Conceptual qualia and communication

Gianfranco Soldati & Fabian Dorsch

15.01.2004

The claim that consciousness is propositional has be widely debated in the past. For instance, it has been discussed whether consciousness is always propositional, whether all propositional consciousness is linguistic, whether propositional consciousness is always articulated, or whether there can be non-articulated propositions. In contrast, the question of whether propositions are conscious has not very often been the focus of attention.

In this paper, we would like to render two ideas plausible and defend them against certain objections that have been raised against them. The first, perhaps less controversial idea is that at least certain propositional mental states - such as judgements, thoughts or felt desires - involve a particular kind of consciousness, which has often been called phenomenal or qualitative consciousness. The second and more important, since far more controversial, idea is that propositions - and concepts as their constituents - possess distinct and specific phenomenal characters, or qualia, in virtue of which they are experienced differently when entertained or held in thought.

Both claims, we shall see, have immediate consequences on our conception of understanding and communication. Contrary to a widespread view, a view which has its roots in the linguistic turn, we maintain that phenomenal quality is constitutive of the understanding and grasping of meanings.

1. Phenomenal consciousness and propositional states

Franz Brentano (Brentano 1924), and many authors after him (Block 1995; Rosenthal 1986 & 1997; Carruthers 2000), have noted that the notion of consciousness is ambiguous. One particular contrast which they have drawn is that between the intentionality of mental states - our being conscious of and directed at objects (understood in a wide sense) - and their phenomenology - their being phenomenally conscious to, or experienced by, us in a certain way.[1]

Assume that I judge that p: in which sense am I then conscious of p? To judge that p is an intentional state: it is a mental state which is directed at some object or another. If my judgement is directed at the proposition p, then I am conscious of that proposition in the sense that I am intentionally directed at it, by means of my judgement. But is this the only, or even the main way, in which judgements or other mental states are conscious? What does it really mean to be intentionally conscious of something? After all, it seems possible to be unconsciously directed at something: we seem to be able to unconsciously fear, or desire, something; and there may be beings

[1] Brentano, for instance, distinguishes between "primary" and "secondary" consciousness. The former consists in the intentional directedness towards some object (understood in a wide sense) and presupposes - but does not itself generate - the latter, which in contrast is responsible for the mental act being conscious of itself in a particular way (cf. Brentano 1924: 141ff.; 1968: 1-21). It is a matter of debate how exactly Brentano describes and explains the "secondary" form of consciousness (cf. Bell 1990: 9ff.; Brandl 1992/3); but here, it suffices to focus on the phenomenon he was getting at - that is, phenomenal consciousness.

with primitive intentional states to which we might not want to ascribe consciousness. It therefore appears that fears and desires involve something else than mere intentionality when we consciously experience them, and it seems at least possible that, likewise, judgements may possess this further form of consciousness, in addition to their directedness at propositions.

To understand what kind of consciousness this additional feature of mental states may be, consider the case of sensations, such as pain experiences. It is usually (though not universally) accepted to speak of the phenomenal character of such mental states; whereby the phenomenal character is typically taken to consist in the way in which the respective states are *experienced*. For instance, a person who is in a state of pain, has a certain feeling or experience: there is a specific way of *how it is, or feels like* for her to be in pain.[2] Experiences of pain are phenomenally conscious in this particular sense. Sensory perceptions, on the other hand, are phenomenally conscious in virtue of something being presented to us in a specific way: when we see something, it *appears* to us in a certain way.[3] Thus, the letter M may be presented to the subject either as an 'M', or as a sigma turned onto its side; a certain depiction may seem at one time to be of a duck, and at another to be of a rabbit; and the glass to my left is experienced by me to be a certain way, while a patient with blindsight may experience it very differently, or not at all.

