

# The fragmentation of phenomenal character

By Neil Mehta. Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Please cite the final published version.

There have been fierce debates over what it's like to smell vanilla, hear a violin, or imagine the color red – that is, fierce debates over the *phenomenal character* of various types of experiences. I say that these debates have suffered from fragmentation: philosophers who speak of “phenomenal character” have had in mind at least three (and probably more) radically different kinds of properties. This has occurred because the expression “what it's like” exhibits a particularly deep form of context-sensitivity (§1-§2), and when this expression has been used to define phenomenal character, at least three very different contexts have been operating in the background (§3-§6).

These ideas have a number of important applications. I examine just a few of these in detail.

First I rebut an important argument for skepticism about the hard problems of consciousness (§7). I go on to argue that, contrary to an important line of thought, Nagel's “something it's like” characterization of consciousness is not trivial. Quite the opposite: it is very plausible (§8). I then show that one influential naïve realist argument against representationalism misses the mark (§9). The observation is not partisan: representationalists have no doubt committed similar sins against naïve realists.

The final conclusion that I discuss is to my mind the most exciting one: I bring into view some new theories of phenomenal character. The core idea of these theories is that any veridical perception and any matching hallucination are exactly the same with respect to *one* kind of phenomenal character while being radically different with respect to *another* kind of phenomenal character. This approach is very initially attractive, and it is worth exploring for representationalists and naïve realists alike (§10).

## 1. A core idea introduced

Roughly put, a core idea of this paper is that different philosophers have used the term *phenomenal character* with radically different properties in mind. In this section, I develop a detailed example to characterize this core idea more precisely.

Begin by contrasting two sorts of context-sensitive expressions. On the one side, for a context-sensitive expression to be *shallow* is for it to have a reasonably narrow range of possible referents. A paradigmatic example is the context-sensitive expression *tall*. To be sure, in principle this expression could refer to just about any height – just imagine a discussion of the dimensions of a mouse. Nevertheless, *tall* will always refer to some height property or other. Similarly for other paradigmatic gradable adjectives: *rich*, *warm*, *funny*, etc. Or, for a very different sort of shallow context-sensitive expression, consider *today*. This

expression might in principle refer to any day, but it will always refer to some day or other.

On the other side, if a context-sensitive expression is not shallow, then it is *deep*. The expression *that* is an especially clear example of a deeply context-sensitive term: in principle it could be used to refer to nearly anything. I will also count slightly more specific expressions such as *that object* or *that property* as deeply context-sensitive, since these expressions can in principle be used to refer to radically different objects or properties, respectively; thus these expressions have a reasonably broad range of possible referents. By contrast, I will count expressions such as *that color* or *that number* as shallowly context-sensitive, since there is some reasonably specific range of possible referents here.

The distinction between shallow and deep context-sensitive expressions is vague.<sup>1</sup> Still, a distinction does not have to be sharp to be real and useful.

Let us make one more distinction. Let *terms* be individuated by their meanings; let *expressions* be individuated by their phonemes and orthographies. Thus there is a single expression, *bank*, corresponding to two different terms, (*river*) *bank* and (*financial*) *bank*. The expression *bank* has two different meanings, we might say.

Now turn to philosophy of mind. By definition, the *phenomenal character* of an experience is what it's like to have that experience. I will soon argue that the defining expression *what it's like* is deeply context-sensitive, and that philosophers who discuss "phenomenal character" have had in mind different definitional contexts. But let me first give a less controversial example as a model.

Thomas N. points to a blue circle and says to his friends, "Let us refer to this property as *property X*." He is in a context in which color properties are salient. What can we say about Thomas's new term?

Thomas's definition relies on a deeply context-sensitive expression, *this property*. So, given Thomas's context, his term *property X* refers to blueness. Surprisingly, Thomas's term *property X* is not context-sensitive at all, *even though* it was defined using the deeply context-sensitive expression *this property*! The term *property X* simply refers to blueness in any context.

Now suppose that John C. is conversing with his own friends across the room and overhears Thomas. John's interest is piqued; he wants to talk about the same topic as Thomas. John points to the same blue circle and say to his friends, "Let us refer to this property as *property X*." However, in John's context, it is not color properties but *shape* properties that are salient. Still, John assumes that his term is the same as Thomas's and even intends for that to be the case when he gives his definition. Let us add, perhaps unrealistically, that John does not realize that the expression *this property* is deeply context-sensitive. What can we say about John's term *property X*?

It is difficult to identify the referent of John's term, for there are two facts that tug in opposite directions. On the one hand, John intends to be using the same term that Thomas is using. This tugs his term towards referring to blueness. On the other hand, John has given an explicit definition of his term via the deeply

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<sup>1</sup> One tricky example is the expression *I*. There is *some* specificity to what the expression *I* can refer to. But a lot is left open, as well: *I* can refer to something that is not a person (imagine a sign that says "I am written in English"). So is the context-sensitivity of this expression deep or shallow? I do not know.

context-sensitive expression *this property*. Given John's context, this tugs his term towards referring to circularity. In light of these opposed pressures, I see three reasonable views about the referent of John's term *property X*. First, that it refers to blueness; second, that it refers to circularity; third, that it is indeterminate whether it refers to circularity or to blueness. (I repeat that on any of these views, John's term *property X* will be context-insensitive.)

I will not try to adjudicate among these views. Which view is correct may even depend on further facts about the case that have yet to be specified. I simply wish to observe that no matter which view is correct, there is an obvious sense in which circularity is what John *has in mind* when he talks about property X.

For example, when John discusses what he calls "property X," insofar as he is rational, what his evidence will *non-accidentally support* are conclusions about circularity. He might say things like, "Necessarily, anything that has property X cannot be square or triangular." (His evidence might sometimes support conclusions about blueness, but only by accident: "Necessarily, anything that has property X is spatially extended.") Moreover, suppose that John were asked to rephrase his claims without using the expression *property X*. He would presumably use some expression referring to circularity. These observations retain their force whether John's term *property X* refers determinately to blueness, determinately to circularity, or indeterminately to both.

What underlies these facts is that when John speaks of property X, circularity is what he *has in mind*. I will not attempt to give a precise characterization of what it is to have something in mind. The notion is an ordinary one, and I take it to be clear enough for our purposes.

It will be useful for us to develop our example a little further. Suppose that John is not the only person who overhears Thomas. Many others do as well, and they too turn to their friends, point to the same blue circle, and define property X as "that property." However, they are speaking in still further contexts: textures are salient in Susanna S.'s context, surface areas are salient in Michael M.'s context, and so on. Then there are Thomas's friends, such as David C., Frank J., and Michael T., who were conversing with Thomas and understood the original context. When all of these people mingle with one another and speak about "property X," no matter what that expression refers to in their mouths, they will have many different properties in mind. Mass confusion will be sown.

I say that this is just what has happened in contemporary philosophy of mind. Inspired by Thomas Nagel, philosophers have defined the *phenomenal character* of an experience as *what it's like* for the subject to have the experience.<sup>2</sup> But the defining expression *what it's like* is deeply context-sensitive and has been used in the context of radically different philosophical problems. Thus, philosophers who speak about "phenomenal character" have had radically different properties in mind. That is true whether or not the expression *phenomenal character* has had the same referent in their mouths. The result has been mass confusion.

The rest of this paper defends these claims and draws out some important implications.

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<sup>2</sup> See Nagel (1974). His term is actually *subjective character*, and Nagel focuses in the first instance on what it's like to be a subject. None of this affects my point.

