye 1995, 2000; Dretske 1996;

---

[1] See also Reid (1764/1970). However, it is a matter of debate whether Moore and Reid had in mind the same strong claim made by Harman and Tye (see, e.g., Kind 2003).

Martin 2002; Kennedy 2009)—and against their *internalist* competitors—views that deny that the external environment plays a constitutive role in consciousness.

The recent developments of the literature, however, have made transparency itself quite opaque. The very idea of *transparent experience* has now become quite elusive and fuzzy. Some theorists (e.g., Kind 2003, 2007; Soteriou 2011, 2013; Gow 2016; Aydede 2019) have called into question Harman's and Tye's claim and distinguished different senses of transparency, as well as transparency theses (e.g., strong vs. weak transparency; metaphysical vs. phenomenological transparency). Absent a unified logical space where these notions and theses can be mapped and confronted, we are left with an overall impression of conceptual chaos. In this context, both insiders and outsiders have a hard time getting oriented in the existing transparency literature. That is a problem, given the constant and ubiquitous references to transparency in the literature and its prominent position in contemporary philosophy of mind. My goal in this paper is to restore clarity.

By offering a systematic reconstruction of the debate on the transparency of experience, I aim to give it structure. The key is a proper analysis of the mutual relations between the different transparency theses (§§3-4). Upon closer inspection, I will suggest, they help identify different *dimensions* along which transparency views can vary and differ. This allows me to uncover a unitary multidimensional logical space where existing (as well as possible) views can be properly singled out and located (§§5-6). Thereby, I hope to turn a fragmented and chaotic mosaic of notions and claims into a unitary and coherent picture. My discussion begins with reconstructing Harman's and Tye's takes on transparency, which may be considered the *standard* way of understanding transparency (§2).

2 The standard understanding of transparency

After reviewing Harman's and Tye's understanding of transparency (§2.1) and its (alleged) consequences (§2.2), I will highlight the motivations that have recently led some to revise Harman's and Tye's claims on transparency (§2.3).

2.1 Harman's and Tye's transparency thesis

Let us consider two famous passages from Harman and Tye:

> When Eloise sees a tree before her, the colors she experiences are all experienced as features of the tree and its surroundings. None of them are experienced as intrinsic features of her experience. Nor does she experience any features of anything as intrinsic features of her experiences. And that is true of you too. … When you see a tree, you do not experience any features as intrinsic features of your experience. Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to the intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict that you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree. (Harman 1990: 39)

> Focus your attention on a square that has been painted blue. Intuitively, you are directly aware of blueness and squareness as out there in the world away from you, as features of an external surface. Now shift your gaze inward and try to become aware of your experience itself, inside you, apart from its objects. Try to focus your attention on some intrinsic feature of the experience that distinguishes it from other experiences, something other than what it is an experience of. The task seems impossible: one's awareness seems always to slip through the experience to blueness and squareness, as instantiated together in an external object. In turning one's mind inward to attend to the experience, one seems to end up concentrating on what is outside again, on external features or properties. (Tye 1995: 30)

The idea is clear. Consider your current visual experience and try to introspectively focus on what it's like for you to have it, its *phenomenal character*. Harman and Tye maintain that, in so doing, you only seem to be aware of features of the externally located objects that you see—their color, shape, location (relative to other things in the environment), and so on. In short, what you see exhausts what you introspect. If you were originally looking for some conscious features of the experience over and above those involved in *what* you experience, you will be disappointed: nothing like that seems to be revealed by introspection.

The lesson that Harman and especially Tye draw is summarized clearly by Tye himself:

> [T]he key transparency claims are as follows: in a case of normal perception, if we introspect:
>
> (1)   We are not aware of features of our visual experience.
> (2)   We are not aware of the visual experience itself.
> (3)   We cannot attend to features of the visual experience.
> (4)   The only features of which we are aware and to which we can attend are external features (colors and shapes of surfaces, for example). (Tye 2014: 41)

Moreover, at least according to Tye, the same remarks apply *across the board*. As he writes: 'visual experience … is transparent or diaphanous, as is *phenomenal consciousness generally*' (1995: 31, my emphasis).

All this can be condensed in the following twofold claim:

> **(HT Transparency)** In introspecting one's own experience, (a) one is *not* aware of/*cannot* attend to features of the experience itself. Rather, (b) one is only aware of/can *only* attend to features of the externally located objects one's experience is of.

This is the *standard understanding of transparency*. This is not meant to suggest that Harman's and Tye's characterization of transparency is correct or is the point of convergence of a general and widespread consensus—a standard understanding of transparency in this sense is quite hard to find. Rather, I mean to convey the idea that it has been the *center of gravity* of the debate on transparency. That is, over the last three decades, it has been the way of characterizing transparency that almost everyone would quote and critically discuss—in short, the view to be endorsed, attacked, revised or fine-tuned.

2.2 The Argument from Transparency

HT Transparency has been used as an introspective premise in an argument for a twofold conclusion with a negative and a positive element. The *negative element* speaks against internalist accounts, which cast phenomenal character as fully determined by certain introspectable qualitative properties that experience possesses independently of what goes on in the external environment.[2] The *positive element* (allegedly) speaks in favor of some version of externalism—the view according to which phenomenal character (at least in part) depends on one's being somehow directly related to the external environment. Here is one way to put the argument:[3]

---

[2] Traditionally, some internalists have construed phenomenal character in terms of *qualia* understood as non-representational or only contingently representational qualitative features of the experience (e.g., Block 1996, 2003). That view, known as *qualia* theory, is the view that Harman and Tye originally meant to attack. However, there are also representationalist versions of internalism, so I prefer not to cast those features as non-representational by definition. (Also, I will avoid *qualia*-talk to avoid any non-representationalist connotation.) For example, they might be manners or ways of representing a certain content (Chalmers 2004), attitudes toward a content (Crane 2006, 2009) or phenomenal contents that do not depend constitutively on one's relation to the environment (Horgan and Tienson 2002; Horgan, Tienson, and Graham 2004; Kriegel 2007, 2011; Mendelovici 2018). HT Transparency can be used as evidence against these internalist versions of representationalism, too. Briefly, if qualitative features are ways of representing a content, then the thought is that introspection does not reveal any way of representing, but only ways in which things are represent*ed* as being or even *are*. If they are phenomenal contents, they are ruled out, as long as it is true that we are introspectively aware only of properties of external objects, as HT Transparency states.

[3] For the sake of simplicity, I am formulating the argument in terms of awareness. A formulation in terms of attention might involve further complications not relevant for our present discussion (cf. Tye 2014).

Argument from Transparency

(P1) If internalism is true, then one should be introspectively aware of features of the experience itself.

(P2) In introspecting one's experience, one is not aware of features of the experience itself (but only of features of the externally located objects one's experience is of). Therefore,

(C)   Internalism is false (and some version of externalism is true).

P1 is typically accepted by internalists. So, they react by rejecting P2, namely, HT Transparency.

As it stands, the argument says that *some* version of externalism is true. Now, at least as far as perceptual experience is concerned, externalism about phenomenal character comes in two main versions. According to *externalist representationalism*, experience is a representation relation, understood in terms of tracking (Dretske 1981, 1988; Fodor 1990). *Naïve realism* casts experience as an even more direct relation to worldly properties and things, usually spelled out in terms of a non-representational relation of acquaintance. One might then wonder whether the argument can be pushed a little further to claim that HT Transparency supports one version of externalism over the other.[4] That is a delicate issue and settling it goes beyond the scope of this paper. So, I will set it aside.

The argument claims that HT Transparency supports an externalist take on phenomenal character. However, this does not mean that *any* externalist *accepts*, or *should* accept, HT Transparency (see also §3.1). For example, some externalists (often naïve realists) construe phenomenal character as involving more than just external objects or properties—e.g., the experiencer and their standpoint (Campbell 2009) or features of the experiential relation itself (Martin 2004; Richardson 2010, 2014; Soteriou 2011, 2013). Now, this seems in tension with HT Transparency (see French 2018: 155). Thus, some externalists may want to reject HT Transparency (though they may accept other understandings of transparency).