There are philosophers who are sceptical of the idea of phenomenal consciousness (cf. Dennett 1988). Much more common seems to be the attempt to reduce phenomenal consciousness to other kind of consciousness (cf. Tye 1995; Dretske 1995). Here we will, however, not be concerned with the project of reducing or eliminating phenomenal consciousness to other forms of consciousness, but only with the following, more specific issues. First, assuming that phenomenal consciousness exists, is it reasonable to ascribe it to mental states that have propositions as their content? And second, if this turns out to be reasonable, do these states possess qualitative aspects that are specific enough to distinguish them from other states that involve different concepts and propositions? It is thereby important to note that a positive answer to the first question does not imply a positive one to the second. That is, while one can remain sceptical with respect to the existence of very specific phenomenal characters of judgements and other propositional states, one may nevertheless allow for them to be phenomenally conscious in virtue of a broader qualitative character (e.g., one that all judgements share because of their common attutide towards their respective propositions).

These questions arise since the scope of phenomenal consciousness is usually restricted to a certain group of mental phenomena, mainly those of a sensory nature, as discussed above. For, in contrast to sensations and perceptions, many intentional states do not seem to

---

[2] Cf. the common talk, introduced by Thomas Nagel, of "something it is like to be..." (cf. Nagel 1974). Even a naturalist such as Carruthers adopts this way of speaking (cf. Carruthers 2000: 13ff.).

[3] Again, this manner of speaking is accepted by philosophers of fundamentally different opinions (cf. Carruthers 2000; 241ff.; Siewert 1998: 86).

involve phenomenal consciousness: in particular mental dispositions or standing conditions, such as prejudices, beliefs or desires. These states may manifest themselves in the shape of phenomenally conscious experiences, feelings or thoughts. But it appears that they need not do so (at least not during the whole, or even most of the, period of their existence); and they do not seem to involve any phenomenal qualities on their own, that is, in their non-manifest state, without the mediation of phenomenally conscious experiences, feelings or thoughts.[4]

The first question may be answered very briefly. It concerns the issue of whether judgements, manifest beliefs and similar occurrent thoughts are phenomenally conscious, or whether they are rather more like mental dispositions or unconscious states. To answer this question it should suffice to take a look at two of the features of the propositional states under consideration. First, just like experiences and feelings, they seem to be part of what has been called the "stream of consciousness": they occur in our minds and disappear again, and they alternate with, or accompany, sensations, perceptions and feelings. Second, they can be introspected; in particular, we can tell when they occur in our mind and of what kind they are. In respect to both features judgements and similar propositional states differ strictly from mental dispositions; and both features strongly suggest that the former are phenomenally conscious. On the one hand, "stream of consciousness" appears to be only a different name for what people have in mind when they speak of "phenomenal consciousness": for a mental state to occur in the mind simply means for it to be phenomenally conscious. And on the other hand, it seems widely accepted that the features of mental states that we can introspect are - if not exclusively, then at least primarily - their phenomenal ones. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the propositional states in question are themselves experienced: there is something it is, or feels, like to be in or have them; or they present things as appearing in a certain way. Indeed, it seems plausible to maintain that judgements and other occurrent thoughts play a role in the manifestation of mental dispositions, rather than that they are dispositional themselves. It appears, for instance, that we sometimes acquire, entertain and revise our beliefs by means of judgements.

But there is a further source of support for the idea that at least some propositional states are phenomenally conscious. Imagine two people listening to the news on a French radio programme. One of them - let's call him Jack - speaks only English, while the other - Jacques - speaks only French. Galen Strawson, in whose writings this particular example can be found, asks whether Jacques, who *understands* what the newsspeaker is saying, has an experience of a different kind than Jack, who merely hears the French-sounding words without grasping their meaning (cf. Strawson 1994: 5-6).

---

[4] This has led philosophers (e.g., Wittgenstein) to distinguish between mental episodes - that is, mental states which are phenomenally conscious, such as perceptions, sensations, feelings and, presumably, judgements or thoughts - and mental dispositions, or standing conditions - that is, mental states which are not phenomenally conscious, such as beliefs, desires, prejudices or emotions. According to this distinction, the latter become phenomenally consious only if they manifest themselves by means of the former.