## 2. The deep context-sensitivity of “what it’s like”

According to the utterly standard definition, the *phenomenal character* of any experience is what it’s like for the subject to have that experience. Equivalently, it is what having the experience is like for the subject; equivalently again, it is what the experience is like for the subject.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding that last equivalence: yes, there is not *in general* an identity between what *something* is like for the subject and what *having that thing* is like for the subject. In the special case of experiences, however, it is plausible that there is such an identity: what having a perception of red is like for the subject is presumably the same as what that perception of red is like for the subject.

In any case, for us to understand the expression *phenomenal character*, we must first understand the expression *what it’s like*. It is widely appreciated that the latter expression is context-sensitive.<sup>4</sup> In this section, I argue that this is only the tip of the iceberg. What has remained below the water is that the expression is *deeply* context-sensitive.

Suppose that, in response to a question about what something is like, some property *F* is cited. Sometimes, this will entail that the entity in question really is *F*:

Beth: “What is Sarah like?”

Malcolm: “Honest.”

But sometimes it will be obvious that there is no such entailment:

Beth: “What is blue like?”

Malcolm: “Purple.”

At other times the answer may not cite a property at all:

Beth: “What is Chicago like?”

Malcolm: “London.”<sup>5</sup>

To simplify the discussion, my proposal will focus only on uses of “what it’s like” that are of the first type: *F-entailing uses*, as I shall say. I believe, but will not argue here, that the proposal generalizes to uses that are not *F-entailing*.

My proposal is this:

The *deep context-sensitivity view*: Any *F-entailing* claim of the form “what *x* is like is *F*” is deeply context-sensitive, because it means that *F* is a property of *x* that is relevant in the context at hand (where this context may be further specified with prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses).

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<sup>3</sup> This definition is now so dominant that it would be pedestrian to give further citations.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Snowdon (2010, p. 22); Stoljar (2016, pp. 1174–1175); Gaskin (2019, p. 679 and p. 682).

<sup>5</sup> I take this example from Gaskin (2019, p. 675).

Is the deep context-sensitivity view best understood as a view about (i) *just* the literal meaning, or (ii) the literal meaning *together with* the standard implicatures, of claims of the form “what  $x$  is like is  $F$ ”? This is a delicate question. However, the answer to it will not matter for my purposes. To glide over this question, I stipulate that here and throughout I am using the term *meaning* to refer to the disjunction of (i) and (ii). Thus the deep context-sensitivity view entails that an assertion that what  $x$  is like is  $F$ , where  $F$  is a contextually irrelevant property of  $x$ , is at least *inappropriate*, but it is neutral on whether such an assertion must also be *false*.

I offer six lines of support for the deep context-sensitivity hypothesis.

*The first line of support.* Suppose that we ask what India is like. On an internet travel forum, one appropriate answer might be, “Full of temples, palaces, and other historical sites.” In a geology class, one appropriate answer might be, “Largely shaped by extensive melting, and subsequent basalt flooding, underneath the Indian Craton.” And in an economics conference, one appropriate answer might be, “Enjoying rapid expansion – at present, it has the fastest-growing economy in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Which answer is appropriate evidently depends on the context. It would be inappropriate to answer the question asked on the internet travel forum by citing the geological or economic features of India.

In short, there is radical variation in which properties of India – including cultural properties, geological properties, and economic properties – can be appropriately cited in different contexts. This directly supports the deep context-sensitivity view.

The same sort of evidence can be found when  $F$ -entailing claims about what something is like are adorned with a prepositional phrase or a subordinate clause. For example, the traveler might ask, “What is India like *in the winter*?” or the geologist might ask “What was India like *after the Deccan traps were created*?” or the economist might ask “What is India like *in the manufacturing sector*?” The deep context-sensitivity theorist should say that these adornments will serve to specify the context further (in addition to whatever role they play with respect to the literal meaning of the sentence).

*The second line of support.* I have often tried to explain what I work on to the uninitiated: to students and friends, for example. I have *never* been able to get *anyone* to understand the expression *phenomenal character* merely by giving the what-it’s-like definition, with no prologue or epilogue. This observation is not just about outsiders to our discipline. Even some professional philosophers find the term vague and unhelpful.<sup>7</sup>

This is puzzling. English speakers use what-it’s-like talk all the time. How then can they fail to understand the term *phenomenal character* when they are told that it is what it’s like to have an experience?

You might answer simply that what-it’s-like talk is context-sensitive. But this explanation is too weak. By analogy, imagine that someone wonders who the upper class are. You answer that they are the rich, with no prologue or epilogue. Even though the term *rich* is context-sensitive, your audience will gain a good

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<sup>6</sup> The second and third of these answers are drawn from Wikipedia.

<sup>7</sup> See Snowdon (2010); Hill (2014, pp. 230-231).

understanding of the term *upper class*. For the context-sensitivity here is shallow: the term *rich* has a reasonably narrow range of possible referents.

However, if what-it's-like talk is *deeply* context-sensitive, then the phenomenon is explained. For, on this view, saying that the phenomenal character of an experience is what it's like for the subject to have that experience, with no prologue or epilogue, is much like saying, "The phenomenal character of an experience is *that property*," or like saying, "The upper class are the individuals with *that property*," with nothing to indicate which property you are referring to. Your audience will be mystified.

*The third line of support.* I tell my introductory students to read Nagel's classic paper "What is it like to be a bat?," which offers a what-it's-like definition of the term *subjective character*. They understand this – but they are baffled when the same definition is served neat. How is this possible?

The deep context-sensitivity view provides a satisfying answer: Nagel's article provides the missing context for the what-it's-like definition. To return to our original example, it is unhelpful to hear, out of context, that property X is *that property* of a blue circle. The very same remark could be very informative once you learn that we are discussing color properties.

*The fourth line of support.* It is sometimes held that philosophers are using the expression *what it's like* in a special, technical sense.<sup>8</sup> This would explain why the bare what-it's-like definition is unhelpful. It might also explain why Nagel's article is helpful: perhaps students can glean this special, technical sense of the expression *what it's like* from context. Better, though, not to multiply special technical senses without necessity. That is a virtue of the deep context-sensitivity hypothesis: it does justice to the data above while saying that philosophers use the expression *what it's like* in a perfectly ordinary way.<sup>9</sup>

*The fifth line of support.* The deep context-sensitivity view predicts that if we talk about what it's like to have an experience in a suitably distant context, then we should be talking about properties of the experience that need not be phenomenal characters – i.e., the philosophically relevant "what-it's-like" properties. For if what-it's-like talk is deeply context-sensitive, then such talk can be used in different contexts to refer to radically different properties of experiences.

To test this prediction, consider a case in which you ask what it was like for me to see Cirque du Soleil in New York. I might truly answer that my experience was surprising and exciting. But philosophers do not usually think that surprise and excitement were phenomenal characters of my visual experience of Cirque du Soleil.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophers *do* usually think that the states of surprise and excitement *have* phenomenal characters of their own. What they do not usually think is that the properties of being surprising and being exciting *are themselves* phenomenal characters of visual experiences. Various philosophers have identified the total

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<sup>8</sup> See Lewis (1995, p. 140); Byrne (2004, p. 215).

<sup>9</sup> On the point that philosophical "what it's like" talk is not technical, I side with Farrell (2016).