---

[4] Originally, the argument was put forward to support Harman's (1990) and Tye's (1995, 2000) externalist representationalism. Partly, that was due to the original setting of the debate, in which naïve realism did not feature as an option—Harman and Tye used HT Transparency to attack the internalist construal of phenomenal character in terms of introspectable qualitative features or sense data. One more principled reason might be that if HT Transparency holds across different experiential domains, then representationalism has an advantage: representationalism is a theory of consciousness in general, while naïve realism is a theory of perception only. Another reason might be that representationalism has been traditionally taken to offer a better explanation of the phenomenal continuity between veridical and non-veridical cases of perception, which both seem to be transparent. However, those are far from conclusive reasons, and naïve realists have their own replies to offer.

The take-home message is this: internalists have obvious reasons to reject HT Transparency. However, some externalists might find it unsatisfying, too. So, interestingly, the acceptance/rejection of HT Transparency does not (perfectly) map onto the externalist/internalist opposition.[5] Criticisms to HT Transparency might come from within the externalist camp, too.

2.3 Revising transparency

To block the Argument from Transparency, one must reject HT Transparency. In the early stages of the debate, the general strategy was to produce (putative) counterexamples. Opponents of HT Transparency appealed to cases such as afterimages, phosphenes or blurry vision, as well as itches, pains, orgasms, and moods to argue that we are directly aware of certain qualities of the experience (e.g., Boghossian and Velleman 1989; Block 1996, 2003). Notice: implicit in the debate was the assumption that HT Transparency is the *only* way to look at transparency. So, in that context, the rejection of HT Transparency went hand in hand with the more radical claim that experience is *not* transparent. Consequently, a *rejectionist* attitude toward transparency was generally adopted by opponents of HT Transparency.

Recently, a subtler strategy has emerged that incorporates a more *revisionist* attitude: instead of focusing on counterexamples and concluding that experience is not transparent, many theorists have argued that HT Transparency simply gets transparency wrong.[6] The general structure of their response is something like the following. First, they distinguish and contrast two notions of transparency—e.g., *strong* vs. *weak* transparency (Kind 2003; Soteriou 2011, 2013); *metaphysical* vs. *phenomenological* transparency (Gow 2016); *s-transparency* vs. *transparency datum* (Aydede 2019). Second, they claim that one of the two notions, typically the stronger, captures the notion of transparency presupposed by HT Transparency. Third, they argue that the phenomenon we observe introspectively is the other, typically weaker, one. Thereby, they block the Argument from Transparency without denying transparency altogether.

---

[5] So, interestingly, while a commitment to HT Transparency seems built into Harman's and Tye's externalist representationalism (Kind 2003, 2007; Aydede 2019), this does not seem to be true of externalism in general.
[6] The rejectionism/revisionism distinction is meant to capture a difference in attitude and interest rather than in substance. Once the more fine-grained distinctions are in place, some rejectionists might be happy to accept that experience is transparent *in some sense* (or to some extent), if that implies a rejection of HT Transparency. After all, a subtler criticism might just be a way of refining previously advanced, more coarse-grained critiques. I think this is true of views like Block's and Kind's, which are often very close to each other—but Block has a rejectionist attitude while Kind adopts a revisionist one.

My aim here is not to critically assess this line of reply. I just want to stress that the adoption of a revisionist attitude in response to the Argument from Transparency is the main source of the multitude of transparency theses we currently find in the literature. With that in mind, we can now set aside the motivations behind revisionism to focus on its *products*: the different transparency theses. In what follows, I will not take a stance on what (if any) is the right view on transparency or what (if anything) transparency suggests about consciousness. Rather, my main goal will be to give structure to the debate. The first step in that direction was to clarify the standard understanding of transparency and lay out the background that led to the current proliferation of transparency theses. The next step is to build up a unitary logical space, where the different views can be mapped.

3 Distinctions and transparency theses

In this section, I present the main distinctions between transparency theses drawn in the literature, highlighting the dialectical import of each. To keep things simple, I set aside considerations about the scope of transparency until §6. So, I conduct the discussion having in mind mainly perceptual experience—and, in particular, veridical visual experience.

3.1 Strong vs. weak transparency

Amy Kind (2003) distinguishes between *strong* and *weak* transparency:

> *Strong Transparency*: it is *impossible* to attend directly to our experience, i.e., we cannot attend to our experience except by attending to the objects represented by that experience.

> *Weak Transparency*: it is *difficult* (but not impossible) to attend directly to our experience, i.e., we can most easily attend to our experience by attending to the objects represented by that experience. (Kind 2003: 230)

Matthew Soteriou (2011, 2013) also distinguishes between a stronger and a weaker version of transparency:

> According to the stronger version [of the transparency thesis], introspection of one's perceptual experience reveals *only* the objects, qualities, and relations one is apparently perceptually aware of in having the experience. According to the weaker version, when one introspectively attends to what it is like for one to be having a perceptual experience, it seems to one as though one can only do so by

attending to the sorts of objects, qualities, and relations one is apparently perceptually aware of in having that experience. (Soteriou 2011: 193-4)

The two distinctions are similar but do not perfectly overlap. Kind's Strong Transparency claims that we can only attend to our experience by attending to what experience is of. But that, *per se*, does *not* exclude that something about the experience itself, other than what it is of, is introspectable. In principle, then, Kind's strong thesis is compatible with the following two mutually exclusive interpretations:

> **(Interpretation 1)** We can only introspect what the experience is of. So, we cannot introspectively attend to anything other than that.
>
> **(Interpretation 2)** We can introspect *some* features of the experience (other than what it is of), but it is impossible to attend to them without (or in isolation from) attending to what the experience is of.

Interpretations 1 and 2 look very much like (respectively) Soteriou's stronger and weaker thesis. In this respect, Soteriou's distinction is more fine-grained than Kind's. At the same time, it seems to leave out Kind's Weak Transparency. One natural move, then, is to combine the two distinctions. Thus:

> **(Ultra-Strong Transparency)** Introspection only reveals what experience is of. It is impossible to introspectively attend to anything other than that.
>
> **(Strong Transparency)** *Some* features of the experience (other than what it is of) are introspectable, but it is *impossible* to introspectively attend to them without (or in isolation from) attending to what the experience is of.
>
> **(Weak Transparency)** *Some* features of the experience (other than what it is of) are introspectable, and it is *not* impossible (though it might be *difficult*) to introspectively attend to them without (or in isolation from) attending to what the experience is of.

These three theses take different stances on (a) what and (b) how we introspect. They are built around two main contrasts: (i) direct vs. indirect introspective attention;[7] (ii) what the experience is of vs. features of the experience *other than* what it is of.[8]

Ultra-Strong Transparency is in line with Harman's and Tye's views on transparency. However, it can find supporters in the internalist camp, too. For example, so-called phenomenal intentionality theorists—internalist representationalists who construe phenomenal character as phenomenal content (e.g., Horgan and Tienson 2002; Loar 2003; Kriegel 2007, 2011; Mendelovici 2018)—might happily accept that we can only introspect what the experience is of—its content in this case.

Strong Transparency is not compatible with Ultra-Strong Transparency, insofar as it claims that there is more to attend to in introspection than what the experience is of. However, it also claims that the extra bit cannot be discerned in isolation from the objects and properties experience presents us with. Hence, it is incompatible with Weak Transparency, too.

