

# Is There A Specific Experience of Thinking?<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I discuss whether there is a specific experience of thinking or not. I address this question by analysing if it is possible to reduce the phenomenal character of thinking to the phenomenal character of sensory experiences. My purpose is to defend that there is a specific phenomenality for at least some thinking mental states. I present Husserl's theory of intentionality in the *Logical Investigations* as a way to defend this claim and I consider its assumptions. Then I present the case of understanding as a paradigmatic case for the phenomenal contrast argument and I defend it against two objections.

Keywords: cognitive experience, sensory experience, intentionality, phenomenal consciousness

## 1. *Setting the Question*

Think of a certain person, for example Ingmar Bergman. Now consider: is there anything it is like to have such a thought? Is it maybe that you formed a visual image of him, or you heard the words 'Ingmar Bergman' in inner speech? Neither of these seems to pick out what it is like for you to think about Ingmar Bergman: you might have the visual image while thinking about someone else with similar looks (the film director's twin, say, if he had one) or you might have that bit of inner speech while thinking of someone else named Ingmar Bergman. The intuition that thinking as such has a certain phenomenality which is not the phenomenality of perceptual associated states is the base for those who state that there is a *specific* experience of thinking<sup>2</sup>.

It is commonly agreed that a person who is in a state of pain has a certain feeling or experience, that there is a specific "what-it-is-likeness" or what does it feel like for the subject to be in pain (Nagel, 1974). A phenomenal property is the property or quality of "what it is like" or what does it feel like to undergo certain states. The phenomenal character of consciousness is meant to consist in the way in which the mental states are experienced. The question of phenomenal consciousness usually appears as restricted to *sensory* mental phenomena while many intentional states do not seem to involve phenomenal consciousness. Beliefs or desires do not seem to involve a phe-

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<sup>2</sup> Here and in the rest of the paper, 'specific' means that it belongs to the experience of thinking as such, not that it is precise, determined or fine-grained.



nominal character, at least without mediation of sensory experiences. The term 'experience' is thus normally used to refer to sensory experiences. While it is commonly agreed that sensory states possess this qualitative character, some philosophers cast doubt on the fact that there is something such as a specific cognitive<sup>3</sup> experience or a specific experience of thinking.

The question at stake is then: when there is an experience of thinking, is its phenomenal character reducible to the phenomenal character of sensory experiences? In other words:

1. Could there be two subjects with the same phenomenal sensory aspects but with phenomenally different thoughts?

— If the answer is yes: the proponent of a specific cognitive phenomenology is right

— If the answer is no: the opponent of a specific cognitive phenomenology is right

My aim in this paper is to defend the thesis that there is a specific phenomenality for *some* thinking experiences<sup>4</sup>. I present Husserl's theory of intentionality in the *Logical Investigations* as a way to defend this claim and I consider its assumptions. Then I present the case of understanding as a paradigmatic case for the phenomenal contrast arguments and defend it against two objections.

For some period in the philosophy of mind, it seemed that this debate amounted to an obvious question: those in favour of a specific cognitive phenomenology think that it is true and it is simply too obvious to call for an argumentation, whereas those who refuse it think that it is just obvious that it is false, or just that this issue couldn't bring important consequences for our view of the mind. Clearly, as Pitt (2004) points out, arguments on both sides are called for. And it seems that the situation is starting to change (see Bayne & Montague, in press). The main arguments at stage so far is:

In favour of a specific cognitive phenomenology:

1. Classical phenomenological theories of intentionality (Husserl, 1984).
2. Phenomenal contrast (Husserl, 1984; Pitt, 2004; , 1998; Strawson, 2010):
  - they look for cases in which there are phenomenological differences that aren't grounded in sensory differences.
3. Epistemology (Siewert, 1998; Pitt, 2004). Their key premises are:
  - introspective knowledge (Pitt, 2004)
  - distinctively first-person knowledge (Siewert, 1998)
4. Appeal to arguments found in debates about perception (Jackson's knowledge argument) (Goldman, 1993).

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<sup>3</sup> I use 'cognitive' following its use in the literature on the topic, so that it means involving thought.

<sup>4</sup> I remain neutral with respect to the claim that all cognitive experiences have a specific phenomenal character.