If so - and it indeed seems intuitively plausible -, there are experiences of understanding which are significantly different from the mere auditory perceptions of the sounds produced by a voice (or from mere visual perceptions of signs while reading). As Strawson writes: "There is [...] something it is like for you to read *and understand* these words" (ibid.: 10).
This insight alone, he points out, does not force us to accept that understanding is a deliberate, goal-directed action; nor does it imply that each experience of understanding is characterised by a distinct qualitative nature. But his fundamental conclusion - that we have phenomenally conscious experiences of understanding - suggests that there are propositional states which possess some qualitative aspects. For grasping the meaning of what someone has said surely involves some states which are directed at propositions - namely states which have propositions, that correspond to the expressed meaning, as their intentional objects. Hence, experiences of understanding seem to be both propositional and consciously experienced.

It therefore remains to answer the second question: whether judgements and similar states possess specific phenomenal characters that distinguish them from each other and are at least as fine-grained as their propositional contents. And in what follows, we would like to argue that this question is best answered positively. As a matter of fact, most proponents of the existence of phenomenal consciousness would in contrast provide a negative answer. But they could not easily avoid giving an answer at all because of their own positive stance towards phenomenal consciousness in general: the issue of whether propositional states possess specific qualitative characters, and which role these characters play, arises once one has generally grown sympathetic towards the idea of phenomenal consciousness.[5]

This question becomes relevant also in the light of two other discussions. Some philosophers believe that the intentional content of phenomenally conscious experiences is partly, or even fully, determined by their phenomenal character. Since judgements (and similar states) possess an intentional content, it becomes interesting for these philosophers to know whether judgements show a specific phenomenal character, and if so, whether their claim about experiences is also true of judgements (i.e., that the content of the latter is likewise determined by their qualitative character). As mentioned at the beginning there has also been a debate about whether all conscious states - including sensations and perceptions - are propositional . If this were true, and it would turn out that propositional states do not possess a specific phenomenal character, the result would be a rather untenable position, according to which experiences of pain and colours would not show any distinctive qualitative character. Hence, proponents of both the claim, that the intentional content of mental states is somehow determined by their phenomenal character, and the claim, that all conscious states are propositional, should focus their attention on the issue raised in this paper.

[5] Only a few philosophers have recently discussed the issue of the phenomenal character of propositional states, among them Brian Loar (unpluplished), John Searle (1992), Owen Flanagan (1993), Galen Strawson (1994), Horgan & Tienson (2002) and, especially, Charles Siewert (1998).

2. The first consideration: the phenomenal differences between thoughts

The first source of support for the idea that there is a specific qualitative character of propositional states is the idea that we can tell apart our judgements, manifest beliefs, desires, and so on, by means of introspection. We can tell, say, whether our current thoughts are about the fog in Ivrea, or about some features of the Himalaya; and we can tell whether they involve the endorsement of the respective states of affairs as really obtaining, or as to be brought about, or whether we instead consider the relevant propositions neutrally, that is, without any evaluation or commitment. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that we do not have to observe our behaviour or ask other people in order to discover what we are currently thinking, judging or longing for; it simply suffices to introspect our actual state of mind to find out.

But it seems equally plausible to assume that what we introspect of mental states are their phenomenal features. First of all, both how it is like to be in a certain mental state or to undergo a certain experience, and how things appear or present themselves to us, seem to be accessible to us in introspection. For, again, we do not need to observe ourselves in other ways (e.g., by means of our senses), or to talk to other people, in order to come to know such facts. And then, the qualitative features appear to constitute the bulk, if not the totality, of those features of mental states that we actually can access by means of introspection.

Both these considerations path the way for the conclusion that the introspectible differences between the propositional states in question have to be manifest in their respective phenomenal characters; and hence that these states possess such characters which are at least as specific as their intentional contents. Of course, one could challenge this line of reasoning by arguing that there are other, *non-phenomenal* features that are given in introspection and can distinguish the different propositional states from each other. But it is not clear at all what kind of features these could be. Since it also seems untenable to deny the fact that we can introspect such differences, the conclusion put forward appears to be difficult to avoid.