<sup>10</sup> On the basis of such examples, and contrary to philosophical orthodoxy, Hellie argues that emotional states or properties *are* phenomenal characters (2007a, pp. 261-262). But if the expression "what it's like" is deeply context-sensitive, then Hellie's reasoning is too swift: he has not ruled out the possibility of a shift in context.

phenomenal character of visual experiences with (i) the property of being a special type of representation of such-and-such perceived entities, (ii) the property of being a primitive, non-representational relation of awareness to such-and-such perceived entities, or (iii) the neural property that underlies my visual perception.<sup>11</sup> None of these theorists would treat the properties of being surprising and exciting as phenomenal characters of my visual experience of Cirque du Soleil.

*The sixth line of support.* Here are some standard theories – some of which are compatible with one another – of the meaning of “what it’s like”:

The *predicative theory*: Any *F*-entailing claim of the form “what *x* is like is *F*” literally means that *x* has property *F*.<sup>12</sup>

The *restricted predicative theory*: Any *F*-entailing claim of the form “What *x* is like is *F*” literally means that *F* is a *way* that *x* is.<sup>13</sup> Here, *ways* are to be understood as properties that can be cited in response to questions about *how* something is, as opposed to *where* it is or *why* it is.<sup>14</sup>

The *affective theory*: Any *F*-entailing claim of the form “What it is like to *x* for *y* to  $\phi$  is *F*,” when uttered in context *c*, literally means that *F* is a way that *y*’s  $\phi$ -ing affects *x* in *c*.<sup>15</sup>

If you accept any of these theories, then you should welcome the deep context-sensitivity view with open arms. After all, property-talk, ways-talk, and effects-talk are all deeply context-sensitive.

To appreciate the point, consider the question, “What is it like for you to have a dog?” The theories we are considering would analyze this question as meaning, respectively, “What properties does having a dog have for you?,” “What way is having a dog for you?,” and “In what way does having a dog affect you?” If

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<sup>11</sup> These are the paradigmatic theories of phenomenal character offered respectively by representationalists (e.g., Tye (1995)), naïve realists (e.g., Campbell (2002)), and type-physicalists.

<sup>12</sup> The predicative theorist may remain neutral on how this meaning is derived (see Snowdon (2010, pp. 21-22), or she may hold that this meaning is derived idiomatically (see Hellie (2007b, p. 452)). More interestingly, she may hold that it is derived compositionally. The idea would be that any claim of the form “What *x* is like is ...” literally means, “What *x* resembles is ...,” or equivalently, “What *x* is similar to is ....” Such a theorist offers a unified semantic analysis of sentences such as the following:

- (1) What Chicago is like is London.
- (2) What Chicago is like is exciting.

The analysis of (1) is obvious enough: this sentence means that Chicago *resembles* London, i.e., that Chicago is *similar to* London. The analysis of (2) is what is interesting. This does not mean that Chicago is similar to exciting; that makes no sense. Rather, it means that Chicago is similar to *things* that are exciting, *in respect of being exciting* – or, more simply, that Chicago is exciting (see Gaskin (2019, especially p. 693)).

<sup>13</sup> See Snowdon (2010, p. 22); Stoljar (2016, pp. 1169-1172, including fn. 14).

<sup>14</sup> See Stoljar (2016, fn. 14).

<sup>15</sup> See Stoljar (2016, p. 1173). Stoljar’s actual proposal is about the expression “there is something it’s like ...” rather than the expression “what it is like,” but this is an obvious extension.

we are discussing your physical condition, then an appropriate answer to these questions might be, “It is helpful – it encourages me to get a lot of exercise”; if we are discussing your mental condition, then an appropriate answer might be, “It is deeply meaningful”; if we are discussing your financial condition, then an appropriate answer might be, “It drains my bank account!” There is *some* broad ontological similarity to these properties, insofar as they are all ways that one entity can affect another. Still, I take it that these properties are of radically different types, as per the deep context-sensitivity view.

There is one last semantic theory worth discussing, however:

The *perceptual appearance theory*: Any claim of the form “what experience *E* is like for subject *S* is *F*,” as used in philosophy of mind, literally means that *F* is a way that *E* perceptually appears to *S*.<sup>16</sup>

If the perceptual appearance theory is true, then the deep context-sensitivity view is irrelevant to philosophy of mind (even if it is true). For the deep context-sensitivity view is a view about *F*-entailing claims of a certain form, and the perceptual appearance theory says that there are no such *F*-entailing claims in philosophy of mind: the fact that an experience *perceptually appears* to be *F* does not entail that it *really is F*.

However, I propose to bracket the perceptual appearance theory. For one thing, it has been criticized in detail by others, and I am sympathetic to these criticisms.<sup>17</sup> For another, I do not see how the theory can adequately account for the radically different uses of the term *phenomenal character* that I will identify in §3-§5.

*Summary.* The deep context-sensitivity view enjoys the following lines of support:

- (a) It is directly supported by ordinary examples of what-it’s-like talk.
- (b) It correctly predicts that, and explains why, the bare what-it’s-like definition of phenomenal character will be mystifying.
- (c) It correctly predicts that, and explains why, the what-it’s-like definition *will* be very helpful when given in a clear philosophical context of the sort that Nagel provides.
- (d) It treats philosophical uses of *what it’s like* as entirely non-technical.
- (e) It correctly predicts that, and explains why, in non-philosophical contexts, we can talk about what an experience is like without talking about its phenomenal character.
- (f) It is supported by most theories of the semantics of *what it’s like*.

I take this evidence to be extremely compelling.

Still, it is worth engaging with a concern. Philosophers standardly make certain supplementary remarks when introducing the term *phenomenal character*. Might these remarks provide the missing contextual information?

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<sup>16</sup> See Lormand (2004, p. 315).

<sup>17</sup> See Hellie (2007b, pp. 443-444 and 449-459); Stoljar (2016, pp. 1186-1188); Gaskin (2019, pp. 676-680).



One standard thing to do is to point to some examples: to say that there is something it's like to see purple, to hear a cello, and so on.<sup>18</sup> However, this popular supplement does not supply nearly enough of the missing contextual information. For notice: if you ask someone what it's like to see purple, she may truly answer, "It's simply *wonderful*." But, as we have seen, philosophers almost never think that emotional states or properties are *themselves* phenomenal characters of visual experiences.

Another common way to fill in some missing contextual information is to connect the expression *phenomenal character* to other terms in the neighborhood: perhaps *subjectivity*, *awareness*, or *consciousness*.<sup>19</sup> This is not sufficient. For one thing, these terms are wildly polysemous – it has been said that the term *consciousness* has eight distinct meanings.<sup>20</sup> In any case, these terms would not supply enough of the missing contextual information. For, again, if you ask someone what it's like to have a particular episode of *subjective conscious awareness*, then she can truly answer by reporting her emotions.

Thus the standard supplementary remarks do not suffice to pin down what philosophers have in mind when they use the term *phenomenal character*. More context is needed. I will now argue that philosophers have, without realizing it, given the what-it's-like definition of *phenomenal character* with at least three very different contexts in the background.

### 3. The first context: hard character

I observe that in one strand of the philosophical literature, the term *phenomenal character* gets used in the context of the so-called *hard problem(s) of consciousness*. In particular, at least in the paradigmatic cases, these theorists take it that the phenomenal character of an experience plays the following roles:

1. The *explanatory gap role*: We seem unable to understand how it could be nothing more than something that is conceived purely physically and/or functionally. (See Levine (1983).)
2. The *missing knowledge role*: We seem unable to know everything about it just on the basis of having all physically and functionally conceived information. (See Nagel (1974); Jackson (1982).)
3. The *conceivable absence role*: We seem to be able to conceive of it as present in one subject *S* yet absent in some other subject who is identical to *S* in all functional and physical respects. (See Block (1980); Chalmers (1996).)

