

Jesse Butler

Introspective Knowledge of Experience and Its Role in Consciousness Studies

Abstract: *In response to Petitmengin and Bitbol's recent account of first-person methodologies in the study of consciousness, I provide a revised model of our introspective knowledge of our own conscious experience. This model, which I call the existential constitution model of phenomenal knowledge, avoids the problems that Petitmengin and Bitbol identify with standard observational models of introspection while also avoiding an underlying metaphorical misconception in their own proximity model, which misconstrues first-person knowledge of consciousness in terms of a dichotomous epistemic relationship. The end result is a clearer understanding of the unique nature and epistemic properties of our knowledge of consciousness, as well as the epistemic status of subsequent first-person reports on conscious experience.*

Introduction

Introspection is crucial to the study of consciousness. Indeed, it is our first-person introspective awareness of conscious experience that primarily generates interest in, as well as puzzlement about, the nature of consciousness itself. Yet introspection faces serious problems as the methodological entry-point for respectable scientific and philosophical investigation of consciousness, most centrally due to the tenuous position of the first-person perspective among the dominance of third-person methods and validation criteria in mainstream intellectual pursuits. As Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009) recently surveyed in a

Correspondence:

Jesse Butler, Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Central Arkansas, 224 Harrin Hall, Conway, AR, 72035, USA. Email: jbutler@uca.edu

special issue of *JCS* on first-person methodologies, there are multiple well-known difficulties that critics raise against attempts to derive reliable data and conclusions from introspection, from the potentially distorting effects of first-person verbal reflection to the seeming impossibility of external verification of private experience. If the study of consciousness is to progress, these problems must be addressed, such that we develop an accurate understanding of the nature and epistemic properties of our first-person experience of consciousness.

There have, of course, been attempts to address the methodological and epistemic problems surrounding the use of introspection, but no generally acceptable consensus on the matter has yet emerged (see, for example, the essays in Varela & Shear, 1999; Jack & Roepstorff, 2003; 2004; and Petitmengin, 2009). This is at least partly due to the lack of a conceptually robust and well-developed understanding of the nature of introspection itself. Ordinary folks and academics alike often simply assume that introspection is a kind of inner observation, such that one's own mental states come to be known as observed objects through a first-person process of 'viewing within'. As William James famously stated, 'Introspective observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always. The word introspection need hardly be defined — it means, of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover. Every one agrees that we there discover states of consciousness' (1890). This understanding of introspection as a kind of inner perception or observation is pervasive, yet upon close scrutiny it is not at all clear how this purported inner perception takes place. In fact, it is not clear that introspection really is a kind of observation at all.

It is on this point that Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009) make an attempt to turn things around in support of first-person methods. Petitmengin and Bitbol argue against the idea that introspection constitutes a kind of observation, moving towards a new model of introspection that makes better sense of its crucial epistemic role in the study of consciousness. I agree that we ought to move away from an observational conception of introspection, and commend Petitmengin and Bitbol's efforts toward the development of a more viable understanding of the unique epistemic position we hold to our own consciousness. The idea of introspection as a kind of observation is, at best, a metaphor for grasping a difficult to conceptualize phenomenon. As Petitmengin and Bitbol's analysis illustrates, this metaphorical conception can shape our understanding of mental phenomena in misleading ways. Interestingly, however, the alternative

account that Petitmengin and Bitbol offer is itself metaphorical in nature, appealing to the concept of proximity (closeness) to revise our understanding of introspection and its epistemic qualities. While this proximity model has some benefits over the observation model it is intended to replace, the underlying metaphor still preserves the notion of experience as a knowable object, albeit not an object that one comes to know by observing it but rather by ‘coming closer to it’ (p. 378). So, while Petitmengin and Bitbol’s account helps us see how numerous misconceptions of introspection have emerged from the observation paradigm, it does not go quite far enough to produce a revised understanding of introspection that is free from misleading metaphorical conceptions.