3. The second consideration: the role of phenomenal consciousness in linguistic understanding

But even if one is not convinced by the initial force of this argument, there is another, more complex reasoning that supports the same conclusion and is founded on perhaps less controversial premises. It does not concern the introspection of our own mental states, but instead the experience of understanding the linguistic expressions of other people. Its main ingredient is thus a theory of verbal expression, understanding and communication. This theory, we should emphasise, was first put forward by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology (for more on this see Soldati 1994 & 2000).

If we want to speak, that is, express ourselves verbally, we have to produce complex sounds with our voice. Now, according to the theory under consideration, the difference between an articulated utterance

of words or sentences and the mere generation of meaningless sounds is that only the former is produced by the speaker as the expression of one of her mental states, such as one of her thoughts or judgements. It is this particular relation to an underlying mental state which provides verbally produced sounds with a meaning and thus turns them into speech that expresses the mental state in question.

Conventions, it is true, play a crucial role in *fixing* the meaning of a word in public language over a certain period of time. But most linguistic conventions are far from explicit; they are rather the product of an equilibrium reached by the interaction of different agents with different goals, beliefs and behaviours, linguistic and other. But even if explicit, without mental states to start from, conventions, normatively binding linguistic rules, would hardly get off the ground.

To understand the meaning of an utterance we hear or read we have to have some kind of access to the mental state it expresses. Of course, this access can go wrong and we can misunderstand each other. But, as the theory claims, any attempt to understand someone else's speech nevertheless presupposes that one somehow represents certain mental states of the speaker as those which are expressed by his speech and hence render his utterances meaningful. Grasping the meaning of a linguistic expression therefore simply means to have an access to the expressed mental state. And since understanding someone does not only require to recognize that he has meant *something* by his utterance, but also *what* he has meant, understanding the meaning of a linguistic expression has to involve an access to the particular nature of the expressed mental state and, in particular, of its intentional content.

Now, as the example above of Jack and Jacques has already made plausible, linguistic understanding is (at least in most cases) a consciously experienced process. There is a subjective, qualitative difference between merely hearing certain sounds and understanding them as having a specific meaning, that is, as expressing a certain thought. But if understanding is generally speaking a consciously experienced process, the question arises whether it involves a specific phenomenal character: that is, whether our experiences of understanding differ phenomenally in respect to which particular meanings are grasped. We grasp distinct expressed meanings by recognizing distinct underlying intentional states. Hence, what is really at issue is whether we consciously experience the differences that characterize the specific ways in which we recognize different mental states as being expressed by certain utterances. That there has to be a difference between our different recognitions should be obvious since we can, with their help, understand different linguistic meanings; the question is rather whether these differences among our recognitional states are phenomenally conscious.

We think that the best way of explaining these differences - and how we come to grasp what other people mean by their linguistic utterances - is indeed by postulating such a form of phenomenal consciousness. And a positive answer to this question entails the acceptance of the existence of conceptual qualia - that is, of specific phenomenal characters of states with propositional content. *Qualia*

are concerned in so far as consciously experienced, phenomenal aspects of mental states are concerned. And they are *conceptual since* the intentional contents of these states possess a propositional and hence conceptual content. The latter observation has already been made above: we have to be in some kind of propositional state in order to be able to grasp a linguistic meaning, since this kind of meaning shows itself a propositional, and conceptual, structure. In the remainder of the paper, we would like to show the plausibility of this idea - that specific conceptual qualia play an important role in linguistic understanding - and defend it against certain common objections.

