

Intellectual Gestalts

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Abstract: Phenomenal holism is the thesis that some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences that are parts of certain wholes. The first aim of this paper is to defend phenomenal holism. I argue, moreover, that there are complex *intellectual* experiences (intellectual gestalts)—such as experiences of grasping a proof—whose parts instantiate holistic phenomenal characters. Proponents of cognitive phenomenology believe that some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences that are not purely sensory. The second aim of this paper is to defend cognitive phenomenology. I argue that reflection on intellectual gestalts provides a basis for developing a case for cognitive phenomenology that is immune to many of the worries that beset more familiar arguments for cognitive phenomenology.

By a phenomenal character I mean a property that types experiences by what they are like for their subjects. Two experiences have the same phenomenal character just in case what it is like for a subject to have one is the same as what it is like for a subject to have the other.

There are three different theses about phenomenal characters that will figure in this paper. Here are first pass articulations of them:

Phenomenal Intentionality: (PI) Some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences with certain intentional contents.

Cognitive Phenomenology: (CP) Some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences that are not purely sensory.

Phenomenal Holism: (PH) Some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences that are parts of certain wholes.

Though all three theses will figure in this paper, they will play different roles. (PI) will be an *assumption*. I will take it for granted that one way to discuss the phenomenal character of an experience is to discuss its intentional content—taking it as understood that this is intentional content fixed by phenomenal character. To this extent this paper is a work within what Horgan and Kriegel call the Phenomenal Intentionality Research Program.¹ (PH) will be my *focus*. I will defend phenomenal holism by considering some examples that motivate it and responding to various worries one might have about it. (CP) will be a *beneficiary*. After discussing (PH), I will show how to use it to defend (CP).

The plan of the paper is this. In Section 1, I will consider some of the historical background to (PH) and in particular connect it to one strand—the phenomenological strand, not the psychological strand—in the gestalt theoretical tradition. In Section 2, I will argue that certain kinds of sensory experiences—sensory gestalts—are phenomenally holistic, and so motivate (PH), and I will defend (PH) against some objections to it. In Section 3, I will argue that there are intellectual experiences—intellectual gestalts—that are also phenomenally holistic. And in Section 4, I will explain why I think my defense of (PH), and in particular my extension of it to intellectual experiences, provides resources for defending (CP).

1. Gestalt Psychology and Gestalt Phenomenology

¹ (Horgan and Kriegel ms).

The main motivation for endorsing phenomenal holism derives from reflection on gestalt experiences—both sensory and intellectual. This raises the question: what is the relationship between phenomenal holism and gestalt theory? The question, however, is ambiguous. There are at least two sorts of gestalt theory. One is psychological, the other is phenomenological. Gestalt psychology and phenomenal holism are logically independent. Gestalt phenomenology presupposes phenomenal holism.

Gestalt psychology is a theory about psychological explanation. Here is Wertheimer's famous summary:

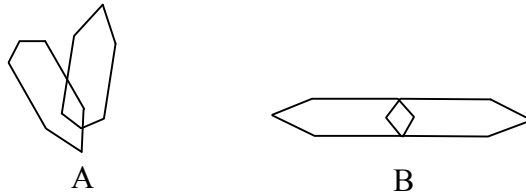
The fundamental “formula” of Gestalt theory might be expressed this way: There are wholes, the behavior of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole.²

Wertheimer makes two claims. The first is negative: there are mental states or events (wholes) certain properties of which are not explained by their composition out of certain other mental states or events (parts) that have certain properties. The second is positive: there are mental states or events (parts) certain properties of which are explained by the role they play in composing other mental states or events (wholes) that have certain properties. These claims could use further elaboration: the negative claim is trivial if there are mental states or events that lack parts; the positive claim is trivial if among the “certain properties” of parts is the property of being a part of a whole. The Gestalt psychologists did not bother about formulating principles immune to such worries. Their main agenda was to develop psychological explanations. And Wertheimer's aim in the quoted passage was to highlight a certain feature of the kinds of explanations they pursued: the explanations are what we might call *downward*

² (Wertheimer 1924).

psychological explanations—they explain the properties of parts by the properties of the wholes those parts compose.