As a viable alternative, I suggest here that we conceive of our first-person knowledge of our own experiences as a kind of self-constitutive knowledge that we have of our experiences as experiencing subjects. On this existential constitution model of phenomenal knowledge, we do not know the character of our experiences by treating them as objects but rather by actually undergoing / being composed of them as conscious subjects. This conception of introspection clarifies the epistemic properties involved in our knowledge of our own conscious experience, thereby helping to further Petitmengin and Bitbol’s efforts towards a more accurate and viable understanding of the role of the first-person in the study of consciousness.

I. The Perceptual Observation Model of Introspection

As the term ‘introspection’ itself suggests, it is quite common to conceive of introspection as a kind of inner perception through which we observe our own mental states. Just as ordinary macroscopic objects (trees, cars, etc.) appear to us through perceptual modalities (seeing, hearing, etc.), it is often thought that our mental states appear to us as objects through an internal perceptual modality in our minds. This conception of introspection can be traced back at least as far as the work of Augustine (Lyons, 1986) and continues to be prominent today. To see this, we need look no further than the front and back covers of the recent special issue of *JCS* devoted to first-person methodologies (Petitmengin, 2009). The front cover displays the title ‘Ten Years of Viewing from Within’, in reference to an influential prior issue titled ‘The View from Within’ (Varela and Shear, 1999), while the back cover displays an advertisement for the 2010 *Toward a Science of Consciousness* conference, in which appears a visual image of a homunculus (little person) peering back towards a screen that is

projecting contents within the person's brain. Both suggest a mode of internal observation with which one can 'view' the contents of one's own mind. Some of the content found in the issue exhibits this perspective as well. For example, in the first article, Vermersch describes introspection as 'a perception in the evocation of a past lived experience' (2009, p. 45).¹

There are, however, good reasons for rejecting the idea that introspection is a kind of perception through which we observe our mental states as objects. One source of evidence against an observational understanding of introspection is that there are cases in which we come to know the phenomenal quality of a conscious experience but in which there is no identifiable perceived object. Consider the simple case of sneezing, for example. When you undergo the lived experience of sneezing, you come to know what it is like to sneeze. In other words, you obtain knowledge of the qualitative phenomenal character of a sneeze experience. But a sneeze experience is not a perceptual object in any clear sense. It is not something that we observe, but rather an event that we undergo. We obtain first-person introspective knowledge in this case not by perceiving something but rather by actually being in a particular kind of conscious state and thereby knowing what that state is like. We could of course reflect further on the experience in an attempt to describe or understand it in some manner or other, but this too would not be an act of perception but rather a kind of conceptual interpretation. Simply put, there is no point at which we literally observe a sneeze experience when we obtain first-person introspective knowledge of the lived experience of sneezing. There is the conscious phenomenal experience of undergoing a sneeze, and various ways of conceptualizing the experience into our understanding of the experience, but no perception of the sneeze experience itself as an object. Similar considerations apply to other types of mental states as well, such as emotions, beliefs, thoughts, ordinary perceptual experiences (we do of course perceive things, but we do not internally perceive those perceptions), and other bodily

[1] It is worth noting here that Petitmengin, the editor of this special issue of *JCS*, presents some caution on this point in her editorial introduction. She states, for instance, that '... in our view, reflective experience does not imply a particular mental state which would take the initial experience (of pain) as its object' (p. 9) and '... we do not consider ourselves as "introspectionists", in the sense that we turn our gaze exclusively "inwards". We have nevertheless chosen to keep the expression "from within" in the title of this issue, not only to pay homage to Francisco Varela, but also to refer to a particular mode of relationship with one's experience, consisting in coming into close contact with it or "dwelling in" it' (p. 13).

sensations (pains, tickles, etc.), none of which reveal themselves as overt perceptual objects in experience.

There are a variety of additional considerations against the literal interpretation of introspection as a kind of perception, from the lack of any identifiable internal perceptual organ in the brain to the untenable division between knowing subject and known object that it requires of our minds. Objections to the perceptual observation model of introspection have been thoroughly developed elsewhere, however, so I will not go into them here (see e.g. Lyons, 1986; Dennett, 1991; and Shoemaker, 1994). Suffice it to say that, despite the fact that observational conceptions of introspection have figured prominently in both past and present accounts of first-person knowledge of consciousness, it is deeply mistaken to take this conception of introspection literally, as suggestive of some kind of inner perceptual faculty.