But before that, it is necessary to formulate some qualifications about the thesis under consideration in order to clarify the scope of the argument and to prevent possible misunderstandings. First, it is important to note that the example of Jack and Jacques alone is not sufficient to shed more light on the phenomenal nature of the experience of understanding; it merely supports the claim that there is a qualitative difference between understanding and not understanding something. The idea that understanding involves specific conceptual qualia requires more support than the idea that experiences of understanding have some qualitative character.
Second, it is not at issue whether *all* propositional states possess a specific phenomenal character. Rather, we try to argue only that some mental states with propositional content possess a specific phenomenal character. In particular, we do not intend to extent our claim to dispositional states; after all, we are concerned with occurring experiences of understanding. Third, we also do not want to claim that all understanding must be phenomenally conscious. Angels - if they exist - may perhaps understand each other in a different way. We do not argue that phenomenal consciousness is necessary for understanding, but only that it is specifically relevant for the manner in which we human beings usually come to understand each other's utterances. Analogously, it is one thing to maintain that sensations of pain are consciously experienced by us humans; but it is a much stronger claim to say that there could not be pain without such a form of consciousness. And fourth, the qualitative character of experiences is introspectively accessible.
We usually know very well how it is like for us if someone drills a hole into one of our teeth, or how the rails appear to us in the distance, and we typically do not let us be influenced by our additional knowledge or by what other people have to say about these issues. The dentist can keep on insisting that our root is dead, but this does not make our pain disappear. And although I know that the rails run parallel, they still continue to seem meet in the distance. This does not mean, however, that introspection cannot go wrong. And our considerations are also neutral with respect to particular theories of introspection; in particular, they do not commit us to the idea that introspection is a form of inner perception or observation. We only assume that we have introspective access to some aspects of some propositional states.

4. A first objection: fallacious inferences by analogy

The picture of communication, with which we have so far operated, has been criticized as naive and as facing many difficulties. Here, we have space to rebut only one of the objections often put forward against it. We have suggested that, in order to grasp the meaning of a linguistic expression, it is necessary to recognize the underlying expressed mental state and its intentional content. But we yet have to say a bit more about how this recognition may come about. And precisely here, the following problem arises. I know, from the first person perspective, what pain is since I have had pain experiences. But when I see you showing the same behaviour that I normally show when I am in pain, how can I come to know, now from the third person perspective, that you undergo an experience that is of the same kind as mine? As far as I am concerned, you may have a completely different kind of experience (e.g., you may phenomenally experience it very differently). On the other hand, we usually seem to be able, after all, to come to know whether someone else is in pain solely on the basis of observing his behaviour. So how can we make the step from our own experiences to those of others?

It has often been stressed that the problem is not so much whether we are justified in our assumption that our experiences are very similar to those of others, but rather whether our own concept of pain, acquired on the basis of our own experiences, could also apply to the experiences of others. In my case, I have acquired a concept of pain that I have good reason to apply to my own sensations of pain because of the way in which I experience them. But since I cannot experience the sensations that occur in your mind, when you show the same behaviour that I show when I am in pain, I do not have a good reason to assume that my concept of pain likewise applies to your sensations. In other words, as Wittgenstein has once written, what is at issue is "that I am expected to imagine experiences of pain, which I do not have, on the basis of experiences of pain, that I do have" (cf. Wittgenstein 1984: § 302).

One idea that has been suggested to close the gap between knowing one's own and knowing other's mental states is that we come to know the nature of the mental states, and in particular the experiences, of other people by means of an inference by analogy. According to this "simple theory" (cf. Peacocke: 97f.), we assume that other people are exactly like us: if they show the same behaviour that we show when we feel pain, then they must feel pain as well - that is, they must have the same experience as us. In other words, it is said that we use our own case as an analogy for the case of the other person in question and infer accordingly from our own experiences to those of the other. For instance, if I know what it means for me to have tooth-ache and observe you expressing yourself in the way in which I would express myself when feeling tooth-ache, I could simply conclude that you have the same kind of tooth- ache and hence would come to know what it means for you to feel this kind of pain. For I would, according to the "simple theory", be able to assume that you and me are similar in that we have the same kind of experiences and express them in similar ways - that we are analogous to each other. As Peacocke stresses, however, such a theory would be circular. It presupposes precisely that what it tries to prove, namely that there are concepts of mental states (such as pain) that apply to both my

own and other peoples' experiences. It simply assumes that this is the case. That is, it does not really answer the problem identified by Wittgenstein, but ignores altogether its existence.

