



## **PHENOMENALITY AND INTENTIONALITY—WHICH EXPLAINS WHICH?: REPLY TO GERTLER**

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**ABSTRACT:** In Chapter 7 I argue that we are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having phenomenal features. According to Gertler, my claim needs, but does not receive from me, a defence against the allegedly rival thesis that phenomenal features are explained by intentional ones. I maintain that this criticism involves a misunderstanding of my view’s implications. In my book I oppose the “rival” thesis only to this extent: where my conception of consciousness conflicts with broad ways of trying to explain the phenomenal by the intentional, I provide (in Chapters 4-6 and 8) arguments against those theories. My point is not that the phenomenal is explanatorily more basic than the intentional, but rather, that it is itself intentional without being explained by that fact.

### **1. Introduction**

Gertler’s comments on my book are in many ways generous. But she is concerned that I overestimate the reach of my arguments about the relationship of consciousness and intentionality. Her concern focuses on my central claim, in Chapter 7, that we are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having visual phenomenal features. (All chapter, section, and page references are to Siewert (1998).) Her criticism is that I leave my claim undefended against the “rival” thesis that intentional features explain phenomenal features. I will argue that her critique rests on misunderstandings. It should be clear though, that to say that I have been misunderstood is not to underestimate the value of Gertler’s remarks. While the relationship of intentionality and phenomenal consciousness

is, as she notes, an important foundational issue, it is (as she also says) a remarkably “thorny” one. Clarifying my position here affords me an opportunity to improve my understanding of these difficult issues.

## **2. The Extent of My “In Virtue Of” Claim: Phenomenal Features are Intentional.**

To sort out these matters, we need to be very clear from the start about just what is meant by my crucial “in virtue of” claim:

**[IVO]** We are assessable for accuracy in virtue of possessing certain phenomenal features.

What I mean here is just this: many common phenomenal features are such that, if one has them, no interpreting conditions need be added to make one assessable for accuracy with respect to these features. So, for example, suppose it now seems to you as it does for it to look as if there’s something X-shaped on your left in a certain place. Now add the fact that nothing occupying just that place is X-shaped. In adding this fact we do not supply phenomenal visual experience with something having the status of an interpretation (in the sense in which interpretation must be added to images or utterances, for example, if they are to be assessable for accuracy or truth). Rather we simply introduce the fulfilment of a condition of accuracy or correctness. In this respect visual phenomenal features parallel such paradigmatically intentional features as belief. Suppose you believe your younger brother is now in New Orleans. Add to this the fact that your younger brother is not now in New Orleans. It follows that what you believe is false. Since this follows just from introducing that condition, and thus without also supplying anything like an interpretation of the feature in question, that feature (i.e., your belief) is one in virtue of which you are assessable for truth. Hence it is an intentional feature. I maintain the same holds for the phenomenal features involved in having visual experience.

Now while Gertler accepts my “no interpretation necessary” claim about visual phenomenal features, and my case for it, she *is* critical of [IVO]. However, since I intend [IVO] as no more than a restatement of the claim she accepts, I think her criticism must involve a misunderstanding. To get to the bottom of this, I need to try to be clear about what more she reads into [IVO] and why. She sees it as committing me to the notion that there is an “asymmetric explanatory relation” between phenomenal features and intentional ones. Very roughly, she reads [IVO] as affirming:

**[PEI]** Phenomenal features *Explain* Intentional ones;

and as denying:

**[IEP]** Intentional features *Explain* Phenomenal ones.

Paradigm cases of affirming [IEP] are to be found in “representationalist” theories like Fred Dretske’s and Michael Tye’s, according to which the phenomenal character of experience is explained by identifying it with a certain kind of representational content. So, in Tye’s account, for instance, the special phenomenal-making content is one which is map-like, and poised to affect one’s beliefs in an involuntary manner. Upholders of [IEP] are also found among those who maintain “higher order representation” theories of consciousness—whether this takes the form of Rosenthal’s “higher order thought” theory, or Lycan’s “higher order perception” theory. [IEP] more generally expresses the position of those David Chalmers (2004) classifies as “reductive representationalists” about consciousness.

My main point is this. Contrary to what Gertler suggests, my “in virtue of” claim, [IVO], does not entail that phenomenal features explain intentional features in some manner incompatible with acceptance of [IEP]—the notion that these phenomenal features can be explained in representational terms. Therefore, no such entailment obliges me to defend [IVO] against representationalist theories of phenomenal character.