Considering its highly problematic nature, however, one might wonder how the perceptual observation model gained ascendancy in the first place. I find it instructive here to consider the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on conceptual metaphors, which illustrates how metaphors can play major cognitive roles in our conceptualization of various phenomena. Consider, for example, the commonplace usage of perceptual concepts to characterize patently non-perceptual phenomena, such as the use of the statements 'I see what you mean' and 'I hear you' to depict comprehension and 'Your viewpoint is unclear' and 'I'm in the dark' to depict the lack thereof. Understanding the meaning of another person's words is a somewhat abstract and difficult to conceptualize phenomenon, so people often resort to more rudimentary (in the sense of being drawn from basic bodily experiences) perceptual phenomena to conceptualize the more abstruse understanding of meaning. As Lakoff and Johnson highlight throughout their work, people commonly utilize basic concepts rooted in bodily experiences to metaphorically conceptualize more complex and abstract phenomena, and do so quite automatically, without recognition of the underlying metaphorical structure of their conceptual processing. I suggest that this kind of cognitive process is at work in the perceptual observation model of introspection. Introspection is an exceedingly difficult phenomenon to conceptually understand. Given a propensity for metaphorical conceptualization in such cases, it is quite natural for people to draw upon the more familiar phenomenon of ordinary object perception to conceptualize first-person access to one's own mind. The conceptual schematic of object perception provides a convenient and accessible way to conceive and talk about first-person self-knowledge and thereby grounds the concept of

introspection as a kind of inner perception. Unfortunately, however, this model of introspection ultimately fails as an accurate and explanatorily satisfying account of how we come to know the contents of our own minds, leading to the misconceptions about introspection that Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009) address and attempt to overcome.

II. The Proximity Model and the Acquaintance Approach to Phenomenal Knowledge

Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009) recognize that there are problems with conceiving of introspection as a kind of observation. In fact, a core theme of their article is that the observation-based account of introspection is behind many of the mistaken criticisms of the use of introspective first-person data in the scientific study of the mind. In response, they state that

becoming aware of one's experience does not consist in distancing oneself from it in order to observe it, considering it as an object, but on the contrary in reducing the distance, in coming closer to it. It is not a matter of splitting into two in order to look at one's experience, but of coming into contact with it (pp. 377–78).

So, for Petitmengin and Bitbol, introspection should not be conceived as a kind of object perception, such that one introspectively investigates experience by observing it. Instead, introspection is to be regarded as a process of contacting and/or getting in touch with one's own experience, via an attentive openness to the experience itself.

I agree with Petitmengin and Bitbol that the object-centred observation model ought to be rejected and replaced, but unfortunately their alternative account still preserves part of the problem. If we conceive of introspection as the process of getting into contact with experience, replacing observation with proximity as the key epistemic relation involved in introspection, there is still a sense in which experience is treated as an object. The general concept of proximity (closeness) entails a relation between two or more distinct objects, such that the objects involved are assessed according to their relative location to one another. This relational structure between objects carries over into metaphorical projections of proximity, such as when we describe our emotional relationships with others using the concept of closeness ('I feel close to you', 'we've drifted apart', etc.). If we apply the concept of proximity to metaphorically conceptualize our first-person epistemic relationship with our own experience, this relational entailment carries over to our understanding of introspection as well. We are thereby drawn to conceive of our experiences as

something that we, as knowers, ought to try to get in 'touch' with, as knowable objects that are distinct from ourselves as knowers. Experience, then, is still conceptually structured as a kind of object if we understand the epistemic character of introspection in terms of proximity.

To be clear, I do not think that this is an intended effect on Petitmengin and Bitbol's part. Much of what they say is in fact aimed at overcoming the conceptualization of experience as an object. Nevertheless, their proposal to conceive of introspection in terms of closeness/proximity inadvertently compels us back towards an object-based construal of experience. They replace one metaphor for another, attempting to remedy the epistemic misconceptions rooted in the commonplace perceptual observation model, but the replacement proximity metaphor keeps the troublesome knowing subject / known object dichotomy in the mix. This is the problem with metaphors; perhaps we need them to help us conceptualize difficult phenomena, but they can prompt us to tacitly import background conceptual structures that we do not intend, and may even wish to avoid. So, while their motivation is right on target, Petitmengin and Bitbol's account of introspection does not take us quite far enough to get out of the troubled waters of object-based representations of the unique epistemic situation of knowing one's own conscious experience.

