

Phenomenal Consciousness and Intentionality^{<1>}

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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: Siewert identifies a special kind of conscious experience, phenomenal consciousness, that is the sort of consciousness missing in a variety of cases of blindsight. He then argues that phenomenal consciousness has been neglected by students of consciousness when it should not be. According to Siewert, the neglect is based at least in part on two false assumptions: (i) phenomenal features are not intentional and (ii) phenomenal character is restricted to sensory experience. By identifying an essential tension in Siewert's characterization of phenomenal consciousness, I argue that his case for denying (i) and (ii) is at best incomplete.

In *The Significance of Consciousness*, Charles Siewert makes a strong case for a number of provocative claims about both the nature of consciousness and the state of the current debate concerning it.^{<2>} Among the central claims of the book are these:

- (a) There is a kind of consciousness, "phenomenal consciousness," which is the kind of conscious experience missing in blindsight cases (both actual and hypothetical) and which is distinct from awareness and judging, among other things (pp. 73-84); "phenomenal character," which constitutes the ways in which phenomenally conscious experiences differ,

is then characterized as follows: the way it seems to one for it to look as if *p*. (For example, the way it seems to me for it to look as if there is an X to my left, or the way it seems to me for it to look as if the grass is green.) "Look" here can be replaced by "sound," "taste," "smell," and so on. Finally, a phenomenal feature is then defined as its seeming as it does to one on a given occasion for it to look/sound/etc. as if *p*. (p. 86)

(b) Phenomenal features are intentional features. (8)

(c) Phenomenal character is not restricted to sensory experience, but also applies to thinking. Thought, too, is phenomenally conscious. (p. 275)

(d) Phenomenal consciousness has been neglected when it should not be, in part because (b) and (c) have sometimes been rejected. Since some philosophers have valued both intentionality and cognition above all else, the rejection of the claims that phenomenal features are intentional and that thinking has phenomenal character has caused phenomenal consciousness to suffer some neglect. (p. 101 ff., p. 149)

I would like first to focus on Siewert's characterizations of phenomenal character, and to try to bring out a tension I find among them. I believe recognition of this tension will reveal some of the reasons why philosophers have denied one of Siewert's central theses, namely, that phenomenal features are intentional.

When Siewert introduces the notion of phenomenal character, he writes,

So: *the way it seems to me* for it to look as if there is an X on my left is the *phenomenal character* of the experience I would report by saying "It seems to me as it does for it to look as if...etc." And, I will say, its seeming this way to me is a *phenomenal feature*, a feature I attribute to myself in such a report. (p. 86)

Acknowledging the awkwardness of the phrase, "the way it seems to me for it to look as if...," Siewert explains why it is nonetheless appropriate: it would not do to eliminate either the "seeming" or the "looking" from the characterization of phenomenal consciousness because two different ways something might look could seem the same. An example helps to illustrate this point: it could look to me as if your tire is low, while it looks to you (viewing the tire from the same angle) as if your tire is full, and yet our experiences have the same phenomenal character. In other words, its looking as if your tire is low seems to me just the same as its looking as if your tire is full seems to you.

At the same time, Siewert claims that the event of its seeming this way to you is the same as that of its looking this way to you. And elsewhere he says, "... I do not mean there is, distinct from its looking to me a certain way, a way this looking seems to me." Or again, "[i]ts seeming this way to me *is* its looking this way to me." (p. 220)

Now according to the way in which phenomenal character is initially introduced, the seeming is not identical to the looking. And it cannot be, if the way it seems to me in the tire case is to be the same as the way it seems to you, since the way it looks to you is different from the way it looks to me. So there appears to be a tension between this claim and the suggestion that the seeming just *is* the looking.

It seems to me that we must make a choice between the two characterizations. At the same time, it seems that which choice we make has consequences both for Siewert's argument that phenomenal features are intentional and for the claim that thoughts are phenomenally conscious in the same way that sensory experience is.

As I understand it, the basic structure of the reasoning for the claim that phenomenal features are intentional goes as follows: A sufficient condition for a feature's being intentional is offered, and it is then argued that its seeming to one for it to look as if p meets that condition.<3> What is the condition? It is given in two steps:

(1) A feature is intentional if, in virtue of having it, you are assessable for accuracy.

And

(2) You are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having a certain feature if having that feature entails that you possess a feature for which there is some condition the obtaining of which (i) entails that it accurate and (ii) does not provide it with an "interpretation."<4>

This needs a brief explanation. The idea is that in order to be assessable for accuracy in virtue of having a feature, your having that feature means that you must have a feature for which there are "accuracy conditions," akin to truth conditions. But this is not sufficient to get intentionality, because things like human utterances have truth or accuracy conditions, but in making an utterance, you are not assessable for accuracy just in virtue of its having accuracy conditions. Your utterance also needs to *mean* something. So the utterance by itself does not make you assessable for accuracy, and, you might say, is not intrinsically intentional; it represents something only because it is *taken by you to* represent. So in order to be intentional in itself, a feature must not require an interpretation in the way that utterances do. Hence, the second requirement in premise 2.

