

Direct Phenomenal Beliefs, Cognitive Significance, and the Specious Present

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Abstract

David Chalmers (2010) argues for an acquaintance theory of the justification of direct phenomenal beliefs. A central part of this defense is the claim that direct phenomenal beliefs are cognitively significant. I argue against this. Direct phenomenal beliefs are justified within the specious present, and yet the resources available with the present ‘now’ are so impoverished that it barely constrains the content of a direct phenomenal belief. I argue that Chalmers’s account does not have the resources for explaining how direct phenomenal beliefs support the inference from ‘*this_E is R*’ to ‘*that was R*.’

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David Chalmers has recently taken up the defense of an acquaintance theory of the justification of phenomenal states.¹ He lays out a detailed theory of phenomenal concepts and argues that direct phenomenal beliefs are foundationally justified. The clarification his account provides enables us to identify a crucial problem with the claim that direct phenomenal beliefs are cognitively significant. I argue that Chalmers’s view implies that direct phenomenal beliefs are foundationally justified only within the specious present and that this implies that these beliefs have little, if any, cognitive significance.

¹See (Chalmers 2010, Ch 8 & 9). See also (Gertler 2001, 2011) for a similar defense of an acquaintance theory.

1 The Specious Present

The specious present is the duration one is immediately aware of, a temporal length in which (intuitively) memory plays no role. Acts of acquaintance occur within the specious present. Bertrand Russell held that one could intelligibly wonder about one's justification for thinking that the world has existed for more than five minutes. This question is intelligible because it's conceivable that a subject similar to oneself comes to exist in the past five minutes. Is, however, there a temporal duration in which radical skeptical questions are not possible? If there is then it is within the specious present.

C.I. Lewis, a defender of a direct awareness view, tries to fill the specious present with as many items of past experience as possible to afford an adequate justification of past beliefs.

[K]nowing takes place in the *epistemological present*; a present in which what is sensuously given is surrounded by or embedded in a mass of epistemically pertinent surrogates of past experience, in the form of memories or of the sense of past experience as having been so and so; and that such present-as-past items are capable of being elicited by attention and reflection and brought into relations with one another and with the sensuously given—all without going beyond the bounds of what is genuinely present now.²

Lewis's brief remarks on the present surrogates of past experience are not phenomenologically plausible. Reasoning and acts of attention and reflection take place in time and only the most Herculean mentalist is able to accomplish these tasks within the present 'now'. Indeed, as Fumerton remarks "without relying on memory ... we seem to be prisoners of an all too fleeting present that simply allows no time for the kind of reasoning necessary to gain justification."³ Once the data is limited to the specious present the opportunities for resisting a wide-ranging skepticism are stark. In the following I consider the problem the specious present poses for Chalmers's acquaintance theory of direct phenomenal beliefs.

²(Lewis 1946, 331-332)

³(Fumerton 2006, 128)

2 Phenomenal Concepts & Phenomenal Beliefs

Let us begin with the notion of a *phenomenal concept*.⁴ A phenomenal concept is a concept of the phenomenal character of an experience. When one has an experience of a characteristic red object in normal conditions, one's experience has a certain character; there is something-it-is-like to undergo that experience. The phenomenal character of experience is what it's like to undergo the experience.

The discussion over phenomenal concepts is helpfully framed in terms of Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment about Mary. Mary is a neuroscientist specializing in color vision who knows every physical fact about color vision. Mary has been raised in a black and white room and has never seen a red apple in normal conditions. One day, Mary leaves the black and white room and sees for the first time a red apple. Upon having this experience, Mary learns something new; she learns what it is like to see to see a red object. That is, she learns about the phenomenal character of typical red experiences.

Chalmers's distinguishes between several types of phenomenal concepts.⁵ When Mary steps outside the monochromatic room and attends to her new experience, her experience instantiates the property of phenomenal red, R. Chalmers distinguishes two relational phenomenal concepts about R. First, there is the *community relational concept*, red_C . This concept indicates "the phenomenal quality typically caused in normal subjects within my community by paradigmatic red things."⁶ The second type of phenomenal concept is the *individual relational concept*, red_I . This concept indicates "the phenomenal quality typically caused in me by paradigmatic red things."⁷ red_C and red_I are distinct concepts. An abnormal subject may have red-green color inversion in which case her concept red_I picks out a different phenomenal quality than red_C denotes.