I have an alternative model to propose that I hope will help with this matter, but before turning to that model I want to draw out a connection I see between Petitmengin and Bitbol's account and a recent trend among philosophers grappling with our first-person knowledge of conscious experience. Several notable philosophers from differing perspectives have converged towards an appeal to the concept of acquaintance in conceptualizing phenomenal knowledge, or knowledge of the phenomenal properties of conscious experience (Bigelow and Pargetter, 1990; Conee, 1994; Chalmers, 2003; McGinn, 2008; and Tye, 2009). Drawing upon Bertrand Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (Russell 1910), these philosophers portray phenomenal knowledge as (being, or at least minimally containing) a fundamentally non-propositional type of epistemic content that is acquired by becoming acquainted with a phenomenal property itself, rather than assenting to a proposition that describes it in some way or other. For example, in explaining knowledge of a sneeze experience, an acquaintance theorist might say that knowing what it is like to sneeze consists in becoming acquainted with the phenomenal properties of a sneeze experience. Here are some representative statements of this acquaintance approach to phenomenal knowledge:

Knowing what an experience is like is knowledge essentially resting on acquaintance by introspection. ... There is a kind of knowledge of the phenomenal properties of your own mental state that is not available to other persons unless they stand in an introspective acquaintance relation to one of their own mental states, and that state shares the phenomenal properties of your mental state. ... Some kinds of knowledge require distinctive forms of engagement between the knower and the known. That is why, although qualia are physical, people cannot know all there is to know about them unless they experience them for themselves. (Bigelow and Pargetter, 1990, pp. 146–47)

The claim is that there is a kind of knowledge of a phenomenal quality, knowledge by acquaintance, which can consist in attentively experiencing the quality rather than possessing information or abilities. This is not an exotic epistemic state. It is neither ineffable nor unmistakable. It is the familiar sort of knowledge to which we refer when we discuss knowing people and places as well as experiences. (Conee, 1994, p. 147)

... we bear a special relation to the phenomenal properties instantiated in our experience... This relation would seem to be a particularly intimate one, made possible by the fact that experiences lie at the heart of the mind rather than standing at a distance from it; and it seems to be a relation that carries the potential for conceptual and epistemic consequences. We might call this relation *acquaintance*. ... Acquaintance can be regarded as a basic sort of epistemic relation between a subject and an *instance* of property: I am most directly acquainted with *this instance* of phenomenal greenness. (Chalmers, 2003, pp. 248–50)

In talking of my knowing the phenomenal character of a given experience, I am talking of knowing a certain thing — something you too can know. Surely the natural and obvious view to take is that you and I know this thing by being acquainted with it. We experience phenomenal character, and thereby we know it. In so knowing it, we do not know a truth. We do not merely have abilities. We know a thing. (Tye, 2009, p. 117)

Some of these philosophers would not want to be caught dead in bed together when it comes to the basic ontology of consciousness. Chalmers, for example, is a property dualist while Tye is a materialist. Nevertheless, they all share the idea that our knowledge of phenomenal consciousness, whatever it may be, consists in an acquaintance relationship between ourselves and the objects we phenomenally experience.² To put the point a bit differently, the idea is that we, as knowing conscious subjects, come to know the phenomenology of

[2] There are some notable differences in these philosophers' various conceptions of acquaintance, however. For example, some seem to follow Russell in thinking that what we are most immediately acquainted with are not external objects but rather introspectively available sense data, while others make some effort to distinguish themselves from this framework. Tye, in particular, goes to great lengths to defend a kind of phenomenal externalism, claiming that what we are acquainted with are not privately introspectable

consciousness via a unique and intimate relationship we hold to our experiences as knowable objects. We acquire introspective knowledge through this relationship, as a kind of acquaintance we have with the phenomenal properties of experience.