Now, it might be suspected that the account of linguistic communication put forward by us is circular in a similar way. To see the possible force of this challenge, it is necessary to look a bit closer at how we come to recognize the mental states that others express linguistically. In order for the interpreter to understand the speaker's expression, the expressed sentence must be one that the interpreter might have uttered himself. Furthermore, if he would have uttered it, he would have himself expressed a certain mental state. The idea is now that the interpreter can come to know which mental state the speaker has expressed by coming to know which mental state he himself would have expressed if he would have made the same kind of utterance. The interpreter thus recognizes the expressed mental state of the speaker by putting himself in the position of the speaker, that is, in the position of using the utterance in question in order to express one of his own mental states. But even if one accepts that linguistic behaviour can serve us as prima facie evidence for the belief that the speaker intends to express a certain meaning, there still seems to be the problem - the objection goes - that we cannot so easily infer from our own mental states to those of other people, again because we cannot be sure whether our concepts of the former can likewise apply to the latter. That is, to know that you use an utterance, that I would use to express a belief which I can conceptualize myself as a belief about, say, the current weather, does not guantaree that I have a good reason to conceptualize the mental state underlying your expression in the same way. After all, there may not be a concept that applies to both; and I cannot simply assume the existence of such a concept.

Using inferences from oneself to others and applying the concepts that capture one's own mental states to the states of the others is not the only way by means of which the hearer can put himself in the position of the speaker and recognize what he has expressed by his utterance. Instead, a theory of our knowledge of other minds can be formulated in terms of *empathy*, according to which a person grasps what is going on in someone else's mind, not by means of the application of mental concepts on the basis of observations, but by means of imagining herself to be in the position of the other person and grasping what is happening in her own mind as a result.[6] According to this proposal, if I hear you making a certain utterance and try to understand it, I imagine what it would take to make that utterance myself. And in order to do so, I have to imaginatively entertain a corresponding propositional state that could be expressed by the utterance in question. I come to understand what you have meant with your utterance simply by imaginatively entertaining that propositional state. Of course, I can be wrong since I may fail to appropriately imagine being in your position of making that utterance. But what is more important is that this account of how we come to recognize the mental states that other people express does not require that we conceptualize the other's mental states in any way.

[6] Cf. Husserl 1950: § 50; Husserl 1954: § 67.

For the proposal suggests that we grasp them simply by imaginatively entertaining them ourselves. To put it briefly, it conceives of communication as a very straightforward and direct way of putting one's own thoughts into the listener's mind. Hence, it can avoid the problem that the inference-by-analogy model faces.

5. A second objection: the sensory aspects of thought

When people speak of phenomenal character, they usually refer to an aspect of sensory experiences, such as sensations of pain or perceptions of colour. This might suggest the idea that thinking, understanding and judging possess a qualitative character only in the sense that they involve, or are accompanied by, some related sensory state. The idea is that my experience of understanding or judging that p is experiential only in so far as I sensorily hear or read or imagine the utterance "p". Some philosophers have indeed believed that the propositional states in question occur only in conjunction with the perception or imagination of signs or symbols.

However, even if this were true, the phenomenal character of these sensory states would be only contingently linked to the content of the respective propositional state. For instance, that fact that we express in English a thought about a house by means of the symbol "house", and not by means of another one, is not essential to what the thought actually means. Therefore, the specific phenomenal character of thoughts and judgements - if it exists - could not be of a sensory kind.[7]

Nevertheless, this kind of reasoning leaves some room for an objection against the thesis that propositional states possess a specific phenomenal character. For one could insist that the qualitative character of these experiences belongs exclusively to the accompanying sensory representations and that it is, in this sense, independent of their conceptual content. We often entertain symbolic, acoustic or diagrammatic representations, while we think, understand or judge something. Hence, it seems plausible to maintain that, since the sensory representations of such signs occur usually in conjunction with particular thoughts, we have the tendency to take the phenomenal character of the sensory representations to be a feature of the non-sensory thoughts.

But this objection can be dealt with by making it plausible that the propositional states in question can, and often do, occur without the simultaneous presence of sensory representations of symbols or signs. Already Karl Bühler (1907) has argued, on the basis of an empirical investigation of the mental states to which we have introspective access while thinking, that visual, acoustic or motoric representations are not necessary components of thought. And

[7] Wittgenstein writes in the Philosophical Investigations: "In the sense/in so far, that there are no characteristic processes/experiences (even mental processes/experiences) of understanding, understanding is no mental process/experience. (The increase and decrease of a sensation of pain, the hearing of a melody, of a sentence: mental processes/experiences)" (Wittgenstein (1984): § 154). Wittgenstein seems here to reject that understanding is a mental process/experience on the basis of the argument that it is not a sensory process/experience. But the argument does not address the possibility of there being non-sensory processes/experiences.

