

Access to Phenomenality: a Necessary Condition of Phenomenality?

Commentary on Ned Block's target article "Consciousness, accessibility, and the mesh between psychology and neuroscience", published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 30 (4), 2007.

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ABSTRACT: Block argues that relevant data in psychology and neuroscience shows that access consciousness is not constitutively necessary for phenomenality. However, a phenomenal state can be access conscious in two radically different ways. Its *content* can be access conscious, or its *phenomenality* can be access conscious. I'll argue that while Block's thesis is right when it is formulated in terms of the first notion of access consciousness, there is an alternative hypothesis about the relationship between phenomenality and access in term of the second notion that is not touched by Block's argument.

Ned Block in a series of papers (Block, 1990, 1995, 2002) has made a *conceptual* distinction between the *phenomenality* of a mental state (aka its *phenomenal character* or the *qualia* it instantiates) and *access consciousness* of the same state. There is a view – Block calls it “epistemic correlationism” – according to which the *metaphysical* relationship between these two is not scientifically tractable. While cognitive accessibility is intrinsic to our *knowledge* of phenomenology, it might or might not be *constitutive* of the phenomenal facts themselves. According to the epistemic correlationist, there is no possible empirical evidence that could tell us one way or another. This view is Block's main target. The thesis of his paper is that the issue of the relationship between phenomenal and access consciousness is an empirical issue, and, moreover, it is approachable by the same empirical methods we employ in science in general. Block's aim is to show that by looking at the relevant data, and employing the method of inference to the best explanation, we can already mount an argument for the specific thesis that access consciousness is not constitutively necessary for phenomenality. If this is so, he has given reasons to reject “metaphysical correlationism” as well, i.e., the view that the cognitive access relations that underlie reportability are *constitutive* of phenomenology.

Block's thesis, however, needs further clarification. A phenomenal state can be access conscious in two radically different ways. Its *content* (or part of its content) can be access conscious, or its *phenomenal character* can be access conscious. Say, I am having a visual experience of a red circle in an orange background. In this case, both the content and the phenomenal character of this experience can be access conscious. I can be aware that I am seeing a red circle in an orange background, and I can also be aware that my experience has such and such a phenomenal character. However, in the experiments that Block discusses in his article, the two kinds of access come apart. As a result, while Block's thesis holds if understood as involving the first notion of access, an alternative thesis involving the second sense of access can be formulated that is untouched by Block's arguments. Let me first explain Block's thesis and his defense of it, and then sketch an alternative hypothesis about the relationship between phenomenality and access that survives Block's argument.

Consider the following kind of experiment which provides crucial support for Block's thesis. Following Sperling's (1960) famous experiments, Landman and his colleagues (2003), showed subjects 8 rectangles in different orientations for half a second. The resulting experience *e* has a – presumably non-conceptual (pictorial or iconic) – representational content *r*, and, according to the introspective reports of subjects, a phenomenal character *p*.¹ Given the model of access consciousness assumed in Block's paper as broadcasting of *conceptual* representations in a *global workspace* (Baars (1988, 1997), Block takes *e* to be access conscious iff conceptual representations of *e*'s content are present in the global workspace. In other words, *e* is access conscious iff there are conceptual representations in the global workspace that extract the content of *e* (e.g., "There were rectangles of the following orientations...").

That typically we are not access conscious in this sense of *all* aspects of a phenomenal experience's content is convincingly shown by the Landman et. al. (2003) experiments. After the brief exposure, subjects are only able to report on the precise orientation of up to four of these rectangles. This experiments show, to my mind conclusively, that access consciousness of this sort – i.e., the existence of conceptual representations in global

workspace that extract all the relevant content of e – is not constitutively necessary for the phenomenality of the experience. This finding is further supported by the neurophysiological data Block cites which shows the neural implementation of sensory representations and the neural implementation of global access to be physically separate and independent from each other.

However, these experiments – which comprise the bulk of Block’s supporting evidence – don’t show that *no* access is constitutively necessary for phenomenality. Notice that the above interpretation of the Sperling (1960) and Landman et. al. (2003) experiments crucially relies on the subjects’ introspective report of the phenomenality of their *entire visual experience*, including those aspects of the experience whose content is not access conscious. (Dehaene and Naccache (2001) question the accuracy of these reports but I find that move implausible.) Introspective access to the phenomenality of the entire experience was part of the evidence in the Sperling and Landman experiments for why access to the *conceptualized content* of the experience is not necessary for phenomenality. But this data leaves the room open for the hypothesis that access to the *phenomenality* of the experience *is* constitutively necessary for that phenomenality. How exactly should we think about access to the phenomenality of the experience if it is not access to its conceptualized content?

Notice that the representations in the global workspace that are not constitutively necessary for phenomenality are *separate from* the representations whose phenomenality is in question. Phenomenal experience quite plausibly involves non-conceptual representation; representations that enter the global workspace, on the other hand, are conceptual representations. There are different representations involved. What about access to the *phenomenality* of the experience itself? It seems plausible that the relationship between phenomenality and the representation of it that is in the global workspace is more intimate. Here is an idea. Perhaps phenomenality requires that a *conceptual* representation of the *phenomenal character* of the experience itself is in the global workspace. Plausibly, this would not be any old conceptual representation of the phenomenality of the experience, but a phenomenal representation involving phenomenal

concepts. On a plausible account of phenomenal concepts, the *constitutional account* (see e.g., Papineau, 2002), phenomenal concepts – in their canonical, first person, present tense applications relevant to these experiments – are partly constituted by the *experience* they refer to. That is, the first person present tense judgment that *e* has phenomenal character *p* is partly constituted by *e* itself. The thesis then would be that phenomenality is only possible if the relevant phenomenal judgment is in the global workspace. Notice that here the experience whose phenomenality is at issue and the state in global workspace that constitutes access to it are not separate and independent. The conceptual representation in the global workspace involves *e* itself and this adds to the plausibility of the idea that this kind of access is intrinsic to phenomenality.

Unlike the thesis Block is criticizing – let’s call it the Access_c Thesis –, this thesis – let’s call it the Access_p Thesis – seems to be a viable hypothesis. None of the data discussed by Block rule it out, or even make it implausible. But if the Access_p Thesis is true, then some interesting consequences follow, e.g., that, despite suggestions to the contrary by Block, activations in the “fusiform face area” of “visuo-spatial extinction” patients could not be phenomenal.

The issue of epistemic correlationism can be raised all over again with respect to the Access_p Thesis. Is it the case that in time we might find empirical evidence that supports or refutes the thesis, or is it the case, as the epistemic correlationist claims, that we are not epistemically situated to ever find out? One might argue that no empirical evidence could be decisive. Take a representation that is not access_p conscious, e.g., a representation *r* involved in early visual processing. In the absence of direct introspective evidence (involving access_p consciousness) for the phenomenality of *r*, for any explanation that appeals to the phenomenality of *r*, one can construct another explanation that appeals to the mere *proto-phenomenality* of *r*, where *r* is proto-phenomenal just in case *were* *r* access_p conscious, it would be phenomenal. It is hard to see how appeal to phenomenality can be explanatorily superior to appeal to proto-phenomenality. Considerations of simplicity or informativeness will not cut one way or another. Epistemic correlationism

with respect to access_p consciousness then seems to be a viable position despite all the psychological and neurophysiological data amassed about conscious experience.

Footnotes:

1. I want to sidestep the issue of representationalism about qualia here. All I assume is that *e* has *r* and *p*; I won't discuss the relationship between *r* and *p*. [Back to text](#).

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