Now that we have the sufficient condition for intentionality in hand, we get what amounts to the claim that phenomenal features meet it:

(3) If it seems to you for it to look as if p , then it looks to you as if p .

(4) Its looking to you as if p is accurate if p obtains.

(5) The obtaining of p does not provide its looking to you as if p with an interpretation.

Putting these premises together, as is done in the rest of the argument, we get it that the phenomenal feature of its seeming to you for it to look as if p meets the sufficient condition for intentionality. For premises (4) and (5) entail that

(6) Its looking to you as if p is a feature for which there is some condition the obtaining of which (i) entails that it is accurate and (ii) does not provide the feature with an "interpretation". [(4), (5)]

Further, since premise (3) claims that if it seems to you for it to look as if p , then it looks to you as if p , (3) together with (6) yield the conclusion that

(7) If it seems to you for it to look as if p , then you possess a feature for which there is some condition the obtaining of which (i) makes it accurate and (ii) does not provide it with an "interpretation." [(3), (6)]

Now, given the definition of assessability for accuracy in premise (2), (2) and (7) entail that

(8) You are assessable for accuracy in virtue of its seeming to you for it to look as if p . [(2), (7)]

Finally, given the characterization of intentionality in terms of assessability for accuracy given in premise (1), (1) and (8) yield the final conclusion, namely,

(9) Its seeming to you for it to look as if p is an intentional state. [(1), (8)]

In what follows, I will concentrate exclusively on premises (3) and (4). A key premise in this argument is (3), the claim that if it seems to you for it to look as if p , then it looks to you as if p . This premise is very plausible--*if* we think the seeming is nothing other than the looking. However, if we do not take the seeming to be the same as the looking, the premise becomes much less plausible. In fact, one might argue that the premise is false if the seeming is not the looking, by appealing to the tire example described earlier. For if the seeming can be the same, while the way it looks to one varies, then it would appear that it could seem to you for it to look as if p when it does not in fact look as if p .

To put the point in another way, it is natural to think that phenomenal consciousness is intentional if it consists in something's looking *as if* p . It is reasonable to assume that such features are assessable for accuracy, and that being assessable for accuracy is sufficient for being an intentional state. However, if phenomenal consciousness consists in the way *those* (admittedly intentional) features seem to us, then it is not at all clear either that phenomenal features themselves make one assessable for accuracy or even that their occurrence entails the occurrence of other features which make one assessable for accuracy. In that case, we cannot conclude that phenomenal features are intentional. Thus, it seems crucial to the argument for the intentionality of phenomenal features that we understand the "seeming" of phenomenal consciousness *to be* the state of its looking as if p .<5>

Unfortunately, there are two sets of problems with accepting this characterization of phenomenal features. First, there are difficulties for the claim that thought is phenomenally conscious in the same way sensory experience is. Second, there are independent considerations based on a closer examination of what it is for something to look as if *p*.

I will begin by spelling out the difficulties I see in maintaining a parallel between sensory experience and thought. It is one thing to say that the seeming is the looking as if *p*, or the sounding as if *p*; it is quite another to say that the seeming is the thinking that *p*. It is much more natural to say that thinking is phenomenally conscious because it--*the thinking*--seems some way to us. (I must make a disclaimer here: I do not believe that it is *true* that our thinking seems some way to us, only that it is a natural way of describing an essential connection between thought and phenomenality. But that is another discussion.<6>) In sum, while it is natural to say (or at least raise a question about whether) thinking seems some way to us, we are not supposed to say that *looking* as if *p* seems some way to us, according to the characterization required by the argument for the intentionality of phenomenal features. In any case, it would be quite odd to say that the *thinking* just is the seeming, as we would be required to do in order to keep a parallel with sensory experience and consider the looking to be identical to the seeming. In addition, there is another reason that Siewert might have for not wanting to identify the seeming of phenomenal consciousness with the thinking. It is based on a parallel of the tire case discussed earlier. Siewert wants to accept that two people could have two different thoughts while the phenomenal character of their respective thoughts could be the same. For example, the "twins" invoked by externalists about content would appear to have two different thoughts despite things seeming the same to them.<7> Or, to take a more mundane example, your thought that you left your wallet at home might *seem* the same as your thought that you left your wallet at your house, and so on. But now it is quite clear that the seeming cannot be the thought itself. For we have two different thoughts, but the way it seems is the same in both cases. Thus, if a parallel between the phenomenality of sensory experience and thinking is to be maintained, then looking as if *p* cannot be identical to the seeming of phenomenal consciousness.