To fix ideas, here is an example.³ Look at figures A and B:



Here are two facts about the visual experiences subjects typically have in looking at these figures:

- (1) In A, the diamond looks like an area where two hexagons overlap—not like a figure inscribed in an 11-sided polygon.
- (2) In B, the diamond looks like a figure inscribed in a single hexagon—not like an area where two hexagons overlap.

On reflection and further examination, one might very well see the diamond in A as a figure inscribed in an 11-sided polygon, and the diamond in B as an area where two hexagons overlap. But this is not what typically happens. Why? The explanation that Wertheimer suggests invokes the Law of Prägnanz—that “psychological organization will always be as 'good' as the prevailing conditions allow,” where “the term 'good' is undefined,” but “embraces such properties as regularity, symmetry, simplicity,...”⁴ Here is a sketch of how one might appeal to this law in explaining the typical responses to figures A and B: two overlapping hexagons are simpler than one 11-sided polygon, and so by the

³ The example is based on one from (Wertheimer 1923).

⁴ The quoted formulation is from (Koffka 1935) page 110.

Law of Prägnanz that is how our visual experience organizes the stimuli in A; one hexagon is simpler than two, and so by the Law of Prägnanz that is how our visual experience organizes the stimuli in B. Set aside the question of whether this is a good explanation, and whether the Law of Prägnanz is a genuine psychological law. The point of the example is to illustrate the sort of downward psychological explanation that the Gestalt psychologists favored: a property of the whole—greater simplicity in organization—explains a property of the part—the way the diamond looks.

Gestalt phenomenology is not a theory about psychological explanation. It is a theory about psychological individuation, and in particular about the individuation of experiences. Psychologists such as Wertheimer, Koffka, and Köhler endorsed gestalt phenomenology in addition to gestalt psychology. But the philosopher Aron Gurwitsch did the most to promote gestalt phenomenology. Here is a passage in which he discusses its principal tenet:

[a] It is the functional significance of any part of a Gestalt-contexture that makes this part that which it is. The part is what it is only as a constituent of the Gestalt-contexture and as integrated into its unity. Any part of a Gestalt may then be said to be determined as to its existence by its functional significance in the sense that the part only exists in, and is defined by, its functional significance. [b] Properties and characters which qualify any constituent of a Gestalt as that which it is in a concrete case, belong to it on account of its functional significance, and of its integration into the Gestalt-contexture. Such determinations belong to the part in question only insofar, and as long, as it is thus integrated.⁵

I've split the passage into two parts, [a] and [b]. In part [a] Gurwitsch says that there are some part experiences that are metaphysically dependent on—that can only exist in—whole experiences; gestalts

⁵ (Gurwitsch 1964), page 121.

are structured whole experiences that have such metaphysically dependent parts. In part [b] Gurwitsch says that there are some “characters,” i.e. phenomenal characters, that an experience can have only insofar as it is part of a certain whole.

Parts [a] and [b] fit together if we make the assumption that experiences have their phenomenal characters essentially. This is a plausible assumption, and Gurwitsch does seem to embrace it. On the other hand, he—and other proponents of gestalt phenomenology—do sometimes speak as if there are part experiences that feel one way in one whole experience and would have felt another way in another whole experience. Return, for example, to the visual experiences we typically have in looking at figures A and B—call them experience A and experience B. Suppose experience A actually occurs and experience B might have occurred, and focus on the diamond-presenting part of experience A. Consider three different claims about this part:

- (1) It could have been part of B
- (2) If it were part of B, it would have had a different phenomenal character
- (3) It has its phenomenal character essentially

These three claims are mutually inconsistent. I will assume that (3) is non-negotiable. (2) is plausible: were the diamond-presenting part a part of experience B it would have represented the diamond as an inscribed figure, not a region of overlap. So the claim that should be given up is (1). It is not the case that there is a partial experience that while actually a part of experience A, could have been a part of experience B. The most we should say is: had experience B occurred, it would have had a diamond-presenting part, and this part would have been phenomenally similar—phenomenally similar in phenomenally non-holistic ways—to the diamond-presenting part of experience A.