As I understand it, Petitmengin and Bitbol's proximity/closeness model of introspection is a species of this more general acquaintance approach to phenomenal knowledge. The general trait held in common is an attempt to reconceptualize our first-person epistemic stance to our own conscious experience in terms of a special, intimate relationship we hold as knowers to our experiences. There are some differing motives at work here, from Petitmengin and Bitbol's desire to establish a valid basis for first-person introspective data in the science of consciousness to Tye's desire to build a satisfying materialist account of consciousness itself, but behind these differences is a general recognition of the inadequacies of existing conceptual schemes in making sense of the unique epistemic event of knowing one's own conscious experience and an attempt to reframe our understanding of introspection in terms of acquaintance, proximity, and closeness between ourselves and our experiences.

This broad motivation across disciplinary boundaries reveals a need for conceptual change in consciousness studies. The philosophical and scientific investigation of consciousness requires a clear and accurate understanding of introspection, our first-person epistemic stance towards our own conscious experience, but existing epistemic paradigms are failing us in our pursuit of this understanding. Unfortunately, however, the attempt to reconceptualize introspection along the lines of proximity/closeness and acquaintance is not adequate, for the reason I gave above; all such accounts erroneously preserve the epistemic dichotomy between a knowing subject and a known object and thereby inherit the problems that the standard observation account generates in treating experiences as objects. As I see it, the general moral to draw is that we ought to stop trying to conceptualize introspection / first-person knowledge of conscious experience in terms of something else, whether that something be observation, proximity, acquaintance, or some other seemingly applicable epistemic schematic that relates us to our experiences in a dichotomous relationship.

internal states but rather external properties of physical objects out in the world. I will not worry much about such differences here, however. My target is what all of these views have in common: the idea that phenomenal knowledge involves an epistemically dualistic acquaintance relationship between a knowing subject and a knowing object, regardless of what the nature of that object itself may be (sense data, qualia, properties of things in the world, etc.).

Instead, we need to start anew and attempt to conceptualize introspection from the ground up, on the basis of its unique epistemic character in experience. This is what I will attempt to do in what follows.

III. The Existential Constitution Model of Phenomenal Knowledge

As explained above with the example of sneezing, it is erroneous to think of experiences as objects that we come to know. A sneeze experience is not something that appears to us as an object in an act of perceptual observation, but neither is it an object that we can come to know by getting acquainted with it or close to it. It is not an object at all, but rather an experiential event. So how then are we to conceive of the case of coming to know what it is like to sneeze, of obtaining phenomenal knowledge of a sneeze experience? I propose that we think of this kind of knowledge as a unique epistemic state that we acquire in virtue of the fact that we ourselves are composed of the known experiences. When I come to know what it is like to experience a sneeze, this knowledge is *constituted* by my actually *being in a sneezing state* and undergoing the sneezing experience as a conscious being. I know the sneezing experience by being in it, rather than being related to it in a dichotomous relationship between myself and the experience.

I label this conceptualization of introspective knowledge the ‘existential constitution’ model of phenomenal knowledge, on the basis that our first-person knowledge of our own experiences is composed of the experiences themselves. We know our experiences through our being constituted by them, as conscious beings existing over time. The key feature that distinguishes this model from other attempts to conceptualize first-person knowledge of conscious experience is that it explicitly refrains from characterizing the kind of knowledge in question in terms of the knowing subject obtaining an epistemic relation with a distinguishable known object. In the case of phenomenal knowledge, the knower and the known are one and the same, as a conscious subject undergoing an experience of some sort or other. In this respect, this type of knowledge is quite distinct from other types of knowledge (propositional knowledge that X is the case, acquaintance knowledge with some entity or property X, etc.). It is a type of knowledge that does not match or fall under existing epistemological paradigms and thus must be conceptualized according to its own unique nature. Because it occurs through our being constituted by the

experiences we undergo as concretely existing conscious beings, it is apt to understand it as existential constitution.

It should be clarified that my use of the term 'existential' here is not intended to invoke a strong association with classic existential philosophy, such as found in the works of Sartre, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, and so on. There is a broad shared emphasis on our concrete embodied existence as conscious human beings, but no further associations between my account and the group of philosophers known as 'existentialists' should be inferred here. I choose the term 'existential' simply to point out the fact that phenomenal knowledge is fundamentally rooted in our existence as conscious beings, in virtue of its being existentially composed of our experiences themselves as we undergo them.