Charles Siewert has, to the same effect, put forward examples of thoughts (e.g., one that occured in his mind while he was walking from his table to the till of a restaurant) that are too complex and appear and disappear in such an immediate way and in a brief period of time, that it would seem to be impossible for us to sensorily represent the respective sentences at the same time (cf. Siewert (1998): 264; 277). Finally, there are features of sensory representations that do not seem to occur in pure thought. For instance, acoustic perceptions and imaginations must have at least some acoustic characteristics: the represented sentence or symbol must possess, say, a certain volume, a certain pitch and a certain duration or speed. In the case of an acoustic imagination, it might not be necessary that all such acoustic features be present or determined, but it would be strange to speak of an acoustic representation, if none of them would occur. By contrast, it seems perfectly possible to think something without being conscious of any sensory feature - whether visual or acoustic - at all. Hence, the phenomenal character of the propositional states in question cannot be analysed in terms of the phenomenal character of possibly accompanying sensory representations of symbols or signs.

6. A third objection: the vagueness of phenomenal characters

One more thing remains to be made plausible, namely that the phenomenal character of the recognition is indeed specific enough to individuate the expressed mental state. It might be suspected that the qualitative character of thoughts or judgements is too imprecise in order to determine a particular intentional content.

For it seems that we may not always be able, on the basis of our introspective access to our phenomenal consciousness, to tell for sure which thought we are currently having. Consider the following example put forward by Charles Siewert (cf. Siewert 1998: 287f.). I am driving to work and suddenly realize that I have left my briefcase at home. This realization happens by means of a conscious thought. But which one exactly? The thought that I have forgotten my briefcase? Or the thought that it still lies on my desk at home? Have I been thinking that I have unintentionally moved myself away from my briefcase? Or that I have moved while my briefcase stayed where it were? Has my thought involved the idea that I have left the briefcase where I and my family live? Or the idea that I left the thing with which I usually transport my books, papers and pens? When I wonder about the precise nature of my thought and begin to concentrate on how I have phenomenally experienced the thought in question, I may for some while consider these and similar options and accept them as appropriate descriptions of my thought. But when and where exactly will my acceptance stop? Will there be a point during my considerations at which I will begin to say to myself: "no, I haven't thought *that*"? As Siewert has concluded, the argument suggests that there is good reason to assume that there is no such clear and precise border (cf. Siewert 1998: 290).However, he has also argued that the qualitative characters are not more vague than the corresponding intentional contents (cf. Siewert 1998: 284ff.).

Accordingly, the potential vagueness of the former does not seem to prevent them from being able to determine the latter. In order to see

how this claim is supported, it is not necessary to concern oneself with our more or less successful transformation of thoughts into language. For it is not at issue whether, for instance, a particular utterance is the most appropriate one to express a certain thought. Instead, we are confronted with the question as to whether our mental concepts are vague with respect to the mental states they are supposed to pick out. Is the concept "thinking that p", for instance, capable of precisely determining which thought I have been thinking on a certain occasion? It seems not.

The problem is due neither to my inability to find the right concept to express my thought, nor to the possibility that my thought has no specific intentional content (we take it that we can assume that in many, if not most cases, our thoughts have determined contents). Rather, it is due to the nature of our concepts of intentional states and to the general criteria for their application.
Althought the thought that I have forgotten the briefcase at home and the thought that I have left it where my family lives differ in their content, it is normally not possible to determine, neither by means of concepts of intentional states, nor by means of concepts of phenomenal characters, which of the two thoughts I have actually experienced and expressed. Consequently, there does not seem to be any difference with respect to vagueness between the two kinds of concepts. The objection that the phenomenal character is too vague to determine the intentional content is hence untenable.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, we have suggested that we can understand the way in which we understand linguistic expressions of other people in terms of empathy: we imaginatively entertain a propositional state that we would have expressed if we were in the position of the speaker, and thereby experience the content of the mental state that he actually has expressed. Furthermore, we have tried to show that, in order to be able to individuate the expressed mental state in this way, we have to fall back on a characteristic and easily accessible aspect of our own imaginative state, namely its specific phenomenal character. And our theory has also included the claim that we refer to this very same character, too, when we try in general to distinguish and individuate our own conscious mental states. One main source for the plausibility of our account of the role of phenomenal consciousness in thought and understanding has been its explanatory power: it can explain how we come to recognize or grasp the mental states of ourselves and others. The other source has been the possibility to rebut the challenges and objections that have been raised against accounts like the one that we have put forward.