### 5. Parity arguments:

- if one has reasons to accept qualitative character for some sensory mental states, then one has equal reasons to accept qualitative character for cognitive states (Schiels, *in press*)

The arguments against a specific cognitive phenomenology proceed by (i) rejecting classical phenomenological theories of intentionality (for different reasons), (ii) explaining away the cases of phenomenal contrast by appealing to other sorts of phenomenology (perceptual, emotional) (Tye & Wright, *in press*), (iii) rejecting the epistemology arguments, or (iv) appealing to asymmetries between sensory and non-sensory states (Georgalis, 2003).

My aim in this paper is then to present 1) and 2) of the arguments in favour of a specific cognitive phenomenology and discuss two objections to 2).

### 2. *A Phenomenological Theory of Intentionality*

In the *Logical Investigations* (LU), Husserl describes the following scenarios. Someone listens carefully to a complex of sounds that is completely new for her so that it is merely an acoustic complexity and then, afterward, once she is familiarized with its meaning and she hears that chain of sound in a conversation, she understands it. Or we imagine that certain figures produce in us a merely aesthetic effect, and then suddenly we comprehend that they can be symbols or verbal signs. Then he asks: which is the difference between the two states? Where does this plus of the understood expression over the articulated sound empty of meaning lie? (LU, V, § 14). Husserl's answer is that the difference lies in the "character" of the mental state. "Character" is the general term which covers what he calls the "Quality" and the "Matter"<sup>5</sup> of an act ("act" is the technical term for intentional experience). The Quality, or what we could call the "style of presentation" of the act, is the type of act—a thought, an imagination, a belief, etc. — (what in analytic terminology are propositional attitudes<sup>6</sup>), whereas the Matter is the aspect under which the object presents itself. Both Quality and Matter constitute an intentional experience or act.

If we want to present Husserl's descriptions in the form of an argument, it would be the following (see Soldati, 2005):

- (i) Psychic acts are wholes and Matter and Quality are moments (dependent parts) of the whole.
- (ii) The parts of a whole have the same ontological status as the whole itself (principle of ontological homogeneity)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Quality' and 'Matter' are here technical terms not to be confused with some other non technical meanings. I use capital letters to indicate it.

<sup>6</sup> For Husserl, however, not all intentional experiences or acts have a propositional content as content, he leaves space for non-propositional content.

<sup>7</sup> This principle must be restricted to the case of experiences, for it is not true in general for all parts and whole relations.

(iii) Psychic acts as wholes are experienced.

Therefore: The Matter and the Quality are experienced.

That the Matter is experienced means that the way the object is given to us (the object with this and that feature) is experienced, that is, that the meaning is experienced (because the Matter is where the meaning as a species instantiates itself, according to Husserl's theory of species and particulars). Thus, the meaning of the act belongs to the experienced content. If the experienced content is the qualitative content, and if the meaning is of conceptual nature, it corresponds to it a conceptual qualitative content, what can be called "conceptual qualia" (see Dorsch & Soldati, 2005).

That the Quality is experienced means that there are *experiential* differences between different Qualities: whether a certain act or intentional mental state is an imagination, a perception, a thought, a judgment, etc., is recognized because they are experienced differently, they are different kind of experiences which instantiate themselves in token experiences.

We have seen a way to defend a specific phenomenality for cognitive experiences relying on Husserl's theory of intentionality in the LU. Once one accepts that intentionality is a lived phenomenon, it follows that intentional mental episodes have phenomenal character. Moreover, the difference between them is an experiential difference (see also Zahavi, 2005). The very fact that we experience a thought as a thought and not as an imagination or as any other kind of mental state. These experiential differences make the phenomenal character of thinking specific, not reducible to the character of other experiences. This approach defends that the experience of understanding or of thinking in general is given in a different way as sensory experiences. The idea is that the thinking experience can —and maybe should— be given through images but we undergo it and properly speak of it as such when these images are not there. Before concluding this section, two important comments should be done.