It should also be clarified that I do not intend to support any particular view of the self or mind here. In saying that we know our experiences by being composed of or constituted by them, I am not necessarily suggesting (but also not ruling out) the possibility that we ourselves are composed merely of a bundle of experiences, as Hume and others have maintained. Even if there is more to the self than that, we are actually in various experiential states over the course of our lives, and that is all my account requires. I am also not suggesting that our minds are merely composed of experiences. There may very well be aspects or components of our minds that we do not experience at all, as suggested by both psychoanalytical and cognitive approaches to human psychology. Whatever the case may be, however, our minds do at least undergo conscious experiences at times, and we know what these experiences are like through our minds actually undergoing them. That is all that my 'existential constitution' model stipulates or requires.

It is also important to recognize that this model is not intended to explain all aspects of introspection. As I see it, introspection is complex, consisting of a plurality of very different kinds of mental phenomena. There is the unique knowledge of our own experiences that we acquire by actually undergoing them, which is what I have been focusing on and which is central to understanding the epistemic qualities of our first-person knowledge of conscious experience, but there are also introspective processes that involve higher-order conceptual representation of our experiences as we attend to and think about them. Such processes themselves are diverse, from simple recognitional conceptualization of an experience (recognizing a hunger experience as a desire for food, for example) to rambling inner speech narratives about one's personal character, social role, or broad

direction in life. The latter are perhaps what people in general most frequently have in mind when appealing to the concept of introspection ('I've been in an introspective mood lately, thinking about where I am going in life', etc.), but what is most interesting and salient about introspection from a methodological standpoint concerning consciousness studies is the unique character of our knowledge of our own experiences, which, as I have argued here, is not a higher-order state of reflectively looking back upon or getting in touch with our experiences but rather the unique knowledge we have of our consciousness by actually being composed of it.

It is interesting to note that there are hints towards this model in Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009). They state, for instance, that 'It [introspective knowledge of a conscious experience] is not a matter of "looking at" one's experience but of "tasting" it or "dwelling in" it' (p. 378). The concept of 'tasting' an experience harkens back to the proximity model analysed above, treating the experience as something we come to know by somehow getting in contact with it. The concept of 'dwelling in' a conscious experience, however, is somewhat different, and this difference is crucial to the issue at hand. As I understand it, the idea of 'dwelling in' an experience leads us to think of knowing the experience by being in it, which I contend is the right way to think about our first-person knowledge of experience. A conscious being knows its experiences by literally inhabiting them as compositional constituents of its nature, by 'dwelling' in them as components of itself. As Petitmengin and Bitbol further state, 'In the nonobservational perspective, reflective consciousness is not a second consciousness that stares at the former, at the risk of reifying, freezing, distorting or disturbing it.' (p. 380) Conscious experiences, as constituents of a person's mind, do not require a second reflecting consciousness to be known. They are known, in a unique first-person manner, by their occurrence as conscious events in a conscious mind, and not by a higher-order consciousness of consciousness, whether that second level of consciousness be understood as a kind of observation, contact, or acquaintance with a first level conscious experience. First-person experiential knowledge of conscious experience simply consists of the conscious experience itself, as a lived state undergone by a conscious subject.

One might object to the existential constitution model on the basis that an experience alone does not constitute introspective knowledge. To have genuine introspective knowledge of an experience, it may be argued, one must not only undergo the experience but also have some further representation of the experience such that it becomes known to

oneself as an epistemic agent. So, with regard to the sneeze experience example, simply experiencing the sneeze would not provide oneself with introspective knowledge. To know the experience, one would need to attend to the experience and obtain some further epistemic relation towards it.