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<sup>18</sup> This practice is so ubiquitous that I trust that citations are unnecessary.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Chalmers uses the "what it's like" definition of consciousness and says that "[t]he subject matter [of a discussion of consciousness] is 'the *subjective* quality of experience'" (1996, p. 4, emphasis mine); Tye equates phenomenal aspects with what-it-is-like aspects and adds that "a mental state is phenomenally conscious just in case there is some immediate *subjective* 'feel' to the state" (1995, p. 4, emphasis mine); Sturgeon (2008) explains that "the conscious character of Good cases" is "what it is *consciously* like to enjoy Good visual experience" (p. 116, emphasis mine).

<sup>20</sup> See Lycan (1996, ch. 1).

4. The *conceivable inversion role*: We seem to be able to conceive of it as invertible across subjects who are identical in all functional and physical respects. (See Shoemaker (1982).)<sup>21</sup>

You might immediately object that to say that something plays roles 1-4 is to assume that there is some property of experience that *in fact* generates an explanatory gap, missing knowledge, and so on – but this assumption is very controversial. This objection is mistaken, however. To say that something plays roles 1-4 is only to assume that there is a property of experience that *has seemed – in a reasonably robust way, to a reasonably large group of philosophers, from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century* – to generate an explanatory gap, to generate missing knowledge, and so on.<sup>22</sup> This assumption is very plausible.

Why think that the context characterized by roles 1-4 pins down one property that philosophers have had in mind when using the expression *phenomenal character*? One compelling reason is sheer influence. Look at discussions of phenomenal character from the final decades of the twentieth century. You will find over and over that it is the problems implicated in roles 1-4 that are discussed, and it is the works listed above that are cited.

In addition, in the more recent literature many philosophers assert that there is an intimate connection between phenomenal character and roles such as 1-4, especially the explanatory gap role. Below are a few representative quotations. Note that although these quotations use terms other than *phenomenal character*, these other terms are always defined with the help of the expression *what it's like*.

“A property is phenomenal only if it contributes to the hard problem of consciousness, and in particular, only if it gives rise to an explanatory gap.” (Carruthers and Veillet 2011, p. 45)

“Perhaps the most striking feature of phenomenal properties is that they appear to present an explanatory gap.” (McClelland 2016, p. 540)

“The traditional explanatory gap consists in the fact that phenomenal states do not seem to be explainable in terms of physical states [see Levine (1983)]. Phenomenal states are states that there is *something it is like to be in*. In what follows, I distinguish four features of phenomenal states that individually resist explanation.” (Saad 2016, p. 2356; the emphasis and reference to Levine are both his.)

“*Consciousness properties* are properties that contribute to making up what things are or can be *like* for subjects....I will often abbreviate the physicalist identity thesis as the claim that C=P.... Many of us have an exceptional resistance to the physicalist identity thesis.... Our exceptional resistance to physicalism is the “explanatory gap” on one understanding of that phrase. (Sundström 2017, pp. 681-682, emphasis his)

These remarks make perfect sense if roles such as 1-4 are intended to fill in the context for the expression *what it's like*.

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<sup>21</sup> There may be other roles related to the hard problems of consciousness. For further discussion, see Chalmers (2018).

<sup>22</sup> Let the italicized phrase be a specification of the meaning of the word “we” in roles 1-4.

But why think that these remarks are intended as *reference-determining* contextual information for the expression *what it's like*, when that expression is being used to define the term *phenomenal character*? Couldn't these simply be further assertions about phenomenal character?

I doubt it. It is very clear that all of these theorists have in mind *some* restrictions when they use the term *phenomenal character*. None of them would count *every* property of an experience as a phenomenal character of that experience. But I just cannot find anything else in these works that would supply these contextual restrictions. The remarks that I have quoted are the only substantial pieces of dialectically neutral contextual information that these theorists give before they launch into their arguments. So – in the interest of charity, in light of the historical importance of the hard problems of consciousness, and in light of the deep context-sensitivity of the expression “what it's like” – I interpret the quotations above as providing contextual information that is reference-determining.

In other cases, I would offer the same interpretation on more holistic grounds. A paradigmatic example is Michael Tye's 1995 book *Ten Problems of Consciousness*. In the first paragraph of chapter 1 of this book, Tye simply lists a few experiences, mentions their “phenomenal or ‘what it is like’ aspects,” and moves on. But it is impossible to miss the imprint of the hard problems on Tye's way of thinking: the titular ten problems include the explanatory gap problem, the missing knowledge problem, the conceivable absence problem, and the conceivable inversion problem.<sup>23</sup> Similarly for Dretske's book *Naturalizing the Mind*. Dretske briskly defines the “subjectivity” of an experience of *F* as what it's like to experience *F*.<sup>24</sup> Immediately afterwards, however, he launches into a 15-page discussion of the missing knowledge role, as it is characterized by Jackson and Nagel.<sup>25</sup>

There is a final reason that I am partial to thinking that roles 1-4 help to fix what some philosophers have in mind when using the term *phenomenal character*. Recall my earlier report that I have *never* been able to get the uninitiated to understand the term just by appealing to what it's like to have an experience. I now add that I have *routinely* been able to get the uninitiated to understand the term, at least in the way that this group of philosophers understands it, just by describing roles 1-4. In fact, this is the *only* way that I have found to get the uninitiated to use the term *phenomenal character* in the way that these philosophers do – regardless of whether I use the expression “what it's like.”

I would like to offer a particular proposal about how to more precisely characterize what philosophers have in mind when they define the expression *phenomenal character* in the context of the hard problems. My argument does not require this, but it will make the discussion easier to follow.

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<sup>23</sup> See pp. 16-17, 12-13, 21-25, and 26-29, respectively. One minor complication is that Tye thinks of phenomenal character not as a *property* of an experience, but as the *content* of the experience. If anything, this is more grist for my mill: here is even more fragmentation in uses of “phenomenal character.”

<sup>24</sup> Dretske (1995), p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 81-95.

The idea is to treat the term *phenomenal character* as a natural kind term like *water* or *gold*.<sup>26</sup> We can start by identifying the *apparent paradigms* of phenomenal characters as those entities that play enough of (but not necessarily all of) roles 1-4. We can then use those apparent paradigms to lock onto the relevant natural kind, thereby pulling in any non-paradigmatic phenomenal characters, and maybe also pushing out some entities that seemed to be paradigmatic phenomenal characters but turned out not to be phenomenal characters at all.<sup>27</sup>

More precisely, I propose that:

When philosophers define the expression *phenomenal character* (*of an experience*) in the context of the hard problems of consciousness, they have in mind what I will call *hard character*: any property of that experience that belongs to the natural kind associated with the properties of experiences that play enough of roles 1-4.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. The second context: perceptual character

Turn now to philosophers working, not in the context of the hard problems of consciousness, but in the context of certain problems involving perception – the paradigm being John Campbell in his 2002 book *Reference and Consciousness*. It is a central aim of Campbell's book to account for the phenomenal character of perception. Yet Campbell has little interest in the hard problems of consciousness: his main discussion of phenomenal character occurs in chapters 6 and 7, but these chapters do not contain even a passing mention of explanatory gaps, inverted spectra, or zombies. What is going on?

I suggest that although Campbell uses the same expression *phenomenal character*, his context is one in which an entirely different set of theoretical roles is salient – in particular:

5. The *mind-independence role*: It helps to explain why perceptions position us to recognize that perceived objects are mind-independent.
6. The *semantic role*: It helps to explain why perceptions position us to know the reference of perceptually-based demonstratives.
7. The *categorical role*: It helps to explain why perceptions position us to recognize that perceived objects are the categorical grounds for various dispositions.