Externalist representationalists *à la* Harman and Tye should reject Strong Transparency, as in their view phenomenal character just is what the experience is of—and that is all we can introspect. However, other externalists (representationalists of a different sort or naïve realists) can accept Strong Transparency. For example, Soteriou (2011, 2013; but see also: Martin 2004; Richardson 2010, 2014) claims that, by attending to the objects of the experience, we can introspectively discern certain invariant *structural* features, such as the visual field or its boundaries, which remain constant as objects and properties change. Such structural features are modality-specific and are responsible for *how* we experience things within that modality. Consequently, they are not properties of *what* we experience but of the experience itself.[9] And indeed, according to Soteriou, we do not seem to be aware of them in the same way we are aware of the objects of our experiences—they cannot be targets of independent attention or scrutiny. Nonetheless, they are constituents of phenomenal character, and we can notice them *by* performing proper introspective reflection on the

---

[7] Importantly: this should *not* be understood as a contrast rooted in the distinction between awareness of/awareness that, along the lines of what supporters of introspection as displaced perception argue (e.g., Dretske 1994, 1999; Tye 2000; Byrne 2018). That view makes our epistemic contact with phenomenal character indirect, and it counts as one way of supporting Ultra-Strong Transparency.

[8] For the sake of brevity, sometimes I will refer to features of the experience other than what it is of using shorter labels such as 'features of the experience,' 'experiential features,' 'experience itself' and the like.

[9] The idea that features of the experiential relation partly constitute phenomenal character, thereby shaping our awareness of worldly objects and properties, is often voiced by naïve realists. However, it is also compatible with versions of externalist representationalism that accept that modality-specific manners of representing contribute to phenomenal character. This is *not* Harman's and Tye's externalist representationalism.

objects of the experience and their properties. An externalist supporter of Strong Transparency might then argue that, when properly understood, transparency supports this view and not Harman's and Tye's.

However, Strong Transparency is compatible with internalist views, too. For example, Siewert (2004), who defends a version of internalist representationalism, endorses it:

> I would endorse this general formulation of transparency:
>
> > T3: You cannot attend to how it appears to you, by turning your attention *away from* something that appears to you, and *towards* your experience. …
>
> We should recognize that directing attention to experience is not like directing attention *from* one sensorily apparent thing to some other. You can turn your attention *away* from one visually apparent thing, and *to* another, so as to *ignore* the first, in *favor* of the second. Directing attention to the second thing excludes attending to the first. But if you turn your attention to how some object looks to you on some occasion, you don't (and can't) do so, by turning your attention away from it or diminishing how much attention you devote to it, while increasing your attention to its looking to you as it does. (Siewert 2004: 35-6)

Likewise, an internalist representationalist who construes phenomenal character as constitutively involving, say, manners or ways of representing or attitudinal features (e.g., Chalmers 2004) might well accept Strong Transparency and claim that we can only attend to those features by attending to what the experience presents us with.

What about Weak Transparency? It is incompatible with both Strong and Ultra-Strong Transparency. Clearly, it is at odds with accounts, externalist or internalist, that construe phenomenal character as exhausted by what the experience is of. Instead, it sits well with internalist non-representationalist views, which explain phenomenal character by appealing to non-(essentially-)representational qualitative features of the experience (e.g., Block 1990, 1996, 2003; Kind 2003, 2007). But it is also compatible with internalist representationalist accounts that appeal to extra-content attitudinal features (e.g., Crane 2006).[10]

---

[10] An interesting question is whether Weak Transparency is compatible with some version of naïve realism that construes phenomenal character as including more than just the objects of the experience and their features. The reply depends on whether, within a naïve realist framework, non-objectual experiential features can be construed as introspectable in isolation from, and independently of, what the experience is of. As far as the extant views are concerned, it is quite safe to say that naïve realism rejects Weak Transparency. I leave it open here whether that is a matter of principle, or it is just by accident.

Kind argues that Weak Transparency is the right way to look at transparency. Given the above, *if* she is right, then the Argument from Transparency is blocked and the situation is turned around: when properly understood, transparency would not only be compatible with internalism but would also be at odds with at least some versions of externalism.[11]

3.2 Metaphysical vs. phenomenological transparency

Laura Gow (2016) distinguishes between *metaphysical* and *phenomenological* transparency:

> Perceptual experience is phenomenologically transparent if and only if it is true that the properties we are aware of during a perceptual experience all *seem* to us to be externally located.

> Perceptual experience is metaphysically transparent if and only if all the properties we are aware of *are in fact* externally located. (Gow 2016: 723)

The distinction is built around two main oppositions: (i) what *seems* to be the case vs. what *is* the case; (ii) external vs. internal. Some remarks are in order. First, 'seem' (or 'appear') is to be read *phenomenologically*. Second, 'externally located' is to be read in light of the internalism/externalism opposition. So, it alludes to what is "outside one's head," namely, worldly, mind-independent features, located in the environment. I will use these labels interchangeably. Third, 'the properties we are aware of during a perceptual experience' is a bit vague—we can be aware of many things during a perceptual experience that are not relevant for what (I think) Gow is aiming at here. So, I will understand it as something like 'the properties of which we are aware *in virtue of* having a perceptual experience.' Fourth, the distinction concerns perceptual experience and the target-properties of perceptual awareness that constitutively contribute to perceptual phenomenal character. However, in principle, it can be extended to other experiential domains. Finally, because transparency is an (alleged) introspective datum, introspection is to establish which (if any) of the two conditions stated in the quote is met (Gow 2016: 725). However, as Gow points out, introspection can only tell us how things appear to us, not what they are. So, it can only establish whether experience is phenomenologically transparent, remaining silent on metaphysical transparency.

---

[11] Or *all* versions of externalism, if naïve realism involves a commitment to either Ultra-Strong Transparency or Strong Transparency (see previous footnote).

We can now state the following two theses:

(Phenomenological Transparency) [Introspection shows that] the properties we are aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind all *seem* to us to be externally located/worldly.

(Metaphysical Transparency) All the properties we are aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind *are in fact* externally located/worldly.

Phenomenological Transparency tells us how the targets of experiential awareness *appear* to us and is taken to state an introspective datum. Metaphysical Transparency is a stronger claim concerning the *nature* of the targets of experiential awareness and needs more than introspective observation to be established. Neither thesis (explicitly) comments on whether introspection reveals more than the targets of experiential awareness.[12]

Now, Gow maintains, HT Transparency presupposes Metaphysical Transparency, so it is *not* the right rendition of transparency. This blocks the Argument from Transparency. For unlike Metaphysical Transparency, Phenomenological Transparency is compatible with at least some representationalist versions of internalism. For example, on the phenomenal intentionality theory, experiences possess certain qualitative properties independently of the external environment that are also essentially representational. Phenomenological Transparency would then be explained by experience's instantiating those properties and, in virtue of that, representing a certain phenomenal content. Hence, when properly understood, transparency does *not* rule out internalism.

Regarding entailment relations between the two: Phenomenological Transparency *does not entail* Metaphysical Transparency. In general, a deductive inference from appearance to reality does not look good. One might try to argue that the transition can be justified otherwise, perhaps by appealing to an inference to the best explanation—Metaphysical Transparency would best explain Phenomenological Transparency (Tye 2000). But inferences to the best explanation can be resisted (Gow 2016: 731-736), and anyway these are

---

[12] So, Phenomenological Transparency is not obviously incompatible with a view on which the target of introspective awareness and the target of experiential awareness do not coincide (see §§4.2-4.4). One might then think that Phenomenological Transparency, alone or combined with Metaphysical Transparency, does not fully capture Harman's and Tye's view, on which the target of introspective awareness and the target of experiential awareness coincide. Ultimately, I agree: I do not think that the phenomenological/metaphysical distinction, alone, exhausts the logical space of the debate.

not entailment relations. So, accepting Phenomenological Transparency does not force one to accept Metaphysical Transparency.

Metaphysical Transparency *does not entail* Phenomenological Transparency either. If appearance and reality can come apart, then it is not clear why we should rule out the possibility that what *is* in fact an external property fails to *appear* external. Gow, too, makes a similar point and mentions phosphenes as a candidate-case where one might hold Metaphysical Transparency and reject Phenomenological Transparency.[13] She claims that an externalist might concede that the color-quality involved in the experience does not appear to be externally located; and yet, she suggests, an externalist explanation of this case—e.g., in terms of uninstantiated property—is still a coherent option.[14] One can then coherently hold Metaphysical Transparency and reject Phenomenological Transparency.