This perspective, however, does not do justice to the unique epistemic character of our first-person knowledge of our own experiences. As mentioned above, I do not deny that there are higher-order states through which we represent our mental states. In fact, I think that there are indeed kinds of introspection that match the description of introspective knowledge alluded to by this potential objection, but they are not what provide us with the unique knowledge we acquire when we come to know the qualitative character of an experience in itself. Higher-order representations are mediated by the same cognitive processes involved in our knowledge of the external world, such as our ability to conceptually attend to some given phenomenon or other, and thereby have the same fallible epistemic properties as ordinary knowledge of the external world. For instance, in conceptually attending to a sneeze experience, I might reflectively understand it as an involuntary response, perhaps relating it to a prior experience of flinching in pain. Epistemically speaking, this conceptual categorization of experience is on a par with categorizing some external phenomenon, such as attending to the shared characteristics of a beetle and a butterfly as types of insects. It carries no special epistemic qualities with regard to its first-person orientation, in contrast with ordinary third-person knowledge acquisition. Knowledge of the phenomenal quality of the experience itself, on the other hand, is not mediated by conceptual representation but rather is known simply by, and only by, undergoing the experience itself. It is a unique type of knowledge, particular to one's first-person experience and fundamentally distinct from our further representational conceptualization of experience.

Although the knowledge and the experience are one and the same thing on my existential constitution model of phenomenal knowledge, the experience itself can be properly regarded as a kind of knowledge due to its distinct epistemic character. Indeed, we commonly speak of the phenomenal quality of experience as a kind of knowledge when we speak of 'knowing what it is like' (e.g. knowing what it is like to sneeze, to taste wasabi, to feel happy, to hear the sound of a sitar, and so on). Insofar as we continue to speak of this as a kind of knowing, and to treat this knowledge of experience as a central facet of the study of consciousness, it is important that we recognize and accurately

understand its unique epistemic character, as distinct from other types of knowledge. I will elaborate on this unique epistemic character in the remaining section below, with the goal of clarifying how it pertains to the methodological issues surrounding the study of consciousness.

IV. Epistemic Implications

Understanding the unique epistemic character of first-person knowledge of conscious experience is crucial to an accurate and viable approach to first-person methodologies in the study of consciousness. Of central importance here is the recognition that this kind of knowledge is not propositional in nature. In knowing what a conscious experience is like, where the knowledge gained is knowledge of the phenomenal character of the experience itself, there is no particular propositional fact that comes to be known. Consider again the sneeze experience example. When a conscious subject learns what it is like to sneeze by actually undergoing the experience of sneezing, there is no proposition (e.g. 'Sneezes are X', where X constitutes a propositional description of a sneeze experience) that forms the basis of the acquired knowledge. Of course, an epistemic agent could go on to form propositional beliefs about the experience, but with regard to knowing the qualitative character of the experience there is simply the sneeze experience itself, as a consciously experienced event, that constitutes this particular kind of knowledge. This lack of propositional content is what the acquaintance approach to phenomenal knowledge, as described above, gets right (despite its mischaracterization of phenomenal knowledge in terms of a dichotomous acquaintance relationship) and is the source of its appeal among the philosophers there mentioned. As Bertrand Russell emphasized when he introduced the concept of acquaintance knowledge into philosophical discourse, there is a fundamental epistemic difference between knowing an experience and acquiring propositional knowledge through descriptive representation (1910). Knowing the experience, in contrast to knowing *that* the experience is X, is not propositional in nature. We thus cannot address first-person knowledge of conscious experience with the same concepts and epistemic standards that we apply to the more commonly addressed issues pertaining to standard propositional knowledge (knowledge that X is the case, where X is some proposition about the world).

Perhaps the most significant implication of the non-propositional nature of our first-person knowledge is the fact that this kind of

knowledge does not have a determinate truth value. An experience in itself, though epistemic in nature in the sense I have described, is neither true nor false. Descriptions of the experience, of course, may be either true or false, but the experience itself has no descriptive content of which it may be said to be true or false. Thus, by default, first-person knowledge of experience is not fallible, due to the fact that it does not contain any content that could possibly be false. On the flipside, though, we cannot properly say that it is infallible either. These standard epistemic evaluations simply do not apply at all.