Both gestalt psychologists and gestalt phenomenologists think that there are special kinds of

experiences—gestalt experiences. According to gestalt psychologists gestalt experiences are special because they are structured wholes the facts about which explain the facts about their parts. According to gestalt phenomenologists gestalt experiences are special because they have parts that are phenomenally and so metaphysically dependent on them. The two views are logically independent: a gestalt psychologist might think that gestalts bear explanatory, not individuating, relations to their parts; and a gestalt phenomenologist might think that gestalts bear individuating, but not explanatory, relations to their parts. For the same reason, gestalt psychology is logically independent of phenomenal holism. Finally, it should be clear from the foregoing that gestalt phenomenology presupposes phenomenal holism: gestalt phenomenology entails phenomenal holism, and, further, it is phenomenal holism and essentialism about phenomenal character that provide the best account of why gestalt phenomenology should be accepted.

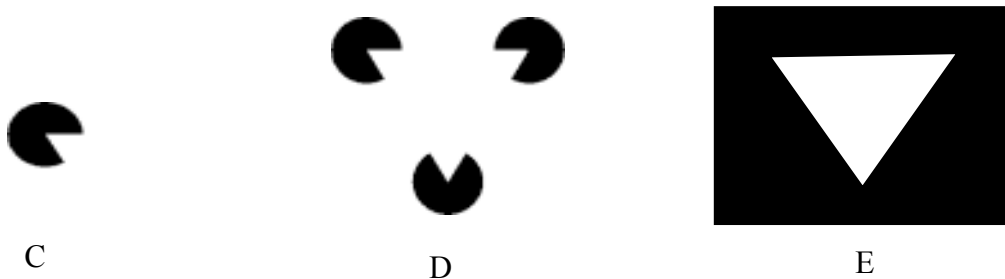
2. Sensory Gestalts

Gestalt experiences are structured whole experiences whose parts seem to have their phenomenal characters—and perhaps other of their psychological properties—because of the role they play in composing the whole. One might agree that there are gestalt experiences, but reject phenomenal holism, gestalt psychology, and gestalt phenomenology: one might not take what seems to be the case about gestalt experiences at face value, or one might develop an alternative theoretical account of it. In this section I will examine sensory gestalt experiences, argue that they motivate phenomenal holism about the phenomenal characters of their parts, and defend phenomenal holism against a range of objections.

Experiences A and B discussed in the previous section are examples of sensory gestalts. The diamond-presenting part of experience A represents the diamond as a region of overlap. The diamond-

presenting part of experience B represents the diamond as an inscribed figure. These representational differences are—I will assume, hereby invoking (PI)—phenomenal differences.⁶ Further, the diamond-presenting parts of the visual experiences seem to have their phenomenal characters because of the role they play in composing the respective whole visual experiences. So much is fairly neutral ground. Phenomenal holists think that the diamond-presenting parts of the two visual experiences have phenomenal characters that partial visual experiences can have only insofar as they play respectively similar roles in composing respectively similar whole visual experiences. What reason is there for making this additional claim? The main reason is that it is impossible to *imagine* a visual experience having the phenomenal character of the diamond-presenting part of experience A, or the diamond-presenting part of experience B, without also being part of a whole visual experience that is largely similar to experience A, or a whole visual experience that is largely similar to experience B. I think we should take the impossibility of imagining such partial visual experiences as evidence that there can be no such partial visual experiences. And this is precisely the phenomenal holist's point.

Consider some other examples. Compare the following figures:



Compare the way the pie in figure C looks with the way the upper left pie in figure D looks. In figure C the pie looks like a pie with a wedge cut out. In figure D the pie looks like a pie that is partially

⁶ (PI) must be true if these representational differences are phenomenal differences, though (PI) might be true even if these representational differences are not phenomenal differences.

occluded by a triangle. Now compare the triangle in figure D with the triangle in figure E. The triangle in figure D looks like it hovers above three pies. The triangle in figure E looks like it is cut out of a black patch. The differences I have pointed out are phenomenal differences. Further, they seem to derive from the role the respective partial experiences play in composing the whole experiences to which they belong. Let us just focus on figure D. According to phenomenal holists, the upper-left-pie-presenting part of our visual experience of figure D has a phenomenal character that only partial visual experiences that play similar roles in similar whole visual experiences can have—and the same goes for the triangle-presenting part of our visual experience. The main reason for endorsing the phenomenal holist view, again, is the impossibility of imagining visual experiences having the same phenomenal characters by themselves or as parts of very different whole visual experiences.