The upshot is: Metaphysical and Phenomenological Transparency are *logically independent* claims. However, they are *not* mutually exclusive—so, they can be held together. That seems in line with the view of many externalist representationalists, including Harman and Tye.

As they stand, both Phenomenological and Metaphysical Transparency are universally quantified claims. So, they hold *unrestrictedly* within the domain of a certain kind of experience. However, in some cases, one might not want to commit rather to an unrestricted thesis. In these cases, one endorses a *restricted* version of Phenomenological or Metaphysical Transparency:

> **(Restricted Phenomenological Transparency)** [Introspection shows that] *some* of the properties we are aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind seem to us to be externally located/worldly.
>
> **(Restricted Metaphysical Transparency)** *Some* of the properties we are aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind are in fact externally located/worldly.

---

[13] Smells too, one might think, fail to be *phenomenologically* transparent without failing to be *metaphysically* transparent. (For a discussion see, e.g., Lycan 1996, 2000, 2014; Batty 2010; Richardson 2013.) More on olfaction and transparency in §6.

[14] However, this is not the path typically taken by externalists: they insist that phosphenes, afterimages, and blurry vision are phenomenologically *and* metaphysically transparent. By the way, in another paper (2019), Gow herself defends the claim that phosphenes, afterimages, and blurry vision are all phenomenologically transparent experiences.

These are logically independent claims. Each restricted thesis is of course entailed by, but does not entail, the corresponding unrestricted version.

3.3 S-transparency vs. transparency datum

More recently, Murat Aydede (2019) has distinguished between what he calls 'S-Transparency' and 'Transparency Datum:'

> **(S-Transparency)** 'Experiences have no introspectable features over and above those implicated in their representational contents.' (Aydede 2019: 685)

> **(Transparency Datum)**
> '(LOCATION) The qualities that we are aware of in virtue of having a (perceptual) experience … all *appear* to be qualities of extra-mental objects (particulars), including bodily parts. …
> (FOCUS) If there are intrinsic qualities of experiences, it seems impossible to attend to or focus on these qualities *without* attending to or focusing on the qualities that these experiences present as belonging to the extra-mental particulars.' (Aydede 2019: 683)

These are claims about the phenomenological aspects of what we introspect, as well as what we can attend to introspectively and how we do that. It should not be difficult to see, then, that they can be reconducted to some of the theses already encountered. Abstracting away from the specific formulation in terms of content, S-Transparency claims that we can only introspect what an experience is of. So, it corresponds to Ultra-Strong Transparency.

Transparency Datum involves two elements. LOCATION, Aydede (2019: 683) stresses, 'is supported by introspection. It describes *how* your (perceptual) experiences present the qualities they do: they present them as qualifying extra-mental *particulars/objects*.' So, it is (a version of) Phenomenological Transparency with a slightly different wording. FOCUS is either Strong Transparency or Weak Transparency, depending on how one reads it: setting aside the representationalist jargon, it claims that we cannot (or it is at least very difficult to) attend to features of the experience without attending to what experience is of.[15]

---

[15] I read Aydede as supporting Strong Transparency, as he seems to consider attending to what the experience is of as crucial to our capacity to introspect features of the experience (Aydede 2019: 701).

Finally, following a usual pattern, Aydede argues that, when properly understood, transparency does not rule out, but indeed supports, internalism against Harman's and Tye's externalist representationalism (he does not consider naïve realism). He maintains that S-Transparency is Harman's and Tye's transparency, but what we really gather from introspection, and hence the best rendition of transparency, is Transparency Datum. Since the latter is compatible with, and best explained by, internalist accounts (Aydede 2019: 696-705), the Argument from Transparency is blocked.

4 Logical relations across distinctions

Transparency Datum combines (a version of) Phenomenological Transparency with another thesis from the weak/strong distinction. That is interesting, as it suggests that theses from different distinctions *can* be combined. Ultimately, this is no accident: the two distinctions are largely independent. To see the point, let us have a closer look at (some of) the relations between theses across distinctions. For convenience, I focus on Phenomenological Transparency and its relations with theses from the weak/strong distinction.

4.1 Phenomenological Transparency and Ultra-Strong Transparency

It is perfectly okay to say that (a) all the properties we are aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind *seem* to be externally located, (b) those seemingly externally located properties are what the experience is of, and (c) that is all we can introspect about that experience. Therefore, Phenomenological Transparency is *consistent* with Ultra-Strong Transparency. Moreover, the two are often held together. One natural question, then, is whether Phenomenological Transparency is *entailed* by Ultra-Strong Transparency. I tend toward a negative reply: one can coherently hold Ultra-Strong Transparency and deny Phenomenological Transparency.

For example, consider phosphenes or afterimages. One might admit that the color-quality we experience in virtue of undergoing such experiences does not appear to qualify any externally located object; nor does it appear to be located anywhere in the outside space

or more generally mind-independent.[16,17] Perhaps, one might add, in these cases we are just confronted with a peculiar "in-between" phenomenology whereby it is not clear where the color-quality really belongs—that would be enough for Phenomenological Transparency to fail.[18] And yet, one might insist, there are independent (plausibly, theoretical and non-introspective) reasons to think that that quality *is* represented by the experience. The proponent of such a view can still accept Ultra-Strong Transparency—i.e., that the represented color-quality an experience is of is all that we can introspectively attend to about the experience.[19]

To my mind, however, better examples come from accounts of non-perceptual experiences such as moods. Rephrased to cover these cases, Phenomenological Transparency maintains that the properties we are aware of in virtue of being in a certain mood all seem to be externally located. Now, at least sometimes, the peculiar affective qualities involved in these experiences do not seem to be properties of anything in outside space, or located in outside space—including the subject's body. Nonetheless, one might argue, they can still be accounted for in terms of what the experience is of. For example, accepting this phenomenological description, Mendelovici (2013a, b) casts some moods as representing unbound affective properties (*sui generis* properties represented by affective states, but without being represented as bound to, or exemplified by, some object). Barlassina and Hayward (2019a, b) seem to accept that the distinctive affective component involved in mood phenomenology, valence, appears to qualify the experience itself—e.g., in depression, it is the experience that feels bad and not (things in) the external world. Still, they cash out this component as a kind of content—(self-reflexive) imperative content. On such accounts, there would still be nothing to introspect and attend to over and above what the experience represents (in accordance with Ultra-Strong Transparency), and yet that would not appear external or worldly (failure of Phenomenological Transparency).

---

[16] For instance, afterimages are usually described as violating some of the constraints for appearing worldly—e.g., they do not appear to move independently from us, they cannot be inspected from different perspectives, they remain there when we close our eyes, they lack size-constancy, etc. (Siegel 2006; Farkas 2013; Masrour 2013; for a critique, see: Phillips 2013 and Gow 2019).

[17] Other cases might be the so-called "brain-gray" (Johnston 2004) and *ganzfeld*-experiences (Frey 2013).

[18] One might complain that there is no such thing as an "in-between" phenomenology of this sort. For example, Batty (2010: 116) writes: 'if properties do not appear to be those of external things, then they must appear to be properties of the experience itself. Experience must attribute properties to *something*.'

[19] Lycan (1996, 2000, 2014) suggests that different versions of representationalism might agree that smell-qualities do not appear external or worldly, identify them with contents, and yet claim that they exhaust the phenomenal character of olfaction (see, e.g., Lycan 2014: 2 fn10). Those contents would thus be all that there is to introspect about experience. Phenomenological Transparency would then fail, but Ultra-Strong Transparency would not.

In short, how what the experience is of appears does not impinge on whether it is the only introspectable aspect in experience. So, nothing in Ultra-Strong Transparency seems to force one to accept Phenomenological Transparency.[20] The two theses often go together, but that does not seem to be because of some internal connection; rather, it seems to be the result of the work of some (hidden) extra assumption—something like:

> **(Extra Assumption #1)** If an experience is of a certain property P, then P seems externally located/worldly.