Perhaps due in part to a recognition of this point, Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009) also reject truth as the key epistemic factor involved in first-person knowledge of experience, particularly with regard to assessing the validity of introspective reports. In their conception, 'This validity is no longer measured in terms of "truth" — conceived as adequacy or representative accurateness, but in terms of authenticity on the one hand, and of performative consistency on the other' (p. 373). Notice, however, that the lack of truth value in phenomenal knowledge of experience does not entail the absence of truth values in reports on conscious experience. First-person reports of experience do have truth values, insofar as they consist of statements that describe one's own experience. Petitmengin and Bitbol's epistemic revisions concerning first-person methodologies, which attempt to replace truth with authenticity, cannot apply to all aspects of introspection. The absence of truth value is only applicable to the experiential knowledge of conscious experiences themselves, but not to other ways of knowing our own minds. As mentioned above, there are kinds of introspection that involve descriptive reflection upon experience and thereby produce statements that may be either true or false. For example, upon experiencing the onset of a sneeze I may produce the report 'I am going to sneeze!' This report has a determinable truth value and is thus subject to epistemic evaluation concerning its descriptive accuracy. It may also be regarded as an authentic report in some sense (perhaps due to the development of recognitional concepts from similar experiences in the past, for instance), but it still nonetheless contains propositional content that is either true or false. According to Petitmengin and Bitbol's account of first-person methodology, there are ways of generating first-person experiential reports that produce authentic descriptions of the experience, rather than theory-mediated interpretations that may fail to portray the experience. There may indeed be better and worse ways of producing first-person reports, and perhaps authenticity is an applicable epistemic criterion in distinguishing between them, but it does not

follow that some introspective reports are immune to epistemic considerations concerning truth value, nor does it follow that they lack potentially fallible conceptual mediation. Once we begin to use language to describe experience, we embed our cognitive processes among concepts and generate thoughts with propositional structure. The mediums of words and concepts, by their very nature, produce a second layer (and maybe more, depending upon how we understand the relationships between concepts and language) of epistemic phenomena that mediate between our experiences and our descriptions of them. This mediation enables the production of propositional thoughts about one's own experience, thoughts which can be either true and thereby accurately represent the experience or false and thereby fail to provide a viable description of the experience.

So where does this leave us, with regard to the epistemic status of first-person methodologies? In light of the existential constitution model I have developed here, we can see that there is a unique kind of knowledge that we have of our experiences, in virtue of our undergoing them as conscious beings. This knowledge is paramount to the study of consciousness. Indeed, it is the very phenomenon under investigation. As such, it is the bedrock of any viable understanding of consciousness. Nevertheless, due to its non-propositional nature, this first-person experiential knowledge does not itself directly produce knowable facts to ground our conceptual understanding of consciousness. To acquire propositional content about experience that can be drawn upon to construct a robust conceptual grasp of the nature and structure of consciousness, we must engage in the production of language-mediated reports about conscious experience. This brings us into the domain of fallible interpretation. No matter how 'close' a report may be to a conscious experience, its very nature as an instance of conceptually-mediated language, opens the door for error.

It is important to recognize that this fallibility does not render first-person reports useless to the study of consciousness, however. First-person descriptions of experience are no worse (nor better) off in this regard than any other kind of description we may make, including third-person scientific descriptions that aim to accurately explain some given phenomenon. Despite their fallibility, first-person reports provide us both a way of conceptually articulating our own lived experience and, when obtained through second and third-person methods, of obtaining descriptions of the experiences of others. They are thus indispensable sources of information in the investigation of consciousness. It is on this point that Petitmengin and Bitbol's contribution is most productive to the further development of consciousness

studies. They describe and advocate methods of evoking reports that authentically portray the character of lived conscious experience and that can be subsequently utilized to reveal underlying structures and patterns through intersubjective validation procedures. Authentic report production is not immune to epistemic standards of truth, as Petitmengin and Bitbol suggest, but it may nonetheless be a way of generating viable data that can be used to investigate the nature of consciousness. I have nothing substantial to say on this matter here, so I will leave Petitmengin and Bitbol's work to speak for itself on this point. Suffice it to say that, properly limited to the generation of first-person reports, Petitmengin and Bitbol's methodological proposals have the potential to help researchers distinguish between viable and untrustworthy reports on experience. As long as it is recognized that first-person reports do not carry forth the unique epistemic properties of the experiential knowledge from which they emerge, I see no reason why we cannot uncover ways of producing reports that describe experience in an authentic and / or accurate manner, and hope that the thoughts I have offered here help clarify the proper domain of such pursuits.

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