Why does Gertler think otherwise? I suspect that something like this train of thought lies behind her criticism. When I say we are assessable for accuracy *in virtue of* having certain phenomenal features, one may take this to mean that our having phenomenal features *explains* our being assessable for accuracy. Then one may take that as entailing [PEI]—phenomenal features explain intentional ones. And then (because of the “asymmetry” of explanation) it is natural to see this as excluding [IEP]—intentional features explain phenomenal ones. However, I think this train of thought depends on conflating different sorts of explanation. My “in virtue of” talk commits me to saying that phenomenal features explain intentional ones in at most a very limited way, which cannot be used to rule out representationalist explanations of phenomenal character, and exclude any [IEP] thesis.

To clarify this point, let’s see in what sense, if any, I am committed to saying that having visual phenomenal features explains one’s assessability for accuracy. Consider what “assessability” comes to in this context. To be assessable for accuracy, it would suffice for you to be such that, if there is nothing X-shaped in a certain place, then the way it now looks to you is inaccurate. Now, on my view it would be correct to say that your possession of a certain phenomenal feature makes you such that this is true of you. Maybe we could say that, to that extent, your having that feature explains why you are assessable for accuracy. We might, in a similar vein, say that your believing you drove your car to work today explains why you are somehow assessable for truth. For if you believe that you drove your car to work today, then you are such that, provided you actually did drive it to work today, it follows that what you believe is true. And if you are such that this is so, you are assessable for truth.

So far it is hardly clear I am committed to the idea that the phenomenal explains the intentional. The fact that it visually seems to me as if p may “explain” the fact that I am such that, if p is the case, then the way it visually seems to me is, at least partly, correct. And yet: is that to say its visually seeming this way to me explains my possession of some intentional feature? Which one? It certainly doesn’t explain its visually seeming to me as if p. But maybe we can squeeze some relevant explanatory claim out of this “in virtue of” talk, if we think of “intentional features” not as features like believing and

visual seeming, but rather as the features such states have of possessing this or that “representational content.” Then we could say something like: “The fact that you *believe* that dogs are mammals explains why you have a state with the representational content: dogs are mammals. And likewise its *visually seeming* to you as if p explains why you are in a state with the representational content: p.”

Well, maybe. I myself do not employ the jargon of “representational content” when stating my own views about intentionality, though it would be too great a digression to explain now my qualms about understanding intentionality generally in terms of representational content. So I will leave that aside. Nor do I wish to get into the question of whether the decidedly meagre explanations of representational content just suggested are genuine explanations at all. For present purposes, it suffices to say that these sorts of explanations of representational content would still leave quite unsettled the issue of whether phenomenal character is somehow to be explained in terms of intentionality or mental representation, in the manner proposed by friends of [IEP].

To see this, note that while you can (perhaps) say why someone is in a state with certain representational content by pointing out that they are in a specific type of state (belief, visual appearance) with that content, this would not answer a further ‘why’ question: “Why is one in a state of that specific type, having that representational content?” (So: why does one believe that p?” Why does it visually seem to one as if p?”) Now, one way to try to answer this further question would be to cite other states, conditions, or events that *cause* one to be in a state of that type. However, another form an answer may take is an account of what believing that p *consists* in, or what it is for it to visually seem to one as if p. I think it is this last sort of an answer that those who propose to explain consciousness representationally are trying to provide. These three kinds of answers to “why” questions about mental states are not rivals. Notice that Michael Tye, for instance, could consistently say: “Yes, in a sense, I have a state that represents something being of a certain shape in a certain place because something looks to me to be that shape in that place. However, that doesn’t preclude my also accepting a causal explanation of why it looks this way to me, and on top of that offering my favourite constitutive explanation of why it looks this way to me: it looks this way to me because my visual system contains a certain detailed map-like representation of shape and position that is poised to affect my beliefs in the right way.”

To bring this back to my text, and Gertler’s criticism: my claim is that we are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having phenomenal features. However, if there is any sense in which this implies that having those features explains certain intentional features, it is this very limited one, in which having a given type of attitude explains why one is in a state with a certain representational content (the sense in which one’s believing that p explains why one is in a state with the content: p). One may reasonably doubt whether this even passes muster as explanation. In any case I am leery of using the notion of representational content to understand the intentionality of visual experience. But even putting all that aside, it should be clear that such explanations of content leave unaddressed other questions of explanation and Gertler’s general issue of explanatory priority.