However, as we have seen, the supporter of Ultra-Strong Transparency is not forced to accept this.

4.2 Phenomenological Transparency and Strong Transparency

Like Ultra-Strong Transparency, Strong Transparency makes *no claim* about how the targets of our experiential awareness appear. Instead, it imposes a constraint on how we manage to introspectively attend to features of experience. Thus, Strong Transparency stands in conflict with Phenomenological Transparency *only if* one also accepts the *conjunction* of the following two assumptions:

> **(Extra Assumption #2)** The features of the experience we can introspectively attend to are among those we are aware of in virtue of having that experience; *and*
>
> **(Extra Assumption #3)** The features of the experience we can introspectively attend to do not seem to be externally located properties.

But the supporter of Strong Transparency does not have to accept this conjunction—they might reject either assumption, or both.

Concerning Extra Assumption #2, a supporter of Strong Transparency could accept that the targets of (say) perceptual awareness, and indeed what the experience is of, are all seemingly externally located sensory qualities. However, they might believe that the scope of introspection is simply larger than the scope of perceptual awareness. So, in principle,

---

[20] If one rephrases Ultra-Strong Transparency as a claim about what it *seems* to one in introspection, then failure of Phenomenological Transparency might indeed lead to a failure of Ultra-Strong Transparency. However, Ultra-Strong Transparency is a stronger claim about what one *can* or *cannot* introspect—where 'can'/'cannot' might express psychological or epistemic (and not necessarily metaphysical) possibility/necessity.

nothing prevents them from endorsing the following claim: when we switch to an introspective mode, we attend to the seemingly externally located properties our experience is of and, by doing that, we also manage to become aware of, and thereby attend to, some other features of our perceptual experience that contribute to its phenomenal character.

Concerning Extra Assumption #3, a supporter of Strong Transparency might respond that it misconceives what it is to introspect the features of the experience and what it means that they do not *seem* external. Recall, supporters of Strong Transparency often stress that there is a difference between experiential (perceptual) awareness of/attention to seemingly external features and awareness of/attention to the experience and its features.[21] So, some could argue that introspecting the experiential features does not amount to discovering some seemingly "internally located" properties of an "internal" object in addition to the seemingly externally located ones.

How to positively develop this further will depend on one's specific account of introspection. One option is to say that introspecting the experience consists in the specific capacity to deploy the right cognitive resources—e.g., the right sort of recognitional concepts or thoughts—to focus on and recognize the *ways* in which the properties we are perceptually aware of appear or are presented by the experience (Siewert 2004: 35-7, 2012: 148f; Aydede 2019: 696-705). So, introspecting the features of the experience is focusing on the very appearance of externally located properties, and clearly appearances do not themselves appear—internal, external or otherwise.[22] Thus, the sense in which experiential features do not *seem* external has to do not with their *appearing* internal, but with the way in which we *conceptualize* them. So, Extra Assumption #3 is false; or if true, it must be read in a way that does not presuppose a phenomenological reading of 'seem.' Thus, Strong and Phenomenological Transparency can be consistently combined.

4.3 Phenomenological Transparency and Weak Transparency

---

[21] Importantly, the relevant difference here is not (just) *quantitative* but *qualitative*: a difference in the way we are aware of/attend to things in perception and in introspection. Recall Siewert's (2004: 36) comment that 'we should recognize that directing attention to experience is not like directing attention from one sensorily apparent thing to some other' (see also: Kennedy 2009: 586; Soteriou 2013: 119; Aydede 2019: 701).

[22] I am following Siewert (2004, 2012) here. But I suspect others might make claims in the vicinity. For example, Aydede (2019: 700), who casts experiential features as ways in which the experience presents sensory qualities, writes: 'my experience presents a certain extra-mental particular to me as F, and then, my phenomenal knowledge consists of my applying a phenomenal concept to an "object" conceived by me only as *the way Fness is experientially/perceptually presented to me now*. … I do not sense, perceive, or in any other way experience, this "object", i.e., the *way F*ness is presented to me in my experience.'

Often theorists have supported Weak Transparency because of a putative failure of Phenomenological Transparency in cases like phosphenes, afterimages, blurry vision, itches, moods, or orgasms. The thought is that the qualities involved in such experiences do *not* seem to be worldly properties but properties of the experience itself. And indeed, that is what they are, according to these theorists: intrinsic qualitative features of the experience to which we can introspectively attend directly, i.e., in isolation from what the experience is of (e.g., Block 1996, 2003; Kind 2003, 2007)—as per Weak Transparency.

But what about Weak Transparency and the *unrestricted* version of Phenomenological Transparency? The two can be held together. For one can coherently (a) accept that all the properties we are aware of in having a visual experience *seem* to be externally located, (b) deny that they are what the experience is of, and (c) maintain that they are, instead, features of the experience itself. That would cast experience as phenomenologically transparent not because of *what* it is *of*, but because of *how* it *is* in itself—perhaps, due to the internal arrangement of its qualitative features or some such (Farkas 2013; Masrour 2013; Papineau 2021). At least some mental-paint-friendly views might accept that (e.g., Loar 2003; Molyneaux 2009; Papineau 2021). They construe phenomenal character as constituted by qualitative features of the experience that are not represented, some of which represent things and properties in the external environment in virtue of some contingent causal-covariation relation. As Molyneaux (2009: 131) stresses: 'we can … experience the properties of experience itself (mental paint) as properties of external objects and surfaces even though the former are *not* properties of external surfaces and objects.' So, I see no principled compatibility issue with Weak Transparency: if one believes that it is possible to bring "mental paint" to the foreground of one's introspective attention while leaving what the experience is of in the background, then one can combine the two theses.

Loar (2003) seems to suggest something along those lines. He claims that introspection involves different ways of framing attention. When we take a naïve introspective attitude, which he calls *transparent reflection*, our attention is oriented toward the external properties the experience represents and "passes through" the qualities of the experience itself. However, Loar maintains, we can perform introspective reflection of a "deeper" sort, which he dubs *oblique reflection*. And *that*, on his view, reveals the real nature of visual phenomenal character. When in this introspective mode, we consider experience in isolation from its referential relations to the external world. Thereby, we appreciate what remains

constant across different veridical and non-veridical scenarios.[23] What oblique reflection discloses is still a phenomenology of *seemingly* worldly objects and their properties—so, Phenomenological Transparency is preserved. However, now, we no longer take such a phenomenology as consisting in a relation to external objects and their properties—Metaphysical Transparency is dropped. Rather, we take it as something non-relational, namely, the way our experience is internally constituted (and represents). So, according to Loar, in shifting to oblique reflection, a shift in our introspective attention occurs: we manage to attend directly to the qualitative features of the experience itself, in isolation from what it is of—thus, Weak Transparency is endorsed.

4.4 Upshot

Here is the upshot. Phenomenological Transparency, both in its restricted and its unrestricted version, is compatible with *all* the theses from the weak/strong distinction. So, it does not entail any of them. Nor is it entailed by *any* of them. Extra assumptions are needed to generate entailment relations or inconsistencies. *Mutatis mutandis*, considerations along the same lines apply to Metaphysical Transparency, too. The principled reasons are these. First, each distinction revolves around two main contrasts: (i) direct vs. indirect introspective attention and (ii) what the experience is of vs. features of the experience (other than what it is of), in the case of the weak/strong distinction; (iii) appearance vs. reality and (iv) external vs. internal, in the case of the phenomenological/metaphysical distinction. None of these contrasts overlap. Moreover, each distinction includes theses that take a stance on different issues. Phenomenological and Metaphysical Transparency are theses about the targets of experiential awareness constitutively involved in phenomenal character—how they appear and what they are. They do not comment on whether (and in case how) introspection reveals more than the target of experiential awareness, as do Ultra-Strong, Strong, and Weak Transparency.

