

The Relationship Between Phenomenality and Intentionality

Comments On Siewert's *The Significance Of Consciousness*

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ABSTRACT: Charles Siewert offers a persuasive argument to show that the presence of certain phenomenal features logically suffices for the presence of certain intentional ones. He claims that this shows that (some) phenomenal features are inherently intentional. I argue that he has not established the latter thesis, even if we grant the logical sufficiency claim. For he has not ruled out a rival alternative interpretation of the relevant data, namely, that (some) intentional features are inherently phenomenal.

1. Siewert's Thesis

The relationship between phenomenality and intentionality is, I think, one of the most important unresolved issues about the mind. Not surprisingly, it is also one of the most perplexing. Charles Siewert deserves to be commended for tackling this thorny issue head-on.

Siewert's proposed resolution of this issue is encapsulated in the claim that "our phenomenal features *are* intentional features." (p. 8) My discussion will focus on this claim. After clarifying the thesis, I will evaluate Siewert's key argument for it and consider a rival thesis which may also accommodate his evidence. I do not intend to show that Siewert's thesis is false; at the present time I am not prepared to accept it or to reject it. My aim is only to demonstrate that his argument does not provide a reason to favor his thesis over the rival alternative. If my reasoning is sound, a well-grounded decision between the alternatives must await further investigation into the issues.

Siewert understands "intentional feature" as "a feature in virtue of which one is assessable for accuracy". (More strictly, he claims that the latter is at least sufficient for intentionality.) The claim at hand is, then, that we are assessable for accuracy in virtue of (some of) our phenomenal features. Now the crucial claim here is that phenomenal features are features "in virtue of" which one is assessable for accuracy. If this "in virtue of" yields to a causal interpretation, Siewert's thesis is not so radical. After all, it is unsurprising that instantiating certain phenomenal features might causally lead one to instantiate certain intentional ones, and hence to be assessable for accuracy. This occurs when, for instance, a particular pain sensation causes me to believe that I've pulled a muscle. In that case, the pain's phenomenal character (in conjunction with certain background beliefs about how muscle pulls feel) causes me to be assessable for accuracy, regarding whether I actually have pulled a muscle.

Siewert's thesis is much stronger than this relatively uncontroversial claim of a causal link between phenomenality and intentionality. It is that instantiating a phenomenal feature can *constitute* one's being assessable for accuracy; that is, some phenomenal features simply *are* intentional features. Siewert's characterization of phenomenal states as "inherently intentional" (p. 227) reveals the modal strength of this thesis. It entails that the presence of certain phenomenal features *logically guarantees* the presence of certain intentional ones.

It is worth noting that Siewert's thesis contrasts sharply with representationalism about the phenomenal. Representationalists claim that phenomenal states are reducible to intentional states, and typically take intentional states to be structurally defined. Siewert's thesis is non-reductive, in that it does not assimilate the phenomenal to something structurally defined. This is why he spends so much of the book defending the phenomenal from attempts to reduce or eliminate it. If he is correct, phenomenal features perform crucial work in representation. Certain phenomenal features logically suffice for intentionality, but they need not be exhausted by their representational contributions.

2. Siewert's Basic Argument

Here is Siewert's basic argument for this strong link between the phenomenal and the intentional. (He later bolsters this basic argument by responding to several objections.)

First, consider some instance of its seeming to you as it does for it to look as if something is shaped and situated in a certain way, such as its seeming to you just as it does on a given occasion for it to look as if there is something X-shaped in a certain position. If it seems this way to you, then it appears to follow that it does look to you as if there is something X-shaped in a certain position. If this is right, then its seeming this way to you is a feature in virtue of which you are assessable for accuracy—that is to say, it is an intentional feature. For, from what we have said, if it seems to you as it does for it to look this way, then, if it is also the case that there is something X-shaped in a certain position, it follows that the way it looks to you is accurate. (p. 221)

This argument proceeds by thought experiment. Siewert invites us to reflect on a particular phenomenal state and to consider whether we could be in that state without being assessable for accuracy. He predicts that we will find ourselves unable to imagine instantiating this phenomenal state without instantiating the relevant intentional state.