This is the intuitive case for phenomenal holism. Now I will try to strengthen the case for phenomenal holism by responding to a few objections to it.⁷

Barry Dainton distinguishes between the following two theses:

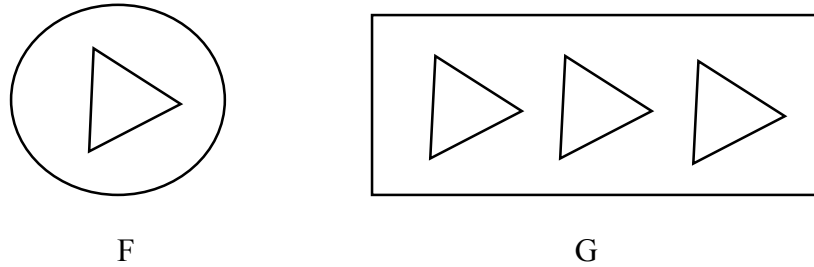
Strong Impingement: (SI) Phenomenal wholes have certain parts that possess intrinsic phenomenal features that reflect the character of that whole, and parts with the same character could not possibly occur except in a whole of the same or similar type.

Weak Impingement: (WI) The character of the constituent parts of a phenomenal whole are partly dependent on their being such, but items with just the same intrinsic phenomenal characters as these parts could exist in wholes of a different type, or as perceived wholes in their

⁷ The objections I will consider come from Barry Dainton (Dainton 2000) and Timothy Bayne (Bayne 2001). Neither Dainton nor Bayne rejects phenomenal holism. Both, however, argue that holistic phenomenal characters are very rare, and that most putative examples of holistic phenomenal characters turn out, on further consideration, not to be holistic. The balance of this section is dedicated to examining some of the considerations Dainton and Bayne discuss, and arguing that in general they fail to show that putative examples of holistic phenomenal character are not really holistic.

own right.⁸

(SI) is more or less equivalent to (PH); (WI) is incompatible with (PH). Dainton argues that many putative illustrations of (SI), and so (PH), are at most illustrations of (WI). One example he considers is the following:



The triangle in F might appear to point in any of three directions. The left-most triangle in G also might appear to point in any of three directions, but there is a tendency for it to appear to point along the axis of symmetry of the whole of figure G. Consider two experiences: an F-experience representing the triangle in F as pointing rightward, and a G-experience representing the left-most triangle in G as pointing along the axis of symmetry of the whole of figure G—that is, rightward. It is natural to say of this G-experience that the axis of symmetry determined by the whole of figure G contributes to making the left-most triangle in G appear to point rightward. Dainton argues, however, that this is an example of at most weak impingement: the F-experience represents the triangle in F just as the G-experience represents the left-most triangle in G, and it does so even though the whole F-experience is quite different from the whole G-experience.

Dainton's observation fails to show that our G-experience of the left-most triangle in figure G is an example of weak rather than strong impingement. Focus on the triangle-presenting part of our F-experience and the left-most triangle-presenting part of our G-experience. Suppose—conceding

⁸ (Dainton 2000). Both (SI) and (WI) are presented on page 199.

Dainton's observation—that these partial experiences have the same propositional content, roughly that there is an equilateral triangle pointing rightward. Our partial F-experience and our partial G-experience might, nonetheless, possess different *phenomenal characters*. How? One way is for there to be differing non-intentional aspects of their phenomenal characters. But set this possibility aside. Another way is for the *modes of presentation* under which each partial experience presents the proposition that there is an equilateral triangle pointing rightward to be different. Take the property of pointing rightward. Both our partial F-experience and our partial G-experience represent the property of pointing rightward. But they might do so under different modes of presentation. One way this might happen is for the two experiences to use different frames of reference. The partial F-experience might represent the property of pointing rightward as the property of pointing 3 o'clock on the circle, and the partial G-experience might represent the property of pointing rightward as the property of pointing along the axis of symmetry of the whole of figure G.⁹ Because of these possibilities, it follows that Dainton's premise—that our partial F-experience and partial G-experience has the same propositional content—does not adequately support thinking that our partial F-experience and partial G-experience have the same phenomenal character, and so does not adequately support his conclusion—that our G-experience is an example of weak impingement, rather than strong impingement.