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<sup>26</sup> On the notion of a natural kind, see Lewis (1983).

<sup>27</sup> Here I am taking inspiration from Lewis (1970).

<sup>28</sup> If there is no such natural kind, then *phenomenal character* might refer simply to any property of that experience that plays enough of roles 1-4.

There is another possibility: perhaps a few distinct natural kind properties play different sets of roles 1-4. For example, some properties might play the missing knowledge role but not the conceivable absence role (see Carruthers and Veillet (2011); McClelland (2016); Bayne (ms)). In this case, perhaps *hard character* refers indeterminately to these, or determinately to their disjunction. If so, then fragmentation is even more widespread, and my central points have even wider application.

Thus I propose:

Philosophers who define the expression *phenomenal character (of an experience)* in the context of certain problems involving perception have in mind what I will call *perceptual character*: any property of that experience that belongs to the natural kind associated with the properties of experiences that play enough of roles 5-7.<sup>29</sup>

This proposal is supported by a number of remarks from Campbell. For instance:

“Since both the Relational and Representational Views of the phenomenal character of experience have to be taken seriously ..., how are we to decide between them? ... I think that the only way to proceed is to ask why we need the notion of the phenomenal character of experience. We have to look at the role that the notion plays in our reflective thinking, we have to ask what the point is of the notion. I have been arguing that experience is what explains our grasp of substantial objects.”<sup>30</sup>

Substantial in what sense, however? As Campbell soon clarifies, “Experience of objects has to explain how it is that we can have the conception of objects as mind-independent.”<sup>31</sup> Hence the relevance of role 5.

As for role 6:

“Why do we need the notion of the phenomenal character of experience? We have to look at the role that the notion plays in our reflective thinking, we have to ask what the point is of the notion ... I have argued that we use the notion of experience of an object – or more precisely, conscious attention to an object – in explaining how it is that we have knowledge of the reference of a demonstrative.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, regarding role 7:

“So for any description of the phenomenal character of experience of shapes, we can ask whether phenomenal character, so described, could be what explains our grasp of the concepts of the categorical properties of objects around us.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See fn. 28 for what to say if there is not a single natural kind here.

<sup>30</sup> Campbell (2002, p. 120). To be sure, at the end of this quotation Campbell slides from talk about the *phenomenal character* of an experience to talk of *the experience itself*. But the expression *phenomenal character* does not appear anywhere else in the paragraph from which this quotation was taken. Thus, the charitable interpretation is that, according to Campbell, the point of the notion of phenomenal character is to explain our grasp of substantial objects.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 138. Again there is the slide from talk about the phenomenal character of an experience to talk about the experience itself. But for the same reasons provided in fn. 30 I think it is clear what Campbell means.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

I suspect that this remark is intended to be definitional, though I am not sure. If I am wrong then we can simply drop this role from the proposal.

I conclude that when Campbell uses the expression “phenomenal character” in his book *Reference and Consciousness*, it is perceptual character that he has in mind. For reasons explained in §1, this conclusion is silent about the *referent* of Campbell’s expression. If his dominant intention is to use the same term as certain previous thinkers, then his expression may *refer* to hard character, even while perceptual character is what he has *in mind*.

One consequence of this is that Campbell ends up talking past some of his opponents. Campbell argues against the representationalist view of “phenomenal character” championed by Dretske and Tye<sup>34</sup> – but these thinkers have in mind hard character, not perceptual character! To be sure, Campbell has many real, substantive disputes with Dretske and Tye. But he is talking past them *insofar as he is discussing phenomenal character*. In §9, I will show that this creates problems for one of Campbell’s central lines of argument.

*A concern.* A perceptive reader might have noticed that the expression “what it’s like” does not appear in any of the above passages from Campbell. Perhaps, then, Campbell is simply defining the term *phenomenal character* directly, without appeal to what it’s like to have an experience. Would this affect any of my central conclusions?<sup>35</sup>

It would not. To begin with, the quotations would still show that when Campbell uses the term *phenomenal character*, it is perceptual character that he has in mind. We should continue to conclude that Campbell is talking past philosophers like Dretske and Tye.

In addition, the present concern still allows the deep context-sensitivity hypothesis to play a crucial explanatory role. To see what this role is, note that it is somewhat puzzling that Campbell ends up talking past Dretske and Tye. Campbell is plainly familiar with their work. Why then would he fail to understand how they are using the term *phenomenal character*? The deep-context sensitivity hypothesis suggests an answer. Campbell was immersed in certain philosophical problems regarding perception before he encountered the term *phenomenal character*. Thus, when Campbell encountered the standard “what it’s like” definition of phenomenal character, he assumed, mistakenly but quite reasonably, that his interlocutors were speaking in a context in which such problems were salient.

*Conclusion.* When Campbell uses the expression *phenomenal character* in his book *Reference and Consciousness*, it is perceptual character that he has in mind. The significance of this conclusion is far-reaching, for Campbell’s book has a foundational status in contemporary philosophy of perception.<sup>36</sup> In particular, it is often agreed that perception gives the subject a special kind of knowledge of the reference of her demonstrative terms, and it is sometimes thought that this requires perceived objects and property-instances to be constituents of phenomenal character. *Reference and Consciousness* is the seminal expression of these ideas. I thus conjecture – though I will not argue here – that Campbell has

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<sup>34</sup> See pp. 116-117 for Campbell’s characterization of the representationalist theory of phenomenal character. See p. 146 for Campbell’s attribution of representationalism to Dretske and Tye.

<sup>35</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

<sup>36</sup> It might help to note that *Reference and Consciousness* has received more than 1000 citations.

colored the way that some other philosophers understand the expression *phenomenal character*.<sup>37</sup>

## 5. The third context: conveyed character

That is not all; there are even more contexts in play. Siegel's 2010 book *The Contents of Visual Experience* is a fine example. What Siegel has in mind when she uses the term *phenomenal character* is what I will call *conveyed character*: any property of the experience that is conveyed to its subject.

Siegel clarifies that an experience *conveys* a content "if [that content] would be a content of explicit beliefs that are natural to form on the basis of visual experience," "if [the content] enables the experience to guide bodily actions," and "if it is manifest to introspection that [the content] is a content of experience."<sup>38</sup> Siegel also speaks of entities other than contents that can be conveyed to the subject – properties, for example – so presumably her remarks above can somehow be generalized to explain what it is for these other entities to be conveyed to the subject.

Why do I think that Siegel uses the term *phenomenal character* with conveyed character in mind? Admittedly, Siegel is not explicit on the point. Like most authors who use the term *phenomenal character*, Siegel introduces that term simply by giving the "what it's like" definition, along with an example of an experience. This, by itself, does not give us much information.

However, Siegel does leave behind some interesting clues. To begin with, Siegel presupposes that if there are properties presented in phenomenology, then "those properties are conveyed to the subject."<sup>39</sup> Now, from context, it is clear that this presupposition is meant to be acceptable to all parties in the dispute, which suggests that Siegel is thinking of phenomenology as something like conveyed character. And Siegel makes it clear that, for her, the term *phenomenology* is interchangeable with the term *phenomenal character*.<sup>40</sup>

In a similar vein, Siegel describes one of her arguments, the *Argument from Appearing*, as "starting with something that is conveyed to the subject."<sup>41</sup> Shortly afterwards, Siegel characterizes this same argument as "proceeds from premises about the phenomenal character of visual perceptual experience." This further supports the idea that, for Siegel, the phenomenal character of an experience is what the experience conveys to the subject.