Given the nature of Siewert's thesis that some phenomenal features are intentional features, the thought experiment must carry significant modal weight. It must imply that it is impossible to be in a given phenomenal state without being in the relevant intentional state. This is why Siewert invites us to reflect on a phenomenal state in which it "looks as if" something is the case. For suppose he instead invited us to reflect on a less obviously representational phenomenal state, such as an itch. It appears possible, at least *prima facie*, to conceive having an itch without being assessable for accuracy in virtue thereof. Perhaps it is a slight, barely discernible itch experienced while your attention is focused on an urgent action. In that case, you may not possess even a tacit belief that you have an itch. (One with deep representationalist intuitions may claim that the itch does render you assessable for accuracy, namely about whether there is some tissue disturbance. But of course this requires further argument.) This is why Siewert chooses the "looks as if ..." phenomenal feature to make his point. Such a feature seems to introduce intentional content more directly-or, at least, more obviously-than itchings or headaches do.

3. An Alternative Interpretation of the Evidence

Yet this choice of case opens Siewert's thought experiment to an alternative interpretation. Let us suppose that, as Siewert predicts, you are unable to imagine its "seeming to you just as it does on a given occasion for it to look as if there is something X-shaped in a certain position", while you are unassessable for accuracy. Still, it is a further step to say that the assessability for accuracy occurs "in virtue of" the phenomenal features. "In virtue of" expresses an asymmetrical explanatory relation, but no facts about explanation, or asymmetry, follow directly from a logical sufficiency. Even if the possession of certain phenomenal features logically suffices for the possession of certain intentional ones, there may be no interesting explanatory relation here at all. And if there

is an interesting explanatory relation, it may go the other way: the presence of intentional features may explain the presence of phenomenal ones.

Let me flesh out this latter alternative. Suppose that some intentional states have a characteristic phenomenal feel. That is, roughly speaking, it *feels* a certain way to represent something. Suppose further that the characteristic phenomenal feel of an intentional state is present only when the relevant intentional state is present, so that one never *feels* as if one is representing something unless one is, in fact, representing it. In that case, the presence of certain phenomenal features will suffice for the presence of intentional features, but the phenomenal features are derivative from the intentional ones.

To accommodate the logical sufficiency of the phenomenal for the intentional, it must be added that the inherent phenomenal features in question cannot occur in the absence of the intentional features. But this is more plausible than it may appear. For instance, on one view of introspective privilege we have special access to our representational contents (though we are of course highly fallible about the accuracy of those contents). This view may be combined with the claim that we recognize our states by their phenomenal features, that is, by grasping what it's like to instantiate them. The resulting position supports the idea that (some) intentional features have *unique* characteristic phenomenal feels.

So even if we agree with Siewert that one's instantiating a particular phenomenal feature entails that one instantiates an intentional feature, we may deny that in these cases one is assessable for accuracy *in virtue of* their phenomenal states. In the alternative sketched, representing something X-shaped in a certain position has a characteristic phenomenal feel; there is *something it is like* to represent something X-shaped in a certain position. And one cannot experience the what-it's-like-ness of representing something X-shaped without actually (perhaps non-veridically) representing something X-shaped. Still, on this alternative phenomenal features accrue to a state in virtue of the state's intentional features, rather than vice versa. For the phenomenal state just is the characteristic feel of the intentional state. To modify Siewert's expression, on this alternative some intentional features are *inherently phenomenal*.

4. Deciding Between the Two Alternatives

I am not endorsing this alternative thesis as the correct explanation of the fact that phenomenal features logically suffice for one's being assessable for accuracy. I am simply presenting it as a rival which Siewert must counter. How might Siewert rule it out? Siewert argues as follows for his claim that phenomenal features are inherently intentional. (i) Phenomenal features either gain their intentional content by being furnished with an interpretation or they are inherently intentional; (ii) phenomenal features don't (always) gain their intentional content by being furnished with an interpretation; so (iii) they are (sometimes) inherently intentional.