Similar considerations apply to attempts to extend Dainton's argument to cover other cases, such as our experiences of figures A through E. Bayne, for example, argues that our experience of figure E is at most an example of weak impingement.¹⁰ He writes:

9 Clearly 3 o'clock is no more distinguished than 7 o'clock or 11 o'clock. Plausibly, that is part of the reason why the F-experience representing the triangle as pointing 3 o'clock is no more likely to occur than alternative F-experiences representing the triangle as pointing 7 o'clock or 11 o'clock. The axis of symmetry of G is, however, a distinguished feature of figure G. Plausibly, that is part of the reason why the G-experience representing the left-most triangle as pointing along the axis of symmetry of G is more likely to occur than alternative G-experiences representing the left-most triangle as pointing in its other possible directions. For an illuminating discussion of these matters from a psychological perspective see (Palmer 1990).

10 (Bayne 2001).

Cut around 'the white triangle' that you see on this page and superimpose it on almost any solid background: aren't you now having a type-identical white triangle experience in a markedly different phenomenal context?

I've done what Bayne suggests in presenting figure E. And he is correct: we have a type-identical white triangle experience in a markedly different phenomenal context. The relevant type under which the two experiences are identical is this: they both represent white triangles. Even so, the white triangle experiences might be, and plausibly are, phenomenally different. First, Bayne—like Dainton—has not ruled out the possibility that even though both white triangle experiences represent some of the same properties, such as whiteness and triangularity, they do so under different modes of presentation. Second, Bayne's argument suffers from an additional flaw: the white triangle experiences do not have the same propositional content, since the white triangle in our experience of figure D hovers and the white triangle in our experience of figure E does not.

There is a second sort of challenge that Dainton presses against certain putative examples of strong impingement, and so phenomenal holism.¹¹ Consider the following instructions:

Focus on the diamond-presenting part of your experience of figure A. Take its phenomenal character. Now try to imagine that phenomenal character instantiated by experiences that occur in isolation or as parts of significantly different whole experiences.

I claim that when you try to do this, you fail. And I claim, further, that this gives you a reason to think the phenomenal character of the diamond-presenting part of your experience of figure A is holistic.

Applied to this bit of argumentation, Dainton's second sort of challenge can be framed like this:

¹¹ In (Dainton 2001), page 202.

The phenomenal character that you wind up isolating is the phenomenal character of your whole experience. What you find impossible to imagine is the phenomenal character of your whole experience of figure A instantiated by significantly different whole experiences that also happen to have a diamond-presenting part. But if this is what you cannot imagine, your failure to do so does nothing to suggest phenomenal holism: rather it suggests that the phenomenal characters of two whole experiences can only be the same if they share phenomenally identical or similar parts.

Where, however, do we fail to follow the instructions, according to Dainton? We might fail to focus on the diamond-presenting part of our experience of figure A, and focus on our whole experience of figure A instead. But it is not clear why we should fail in this way. Dainton has provided no reasons to be skeptical about our ability to focus on partial experiences rather than whole experiences. And doing so in this case seems fairly simple: we can pick out the relevant part of our experience by the description “the part of our experience that presents a diamond shape.” Suppose, then, that we succeed here, that is, we get the part, rather than the whole in mind as our object of attention. Then where we might fail is in passing from this to the part's phenomenal character rather than whole's phenomenal character. That is, while having the partial experience in mind and trying to isolate its phenomenal character, we might fail to do so and, rather, isolate the phenomenal character of the whole experience instead. Again, it is not clear why we should fail. We can just add to our description and form the description “the phenomenal character of the part of our experience that presents a diamond shape.” What these considerations show is that it is a simple matter to isolate in *thought* both partial experiences and their phenomenal characters. What might not be such a simple matter, however, is to isolate partial experiences and their phenomenal characters in *imagination*. But what could isolating partial

experiences and their phenomenal characters in imagination be other than imagining partial experiences and their phenomenal characters in isolation? If this is what we cannot do, according to Dainton, then he is simply *granting* the major premise in the argument for phenomenal holism.

3. Intellectual Gestalts

In this section I want to present some examples that suggest that there are intellectual experiences whose parts instantiate holistic phenomenal characters. I should first say something about intellectual experiences.