5 A unitary multidimensional logical space

Since transparency theses across the strong/weak and metaphysical/phenomenological distinctions are largely compatible, I suggest that the two distinctions should be *integrated* to

---

[23] To do that, one must deploy some sophisticated introspective (or introspection based) techniques: variation of some of the features of the actual scenario, consideration of possible scenarios like inverted spectrum cases, etc.

compose a unitary logical space. To a first approximation, the idea is that a view on transparency results from combining different transparency theses, in a way that respects the (few) constraints on the possible combinations highlighted by our discussion in §4.

5.1 Four dimensions

The transparency theses take different stances on different questions. In particular, four questions can be singled out:

> **(Q1)** What is introspectable about experience?
> **(Q2)** Can we attend to it directly?
> **(Q3)** How does what we are experientially aware of appear?
> **(Q4)** What is it?

Q1 is a question about the *target of introspection*; Q2 is about the *focus of introspection*; Q3 is about *phenomenology*; Q4 is about *metaphysics*. Ultra-Strong, Strong, and Weak Transparency take a stance on both Q1 and Q2.[24] Phenomenological Transparency takes a stance on Q3, while Metaphysical Transparency takes a stance on Q4.

So, *qua* combinations of different transparency theses, views on transparency are the overall result of taking a stance on the whole set of questions Q1-Q4 with respect to a certain experiential domain. Thereby, Q1-Q4 individuate four *dimensions* along which views on the transparency of experience (can) vary:

> **Dimension 1: Introspective target.** It is captured by the weak/strong distinction and consists in the reply one gives to Q1. The choice to be made is as to whether we can introspect only what the experience is of or also other features of the experience.
>
> **Dimension 2: Introspective focus.** It is captured by the weak/strong distinction and consists in the reply one gives to Q2. The choice to be made is as to whether we can attend *directly* to features of the experience (other than what it is of).
>
> **Dimension 3: Phenomenology.** It is captured by the phenomenological/metaphysical distinction and consists in the reply one gives to Q3. The choice to be made is as

---

[24] Notice: Ultra-Strong Transparency claims that we cannot introspect anything other than what the experience is of (Q1). Thereby, it also (trivially) replies to Q2: we can only attend to the experience by attending to what it is of.

to whether the properties one is aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind *appear* external/worldly or internal/experiential.

Dimension 4: Metaphysics. It is captured by the phenomenological/metaphysical distinction and consists in the reply one gives to Q4. The choice to be made is as to whether the properties one is aware of in virtue of having an experience of a certain kind are *in fact* external/worldly or internal/experiential

These four dimensions provide us with the essential coordinates to individuate and locate different points in the logical space—each of those points corresponding to a (possible) view on transparency. They are thus the basic structure of a unitary and multidimensional logical space where the different (existing as well as possible) views on transparency can be mapped.

Typically, *every* view takes a stance on introspective target, introspective focus, and phenomenology, while some (but not all) take a(n explicit) stance on metaphysics. However, this does not make the metaphysical dimension idle. First, it is useful to capture fine-grained differences between at least *some* views. Second, even neutrality on it is a feature of a view. Thus, a view on transparency combines *at least* two transparency theses: one thesis (or negation thereof) from the phenomenology/metaphysics distinction (typically the phenomenological thesis) and one from the weak/strong distinction.

5.2 Mapping the views on visual transparency

With this at hand, by way of example, we can map the main existing views on the transparency of visual experience and see how they interact with views on the nature of visual experience. In particular, we can single out the following main views in the debate.

Externalist camp:
- *Externalist representationalists à la* Harman and Tye typically hold a combination of Ultra-Strong, Phenomenological, and Metaphysical Transparency.
- *Other externalists* (naïve realists or representationalists) combine Strong Transparency with (Restricted or Unrestricted) Phenomenological Transparency, and at least Restricted Metaphysical Transparency (e.g., Martin 2002, 2004; Kennedy 2009; Richardson 2010, 2014; Soteriou 2011, 2013).

Internalist camp:

- *Internalist representationalists* hold different views. Some combine Ultra-Strong Transparency and Phenomenological Transparency (e.g., Horgan and Tienson 2002; Horgan, Tienson and Graham 2004; Kriegel 2007; Mendelovici 2018). Others embrace Strong Transparency and (Restricted or Unrestricted) Phenomenological Transparency (e.g., Chalmers 2004; Siewert 2004; Aydede 2019). Still others support Weak Transparency in combination with Restricted (e.g., Crane 2006) or Unrestricted (e.g., Loar 2003) Phenomenological Transparency.
- *Internalist anti-representationalists* typically hold Weak Transparency in combination with Restricted Phenomenological Transparency (e.g., Block 1996, 2003; Kind 2003, 2007).

Internalists are not always explicit on Metaphysical Transparency. That is not crucial for our present discussion. However, in passing, we can note the following: insofar as versions of Metaphysical Transparency are claims about the nature of properties constitutively involved in phenomenal character, plausibly an internalist *should* reject any version of this thesis.

One final remark. The proposed mapping shows something like a convergence on (at least) Restricted Phenomenological Transparency, which seems to support the claim that visual perception is largely (or normally) phenomenologically transparent. Theorists disagree on whether it is metaphysically transparent and on introspective target and focus—and these seem more theoretically oriented disagreements, plausibly rooted (at least in part) in the underlying metaphysics of visual experience one embraces or in the view of introspection one presupposes.

Interestingly, relevant differences emerge not only among views from different camps, but also among views from the same camp. For example, supporters of different versions of externalism tend to accept different theses from the weak/strong distinction. Acceptance of Strong (as opposed to Ultra-Strong) Transparency seems to go along typically with a construal of phenomenal character as including features of the experiential relation as opposed to just worldly objects and/or properties. Likewise, in the internalist camp, phenomenal intentionality theorists tend to endorse Ultra-Strong Transparency, whereas the others tend to endorse Strong or Weak Transparency. So, at least *prima facie* and to some extent, the differences between the various transparency views seem to go together with

differences in views of the underlying metaphysics of visual experience. Plausibly, similar remarks apply to views of introspection, too.

Defending, investigating, or explaining these *prima facie* correlations is not my aim here. To be sure, assuming that they are real, they suggest a deep level of theoretical penetration of the "raw" introspective data—transparency views seem to be built into descriptions of the data from the very beginning. Transparency seems to have a dual structure: a very thin pre-theoretical core—plausibly captured by the phenomenological dimension—is largely supplemented and permeated by more theory-laden considerations— plausibly linked to the other dimensions. In a way, it is as if transparency demanded supplementation and interpretation almost all the way down, to be brought to full philosophical significance.[25] Whether this is really the case, how it should be properly explained, and what (if anything) it tells us about the phenomenon of transparency itself and its significance are interesting questions that cannot be addressed here but deserve to be dealt with in future work.

6 Scope

In the previous section, I characterized a transparency view as the result of taking a stance on Q1-Q4 *with respect to a certain experiential domain*. In this section, I say more about 'with respect to a certain experiential domain.'

6.1 A fifth dimension

Zooming out of the visual domain and taking a broader perspective on experience, a further question arises:

(Q5) Does transparency hold across different experiential domains and in what form?

A reply to Q5 specifies the relevant domain of application of a transparency view, i.e., its *scope*. Scope can be seen as a *fifth dimension* along which transparency views vary, with the following qualification: while the other four dimensions capture *intra*domain variations between views, scope captures *inter*domain variations.

---

[25] Although I will not argue for this here, I suspect that this is at least partially linked to the largely ostensive, elusive, and scarcely descriptive way the phenomenon has been singled out originally (e.g., by Moore).

When it comes to scope, a first opposition is between *global* and *local* transparency views. A global view is one with *maximal scope*: it holds in *all* experiential domains. A local view holds in only *some* experiential domains. Clearly, local views can take different scope, so a second opposition is among local views with larger or narrower scope.

