

Do We Think Outside The Stream Of Consciousness?

(Long abstract: 992 words)

Call the thesis that there is a specific cognitive phenomenal character for thought, different from sensory and emotional phenomenology, the ‘cognitive phenomenology thesis’. Recently, there has been a line of resistance against the idea of cognitive phenomenology based on the idea that thought is not the right kind of element or aspect of the mind for having phenomenal character. Matthew Soteriou (2007) and Michael Tye and Briggs Wright (2011), relying on some observations of Peter Geach (1969), argue for the conclusion that thought *does not* and *cannot enter the stream of consciousness*, contrary to sensory mental episodes, and thus there is no such thing as cognitive phenomenology. Tye and Wright (2011) present it in the following way:

- (i) Anything that figures in the stream of consciousness must have a temporal character, must ‘unfold over time’ -it must be an event or process rather than a state.
- (ii) Thoughts are states, and as such they do not unfold over time. The thought arrives ‘all at once’, it is not grasped by phases (first the noun, then the verb, and so on) or as a process.
- (iii) It is only accompanying aspects of thoughts -images, sub-vocalizations, etc- which unfold over time.

(Conclusion) Thoughts do not and cannot enter the stream of consciousness.

The argument does refer to the ‘stream of consciousness’, that is, to the continuous going on of conscious experiences and assimilates the question of whether something enters the stream or not with the very possibility of this element enjoying phenomenal character. The conclusion of the argument plays a hidden assumption in many contemporary views about phenomenal consciousness, taking somehow for granted words like ‘thought’ and ‘stream of consciousness’. This is one motivation to carry out a detailed examination of it.

I briefly reconstruct William James’ (1890) view and description of the stream of consciousness together with the criticisms Peter Geach (1969) made to the

stream of thought, on which both Soteriou and Tye and Wright rely. James' main reasons for the continuity of consciousness is their belonging to a self and the presence of transitions linking "substantive" parts (percepts, concepts, etc.). I set aside the first question and regard the second issue as relevant for the section *Reply 2*, as we will see. Geach's main reasons against the stream of thought are, first, that there is no *gradual transition* from one act of thinking a thought to another and second, that there is no *succession* within any act of thinking a thought. The analysis of this discussion helps me reconstructing the argument and putting forward its assumptions, as well as provides me with the tools to argue against it, in different ways.

Firstly, it is not clear that *events* and *processes* are the only candidates which can enter the stream by way of its 'unfolding over time' (against premise (i)). In the section *Reply 1* I argue that we can make sense of the idea of a mental episode having phenomenal character and yet being not processual, both for the perceptual and for the cognitive domain. A sudden quick sound in the auditory field environment is arguably something given 'all at once' and it is usually considered as enjoying phenomenal character. In the domain of cognition, I consider the case of the understanding experience as a non-processual mental episode – with Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953; § 154) and Galen Strawson (2010) – although I discuss both Wittgenstein's and Strawson's basis for this claim. The non-processual character does not preclude understanding from having phenomenal character. I offer independent reasons to think that this phenomenal character belongs to the cognitive episode and not to the accompaniments of thought.

Second, I highlight an important assumption Geach (and thus Tye and Wright) is making about thinking: states of thought are individuated by its *propositional content*. This makes the argument *partially* valid, that is, valid just for the propositional content of thought, but not for the *experience of this content*, as I will argue. At this point, they either accept this restriction and therefore restrict the application of the argument to propositional content as such or, if they want to go with its general character, then I claim it is false because we do have candidates of thinking which can be processual or unfold over time *in themselves* (against premise (ii)). I present these cases in the section *Reply 2*: mental episodes of *voluntary deliberation* and *trains of thought* provide examples. I defend the claim that their explanation requires us to posit *transitions* between mental states, thus providing cases of processual thought.

I finally address the key point of the whole discussion, the principle of individuation of thought. The individuation of the thought state in terms of propositional content shows James and Geach main difference: it is not that they talk about different things, but that they operate with different individuation principles for the same phenomenon. I think there is something true in both positions, but as *aspects* of the experience and not as *all there is to say* about them, respectively. What is lacking in the presented argument is the propositional content *as it is experienced in the very experience of thinking it*: even if propositional content *per se* is out of the stream and its description does not need to point to phenomenal character, what we need to face is the consciously entertaining

of a certain content. What would it be for an experience of thinking not to enter the stream? It would mean, I believe, that the experiencing part of the episode does not count *at all* for individuating the kind of mental episode we are talking about. Contrary to this, I hope to have made the case for recognizing the *experienced propositional content* and the propositional content as two different kinds of content or two different aspects of the whole content of thinking experiences. I finally suggest a way of cashing out this idea.

References

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