I do not know how to define what an intellectual as opposed to a sensory experience is. Here are some examples: intuiting that circles are symmetrical about their diameters, grasping a proof of the Pythagorean theorem, deciding to bike rather than walk to work, understanding what some passage is about. Let me illustrate the last with an example that I am quite fond of. Consider the following passage:

A newspaper is better than a magazine. A seashore is a better place than the street. At first it is better to run than to walk. You may have to try several times. It takes some skill but it is easy to learn. Even young children can enjoy it. Once successful, complications are minimal. Birds seldom get too close. Rain, however, soaks in very fast. Too many people doing the same thing can also cause problems. One needs lots of room. If there are no complications it can be very peaceful. A rock will serve as an anchor. If things break loose from it, however, you will not get a second chance.¹²

¹² This is taken from (Burton 2009), page 5.

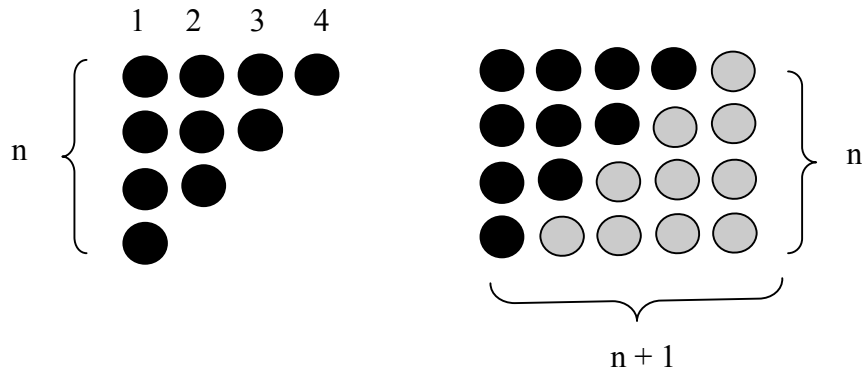
The typical response is to find this passage incomprehensible. Now let me give you the key word: kite. Re-read the passage. Now when you read it, you should have a felt sense of understanding what it is about. This new experience which was missing at first and which is now present is the experience of understanding what some passage is about.

The claim that there are intellectual experiences should be distinguished from (CP), the cognitive phenomenological thesis that some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences that are not purely sensory. I take the claim that there are intellectual experiences to be uncontroversial. There just is this experience of understanding what the kite passage is about, and it is—in a perfectly ordinary, even if so far undefined—sense non-sensory. What is controversial is that this experience of understanding possesses a phenomenal character that no purely sensory experience can possess. One might agree that the experience of understanding what the passage is about is intellectual, but think that it is possible to have a sensory experience with the same phenomenal character. One might argue that all you have to do is have a sensory experience as of hearing the words of the passage in your mind's ear and also seeing various kites in your mind's eye. The idea is that this experience is a sensory experience with the same phenomenal character as the intellectual experience of understanding what the passage is about. Whatever differences between the two experiences there are must be non-phenomenal: perhaps when you read the passage with understanding you form certain beliefs, which you do not form when you only have the sensory experience.¹³ This is not a view that I endorse, but it is a view that someone who rejected (CP) might endorse.

What I want to focus on now are experiences of grasping a proof. Consider the following proof that the sum of the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$.

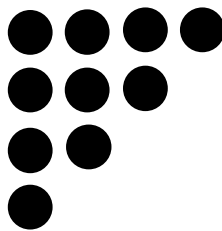
¹³ The beliefs themselves must—on this view—be non-phenomenal states.

Proof: The first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots, as in the first diagram:



Two of these triangular arrays can be fit together to form a rectangular array containing $n * (n + 1)$ dots, as in the second diagram. Each triangular array is half of the rectangular array. So, the sum of the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$.

When you consider this proof you have an intellectual experience with a certain phenomenal character. Part of this intellectual experience is a certain visual experience—a visual experience that is similar to the visual experience you might have of a *mere* array of dots presented below.



Though these two visual experiences—the visual experience of the mere array and the visual experience of the array as part of the proof—are similar, there are, I find, phenomenal differences between them. That is, the visual experience that I have as part of my intellectual experience of grasping the proof feels different from the visual experience that I have independently of my

intellectual experience of grasping the proof. I am not sure how best to *articulate* the differences, but here are some things I would say about how I represent the array in the proof that I wouldn't say about how I represent the mere array: it seems meaningful, open-ended, representative of something else, a portion of something larger.