6.2 Relevance of scope

In addition to providing a further element to mark out fine-grained differences between transparency views, scope is relevant for other reasons. Let me quickly survey some of them. .

6.2.1 Pervasiveness and significance of transparency

Indicating scope spells out whether (and in what form) transparency is a widespread phenomenon. This reflects importantly on the significance of transparency for the study of consciousness. If the scope of transparency is large enough, then arguably there are good reasons to take it as a constraint on theories of consciousness (or perception): something that those theories must explain. By contrast, the narrower the scope, the easier it is for one to deflate the relevance of transparency for evaluating theories of consciousness (or perception). It is indeed not by accident that, e.g., Tye combines the strongest transparency theses in a view with global scope. As we have seen, when so understood, transparency can be claimed as strong evidence in favor of radically externalist views, such as Harman's and Tye's representationalism.

From the opposite angle, internalist anti-representationalists have often tried to neutralize this line of argument by offering very deflationary (if not rejectionist) views of the phenomenon, not just by endorsing the weakest transparency theses, but also by narrowing its scope. For example, Block's overall view seems to be that experience is largely *non-transparent*—though he might accept Restricted Phenomenological and Weak Transparency for visual experience. In a similar vein, Kind (2007: 423) suggests that transparency is '*inapplicable*' outside of the perceptual domain (see also Kind 2013), while defending a combination of Restricted Phenomenological and Weak Transparency in the case of perceptual experience. When so understood, transparency looks like an exception rather than the rule—or anyway, it does not look like an impressive phenomenon.

6.2.2 Transparency as a guide to differences between experiences

Differences or similarities in the way experiences are transparent across experiential domains, or even presence versus lack of transparency across domains, are often taken as a guide to underlying differences or similarities among experiences themselves. To put it somewhat boldly, the idea would be that transparency might help us draw distinctions that (purportedly) carve experience at its joints.

A shared thought is that transparency—whatever it boils down to—is a distinctive feature of perceptual experience, hence something that an adequate theory of perception should explain. Many theorists of perception are persuaded that some fairly strong transparency view is true of perceptual experience, without extending such a view across the board to all experience. For example, naïve realists defend fairly strong views of transparency encompassing Metaphysical Transparency limited to perceptual (and visual in particular) experience.

Other theorists have treated the differences between perceptual transparency and what we observe in non-perceptual domains as revealing something important about the nature of non-perceptual experience. For example, Deonna and Teroni (2012) sharply contrast perceptual with emotional experience:

> Try … to describe the content of the visual experience of a vase of flowers on a table. You will realize that it is very difficult to mention anything other than the properties exemplified by the objects that you see … . [In contrast,] the felt quality of fear is not clearly experienced by us as a feature of the spider that frightens us, nor is that of gratitude given as a property of such and such a benefactor. If you are to describe how it feels to be frightened by a spider, you would not do so in terms of the spider's qualities, but rather in terms of how it feels to experience a jolt up your spine, your hair standing on end, your teeth clenching, muscles freezing, heart jumping, etc. And these felt changes in your body are definitely not what you apprehend as dangerous in the circumstances. (Deonna and Teroni 2012: 68-9)

So, they seem to endorse different local views in different domains: while perceptual experience is phenomenologically and (ultra-)strongly transparent, emotions would be only weakly and perhaps non-phenomenologically transparent. This difference is used by Deonna and Teroni to support their account of emotions as attitudes toward values.[26] Moreover, as

---

[26] See also Deonna and Teroni (2015). de Sousa (2004) defends a similar view. Mitchell (2020) argues for a combination of Weak and Restricted Phenomenological Transparency in the case of emotion. Tye (2008) argues that emotions are as transparent as perception. Mendelovici (2013a, b) argues that emotions (but not moods) and perception are phenomenologically on a par: both present us with qualities that are experienced as properties of worldly object, and that exhausts their phenomenal character.

stressed by Tappolet (2016), it can be used to question theories that cast emotions as perceptions of values.

Some have contrasted *moods* with both perception and emotions, as an even more straightforward failure of Phenomenological Transparency, and some have concluded that moods are not representational (Deonna and Teroni 2012; Kind 2013; Bordini 2017).[27]

Other theorists have looked at differences in transparency between sensory vs. affective phenomenology rather than perceptual vs. non-perceptual experiences. For example, Aydede (2019: 684, 694) maintains that perceptual and bodily experiences, pain and pleasure included, are phenomenologically and strongly transparent, insofar as they are considered from the point of view of the *sensory* aspects involved in their phenomenology, but doubts that such a combination can be extended to the distinctively *affective* bit involved in at least some of those experiences—e.g., the painfulness of pain (see also Barlassina 2020). Aydede and Fulkerson (2014) argue against such an extension.[28] This might suggest a deep difference between sensory and affective components of phenomenal character, regardless of their being involved in perceptual or non-perceptual experiences.

However, differences in transparency have been highlighted within the sensory domain, too, to stress relevant differences between sensory modalities. For example, Lycan (2000: 281) claims that, unlike visual and auditory qualities, 'a smell seems a modification of our own consciousness rather than a property of a perceptual object that would exist unperceived.'

6.2.3 Cross-modal phenomenological differences and the core of transparency

However, variations in transparency across different sensory modalities might also lead one to argue that Phenomenological Transparency misses the real phenomenological core of transparency, failing to capture the relevant phenomenon.

For example, Frey (2013) acknowledges phenomenological variations among sensory experiences—e.g., at least some of them would involve qualities that do not appear externally located, worldly or mind-independent. His diagnosis is that standard formulations of Phenomenological Transparency are too metaphysically loaded, in that they categorize sensory qualities by making use of descriptors such as 'external,' 'mind-dependent,' 'objective,' etc. On top of exposing them to counterexamples, this makes them incapable of

---

[27] For an argument to the effect that moods represent despite their phenomenology, see Mendelovici (2013a, b).
[28] For views that the affective component of pain/pleasure experience is transparent, see, e.g., Tye (2006), Cutter and Tye (2011), Carruthers (2018).

rendering the deep phenomenological lesson that transparency has to teach, namely, that in all cases, we appreciate sensory qualities as *other* than ourselves:

> [W]hen we phenomenally appreciate a sensuous element in an experience, we appreciate it as being both something other than ourselves and as standing in opposition to ourselves. This view, which I call *Core Transparency* (CT), can be formulated in two interdependent ways.
>
> > (CT1) The sensuous elements that one phenomenally appreciates in an experience are always appreciated as *other*.
> >
> > (CT2) The sensuous elements that one phenomenally appreciates in an experience are never appreciated as being, being instantiated in, or being about *the self* qua experiential subject (or a state/mode thereof). (Frey 2013: 76)

Discussing olfactory experience and objecting to both Lycan's and Tye's views, Batty (2010) makes a very similar suggestion:

> *Generalized Transparency*:
>
> An experience is generally transparent iff all of the modality-salient properties of which you are aware appear to be properties of something other than the experience itself.

Notice: Phenomenological Transparency, so revised, is meant to extend over the entire sensory domain but *not* beyond that domain—so, not to affective phenomenology (Frey 2013: 77). Hence, as it stands, this is a localist proposal. It would be an interesting project to explore the possibility of using the model offered by Batty and Frey to try and overcome differences between sensory and affective phenomenology, too, or alternatively to pin down more precisely the phenomenological differences between sensory and affective phenomenology (Bordini 2014: Ch. 4).

7 Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to give structure to the debate on the transparency of experience by constructing a unitary logical space where the different views could be identified, mapped, and confronted. According to the reconstruction I have offered here, such a logical space is complex and multidimensional. In particular, it involves five dimensions:

introspective target, introspective focus, phenomenology, metaphysics, and scope of the view.

The discussion suggests that the recent developments of the debate, and the distinction of many different transparency theses and notions, have not led to a merely verbal dispute but involve substantial disagreement. Theorists do not disagree on the meaning of the word 'transparency,' but on what it is for an experience to be transparent and what (if any) experiences are transparent in the relevant sense.