Chalmers observes that R can also be picked out by using a demonstrative concept. One may refer to the phenomenal quality of one's experience by using the phrase 'this quality' or 'this sort of experience.' Let us refer to this demonstrative concept as $this_E$. This demonstrative concept picks out whatever quality is present on the specific occasion. It functions in the same way one may pick out one's location by 'I am here'. The function of that expression picks out one's location, wherever one happens to be.

⁴This section and the next borrow material from (Poston 2013)

⁵(Chalmers 2010, 254-260)

⁶(Chalmers 2010, 255)

⁷(Chalmers 2010, 255)

Chalmers claims that each of these concepts fixes the reference to phenomenal redness relationally, either through external objects or acts of ostension. He then argues that there is a fourth phenomenal concept that picks out phenomenal redness “directly in terms of its intrinsic phenomenal nature.”⁸ He terms this a ‘pure phenomenal concept.’

Chalmers argues that there are pure phenomenal concepts by reflection on the case of Mary. When Mary steps outside the black and white room she learns that red experiences have “such and such a quality.” She learns that red experiences cause experiences of such and such quality and she learns that the quality is now extending is such and such. Chalmers refers to this as “Mary’s ‘such-and-such’ concept.”⁹ This is Mary’s pure phenomenal concept R . This concept R picks out the phenomenal quality R .

Chalmers then argues that the concept R is distinct from the concepts red_C , red_I , and $this_E$. His argument relies on using cognitive significance tests for difference between concepts. When Mary steps outside the monochromatic room and sees a red object in normal conditions she gains the following beliefs:

$red_C=R$,
 $red_I=R$, and
 $this_E=R$.

The first two beliefs are cognitively significant. She learns that the quality typically caused in normal subjects in her community by paradigmatic red things is R . Similarly, for the second identity, Mary learns that the quality caused in her by paradigmatic red things is R .

A crucial question is whether $this_E=R$ is cognitively significant. The belief expressed by this identity is the claim that “the quality she is now ostending is such-and-such.”¹⁰ Chalmers needs to successfully argue that this thought differs in content from the trivial thought that *this quality is whatever it happens to be*.

Two lines of argument support the cognitive significance of $this_E=R$. First, no a priori reasoning supports $this_E=R$ because a priori reasoning cannot rule out the possibility that the quality being ostended is different than it is. Compare the situation with the thought expressed by ‘My location is here’. This thought has a character that implies one can know a priori that any occasion of use will pick out a true sentence.¹¹ However, Mary’s thought that

⁸(Chalmers 2010, 256)

⁹(Chalmers 2010, 256)

¹⁰(Chalmers 2010, 257)

¹¹Arguably, the situation is more complicated. Imagine a person whose location changes every second but whose experience stays the same. It’s not pellucid that the thought expressed by ‘My location is here’ is knowable a priori because the person’s location changes so quickly. This suggests that some indexical expresses require a certain amount of stability. ‘I’ functions to pick out the

$this_E=R$ picks out the phenomenal quality, R , which is not guaranteed by any a priori feature of the linguistic situation.

The second line of argument that $this_E=R$ is cognitively significant proceeds on analogy with other kinds of demonstrative knowledge.¹² Consider a demonstrative concept of a shape $this_S$, which intuitively picks out ‘this shape, whatever it happens to be’. Jill tells Jack she is about to show him her favorite shape. She shows him a circle and Jack forms the thought that *Jill’s favorite shape is this_S*. ‘*This_S*’ picks out the shape of a circle. Jack can form the non-demonstrative thought that *Jill’s favorite shape is a circle*. This thought uses a qualitative concept of a circle. Jack might also form the thought that *This_S is circle*. This thought takes the object of demonstration and attributes to it a substantive qualitative property. Chalmers claims that it’s inessential to this example that the concept *circle* is a public language concept. He claims that Jack might acquire the qualitative concept of circularity for the first time and thereby be able to think the substantive thought that *This_S is circle*.