The visual experience of the array that occurs as part of the intellectual experience of grasping the proof has a distinctive phenomenal character. So much should be evident to naïve introspection. I want to claim, further, that the phenomenal character that this visual experience instantiates is holistic. That is, it is a phenomenal character that a visual experience can instantiate only as part of a largely similar intellectual experience. The main reason I have for thinking this is that I cannot imagine having a visual experience that represents an array of dots in just the way that the visual experience I have as part of grasping the proof does, but that occurs in isolation—as does the visual experience of the mere array with which we started—or that occurs as part of a significantly different experience, whether sensory or intellectual. There might be a range of alternative intellectual experiences—experiences of grasping different proofs for different theorems, for example—within which a similar visual experience of a similar array of dots might occur. It is not necessary to circumscribe the class of alternative intellectual experiences. What I want to emphasize, however, is the plausibility of the claim that there is no alternative purely sensory experience within which a similar visual experience of a similar array of dots might occur. The phenomenal characteristics I tried to pick out by talking about how the array seemed meaningful, open-ended, representative of something else, and a portion of something large plausibly depend essentially on the surrounding *intellectual* context within which the visual experience of the array occurs. I do not see how a mere sensory experience can endow the visual experience of the array with these phenomenal characteristics.

The example considered is one in which the phenomenal character of a sensory experience is holistically dependent on the intellectual experience of which it is a part. There are also cases in which

the phenomenal character of an intellectual experience is holistically dependent on the larger intellectual experience of which it is part. Take, for example, the proposition that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots. You might have a thought with this propositional content in isolation. Or you might have it as part of grasping the proof that the sum of the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$. I conjecture that the two occurrences will differ in phenomenal character. This is only a conjecture because, unfortunately, I haven't ever had the thought that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots just pop into mind in isolation. But I have had other thoughts just pop into mind in isolation. I know what that is like. And I can *imagine* the thought that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots popping into mind in a similar fashion. When I do so, it seems to me that if the thought were to pop into mind in this way, the thought episode would feel differently from the thought episode that occurs when I have the thought that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots as part of grasping the proof that the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$.

Here is a worry. I claim that the thought that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots feels a certain way that depends on its occurrence as part of grasping the proof that the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$. Note, however, that the thought occurs early on in the experience of grasping the proof. So, according to my claim, an earlier experience—the thought—depends on later experiences—the parts of the whole experience of grasping the proof that occur after the thought. But how can an earlier experience depend on later experiences? A similar worry will arise about any temporally extended gestalt experience, whether it is sensory or intellectual. One of the early examples of a sensory gestalt was the experience of hearing a melody: it was often claimed that an auditory impression of an individual note feels differently depending on whether it occurs in isolation

or as part of an experience of hearing a melody.¹⁴

Call the proposition that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots P . And let us contrast three cases. Case 1: you work through the entire proof and in doing so think that P . Case 2: you work through part of the proof—you think that P , but then black out before you can finish the proof. Case 3: the thought that P just pops into your mind. Here is a puzzle.

- (1) The Case 1 thought that P is phenomenally identical to the Case 2 thought that P
- (2) The Case 2 thought that P is phenomenally identical to the Case 3 thought that P
- (3) The Case 1 thought that P is phenomenally distinct from the Case 3 thought that P

I am committed to (3) for the reasons presented above. (1) is plausible because Case 1 and Case 2 can be imagined so that you are in the same brain states in each case up to the time you black out, and it is plausible that if you are in the same brain states in two cases then you are in the same phenomenal states in those cases.¹⁵ (2) is plausible because the thought that P comes *first* when you are working through the proof, and if you make it no further, then it is plausible that you are having a thought which is like the thought you would have were you to *just* have the thought that P , say because it pops into your mind.

Something has to give. Suppose we keep (3). Then we have two options. The radical option is to give up (1). This is radical in part because it commits one to the phenomenal externalist view that phenomenal character fails to supervene on brain states. But it is even more radical than that. It is more radical because it commits one to the view that phenomenal character at a time t fails to supervene on

¹⁴ “The flesh and blood of a tone depends from the start upon its role in the melody: a b as leading to tone c is something radically different from the b as tonic.” (Wertheimer 1924).