### 3. But Does Intentionality Explain Phenomenality?

One might, granting all this, still argue that a full defense of my Chapter 7 “in virtue of” claim cannot entirely ignore the issue of explanatory priority. For my thesis presupposes a certain conception of phenomenal features. And that conception of the phenomenal implicitly rejects certain broad ways of trying to explain it by the intentional. So even if I am not obliged to argue quite generally that no such strategy could succeed, I do at least need to offer reasons to oppose certain ways of trying to carry it out. However, this is not an objection. For I do in fact offer arguments of the desired sort. It’s just that they are not found in Chapter 7—but in Chapters 4-6 and 8.

I need to elaborate on this, since it is important to answering Gertler’s criticism that I leave her issue of explanatory priority unresolved. It is true that I do not even purport to argue that one of these—phenomenality or intentionality—is or is not, in general, explanatorily more basic than the other. However, my book does contain considerable argument against a number of ways of trying to explain phenomenal character in representational terms. But Gertler’s criticisms might give one the impression that my book does not really speak to her “which explains which?” issue at all. And that would be a false impression.

To see how my arguments bear on representationalist explanations of phenomenal consciousness, we need to be clear about what theories of that sort require. It would not be enough for the truth of the [IEP] thesis just that (as Gertler at one point seems to suggest) some intentional features are inherently phenomenal. If it were, then I would have to endorse [IEP]. For presumably the features I say are both phenomenal and intentional are “inherently” phenomenal (they are not merely contingently phenomenal features anyway). But merely to say that *certain intentional features are inherently phenomenal* is not to commit to the view that such phenomenal features are *explained by their being intentional*. We might get to this further claim, if we add that we can say just *what* intentional features the phenomenal ones *are*, by starting with intentional features that are *not* themselves inherently phenomenal (perhaps the having of a certain sort of representational content that could belong to non-phenomenal states), and then introducing *further qualifications* to such states that would be either conceptually or metaphysically sufficient to make them experiences with a certain phenomenal character.

If we were to argue for [IEP] along these lines, we would have to recognize restrictions on what sort of “further qualifications” are in order here. For example, in our qualifications, we oughtn’t simply introduce the possession of the phenomenal features we are setting out to explain. And, among the non-phenomenal intentional features we are to use as explainers of phenomenal ones we should not include such features as: its looking to A as if something is so (in the sense in which it cannot look as if something is so to either the blind or the blindsighted). For its looking to one as if p includes, at least in part, a phenomenal feature in my sense. Thus by inserting “looking” in this sense into the conditions alleged to explain the phenomenal by the intentional, we would be introducing unexplained phenomenal features into the would-be explanans. A would-be explanation of phenomenal consciousness needs to avoid this kind of circularity. More generally, the point I wish to highlight here is that, even once we say phenomenal features are intentional features, and have left behind non-intentional qualia and the like, we still have

a long way to go to establish that phenomenal features can be explained in terms of mental representation.

Now that we have some idea of what such an explanation would involve, we are ready to see how my book goes some way to addressing Gertler's question about explanatory priority. Note the following three general variants such an explanation might take.

- (a) Consciousness is explained by identifying it with a species of sensory representation.
- (b) Consciousness is explained by identifying it with a species of higher order mental representation.
- (c) Consciousness is explained as the status belonging to those cognitive, intentional or mental representational states whose informational content is input to certain distinctive or characteristic cognitive functions or operations.

One can combine these strategies. For example, one might combine (a) and (b) by arguing that in one sense 'consciousness' relates to a specific sort of sensory representation, and in another to higher order representation. (This is Lycan's approach.) Or, one might combine (a) and (c) by saying that the special sort of sensory representations that conscious experiences are, can be made out partly in terms of how their content is available to belief formation (as in Tye's account).

I offer no master argument that would apply to any and all [IEP]-style representationalist or intentionalizing theories, nor do I claim to show that any such theory must use one or more of the three strategies just mentioned. But considering (a)-(c) does seem to allow us to cast our net pretty widely. And I believe my book does contain arguments that apply broadly to theories that take these approaches, and show that they do not succeed in giving a representationalist explanation of phenomenal consciousness. Briefly I would list these arguments as follows.