There is another suggestive clue: Siegel insists that "it would stretch the notion of the phenomenal too far if there were phenomenally conscious states that were necessarily completely under the first-person radar."<sup>42</sup> Given Siegel's use of the word "notion," she seems to be making a definitional point here. And it is plausible that the metaphors of being conveyed to the subject and being within the first-person radar are intended to mean the same thing.

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<sup>37</sup> These other philosophers need not have in mind the exact context that Campbell does. They may draw on some of roles 5-7 and some other roles, besides.

<sup>38</sup> Siegel (2010, p. 51).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 51-52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 81, fn. 3.

None of this is conclusive. Like many contemporary philosophers, Siegel does not say enough to make it perfectly clear how she is using the term. But the present interpretation is the best one that I can find.

*Significance.* This is important because Siegel, like Campbell, has a foundational status in contemporary philosophy of perception. In particular, according to the traditionally accepted *conservative view*, the phenomenal character of a visual experience pertains only to *low-level properties and relations* such as shape, size, and color. Nowadays, however, many philosophers accept the *liberal view* that such phenomenal character also pertains to some *high-level properties and relations*: for instance, causation, natural kind properties, emotional properties, and affordances. Siegel was one of the thinkers who helped to put liberalism on the map,<sup>43</sup> so it is plausible that her way of thinking has influenced many others.<sup>44</sup>

The problem is that Siegel is talking past some of her opponents.

She cites Michael Tye as one of her conservative opponents.<sup>45</sup> Presumably she does so because Tye holds that properties like *being a tiger* do not figure in the “phenomenal character” of a visual experience<sup>46</sup>; such contents concern only low-level properties like “distance away, orientation, determinate color, [and] texture.”<sup>47</sup> But it is hard character, not conveyed character, that Tye has in mind. So consider the following claims:

*Conservatism about hard character* (roughly stated): For visual experiences, the hard problems of consciousness are associated only with low-level properties.

*Liberalism about conveyed character* (roughly stated): Visual experiences convey information about low-level and high-level properties.

These claims are perfectly compatible! The idea would be that the properties that characterize what is conveyed in visual experience outstrip the properties of visual experience that generate the hard problems.

For similar reasons, although Siegel thinks that she is engaging with John Campbell’s views of “phenomenal character,” she is actually talking past him.<sup>48</sup> Campbell has in mind perceptual character, not conveyed character. What is even more confusing is that Siegel may be in merely verbal *agreement* with some other liberals. Two examples are liberals Tim Bayne and Tom McClelland, who both see a deep connection between phenomenal character and at least some of the hard

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<sup>43</sup> See Siegel (2005), (2006a), (2006b), (2009), and (2010). The idea caught on quickly. See for example Bayne (2009); Masrour (2011).

<sup>44</sup> Even if those others do not have *precisely* the same context in mind.

<sup>45</sup> See for example Siegel (2005, p. 501, fn. 18).

<sup>46</sup> Tye understands phenomenal character in terms of the contents delivered from sensory modules to cognition (1995, p. 137) and claims that these contents do *not* concern entities such as tigers (p. 141).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Siegel (2010, p. 166, fn. 15).



problems of consciousness.<sup>49</sup> Thus Bayne and McClelland may well accept liberalism about hard character.

Given that there are many philosophical problems about experiences, it would be unsurprising if other philosophers had defined the expression *phenomenal character* in still further contexts, resulting in even more confusion.<sup>50</sup> I conjecture, but will not argue here, that this is exactly what has happened. What I firmly conclude is that the expression *phenomenal character* has been used in at least three very different contexts, and thus with at least three distinct referents in mind.

## 6. Some concerns

Here I address a pair of related concerns.

One natural concern is that even if the expression *phenomenal character* has been used in different contexts, it might have ended up having just a single referent. In other words, hard character, perceptual character, and conveyed character might all be the same property. I think that would be a surprising coincidence – but suppose that such a coincidence has in fact occurred. Even so, there would still be an important rational defect in philosophical disputes about phenomenal character.

Suppose by analogy that you and I disagree about who “that person” is. Neither of us realizes that we have in mind different contexts of demonstration: I assume that we are both thinking of the person at the bar wearing a trench coat, while you assume that we are both thinking of the person who gave a philosophy talk earlier today. Now, as it happens, the person in the trench coat *just is* the person who gave a philosophy talk earlier today – but neither of us knows this. In such a situation, even though you and I will in fact be talking about the same person, our discussion will suffer from an important defect: we will fail to give *dialectically effective arguments* to support our claims. For instance, I might show you a picture of the person at the bar, and I would be right to treat this as evidence about the referent of my expression “that person.” But, absent evidence that the person at the bar is the one who gave the philosophy talk, you would rationally conclude that I have not yet given you evidence about the referent of your expression “that person.”

Similarly, suppose that hard character, perceptual character, and conveyed character just so happen to be the same. Even so, philosophers are routinely failing to engage with one another in a dialectically effective way.

Here is a second, somewhat related concern. Perhaps philosophers like Nagel, Dretske, Tye, Campbell, and Siegel are all using the expression *phenomenal character* in exactly the same way. Perhaps the differences in background context, the ones that I have identified, are meant only to highlight the different *aspects* of phenomenal character that are relevant for their purposes. If so, then these philosophers are not talking at cross-purposes after all.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Bayne (2009, §6) focuses on the relationship between (i) high-level properties and (ii) the knowledge argument and the explanatory gap problem. McClelland (2016) does the same, but with sole emphasis on the explanatory gap problem.

<sup>50</sup> It is even possible that philosophers use the term with different referents in mind *within a single text*.

<sup>51</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

I believe that this interpretation is not sustainable.

Nagel was the seminal figure for popularizing “what it’s like” talk in discussions of consciousness, and I have argued that what he had in mind was hard character. Thus, on the alternative interpretation, Campbell is emphasizing a certain *aspect* of hard character: the aspect that helps to explain why perceptions position us to recognize perceived objects as mind-independent, to know the reference of perceptually-based demonstratives, and to recognize perceived objects as the categorical grounds for various dispositions. Similarly, the alternative interpretation has it that Siegel is emphasizing yet another aspect of hard character: the aspect of what is conveyed to the subject.

We should then expect to find *some tangential evidence* that the properties of experience that Campbell and Siegel have in mind are related to the hard problems of consciousness. Somewhere, at least in passing, Campbell should indicate that perceptual character is an aspect of hard character, that it is deeply entangled with the hard problems. But look at his lengthy discussion of phenomenal character in chs. 6-7 of *Reference and Consciousness*. Pay special attention to the quotations I cited in §4, where Campbell is describing the very purpose of the concept. You will find nothing of the sort.

Likewise for Siegel: *somewhere* across the five works of hers cited in fn. 43, she should drop some hint that the notion of phenomenal character is deeply bound up with the hard problems of consciousness. She does not. I conclude that Campbell and Siegel really are speaking at cross-purposes with Nagel, Dretske, and Tye.

Suppose that I am right, then: suppose that there has been deep fragmentation in philosophical debates about phenomenal character. What applications would this have? Many, I think, but I will focus on four of them.

## 7. First application: on the existence of hard character

Some theorists have argued that phenomenal character, taken as hard character, does not exist, because there are no properties of experiences that play enough of roles 1-4. We can now understand why this argument is unsound.