Given my reconstruction, one might wonder whether transparency is a single, unitary phenomenon or a cluster of somehow parented phenomena. Such questions are importantly connected to the crucial questions of what is the right view of transparency and what (if any) is its significance for the study of consciousness and the mind more generally. I have not addressed these issues here, but I take the work done in this paper to be preliminary and preparatory for properly framing and assessing them.[29]

References

Aydede, Murat (2019). Is the Experience of Pain Transparent? *Synthese*, 196: 677-708.

Aydede, Murat and Matthew Fulkerson (2014). Affect: Representationalists' Headache. *Philosophical Studies*, 170(2): 175-198.

Barlassina, Luca (2020). Beyond Good and Bad: Reflexive Imperativism, not Evaluativism, Explains Valence. *Thought*, 9: 274-284.

Barlassina, Luca and Max K. Hayward (2019a). Loopy Regulations. The Motivational Profile of Affective Phenomenology. *Philosophical Topics*, 47(2): 233-261

———— (2019b). More of Me! Less of Me! Reflexive Imperativism about Affective Phenomenal Character. *Mind*, 128(512): 1013-1044.

Batty, Clare (2010). Scents and Sensibilia. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 47(2): 103-118.

Block, Ned (1990). Inverted Earth. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4: 53-79.

———— (1996). Mental Paint and Mental Latex. *Philosophical Issues*, 7: 19-49.

——— (2003). Mental Paint. In M. Hahn and B. Ramberg (eds.), *Reflections and Replies: Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Boghossian, Paul and David Velleman (1989). Color as a Secondary Quality. *Mind*, 98(389): 81-103.

Bordini, Davide (2014). *The Transparencies and the Opacities of Experience: Intentionalism, Phenomenal Character, and Moods*. PhD Dissertation. University of Milan.

——— (2017). Not in the Mood for Intentionalism. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 41: 60-81.

Byrne, Alex (2018). *Transparency and Self-Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, John (2009) Consciousness and Reference. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, B. P. McLaughlin, B. Ansgar, and W. Sven (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carruthers, Peter (2018). Valence and Value. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 97(3): 658-680.

Chalmers, David (2004). The Representational Character of Experience. In *The Future for Philosophy*, B. Leiter (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crane, Tim (2006). Is there a Perceptual Relation? In Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perceptual Experience*, T. Szabo. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (2009). Is Perception a Propositional Attitude? *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 59(236): 452-469.

Cutter, Brian and Michael Tye. (2011). Tracking Representationalism and the Painfulness of Pain. *Philosophical Issues*, 21(1): 90-109.

de Sousa, Ronald (2004). Emotions – What I Know, What I'd Like to Think I Know, and What I'd Like to Think. In R. C. Solomon (ed.), *Thinking about Feeling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Deonna, Julien and Fabrice Teroni (2012). *The Emotions. A Philosophical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

——— (2015). Emotions as Attitudes. *Dialectica*, 69(3): 293-311.

Dretske, Fred (1981). *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

——— (1988). *Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

——— (1994). Introspection. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 94: 263-78.

——— (1996). Phenomenal Externalism, or If Meanings Ain't in the Head, Where Are Qualia? *Philosophical Issues*, 7: 143-58.

——— (1999). The Mind's Awareness of Itself. *Philosophical Studies*, *95*(1-2), 103–124.

Farkas, Katalyn (2013). Constructing a World for the Senses. In U. Kriegel (ed.), *Phenomenal Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fodor, Jerry (1990). *A Theory of Content and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

French, Craig (2018). Naïve Realism and Diaphaneity. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 118(2): 149-175.

Frey, Christopher (2013). Phenomenal Presence. In *Phenomenal Intentionality*, U. Kriegel (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gow, Laura (2016). The Limitations of Perceptual Transparency. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 66(265): 723-744.

——— (2019). Everything is Clear: All Perceptual Experiences Are Transparent. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 27: 412-25.

Harman, Gilbert (1990). The Intrinsic Quality of Experience. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4: 31-52.

Horgan, Terence and John Tienson (2002). The Intentionality of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Intentionality. In D. Chalmers (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horgan, Terence, John Tienson and George Graham (2004). Phenomenal Intentionality and the Brain in a Vat. In R. Schantz (ed.), *The Externalist Challenge*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.

Johnston, Mark (2004). The Obscure Object of Hallucination. *Philosophical Studies*, 120: 113-183.

Kennedy, Matthew (2009). Heirs of Nothing: The Implications of Transparency. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 79(3): 574-604.

Kind, Amy (2003). What's So Transparent about Transparency? *Philosophical Studies*, 115: 225-244.

——— (2007). Restrictions on Representationalism. *Philosophical Studies*, 134: 405-427.

——— (2013). The Case against Representationalism about Moods. In U. Kriegel (ed.), *Current Controversies in the Philosophy of Mind*. London: Routledge.

Kriegel, Uriah (2007). Intentional Inexistence and Phenomenal Intentionality. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 21: 307-340.

——— (2011). *The Sources of Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Loar, Brian (2003). Transparent Experience and the Availability of Qualia. in Q. Smith and A. Jokic (eds.), *Consciousness: New Philosophical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lycan, William G. (1996). *Consciousness and Experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

———. (2000). The Slighting of Smell. In N. Bhushan and S. Rosenfeld (eds.), *Of Minds and Molecules: New Philosophical Perspectives on Chemistry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. (2014). The Intentionality of Smell. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5: 436.

Martin, Michael G. F. (2002). The Transparency of Experience. *Mind and Language*, 17(4): 376-425.

———. (2004). The Limits of Self-Awareness, *Philosophical Studies*, 103: 37-89.

Masrour, Farid (2013). Phenomenal Objectivity and Phenomenal Intentionality. In U. Kriegel (ed.), *Phenomenal Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mendelovici, Angela (2013a). Intentionalism about Moods. *Thought* 2: 126-136.

——— (2013b). Pure Intentionalism about Emotions and Moods. In U. Kriegel (ed.), *Current Controversies in the Philosophy of Mind*. London: Routledge.

——— (2018). *The Phenomenal Basis of Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mitchell, Jonathan (2020). The Attitudinal Opacity of Emotional Experience. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 70(280): 524-546.

Molyneaux, Bernard (2009). Why Experience Told Me Nothing about Transparency. *Noûs*, 43(1): 116-136.

Moore, G.E. (1903). The Refutation of Idealism. *Mind*, 48: 433-453.

Papineau, David (2021). *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Phillips, Ian (2013). Afterimages and Sensation. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 87(2): 417-453

Reid, Thomas (1764/1970). *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, in T. Duggan (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Richardson, Louise (2010). Seeing Empty Space. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 18 (2): 227–243.

——— (2013). Sniffing and Smelling. *Philosophical Studies*, 162: 401-419.

——— (2014). Space, Time and Molyneaux's Question. *Ratio*, 27(4): 483-505.

Siegel, Susanna (2006). Subject and Object in the Contents of Visual Experience. *Philosophical Review*, 115(3): 355-388

Siewert, Charles (2004). Is experience transparent? *Philosophical Studies*, 117: 15-41.

——— (2012). On The Phenomenology of Introspection. In D. Smithies and D. Stoljar (eds.), *Introspection and Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Soteriou, Matthew (2011). The Perception of Absence, Space, and Time. In H. Lerman and N. Eilan (eds.), *Perception, Causation, and Objectivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (2013). *The Mind's Construction: The Ontology of Mind and Mental Action,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tappolet, Christine (2016). *Emotions, Values, and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tye, Michael (1995). *Ten Problems of Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

——— (2000). *Consciousness, Color, and Content*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

——— (2006). Another Look at Representationalism about Pain. In M. Aydede (ed.), *Pain: New essays on Its Nature and the Methodology of its Study*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

——— (2008). The Experience of Emotion. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 62: 25-50.

——— (2014). Transparency, Qualia, and Representationalism. *Philosophical Studies*, 170: 39-57.