

# Two Puzzles For a New Theory of Consciousness

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**COMMENTARY ON:** C. Siewert (1998) *The Significance of Consciousness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. x + 374pp. ISBN: 0-691-02724-2. Price: \$42.50 hardcover.

**ABSTRACT:** In *The Significance of Consciousness*, Charles Siewert proposes a novel understanding of consciousness by arguing against higher-order views of consciousness and rejecting the traditional taxonomy of the mental into qualitative and intentional aspects. I discuss two puzzles that arise from these changes: first, how to account for first-person knowledge of our conscious states while denying that these are typically accompanied by higher-order states directed towards them; second, how to understand his claim that phenomenal features are intentional features without either risking consciousness neglect or retreating to a more traditional understanding of the relation between qualitative and intentional character.

Thinking of theories that defend phenomenal consciousness might bring to mind Kantian inner-awareness pictures of a mind constantly aware of its own contents, or contemporary 'qualia freaks' who would preserve consciousness by arguing for the irreducibility of sensory 'raw feels' such as that of seeing a red tomato. Thinking of theories that defend a distinctive first-person knowledge of our conscious states might call to mind Cartesian views of mental states as infallibly known by their possessors. Charles Siewert aims to change all that in *The Significance of Consciousness* by developing and defending a new

view of phenomenal consciousness that can avoid the problems of inner awareness views, the trivialization of consciousness through association with mere qualia, and the wrongful association of the idea of first-person warrant with Cartesian infallibilism.

The book pursues two interrelated goals. The first is to defend the idea that there is phenomenal consciousness, as against (and while making evident) various forms of 'consciousness neglect'. The strategy is first, to argue that we do have a distinctive kind of first-person warrant for beliefs about our own experiences and attitudes (although such beliefs may not be infallible), and second, to utilize that first-person warrant as the basis for asserting that we have phenomenal consciousness and distinguishing it from other features. A series of blindsight thought experiments, considered from the first-person point of view, is used to clarify what phenomenal consciousness involves, providing the basis for a series of arguments that many so-called theories of consciousness, including those of Dennett and Rosenthal, in fact leave out phenomenal consciousness entirely. These admirably thorough and incisive arguments squeeze out room for the rhetorical dissimulation so common in discussions of consciousness, and squarely lay out requirements for a theory that really acknowledges phenomenal consciousness. The arguments here seem to me so convincing that I will leave it for others to attempt to respond to or circumvent them. The second goal is to draw out a positive view of the nature and extent of phenomenal consciousness in a way that prevents its dismissal or trivialization and demonstrates its centrality to mind and ultimately to human life. I will focus on this positive view, for the natural question that arises for those of us convinced of the need to account for phenomenal consciousness is whether Siewert's proposal is the best way of bringing phenomenal consciousness into a general theory of the mind. The theory developed provides an interesting and novel understanding of phenomenal consciousness, which parts company with many non-reductive theories of consciousness in at least two ways. First, it abandons those traditional phenomenological accounts of consciousness that would insist that a distinctive feature of consciousness is that it involves (higher-order) consciousness of our mental states themselves, arguing instead for a one-level view of consciousness. Second, it eschews the standard move of those who would argue for the irreducibility of phenomenal consciousness by emphasizing its qualitative or sensory features. Instead, Siewert argues against taxonomies that would divide the mental into intentional and qualitative aspects (identifying consciousness with the latter), in favor of the view that phenomenal features (typically) are intentional features.

These novel aspects of his positive theory of consciousness lead to certain puzzles: 1) How to account for first-person knowledge of our own mental states while maintaining that we often lack any higher-order perception or thought regarding our conscious states and 2) How to defend a closer relation between phenomenal and intentional character without either neglecting phenomenal consciousness or reverting to the view that qualitative character really is what's distinctive about phenomenal consciousness. In this paper I will discuss why these puzzles arise and examine some potential means of resolving them with a view to evaluating whether or not this novel understanding of consciousness will prove acceptable.

# 1. First-Person Knowledge

The idea that we have concurrent first-person knowledge (or at least warranted belief) about our own attitudes and experiences plays an essential role in Siewert's project, since this first-person warrant for beliefs regarding our own conscious states provides the basis for arguing that we do possess phenomenal consciousness and for distinguishing it from other features (66-7). At the start of the book, Siewert argues at length that we have reason to accept our pre-epistemological convictions that we have a distinctive first-person warrant for beliefs about our own attitudes and experience. But once the positive account of phenomenal consciousness is developed, the reader is left wondering how (on this account) concurrent first-person knowledge of our conscious mental states is possible.