Now let us turn to a reason independent of the desire to preserve a parallel with thought that we should not identify looking as if *p*, sounding as if *p*, smelling as if *p*, and so on, with the "seeming" of phenomenal consciousness. To understand it, we need to ask whether the state of "looking as if *p*" requires conceptualization of the kind employed in propositional attitudes. If it does, then I believe we must give up the idea that the "seeming" isolates a phenomenal feature independent of conceptualized states like the propositional attitudes. On the other hand, if "looking as if *p*" does not require conceptualization, then I believe that a second premise in the argument for the intentionality of phenomenal states is cast into doubt.

Consider the first possibility: "looking as if *p*" requires conceptualization. The example of its looking to me as if your tire is low strongly suggests this reading. For its looking that way to me would seem to require that I have a number of concepts, and even a belief about what I am seeing or seem to see. If such conceptualization were required, then the

intentionality of the "seeming as if p " would be inherited from some sort of judgement or other propositional attitude, and not from an isolated phenomenal state. In that case, characterizing phenomenal character as the "seeming as if p " would fail to isolate what is alleged to be missing in the actual and hypothetical blindsight cases described in the book.

On the other hand, if we understand "looking as if p " in a way that does not require conceptualization, then I believe that the argument for the intentionality of phenomenal states becomes vulnerable in another way. In particular, premise (4) becomes questionable: the fact that p obtains does not seem sufficient to make its looking as if p an accurate state. It may be helpful to consider an example in which conceptualization is explicitly ruled out. Suppose a small child smells something that she has never smelled before. Although *she* cannot fill in for " p ", perhaps someone else would be able to say: "it smells to her as if my grandmother's perfume is nearby." But if the child's having that sensory experience doesn't require that *she* have the concept of someone else's grandmother or of perfume or nearness, then I don't see how her experience could make her assessable for accuracy. Even if someone's grandmother's perfume is nearby, that fact would not seem sufficient to make the child's experience accurate. The less conceptualization is required, the less I am inclined to accept that one is assessable for accuracy in virtue of having it.

In sum, on an understanding of the seeming of phenomenal consciousness as not identical to the looking as if p , premise (3) in the argument for the intentionality of phenomenal features is cast into doubt. Alternatively, if the seeming is identical to the looking as if p , then premise (3) in the argument is plausible, but at a price: we would not be able to maintain a parallel with thought and we would not be able to preserve both the plausibility of premise (4) and the claim that the seeming identifies a state separable from conceptualized states like propositional attitudes. Now even if this is right, and even if phenomenal features are not intentional features, it does not follow that phenomenal consciousness should be neglected. But at least one reason why it may have been neglected will have been shown not to be a bad reason.

Notes

<1> This paper is based on a comment given at a symposium on Charles Siewert's *The Significance of Consciousness*, held at the Florida Philosophical Association meeting in Tallahassee, Florida, in November 1998. I would like to thank my fellow commentators, Gene Witmer and Aron Edidin, and the chair of the panel, Kirk Ludwig, for a stimulating discussion. I am also grateful to Charles Siewert both for his reply at the symposium and for his detailed and thoughtful responses to my comment in a subsequent e-mail exchange. Sam Rickless provided very helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper and I am grateful to him for many discussions on the topics raised in Siewert's book. Finally, I am especially indebted to Norton Nelkin from whom I first learned of the

important questions concerning the relationship between consciousness and intentionality.

<2> Siewert (1998). All page numbers will refer to this book unless otherwise noted.

<3> See p. 221.

<4> I believe premise (2) differs slightly from the canonical statement of assessability for accuracy given on p. 192. I choose this statement because it allows me to see the argument of p. 221 as valid.

<5> In correspondence, Siewert has pointed out that his argument need not depend on accepting that the entailment in premise (3) holds for *all* values of p , but rather that it can go through if premise (3) is restricted to a certain class of values for p . For example, it might only hold in cases in which looking as if p can be true for someone with a minimum of conceptual abilities. This is an interesting suggestion, but it faces two challenges: First, since even a restricted version of premise (3) represents an entailment relation, it would be desirable to have some account of why it is true. In other words, we want to know why it is true that, for a *particular* set of values of p , "it seems to one to look as if p " it follows that "it looks to one as if p ." Second, if premise (3) is restricted to a subset of values of p , then, if the argument is to remain valid, the conclusion must be restricted in the same way. But now we face a dilemma. We must say either (a) that only those phenomenal states understood as ones in which the "looking as if p " requires, say, a minimum of conceptual abilities are intentional, or (b) that other phenomenal states are also intentional. If we take the first horn, we again desire an explanation for why only these phenomenal states are intentional. (The need for such an explanation is particularly pressing if the only phenomenal states that are intentional are the ones that require minimal conceptualization. For at first glance, it seems that the less conceptualization required, the less likely it would be for the states to be intentional.) If we take the second horn, we remain without an argument for why they, too, are intentional.

<6> See Nelkin, N. (1996), Part II, and especially p. 143 for a discussion of just this point.

<7> See Siewert (1998), p. 297, for a discussion of this case.

References

Nelkin, N. (1996). *Consciousness and the Origins of Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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