Chalmers asserts that Jack’s thought that *this_S is circle* is analogous to Mary’s thought that $this_E=R$. He explains “Like Jack’s thought, Mary’s thought involves attributing a certain substantive, qualitative nature to a type that is identified demonstratively. This qualitative nature is attributed using a qualitative concept of phenomenal redness, acquired upon having a red experience for the first time.”¹³ The qualitative nature of Mary’s thought, though, is difficult to express in a language. The terms ‘phenomenal redness’ express the concepts of either red_C or red_I . The concept R , by contrast, is a non-relational concept which directly picks out the phenomenal quality currently instantiated in Mary’s experience. The non-relational character of concept R makes it difficult to see how the thought that $this_E=R$ can have much cognitive significance. I turn to argue for this now.

3 Cognitive Significance & The Specious Present

Chalmers explicitly states that the lifetime of a direct phenomenal concept like R is “limited to the lifetime of the experience (or the instantiated quality) that constitutes it.”¹⁴ This implies that a direct phenomenal belief—a belief of the form $this_E=R$ —exists only within the lifetime of the experience. Direct

subject of thought, but, arguably, it succeeds only if the subject of thought is somewhat constant.

¹²(Chalmers 2010, 257-8). The following paragraph summarizes Chalmers’ discussion.

¹³(Chalmers 2010, 258)

¹⁴(Chalmers 2010, 272)

phenomenal beliefs are beliefs that exist only within the specious present. Furthermore, as Chalmers acknowledges, beliefs of the form ‘ R is phenomenal red’ are not direct phenomenal beliefs. This kind of belief involves the pre-existing phenomenal concept expressed by ‘phenomenal red’ which is a relational phenomenal concept, red_C or red_I .¹⁵ Similarly, a belief like ‘I am in pain’ involves a relational concept of pain, either the community relation concept of pain ($pain_C$) or the individual relational concept of pain ($pain_I$). This kind of belief is not a direct phenomenal belief.

The consequence that direct phenomenal beliefs exist only within the lifetime of the relevant experience puts significant pressure on Chalmers’s insistence that direct phenomenal beliefs are cognitively significant.¹⁶ Chalmers argues for the significance of these beliefs by claiming that a direct phenomenal belief constrains the class of a priori epistemic possibilities.¹⁷ His thought is that when Mary forms the belief that ‘ $this_E=R$ ’ her belief is false at all worlds (considered as actual) in which Mary is not experiencing phenomenal redness. Mary’s belief is cognitively significant because her new experience significantly constrains the possible worlds prior to having that experience. For instance, prior to leaving the black and white room it was epistemically possible that Mary form the belief that ‘ $this_E=G$ ’, but now, having had the relevant experience, that thought is no longer epistemically possible.

This sounds as if direct phenomenal beliefs are cognitively significant, but appearances are deceptive. Direct phenomenal beliefs exist only within the specious present, and so they only constrain epistemic possibilities within the present ‘now’. Mary’s thought that ‘ $this_E=R$ ’ constrains epistemic possibilities only for a fleeting moment; let it pass and it is an epistemic possibility that a similar thought ‘ $this_E=G$ ’ is true. What makes this an epistemic possibility is that judgments of identity, similarity, and difference are not direct phenomenal beliefs. When one thinks for instance that ‘ R is phenomenal red’ one identifies a present quality with a relational quality. One’s evidence that this identity is true relies on a host of information that is not contained within the specious present. If the relational quality is red_C then one needs evidence both that this quality exists (i.e., that the members of your community do not experience different properties when faced with red things) and that the majority of other people experience the same quality as you do.

There is a real puzzle here about how to understand the significance of Mary’s knowledge when she leaves the black and white room. She gains a new belief ‘ $this_E=R$ ’ which exists for the present ‘now’ of her experience.

¹⁵(Chalmers 2010, 278).