First of all, the question of the phenomenal character of cognitive states is something obvious for Husserl's phenomenology or, in other words, *it is not a thesis to be defended* but part of his central point of departure for his theory of intentionality, that is, part of the primitive notion (intentional experience) which sustains the theory. Maybe this is so because of the descriptive character of the phenomenological approach to intentionality, which aims to show what we find when we reflect upon our mental lives, without pronouncing itself on the possible reduction of intentionality to a more basic phenomenon (physically speaking).

Secondly, this theory holds a *general* claim with respect to our topic, namely, that the specificity of the phenomenal character for cognitive states is valid for all kinds of cognitive conscious mental states. Experiential differences amount to differences in kinds of cognitive mental states, for all of them<sup>8</sup>.

These two remarks lead to the following consideration. Since intentionality as a lived phenomenon was a starting point for Husserl, he didn't attempt to defend the

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, this thesis is also true for Husserl in the domain of all conscious mental states, not only the cognitive one. Our present case -cognitive experience- is a subset of the set formed by all conscious intentional states.

claim of a specific phenomenality for all kinds of conscious cognitive states, he just endorsed it. I don't defend this general claim in this paper, for which I think further argumentation is necessary.

### 3. *The Phenomenal Contrast*

Imagine two people listening to the news on a French radio program. One of them, Jacques, speaks French, while the other, Jack, speaks only English. We can ask whether Jacques, who understands what the news speaker is saying, has an experience of a different sort than Jack, who merely hears the French-sounding words without grasping their meaning. The answer is that they both have different cognitive experiences although they have the same sensory experience (they hear the same chain of sounds). Jacques has an experience of understanding while Jack doesn't.

The example was put forward in detail by Strawson (2010, p. 5) (although it dates back to Husserl, as we have seen): 'consider what it is like, experientially, to hear someone speaking non technically in a language that one understands. One understands what is said, and one undoubtedly has an experience. How do the understanding and the experience relate? Most will agree that the experience is complex, and that it is not merely sensory, not just a matter of the sounds. But they will hesitate if it is suggested that there is experience (as) of understanding'. The experience is 'as' of understanding because it need not be veridical: 'misunderstanding involves understanding-experience as much as genuine understanding does, for understanding-experience is experience as of understanding and need not be veridical. (It could be called 'meaning-experience')' (idem, p.7). He argues for this understanding-experience over and above visual and auditory experience.

This argument points to a phenomenal contrast between the mental state of understanding and that of not understanding. Its tenet is to show that sensory experiences can not account for this contrast, leading to the conclusion that we must accept a specific phenomenal character for some cognitive experiences<sup>9</sup>.

#### 3.1. *Objection 1: The Accompanying Sensory Aspects of Thought*

A common argument to deny that such phenomenology is specific to cognitive states is to say that thought is normally accompanied by states such as perceptual representations, bodily sensations, images or inner utterances, so that the phenomenal qualities we find in thought are in fact constituted by these mental images and not by the experience of thinking itself. My experience of thinking that p is experiential in so far as I sensory hear or read or imagine the utterance p.

In this line of reasoning, Burge (2007, p.399) asserts that 'when thought is phenomenally conscious, its being phenomenally conscious derives from its making use of phenomenal qualities that derive from more primitive psychological systems'. Carruthers (2006, p. 6-7) has the same point to make: '... thoughts aren't phenomenally

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<sup>9</sup> A functionalist could account for the difference between these two states without having to accept a specific phenomenal character for thought. I am aware of possible functionalist objections, but the response to them would be outside the scope of this paper.

conscious per se. Our thoughts aren't like anything, in the relevant sense, except to the extent that they might be associated with visual or other images or emotional feelings, which will be phenomenally conscious by virtue of their quasi-sensory status. [In inner speech] phenomenal consciousness will attach to the imaged sounds of the sentences, not to the contents of those sentences, i.e. not to the thoughts that are thereby entertained'. And also Jackendoff (2007, p.82) claims that: 'I conclude that phonology is necessary and sufficient for the presence of linguistic qualia, and meaning is neither necessary nor sufficient... if we pay attention to the phenomenology of 'conscious thought', we find it most often has the form of linguistic images-'inner speech' or a 'voice in the head,' a Joycean stream of consciousness... The form of the associated thought, a semantic/conceptual structure that is capable of driving inference, is not at all present in experience'.