*The argument.* According to the predicative theory, any *F*-entailing claim of the form “what *x* is like is *F*” literally means that *x* has property *F*. Assume that this theory is true. Then talk about *what an experience is like* is just talk about *what properties the experience has*. This is entirely unmysterious; it does not in any way support the idea that there are any hard problems of consciousness. Thus, there is no particular reason to think that there are any such problems – or so the argument goes.<sup>52</sup>

*The problem.* For the sake of discussion, grant the truth of the predicative theory. Then, yes, there is nothing *in the meaning of what-it’s-like talk* to suggest that there are any hard problems of consciousness. But from this, we should not

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<sup>52</sup> See Gaskin (2019, p. 695). I have slightly altered my presentation of the objection. Gaskin’s version of the objection draws on a specific version of the predicative theory, the *resemblance theory*, which I describe in fn. 12. However, the objection is actually independent of the details of that theory.

infer that *nothing at all* supports the existence of the hard problems. There is plenty of support!

It comes from claims such as these: first, that there are certain facts about (for example) seeing red that initially seem impossible to fully explain in physical/functional terms; second, that there are certain properties of a bat's echolocatory experiences that initially seem impossible for us to know about; third, that we initially seem to be able to conceive of a subject who is physically and functionally just like us when we see red, but whose experience of red lacks a certain crucial property of our own experience; and fourth, that we initially seem to be able to conceive of a subject who is physically and functionally just like us when we see red, but whose experience of red is similar, in a certain crucial respect, to our experience of green. To put it another way, it is just plausible *from the start* that there are hard problems of consciousness.<sup>53</sup>

My opponent's mistake is to ignore the deep context-sensitivity of the expression *what it's like* – in particular, to look for information about the hard problems of consciousness by scrutinizing the expression *what it's like*. This is as wrongheaded as looking for information about blueness by scrutinizing the expression *that property*. Such information can only be found in the context: it is only when (say) Thomas points to a blue circle *in a context in which colors are salient* that the expression *that property* comes to refer to blueness. Likewise for *what it's like* and hard character.

## 8. Second application: Nagel's characterization of consciousness

Here is a mildly revised version of Thomas Nagel's famous characterization of consciousness:

- (C) For a state to be *conscious* is for there to be something it's like for a subject to be in that state.<sup>54</sup>

Recall the *restricted predicative theory*, which says that any *F*-entailing claim of the form "What *x* is like is *F*" literally means that *F* is a way that *x* is. *Ways* are to be understood as properties of a special type: those that can be cited in response to questions about *how* something is, as opposed to *where* it is or *why* it is.

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<sup>53</sup> My opponent might respond that when she considers Nagel's bat, Jackson's Mary, etc., she sees nothing that seems even initially difficult to explain in physical and functional terms. Such an opponent seems to me to be denying the obvious. But I can offer one parting observation. I have taught several courses on the hard problems of consciousness, and on the very first day of class, I introduce the topic by mentioning the standard examples (of Nagel's bat, of what Mary seemingly could not know, etc.). I then take a poll to see whether the hard problems really do feel hard to my students. Very close to 100% of them agree that they do. I can confirm on the basis of many other polls that students are not reluctant to disagree with me or with each other. This suggests that there really is something that *strongly seems* to be difficult to explain.

<sup>54</sup> Nagel's original characterization is that "an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism" (1979, p. 166). I see no reason to include the reference to organisms, however: perhaps robots or galaxies could be conscious.

Some restricted predicative theorists have objected that (C) cannot be right. For it is trivial to satisfy the right-hand side: what-it's-like talk refers to the ways that the entity under discussion is, and every entity is some way or other.<sup>55</sup> We are now in a position to appreciate why this objection is not a good one.<sup>56</sup>

For argument's sake, grant the truth of the restricted predicative theory. Even so, given the deep context-sensitivity view, this reasoning is clearly mistaken. Yes, *in principle* what-it's-like talk can be used to refer to any way that an entity is. But *in context* that is not so. Nagel was speaking in the context of a hard problem of consciousness: he was discussing the properties of bat experience that seem to elude explanation in purely physical and functional terms. So we can rephrase (C) roughly as follows:

(C\*) Let  $F$  be the property of a bat's experience that makes it seemingly impossible to fully explain the experience purely in physical and functional terms. For a state to be *conscious* is for it to have  $F$ .

Whether or not this characterization is correct, it is certainly not *trivial*. And, for what it is worth, I find the characterization very initially plausible. Conscious experiences quite generally appear to elude explanation in purely physical and functional terms. Isn't it initially plausible that there is a single property  $F$  that explains this across the board?

## 9. Third application: A re-evaluation of an argument from Campbell

Consider a veridical perception,  $V$ , and a matching hallucination,  $H$ . Dretske and Tye say that  $V$  and  $H$  have precisely the same "phenomenal characters."<sup>57</sup> Campbell says that their "phenomenal characters" are radically different.<sup>58</sup> As I have said before, Campbell makes it explicit that he takes himself to be disagreeing with Dretske and Tye on this point.<sup>59,60</sup> I say that this is a merely verbal dispute,

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<sup>55</sup> As Snowdon puts it: "My hypothesis, then, is that when people talk of what an experience was like they are using 'like' in this non-comparative way, where it simply means being some way.... If this is what [the what-it's-like characterization of conscious states] means, then it does not characterize experiences in any way that would not apply to *absolutely everything*. Everything is some way or other" (2010, pp. 22-23, emphasis his). A similar concern is raised by Hellie (2007, p. 461, fn. 13).

<sup>56</sup> An anonymous referee suggests an alternative response: it is the expression "for a subject" that renders Nagel's definition non-trivial. After all, not every property of a state characterizes what it's like *for a subject* to be in that state. Fair enough! Still, Nagel's opponent can justly reply that it remains too easy to satisfy the right-hand side of the definition. There is something it's like for a subject to be in a state of poverty ("degrading"), but poverty is not a conscious state.

<sup>57</sup> See Tye (1995, p. 152); Dretske (1995, p. 101). Similar utterances may be found in Alston (1999); Chalmers (2006); Pautz (2007); Schellenberg (2018); D'Ambrosio (2019). Qualified support is also expressed in Siegel (2010, ch. 6); Brewer (2011, p. 101).

<sup>58</sup> See Campbell (2002, p. 117). Similar utterances may be found in Martin (2004) and (2006); Soteriou (2005); Fish (2009); Logue (2012); Allen (2015); Steenhagen (2019).

<sup>59</sup> Again, see for example Campbell (2002, p. 146).

<sup>60</sup> Alternative views are possible. For instance, there is the view that their phenomenal characters are the same in some significant respects, but also different in some significant respects. See Beck (2019) for a view *somewhere* in this neighborhood.

one that has obscured the shape of the real dispute. In this section, I further substantiate this charge: I argue that Campbell's misunderstanding causes him to mislocate his disagreement with these opponents.

According to the *representationalist* theory of perception defended by Dretske and Tye, perceptions are nothing more than representations of a certain distinctive kind; non-representational relations are not involved in the analysis of what a perception is.<sup>61</sup> According to Campbell's *naïve realist* theory of perception, perceptions are nothing more than non-representational relations of awareness of a certain distinctive kind; representations are not involved in the analysis of what a perception is.<sup>62</sup> This is a real, substantive dispute between Dretske and Tye, on the one hand, and Campbell, on the other.