8. References

Bell, David 1990: Husserl. London: Routledge.

Block, Ned 1995: "On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness". In: Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Vol. 18: 227-87.

Brandl, Johannes 1992-1993: "Innere Wahrnehmbarkeit und intentionale Inexistenz als Kennzeichen psychischer Phänomene". In: Brentano Studien, Vol. 4: 131-153.

Brentano, Franz 1924: Psychologie vom Empirischen Standpunkt Bd. 1. Herausgegeben von Oskar Kraus. Hamburg: Meiner.

Brentano, Franz 1968: Psychologie vom Empirischen Standpunkt Bd. 3 Vom sinnlichen und noetischen Bewußtsein. Äußere und Innere Wahrnehmung, Begriffe. Hrsg. von Oskar Kraus, revidiert von Franziska Mayer-Hillebrand. Hamburg: Meiner.

Bühler, Karl 1907: «Tatsachen und Probleme zu einer Psychologie der Denkvorgänge: I. Über Gedanken ». In: Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie, Vol. 9: 297-365.

Carruthers, Peter 2000: Phenomenal Consciousness. A Naturalistic Theory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dennett, Daniel 1988: "Quining Qualia". In: Marcel, A. and Bisiach, E. eds 1988: Consciousness in Contemporary Science. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 42-77.

Dretske, Fred 1995: Naturalising the Mind. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press

Flanagan, Owen 1993: Consciousness Reconsidered. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Horgan, Terence & Tienson, John 2002: "The Intentionality of Phenomenology and the phenomenology of Intentionality". In: Chalmers, David 2002: Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Husserl, Edmund 1950: "Cartesianische Meditationen". In: Husserl, Edmund: Gesammlte Werke, Bd. 1. Den Haag: Nijhoff.
Husserl, Edmund 1954: "Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie". In: Husserl, Edmund: Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 6. Den Haag: Nijhoff.

Loar, Brian unpublished: "Phenomenal Intentionality as the Basis of Mental Content".

Nagel, Thomas 1974: "What is it like to be a bat?". In: Philosophical Review, Vol. 4: 435-50.

Peacocke, Christopher 1984: "Consciousness and Other Minds". In: Aristotelian Society (Supplementary Volume), Vol. 85.

Pfänder, Alexander 1911: "Motive und Motivation". In: Lipps, Theodor 1911: Münchener Philosophische Abhandlungen. Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 163-195.

Rosenthal, David M. 1986: "Two Concepts of Consciousness". In: Philosophical Studies, Vol. 94: 329-59.

Rosenthal, David M. 1997: "A Theory of Consciousness". In: Block, Ned, Flanagan, Owen, and Güzeldere, Güven 1997: The Nature of

Consciousness. Philosophical Debates. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 729-753.

Searle, John 1992: The Rediscovery of the Mind. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Siewert, Charles 1998: The Significance of Consciousness. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Soldati, Gianfranco 1994: Bedeutung und psychischer Gehalt. Paderborn: Schöningh.

Soldati, Gianfranco 2000: "Frühe Phänomenologie und die Ursprünge der analytischen Philosophie". In: Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung, 54: 1-28.

Strawson, Galen 1994: Mental Reality. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Tye, Michael 1995: Ten Problems of Consciousness. A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1984: "Philosophische Untersuchungen". In: Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1984: Werkausgabe (Bd. 1). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 225-580.