This view seems to be part of a general philosophical attitude toward consciousness influenced by Wittgenstein's (1953, § 154) attack on understanding as a mental process: 'In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process. (The increase and decrease of a sensation of pain, the hearing of a melody, of a sentence: mental processes)'. Wittgenstein (1953) seems to reject that understanding is a mental process on the basis of the argument that it is not a sensory process or experience. According to this quote, it seems that in order to be able to deny that we have an experience of understanding, he has to deny that the understanding is mental, and this supposes that everything that is mental is experienced. If one wants to say that there is no cognitive experience, one should say that it is not a mental process. And if one doesn't accept Wittgenstein's thesis and thinks that understanding is a mental process, one must reduce it to the experience of sensory mental states. However, as Soldati & Dorsch (2004) note, Wittgenstein's argument does not address the possibility of there being non-sensory experiences.

### 3.1.1. Replies

1. We find a reply to this objection in almost all the authors who defend a specific phenomenality of thought. A possible answer is that, even if this objection holds, the phenomenal character of these sensory states would be only *contingently* linked to the content of the respective propositional state. An example: we express a thought about a cat in English with the word 'cat' and not with another one, but this is not essential to the thought itself.

But the objection can come again: one could insist that the qualitative character of these experiences belong exclusively to the accompanying sensory representations and that it is independent of their conceptual content. It seems plausible to maintain that, since the sensory representations usually occur in conjunction with particular thoughts, we have the tendency to take the phenomenal character of sensory representations to be a feature of the non-sensory thoughts.

2. The straightforward response here is that it is plausible to claim that the states in question can, and often do, occur without the simultaneous presence of sensory rep-

representations, of symbols or signs. When one hears the sentence 'The Eiffel Tower is going to be dismantled', one will normally form a visual image of the Eiffel Tower in this particular process described. But others will not, and such an imagining is not a necessary accompaniment nor it is part of the understanding experience. Siewert (1998, p. 277) has put forward examples of thoughts that are too complex and disappear in such an immediate way that it would be impossible to sensory represent (auditory or by images) the sentences at the same time: 'you are standing at the door to your house, reaching in your pants pockets for the door key, and you find it empty. You feel a sudden panic; you think perhaps you have locked yourself out; you try to remember where you put the keys, then recall switching them to your coat pocket earlier; you reach and find them there —relief'. It is a case of sudden wordless thought that involves a kind of anxiety. In this case, however, one could think that the phenomenal character is produced by the anxiety that the situation produces, which may not be necessarily thought of as a specific cognitive state.

So I think that what is called for are instances in which a thought occurs to you, when not only do you not visualize what you think, but you also don't verbalize the thought, either aloud or silently, nor are you understanding someone else's words. Examples of this sort could be an abrupt shift in the direction of thought, as for instance when you are doing something —let's say cooking— and you are occupied with the task and thinking about the ingredients and so on, and you suddenly remember (it comes to you in an instant) an appointment you had.

3. These examples show cases in which we have non-iconic thought, to use Siewert's terminology. But we can also respond to the objection by saying that the phenomenality of thinking and the phenomenality of imagery or sounds vary independently of each other, and therefore the latter can not be identified with the former. Two different thoughts can have the same associated images but nonetheless different phenomenal character: I can imagine the same image of the Eiffel Tower both with the thought 'The Eiffel Tower is 300 meters tall' and 'The Eiffel Tower is 301 meters tall' and nevertheless undergo phenomenally different states. And the other way round: I can associate different images to two utterances of the same sentence separated in time and nevertheless have the same phenomenal character. Another example for this variation is the case of homonyms: what it is like for you to think of a bark (of a dog) is different from what it is like for you to think of bark (of a tree), although they are written and pronounced identically.

We have seen a first objection to the specific phenomenal character for thought. I have argued that the objection doesn't succeed because: (i) the occurrence of sensory accompanying states is not a necessary condition for conscious thought, precisely because there are thoughts for which there is no possible sensory representation and they nevertheless have phenomenal character; (ii) the phenomenality of thinking and the phenomenality of sensory experiences can vary independently of each other<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The reductionist about the phenomenality of thought also has the possibility of accounting for this phenomenality in terms of other associated states (emotional, the experience of trying, etc) (Iye & Wright, in press). I have not addressed this option here.