For the usual story about how we acquire such first-person knowledge of our experiences would be that introspection provides us with a certain distinctive inner awareness of our experiences, unavailable from the third-person point of view, which provides a unique epistemic basis for claims about our own mental states. This account fits naturally with those theories of consciousness that identify conscious states with those mental states we are aware of having, for they ensure that every conscious state is accompanied by a higher-order state about it, which may be argued to provide the basis for knowledge of the original conscious state. But Siewert breaks with the inner awareness/higher-order thought tradition, developing instead a one-level understanding of consciousness.<1> Against the inner awareness tradition, Siewert argues that one should not define conscious experiences as those experiences of which we are conscious. Instead, phenomenal consciousness is defined as "that feature we know with first-person warrant to be shared by episodes of silent speech, other imagery, and sense-experience", such that "[f]or you to have a phenomenal feature is for it to seem a certain way to you to have an experience -- for example, its seeming to you as it does to feel pain, or its seeming to you as it does for it to look as if there is something blue in a certain place, etc." (100). Otherwise put, it is that feature of, e.g., ordinary vision that would be lacking in various cases of blindsight, however well one's judgments and discriminatory capacities might be preserved.

Siewert's arguments against higher-order views are convincing, and (as I have argued elsewhere (2000)), a one-level non-reductive theory of consciousness seems a promising route to take. Yet he argues not only that consciousness is not *definable* in higher-order terms, but also that our conscious experiences typically lack any higher-order states directed towards them. "...I am typically not thinking *about my thinking*--I am thinking [e.g.] only of the arithmetic problem I am solving. I am immersed in the task at hand, and heedless of the occurrence of thought involved in carrying it out," (198). While this also seems plausible, it raises a puzzle for those who (like Siewert) nonetheless maintain that we do typically have a distinctive first-person knowledge regarding our own conscious states.

Siewert claims that despite a typical lack of higher-order states about our first-order conscious states, we nonetheless typically have concurrent first-person knowledge of our own thoughts and experiences, where "the kind of knowledge I then have of my own experience does not require that a thought of some sort occur to me about my experience as I am having it" (198), and he provides general arguments against the view that "it is somehow through ... perception of one's own mind that one has knowledge of it" (19). But even if we accept Siewert's arguments from the book's early chapters that we must (somehow) have distinctive first-person knowledge, it remains mysterious *how* such first-person knowledge of our conscious states can be acquired in the absence of higher-order awareness of our (concurrent) thoughts about these conscious experiences. Whatever story he gives must ensure not only that higher-order thought is not typically *necessary* for the existence of first-person knowledge, but also that our first-person knowledge of our own thoughts and experiences does not itself *constitute* a higher-order awareness of our own mental states (or else it cannot be true that we typically have such knowledge but lack such higher-order states).

One possible avenue of reply would be to take a route similar to Sydney Shoemaker's account of self-knowledge as supervening on first-order "available" experience plus rationality and the possession of the relevant concepts of experience, etc., and thus not requiring any higher-order inner awareness of our mental states, nor entailing the existence of any occurrent higher-order thought about them. (1996, 34) Thus one could argue that having, e.g., a phenomenally conscious belief that it's raining, plus possessing the concept of belief and ordinary human rationality, is sufficient for having at least the tacit (and reliable) belief that one believes that it's raining. For, having the concept of a belief, one will (e.g.) know to respond affirmatively to "Do you believe that it is raining?" just in case one would respond affirmatively to "Is it true that it is raining?", and so on.

Thus a first question to raise is whether or not Siewert would accept this view of how first-person knowledge is possible. One might worry, however, whether such a deflationary account of self-knowledge would be sufficient to ground Siewert's arguments for the existence and nature of phenomenal consciousness. For these require not merely that we have first-person knowledge that we have certain beliefs, desires, etc., but also that we have first-person acquaintance with the subtle differences in phenomenal character among different kinds of experience that can "secure a recognition of what episodes of consciousness have in common" (85). Would the mere possession of the relevant intentional concepts (e.g. belief), plus rationality and the possession of thoughts about the world, alone be sufficient to bring to light the distinctive phenomenal character of the experiences? Or would a higher-order awareness of one's experiences (and their full phenomenal character) be necessary for that?

Of course it is in principle open to Siewert to accept an account such as Shoemaker's to justify his claim that we typically have (some sort of) knowledge of our own experiences, while admitting that his arguments in chapters 1-3 rely on a more developed form of self-knowledge than that which typically accompanies ongoing experiences -- that in these cases he is asking his readers to develop an inner awareness of their conscious experiences that is lacking from everyday experience. But it would require him to admit

(counter his arguments against the Cartesian "perceptual model" of consciousness) that *some forms* of self-knowledge (indeed some crucial forms) *are* based in "perception of one's own mind" (19).