Here is his argument for (ii). Furnishing phenomenal features with an interpretation is a matter of making some judgment about the features, or perhaps of being disposed to make some judgment about them. But such judgments, or dispositions thereto, are not necessary for having phenomenal states. In particular, they are not necessary for instantiating those phenomenal features which guarantee that one is assessable for accuracy. He spends much of Chapter 7 (esp. section 7.5) supporting this point, which he expresses as follows. "What I want to question is whether some separable intellectual component that could be entirely missing, though the phenomenal character of sensory experience was the same, is something essential to sensory intentionality, that is, necessary for experience to be accurate or inaccurate." (p. 235). I accept this point, and hence I take Siewert's argument for (ii) to be well grounded.

But the picture I have sketched, according to which the intentional features are more explanatorily basic than phenomenal features, is distinct from both disjuncts in his premise (i). It is thus a challenge to this premise, which states that the disjunction at issue is exhaustive. On my alternative, some phenomenal features suffice for intentional ones, even if the phenomenal features are neither inherently intentional nor furnished with an interpretation. For the phenomenal features *reflect* intentional features which are explanatorily more basic.

The point of contention is, then, this. On my alternative, intentional features (sometimes) have characteristic phenomenal feels. So the presence of the larger set of phenomenal features, which includes those phenomenal feels, logically suffices for one's being assessable for accuracy. But on this alternative the intentional features are not explained by phenomenal features; the explanation runs in the other direction.

How might we choose between Siewert's alternative and mine? Thought experiments like those Siewert uses in his basic argument quoted above will not decide the issue. For even granting that we cannot conceive of instantiating certain phenomenal features without being assessable for accuracy, as Siewert says, it's still an open question which of these is explanatorily more basic.

To block the rival alternative, Siewert could try to show that salient intentional features are sometimes present in the absence of the associated phenomenal features. Suppose that one could be assessable for accuracy regarding whether there is something X-shaped in a certain position, without instantiating the phenomenal features relevant to its visually appearing to one as if there is something X-shaped in that position. If so, then that intentional feature is not inherently phenomenal.

The difficulty here is to show that the intentional feature which is present in the absence of the relevant phenomenal feature is *precisely the same* as that for which, on Siewert's view, the phenomenal feature logically suffices. If this could be shown, then an asymmetry could be established: viz., some phenomenal features logically suffice for intentional ones, but those intentional features do not logically suffice for (and so do not logically require) the phenomenal ones. This would suggest that phenomenality was inherently intentional, while intentionality was not inherently phenomenal.

I see two major problems with this strategy. First, some representationalists have argued that features which are seemingly purely phenomenal actually subserve representational content. If this is correct, then phenomenal features make an indispensable contribution to intentional features, and hence in the absence of the relevant phenomenal features, the intentional features present would not be precisely the same as those subserved by phenomenal features. (This is why representationalists like Michael Tye reject eliminativism about the phenomenal in favor of reductionism.) The defender of Siewert's thesis would have to counter such representationalist arguments by demonstrating that particular phenomenal feels do not supervene on any particular intentional states, even sensory intentional states.

The second major problem with the strategy described is that it seems to clash with Siewert's larger (titular) project of establishing the significance of phenomenal consciousness. For phenomenal consciousness appears not to be doing necessary work if precisely the same intentional content could be present without it. (In that case, the work it performs is merely sufficient.)

5. Conclusion

As I said at the outset, the relationship between intentionality and phenomenality is an extremely pressing issue in the philosophy of mind. This essay has focused on one aspect of this issue, whether intentionality logically derives from phenomenality, or vice versa, or neither. I emphatically agree with Siewert that phenomenality should not be discounted as a bit of detritus, brute or unimportant in itself or irrelevant to our deeper cognitive life. Siewert has brought much-needed attention to the relationship between intentionality and phenomenality; he has provided a powerful argument for the centrality of the phenomenal; and he has offered a picture of the relationship between intentionality and phenomenality which explains this centrality. These are major accomplishments, even if he has not conclusively established that his explanation is preferable to all possible alternatives.