### 3.2. *Objection 2: The "Click" and the "Aha" Experiences*

It could be argued that the phenomenal difference between thoughts is not due to their specific phenomenal character but to a kind of “click” or “aha!” experiences. These experiences would account for the phenomenal character we might think as specific for thought<sup>11</sup>. An experience of this kind is an experience of an interpretative switch. Were this the case, the phenomenal character of thought would have nothing to do with the experience of the content of the sentence. The appeal to this experience can be used to defend two arguments:

- (i) The “click” or the “aha!” experience is an experience in-between the two thoughts. The two thoughts are separated by this experience of a special phenomenal character, so that the two thoughts don’t have phenomenal character per se.
- (ii) The “click” or the “aha!” experience is a confusion or perplexity experience—confusion resulting from the failure to understand, and thus not something specific of understanding.

The reply to (i) is that the phenomenal contrast between two thoughts when there is such an interpretative switch does not consist in the fact that one happens before, and one after, and in-between the two, a third experience occurs (something like a “click”). For there is nothing like that which happens on those occasions. The experience is more like the duck-rabbit phenomenon—the “Gestalt switch”, where it is difficult to see this intermediate experience of a click over and above the experience of seeing a duck and the experience of seeing a rabbit, that is, one same kind of experience with two different ways of presenting the content (Siewert, 1998).

The reply to (ii) needs some steps. If this confusion experience is just *not understanding*, this is not an objection, but rather another way of isolating the kind of experience we are putting forward (it seems odd to acknowledge phenomenal character to not understanding and not to understanding). If the confusion experience is some kind of positive state, like the *realization* that you didn't understand (Siewert, in press), then one already admits that there is something it is like to be struck by a thought where no sensory reduction is to be had—for how could this “realization state” be of a sensory kind?. Another possibility is to consider this kind of confusion as a puzzlement, but then one can look to *multiply center-embedded* sentences (Pitt, 2004). These sentences are used for linguists to illustrate properties of our language processing abilities, specifically, limitations on our ability to spontaneously understand grammatically well-formed sentences. An example is the following:

- (1) The boy the man the girl saw chased fled.

For most people this is not comprehensible at first reading or hearing. But if it is made clear what the sentence means, one’s experience of it should change. If one is told that (1) means

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the experience of a “click” could not be applied to all kinds of thoughts, for there might not be any “click” at all between them. The objection can be sound if we think of the understanding experience.



(1') The boy, who was chased by the man that the girl saw, fled,

then the experience of understanding the sentence is different. In this example the sentence remains difficult to understand even after it ceases to be puzzling (and even after you know how to analyze it), so the experience of understanding may be separated from the experience of relief from any perplexity that the sentence may cause.

We have presented the “click” or “aha!” experience as a candidate for accounting for the phenomenal difference between thoughts, in two different versions. We have given reasons to think that both arguments fail to account for this phenomenal contrast.

#### 4. Final Remarks

The preceding arguments lead to the following final remarks.

— We find a way to defend a specific phenomenality for thought in Husserl's theory of intentionality in the LU. Once one accepts that intentionality is a lived phenomenon, it follows that intentional mental episodes have phenomenal character. Moreover, the difference between them is an experiential difference. These experiential differences make the phenomenal character of thinking *specific*, not reducible to the character of other experiences. We noted that this phenomenological view has a *descriptive* and not an explanatory or reductive aim. For Husserl, the specificity of the phenomenal character is a *general* feature for all conscious cognitive experiences. I don't attempt to defend this general claim in this paper, for which I think further argumentation is necessary. I have only shown that *some* thinking experiences, such as understanding, have a specific phenomenal character.

— By introducing the experience of understanding and arguing that its phenomenal character is not reducible to the sensory phenomenal character we have pointed to a case in favour of a specific cognitive phenomenology for at least some thinking experiences. Therefore, we have shown that for some thinking experiences there is a specific phenomenal character.

— If the thesis of a specific phenomenality of some cognitive states is true, then the meaning of 'experience' needs to be broadened in order to include them. Any story about them that leaves aside what it is like to specifically be in them is incomplete. And this amounts to acknowledge that the problem of phenomenality spreads into the domain of cognition.

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