Working out a non-reductive one-level view of consciousness is, in my view, an extremely worthwhile enterprise, and Siewert takes important steps towards developing such a view. But a more developed account of how first-person knowledge is possible is essential to seeing how the one-level view of consciousness can be made consistent with the requisite distinctive forms of first-person knowledge about our own conscious states.

## 2. Phenomenal Character and Intentional Character

Mental states are often analyzed into a combination of an intentional character that enables the state to represent something, and a (non-intentional) qualitative or sensory character. This qualitative character has been widely seen as the final battleground in wars over the naturalization of consciousness. For although it seems plausible to many that a reductive account may be available of intentional or representational features of the mind, qualia are said to uniquely resist capture in physical descriptions of the facts (Jackson 1982) or reduction to functional states, and indeed the explanatory gap is supposed to lie precisely in explaining why, e.g. the physical and functional state associated with seeing red leads to experiences with this, rather than another (or no) sensory character (Chalmers 1996, 107). Thus the phenomenal character of consciousness is often identified with qualia or sensory content, and distinguished from intentional character.

But a second novel feature of the account in *The Significance of Consciousness* lies in rejecting that common understanding of phenomenal consciousness as the qualitative or sensory character of mental states. Such views, according to Siewert, trivialize phenomenal consciousness by identifying it with "raw feels" unconnected to intelligence and significant human life. Moreover, they overlook the fact that many (e.g.) visual phenomenal features are themselves intentional features. <2> Instead, he proposes a far broader view of phenomenal character, arguing that it should not be entirely distinguished from intentional character, and that it permeates thought as well as perception and imagination. This broader understanding of phenomenal character is the key to demonstrating the central significance of consciousness for understanding the mind and human life generally.

But here again a puzzle arises. For if we should not "distinguish phenomenal features entirely from intentional ones" (219), this leaves the question of what the relation between phenomenal and intentional character is, and whether one can accept a closer identification of representational and phenomenal properties without losing some of the most powerful arguments for phenomenal consciousness, and perhaps losing the distinctiveness of phenomenal consciousness itself. Given the prominent role of qualia in arguments against the reducibility of consciousness, identifying phenomenal and

intentional features is usually characteristic of those who seek to naturalize consciousness, not defend it. Prominent among these is Fred Dretske's attempt to naturalize the mind by identifying qualia with representational properties, namely, the properties the objects are represented as having, making them definable physically in terms of the information the system is designed to represent (1995, 77-8). In that context, Siewert's claim that "our visual [and other] phenomenal features are intentional features" (261) is rather surprising, and might lead one to worry that, in trying to rescue us from trivializing consciousness, he leads us to neglect it by identifying it with representation.

Siewert stops short of explicitly advocating the universal identification of phenomenal and representational features defended by Dretske, allowing that, e.g. in the case of color, although the phenomenal character of typical color experiences is intentional, "maybe we could have a kind of visual color experience utterly devoid of intentionality" (247). Nonetheless, if we take him as arguing for *identifying* phenomenal and intentional features (at least in the majority of cases), that would threaten to neglect phenomenal consciousness by his own lights, for the blindsighter's spontaneous judgment that there is something green on her left arguably shares a representational content with the blursighter's judgment that there is something green on her left. But if the phenomenal character in question were identical with a certain intentional/representational feature, the purported blindsighter's mental state would also have to be phenomenally conscious. To identify phenomenal character with representational character then would risk neglecting the phenomenal difference between these cases and thus neglecting phenomenal consciousness as such altogether.

Of course, one way Siewert could avoid the charge of consciousness neglect here would be to deny that the blindsighter has the relevant (or any) representational content here, in virtue of her lack of phenomenal content. That is, he could make the opposite move from Dretske's, reducing intentional content to phenomenal content rather than vice versa. This is an intriguing possibility, but I do not know if it is one Siewert would be favorably disposed towards; he officially remains neutral on the issue in *The Significance of Consciousness*, saying that he is "not concerned to deny the possibility of such visual representations" in the blindsight case (85).

The more likely way to avoid this charge would be to deny that, when he says phenomenal features are intentional features, he means to *identify* the phenomenal features with intentional features. In fact, it is not necessary to Siewert's argument in these final chapters of the book that he show that phenomenal character is (ever) identical with intentional character. What is crucial is merely to demonstrate that phenomenal character is not *limited to* or *merely a matter of* an experience having certain sensory content, for it is by broadening the understanding of phenomenal character in this way that we can avoid the trivialization of phenomenal consciousness and acknowledge its centrality to all kinds of human thought and experience. This is established by two sorts of arguments against identifying all phenomenal character with mere sensory character (conceived as involving mere non-representing qualia or sense data): 1) That sensory character is not necessary for phenomenal character, since the latter may be present even in cases of non-iconic thought, and 2) That (even when sensory character is present)

phenomenal features are not limited to a sort of non-representing sensory character, for these very phenomenal features may themselves be intentional in the sense that they may be features in virtue of which we are assessable for accuracy. Thus the question arises of whether Siewert would say that the claim that (many) phenomenal features are intentional features (284) does not involve the 'is' of identity, proposing a reductive identification of phenomenality with representational character, and thus does not involve Dretske-style consciousness neglect, but instead involves the 'is' of predication, asserting merely that these phenomenal features are also features in virtue of which we are assessable for accuracy, making them not just sensuous, but also cognitive features.