¹⁶(Chalmers 2010, 282)

¹⁷(Chalmers 2010, 282)

Suppose Mary stares at the red apple thinking ‘wow, this is what it’s like’. On Chalmers’s account this is a direct phenomenal belief only within the fleeting present. If Mary were to look away and attend to another red object, her belief that ‘ $this_E=R1$ ’ would be a different direct phenomenal belief. But her belief that ‘ $R=R1$ ’ is not a direct phenomenal belief. If Mary’s knowledge is restricted to only direct phenomenal beliefs then she has no way to knowingly identify or compare any pure phenomenal qualities. To the extent that Mary can knowingly identify and compare phenomenal qualities she must rely on a wealth of information that is not contained within the specious present. She relies on her beliefs that memory is reliable, that phenomenal qualities don’t change faster than she realizes, and that people experience the same phenomenal properties. None of these beliefs are given in the specious moment. But to the extent Mary gains new knowledge, she relies on these beliefs.

If you take these beliefs away and consider only about what Mary knows in the specious present via direct acquaintance with a phenomenal quality, the best one can do is get a belief like ‘ $this_E=R$ ’. But, this belief has little cognitive significance. To the extent it constrains epistemic possibilities it constrains them momentarily. The space of epistemic possibilities contracts and expands with every passing moment. Mary cannot hook up this new belief with any other beliefs, at least apart from coherence considerations. She cannot, for instance, reason that ‘phenomenal redness is R ’ because ‘phenomenal redness’ is a public language term.

The problem here is similar to Descartes’s problem in reaching a substantial ego via the indubitability of the cogito. Descartes could not doubt that on any occasion of use ‘I think’ picked out a true sentence, but he wondered ‘what is this ‘I’ that thinks’? As many commentators have pointed out it’s consistent with the indubitability of the cogito that the subject of thought changes with each token thought. Descartes cannot rule out this possibility by the method of doubt. If we think of the epistemic possibilities that are ruled out by the cogito we may think that they are significant. On the one hand, on each occasion of thought the epistemic possibilities are significantly constrained. Every possibility in which someone or something other than the actual thinker thinks are thereby eliminated. The function of ‘I’ picks out a single thinker and on each occasion of use the actual thinker is different from the many merely possible thinkers. But, on the other hand, this elimination of possibilities does nothing to identify or discriminate between possible thinkers. It does not pick out an actual thinker as Rene Descartes or David Hume. For Rene Descartes is a person with a particular history who endures over time. Nothing about that history is contained within the passing moment of thinking. Moreover, once the fleeting moment of the cogito passes, the epistemic possibilities expand again.

Part of the problem Descartes faces is supporting the inference from ‘I think’ to ‘I was thinking’.¹⁸ This inference requires that the second use of ‘I’ has the same content as the former use. If there is an enduring self that is picked out by the two occasions of use of ‘I’ then the beliefs have the same content. But more than sameness of content is required for justification. One needs a reason for thinking that there is an enduring self. It’s not sufficient that, in fact, there is an enduring self.

Similarly, direct phenomenal beliefs should support the inference from ‘*this_E is R*’ to ‘*that was R.*’ But, this requires that the second use of the concept *R* has the same content as the first use. This is not revealed within the specious present. And the fact that the first thought constrains epistemic possibilities does nothing to constrain the relevant epistemic possibilities for the second thought. Chalmers acknowledges that this is a problem for his account, but he claims that no one has “a good account of what is it is for one token of a concept to be a ‘descendent’ of another in a manner that allows it to inherit justification.”¹⁹ As he observes more than sameness of content is required for justification because a new concept with the same concept could be formed ‘de novo.’²⁰ One needs a natural persistence relation between concepts. Furthermore, one needs some justification that such a persistence relation obtains. And yet the options for providing justification are quite limited.

4 Conclusion

I’ve argued that reflection on the specious present undermines Chalmers’s defense of the cognitive significance of direct phenomenal beliefs. To the extent one can have a direct phenomenal belief it has little cognitive significance. The upshot of my argument is that cognitive significance requires a wealth of information that is not contained within the present ‘now.’

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¹⁸The other part is to knowingly identify and discriminate the subject of thought from other possible thinkers.

¹⁹(Chalmers 2010, 298)

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