One of Campbell's most central arguments against Tye-Dretske representationalism may be regimented as follows:

- C1. The phenomenal character of *V* helps to explain why *V* positions us to do the following: recognize that perceived objects are mind-independent (per role 5), know the reference of perceptually-based demonstratives (per role 6), and recognize that perceived objects are the categorical grounds for various dispositions (per role 7).<sup>63</sup>
  - C2. If C1 is true, then the phenomenal character of *V* is constituted partly by perceived objects.<sup>64</sup>
  - C3. The phenomenal character of *H* is not constituted partly by perceived objects.<sup>65</sup>
  - C4. If the phenomenal character of *V* is constituted partly by perceived objects and the phenomenal character of *H* is not constituted partly by perceived objects, then *V* and *H* differ in phenomenal character.<sup>66</sup>
  - C5. If Tye-Dretske representationalism is true, then *V* and *H* do not differ in phenomenal character.<sup>67</sup>
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- C6. Tye-Dretske representationalism is not true.

The argument is valid, and Campbell treats almost all of the premises as obviously true. The exception is C2: Campbell offers a detailed defense of this premise that spans much of chapters 6-7. For our purposes, however, the crucial premises turn out to be C1 and C5.

Suppose that we interpret *phenomenal character* as hard character. Then C5 would indeed be indisputable: it would express a central commitment of Tye-Dretske representationalism. However, C1 would enjoy very little support! The hard character of an experience is roughly the natural kind property that generates the hard problems of consciousness. *But the fact that a property of*

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<sup>61</sup> Tye (1995, ch. 5); Dretske (1995, ch. 6).

<sup>62</sup> See Campbell (2002, esp. chs. 6-7).

<sup>63</sup> See the quotations that I cited in §4.

<sup>64</sup> See for example Campbell (2002, pp. 121, 130, 147-150).

<sup>65</sup> This is granted by nearly all parties – even sense-datum theorists, if the objects in question are understood to be ordinary, mind-independent ones.

<sup>66</sup> See Campbell (2002, p. 117).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117. See p. 146 for Campbell's citation of Dretske and Tye.

*experience plays roles 5-7 has no evident bearing on whether it generates the hard problems.*

Suppose that we instead interpret *phenomenal character* as perceptual character. Then C1 looks much better. It is not *quite* definitional: perceptual character is roughly the natural kind property that plays enough of roles 5-7, and it is in principle possible for a property to play those roles without belonging to this natural kind. Still, C1 would remain extremely plausible.

The problem is that on this interpretation, C5 no longer expresses a commitment of Tye-Dretske representationalism. Tye and Dretske *are* committed to the claim that, for any perception and matching hallucination, there is a common property that explains why both experiences generate the hard problems of consciousness. That is, they are committed to the claim that any perception and matching hallucination have the same *hard* character. But this has no obvious bearing on whether these experiences have the same *perceptual* character.

On either interpretation, then, Campbell's argument is unsound.

That is not the key point, however: perhaps there is some way to repair Campbell's argument. Campbell's best strategy might be to argue that Tye and Dretske cannot account for perceptual character. (Though it will emerge in the next section that Tye and Dretske can accept more of Campbell's view of perceptual character than is usually appreciated.) The key point is that we must skim off the purely verbal dispute before we can even identify where Campbell disagrees with Tye and Dretske, much less assess who is in the right.

## 10. Fourth application: New theories brought into view

With the distinction between hard character and perceptual character clearly in view, we can appreciate the possibility of some new theories concerning "phenomenal character."

Begin with hard character: roughly, the natural kind property that generates the hard problems of consciousness. These problems seem to arise equally, and in precisely the same form, for any perception and matching hallucination. Thus, an initially attractive hypothesis is that any perception and matching hallucination have precisely the same hard character.

This is unsurprising. It is equally unsurprising that this hypothesis is compatible with standard versions of representationalism. What *is* surprising is that this hypothesis is compatible with Campbell's naïve realism!

To be sure, Campbell thinks that the perceptual character of a perception consists partly of the ordinary objects and properties that are perceived. But the subject is not related to any such objects or properties in a matching hallucination. Thus, Campbell concludes that the perception and the hallucination have different *perceptual* characters.

But this puts no particular pressure on Campbell to say that the perception and the hallucination have different *hard* characters. To pick a pair of views arbitrarily, perhaps the hard problems of consciousness are generated by the neural properties that underpin a given experience,<sup>68</sup> or alternatively by

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<sup>68</sup> See Block (1996). This approach might pair well with the *neurocomputational naïve realism* developed in Beck (2019a) and (2019b).

perceptual capacities to single out and discriminate particulars.<sup>69</sup> These neural properties or perceptual capacities could be precisely the same across a perception and a matching hallucination, resulting in identical hard characters. None of these claims are in any obvious tension with Campbell's theory of perceptual character.<sup>70</sup>

Now turn to perceptual character – roughly, the natural kind property that explains why perceptions position us to recognize perceived objects as mind-independent, to know the reference of perceptually-based demonstratives, and to recognize perceived objects as the categorical grounds for various dispositions. *Matching hallucinations do not play any of these roles.* They might first-personally seem to do so, but in fact they do not. Thus, the most initially plausible view is that matching hallucinations have no perceptual character at all!<sup>71</sup>

This result is not only significant. It is surprising. A few naïve realists have indeed argued that hallucinations do not have any “phenomenal character.” But they usually concede that their view is strongly counterintuitive, while adding that this drawback is outweighed by other considerations.<sup>72</sup> I say that if we are talking about perceptual character, then the concession is mistaken. The view that hallucinations have no perceptual character, far from being counterintuitive, is the most initially attractive view.

There is one more surprise: this attractive view is perfectly compatible with Tye-Dretske representationalism. Yes, Tye and Dretske think that hallucinations have *hard* character, but this is quite separate from perceptual character. Perhaps Tye and Dretske will say that perceptual character is to be explained by a causal link to the perceived objects and properties.<sup>73</sup> For a matching hallucination, there are no such objects, no such properties, and no such causal link. Hence this experience need not have any perceptual character.

What about conveyed character? I conjecture that what it is initially plausible to say about conveyed character is very different from what it is initially plausible to say about hard character or perceptual character. However, in the interest of space, I will not pursue this idea further. What I *have* shown is that sharply distinguishing different kinds of “phenomenal character” brings into view some new and exciting theories of perception that were previously obscured from our sight.

## 11. Conclusion

I have argued that because the expression “what it's like” is deeply context-sensitive, philosophers who speak of *phenomenal character* have had at least three different properties in mind. I have applied these ideas to draw several further conclusions: I have rebutted an argument that there are no hard problems of consciousness; I have rebutted an argument that the right-hand side of Nagel's

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<sup>69</sup> This view is inspired by Schellenberg (2018).

<sup>70</sup> The point does not generalize to every version of naïve realism: Fish (2008) offers a naïve realist theory of the hard character of perception that cannot be generalized to matching hallucinations. Still – and quite remarkably – the point applies to *many* versions of naïve realism.

<sup>71</sup> Again, because perceptual character is a natural kind property, it is not *impossible* for matching hallucinations to have it. But this is very unlikely.

<sup>72</sup> See Fish (2008, ch. 4, for example p. 81); Logue (2012, §4-§5).

<sup>73</sup> Campbell *does* have arguments that would engage with this claim.

characterization of consciousness is trivial; I have shown that Campbell has misidentified the commitments of Dretske and Tye, and that one of his central arguments against representationalism relies on an equivocation; and I have identified some exciting new theoretical possibilities for naïve realists and representationalists.

What I have *not* done is attempt to settle the many philosophical debates about hard character, perceptual character, and conveyed character. These tasks remain large and difficult. Still, clearing away the merely verbal disputes will make our footing much firmer as we press ahead.



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