If he would accept this interpretation, however, it seems he must also admit that his view here is not really as novel as he leads us to suppose, for it does not deeply undermine the traditional taxonomy of the mental into qualitative/phenomenal and intentional aspects. For despite his arguments against identifying phenomenal consciousness with qualia, and despite his rhetoric against accounts of consciousness that would divide the mental into a representational/intentional and a qualitative/phenomenal aspect, such a distinction is required on this view as well, and here as elsewhere seems to mark out the boundary of what can and cannot be captured in reductive views of consciousness. We still may distinguish (by abstraction) the phenomenal character of an experience from the intentional features that the experience may have (in virtue of possessing such a phenomenal character), for the former alone is preserved in cases of blindsight. Thus again it seems to be phenomenal character alone that is doing the work of distinguishing conscious from non-conscious states.

Siewert's arguments do seem to require us to acknowledge that such phenomenal character may automatically bring along intentionality, and may be present even in cases of purely cognitive (non-sensory) thought, and thus prevent us from trivializing it by identifying it with idle sense data. But they do not force us to give up the familiar distinction between intentional and phenomenal aspects of conscious experience; on the contrary, his position overall seems to rely on it. Would he be willing to countenance the familiar distinction, provided we acknowledge that these two aspects may only be distinguished by abstraction, that qualitative/phenomenal character need not be sensory, and that in most cases possession of a particular qualitative/phenomenal character is sufficient for possession of a certain intentional character? If he would accept the distinction, would he also accept the standard view that it is the qualitative side (so abstracted) that is truly distinctive of consciousness and resistant to reduction? Doing so, it seems, would provide a stronger though less novel account of phenomenal consciousness.

### **3. Conclusion**

*The Significance of Consciousness* lays out some of the most detailed and careful arguments available against neglecting phenomenal consciousness. It also maps out somewhat new territory in attempting to develop a theory of phenomenal consciousness

that avoids problems of traditional inner awareness views on the one hand, qualia views on the other. I have suggested that two puzzles arise from the apparent differences between Siewert's proposed view of consciousness and more familiar treatments of phenomenal consciousness -- puzzles that may require us to develop the theory in certain ways, and reduce claims of its novelty in others. But the territory he is developing seems extremely promising, and if he can show us how to resolve these puzzles, we may indeed gladly accept this improved view of consciousness as one that more aptly characterizes its nature and justly preserves its centrality to our lives as experiencing, thinking beings.<3>

## Notes

<1>. Previous one-level theories like Dretske's (1995) have typically been put forward with a view to reducing consciousness to representational character; thus it is particularly novel to have a non-reductionist one-level view of consciousness. I similarly attempt to sketch a one-level non-reductive theory in my (2000).

<2>. A minor worry arises in his discussion of what intentional character is. For his only explication of intentionality is that assessability for truth or accuracy is sufficient for possessing intentional character. (189). So carefully stated, it is unobjectionable. But this explication is clearly too narrow to capture the intentionality involved in desires, intentions, and emotions (as Siewert acknowledges) (193). Equally importantly, this narrow understanding of intentionality hampers arguments to show that phenomenality is inextricably linked with intentionality, particularly in the case of imagination (273). First, it is implausible that (in the absence of any causal/historical connection) one should really be considered assessable for accuracy at (e.g.) imagining a unicorn. If one accepts a causal theory of reference, we can't rightly pinpoint any group of beasts as those I was referring to (and then check whether or not my imagination is accurate) (Kripke 1972, 156-7). If one suggests that we accept a purely descriptive theory of reference for these cases, any beasts will be the unicorns if and only if they match the description; but if so, our description couldn't have possibly turned out to be inaccurate of the unicorns, and so it seems to not make sense to say that assessability for accuracy (or inaccuracy) applies here. More generally, it is implausible to consider cases of explicit imagination as assessable for accuracy when they are conducted in the context of an explicit pretense that does not even purport to make claims about the 'real' world that would be so assessable.

<3>. Thanks to Charles Siewert and David Chalmers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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