(1) The Belinda/Connie argument (Chapter 4.2-3). We can apparently conceive my character Belinda to have a sort of spontaneous, amblyopic blindsight (as described in Chapter 3.5-7). If we cannot adequately defend the claim that she is really inconceivable, or at least metaphysically impossible, then we have reason to reject both strategy (c) (as for instance, in Dennett's account) and theories combining (a) and (c) (as in Tye). For, adopting these strategies would have us believe there is nothing Belinda could lack for consciously seeing the stimuli we are asked to suppose she detects only by blindsight. Thus arguably they would, without due justification, rule Belinda's blindsight either inconceivable or metaphysically impossible. This same argument gives us reason to think phenomenal consciousness is not captured in that part of higher order representationalist accounts (like Lycan's and Rosenthal's) that talks about sensory quality and sensory representation. (See Chapter 4, pp.117-120.)

(2) We can also apparently conceive of Belinda's having a kind of reflective spontaneous blindsight (as described in Chapter 3.8-9). This (as argued in Chapter 4.4) counts against Rosenthal-style "thought" versions of the higher order

representation theory. For if we cannot defend their evident commitment to the idea that Belinda's "reflective blindsight" is either inconceivable or metaphysically impossible, then we have reason to think occurrences of higher order thought attributing potentially non-conscious visual states are not, in the relevant (more-than-merely-nomological) way, sufficient for phenomenal vision.

(3) We have, in any case, inadequate warrant for believing such higher order thoughts actually co-occur with all our own conscious visual experience (as argued in Chapter 6.3-4). This is another reason to reject the "thought" version of strategy (b).

(4) Further (as argued in Chapter 6.5) that sort of theory needs to explain why, if it is true, the absence of reflective capacity in animals and young children wouldn't show us something it is plainly inadequate to show—namely, that such animals and children are actually blindsighters. And it needs to explain why it wouldn't show this, while also recognizing non-trivial, substantial requirements on the capacity for higher order thought. If it fails this test, we have reason to reject the higher order thought variant of (b).

(5) Chapter 6.6 argues against alternative, "inner sense" variants of (b)—like Lycan's: we lack warrant for attributing to ourselves an inwardly directed, distinctively sense-like form of representation. It is not even clear what it would mean to have this. So we have reason to reject higher order perception (b) style theories.

(6) In Chapter 8.3-5, I point to subjectively discernable changes in the character of conceptual thought and linguistic understanding that—while evidently not distinctively sensory in nature—are also no less essentially tied to phenomenal consciousness than are paradigmatically phenomenal differences in sensory experience. This furnishes reason to think that (strategy (a)) theories attempting to account for phenomenal character as a specifically sensory sort of representation are fatally flawed.

These six lines of argument, taken together, and elaborated as in my other replies in this symposium (especially, in those to Carruthers, Ludwig, and Lycan), seem to me to present strong reason to doubt the feasibility of explaining phenomenality as a special case of intentionality or mental representation. For it is hard to see how reductive representationalism is supposed to get much of a foothold, without employing strategies (a)-(c). But again, this in no way detracts from the case for [IVO], and involves no appeal to "raw feels," "pure sensations," and their ilk. Phenomenal character may be thoroughly intentional—and yet the intentional has no claim to explanatory priority.

#### 4. Conclusion.

One way to sum up Gertler's criticism would be to say that she thinks my account incurs, but fail to satisfy, obligations to resolve the question "Which explains which—phenomenality or intentionality?" The main thrust of my response is that she has mislocated the theoretical obligations I do incur, and neglected the extent to which, and the manner in which, I have fulfilled them.

That I should have encountered such difficulty in getting my message across to a sympathetic and thoughtful critic such as Gertler, I take to indicate, in part, the size of the challenge I face, once I depart from certain ways of conceptualizing the mind habitual in contemporary philosophy, which contrast phenomenality or "feel" with intentionality or "mental representation." However in my view, we must question these habits, and we must be very wary of taking such global contrasts as our point of departure. For that may obscure from us the possibility—which I argue is actual—that the phenomenal is intentional from the start, but in a way that bolsters no representationalist explanation of phenomenal consciousness.

Though in accepting my picture, one rejects theories according to which the intentional is explanatorily prior to the phenomenal, it is not clear one thereby awards this "priority" status to phenomenal consciousness instead. For I am not saying that the phenomenal explains the intentional. Rather, I am saying that it *is* intentional without being explained *by* its being so. So my view is just this: while our forms of phenomenal consciousness cannot—in any way with which I am familiar—be built up from non-phenomenal intentionality, they themselves are forms of intentionality—both sensory and intellectual—sufficient for a rich, human mental life, and they have a deep intrinsic value lacking in any would-be non-phenomenal substitute. I claim that phenomenal consciousness is explanatorily basic only in whatever sense would follow from this.

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