¹⁵ Phenomenal externalists deny this. As I will point out below, however, even phenomenal externalists might be reluctant to give up (1).

all non-phenomenal states—whether they are states of the brain or states of the environment—up to and including time *t*. The more conservative option, then, is to give up (2). This is what I recommend. In order to render the denial of (2) plausible we must find some feature of Case 2 that differentiates it from Case 3. And there is an obvious one: Case 2 is a case in which you attempt to work through the proof; Case 3 is not. Why should that matter? Plausibly, it matters because when you have the thought that *P* in Case 2 you do so in the context of various other mental states, such as intentions and anticipations, connecting it to the future unfolding of your effort to grasp the proof. The Case 2 thought that *P*, then, does have its phenomenal character partly because of the role it plays in a larger intellectual experience of grasping the proof, but this larger intellectual experience bears on the thought that *P* only insofar as it is represented in mental states that are contemporaneous with the thought that *P*. This seems to me the most promising way to respond to the puzzle about temporally extended gestalt experiences.¹⁶

4. Cognitive Phenomenology

Proponents of (CP), the cognitive phenomenological thesis that some phenomenal characters can only be instantiated by experiences that are not purely sensory, have generally given two sorts of argument for their view. First, there are epistemological arguments. They tend to look like this:

You can tell by introspection, or self-awareness, or inner-sense that you are hearing, or at least seeming to hear, a fire engine's siren rather than a dog's barking. The way this works is that hearing a fire engine's siren has a distinctive feel, different from the feel of hearing a dog's

¹⁶ I have merely sketched a response to the puzzle. There are many difficult questions about time-consciousness connected with the present issue. Husserl's discussion of retentions, impressions, and protentions in the stream of consciousness seems to me to be the most promising starting point for further exploration. See (Husserl 2008).

barking. Similarly, you can tell by introspection, or self-awareness, or inner-sense that you are thinking that idle hands are the Devil's workshop, rather than that misfortunes come on wings and depart on foot, or rather than having the auditory experience of hearing someone utter, "idle hands are the Devil's workshop." Again, the way this works is that thinking that idle hands are the Devil's workshop has a distinctive feel, different from the feel of thinking that misfortunes come on wings and depart on foot, and different from the feel of hearing someone utter, "idle hands are the Devil's workshop."

The basic idea is that in order for us to have the kind of self-knowledge we have about our conscious thoughts, there must be phenomenal characters that can only be instantiated by those thoughts.¹⁷ I find this strategy for motivating (CP) attractive, but I will not discuss it further here. I want, rather, to focus on the second sort of argument—arguments by example.¹⁸ They tend to look like this:

Example (1) Consider the felt difference between (a) hearing "Dogs dogs dog dog dogs" as a mere list of words and (b) hearing it as an English sentence. Example (2) Consider the felt difference between (a) hearing "He is heading toward the bank" as entailing that he is heading toward a financial institution and (b) hearing it as entailing that he is heading toward a part of a river. All of the phenomenal characters that can be instantiated by purely sensory experiences are the same in the (a) cases and the (b) cases. But there are phenomenal differences between the (a) cases and the (b) cases. So these differences must be differences owed to the absence in the (a) cases and the presence in the (b) cases of phenomenal characters that cannot be instantiated by purely sensory experiences.

17 See (Pitt 2004) for a version of this argument.

18 See (Horgan and Tiensen 2002) and (Pitt 2004) for various arguments by example.

Philosophers hostile to (CP) have argued against the claim that all of the phenomenal characters that can be instantiated by purely sensory experiences are the same in the (a) cases and the (b) cases. One might argue, for example, that the phenomenal differences between hearing “Dogs dogs dog dog dogs” as a mere list and as an English sentence are due to differences in perceptual grouping. One might argue, further, that the phenomenal differences between hearing “He is heading toward the bank” as about a financial institution or as about a part of a river are due to differences in associated mental imagery.¹⁹

The aim of this section is to explore some ways in which our previous reflections on phenomenal holism might bolster the case for cognitive phenomenology. The gestalt experiences that motivate phenomenal holism expand the range of examples that can be used to motivate cognitive phenomenology. These new examples are, I will argue, immune to objections that opponents of cognitive phenomenology have made against the standard examples.

I will call a phenomenal character that can be instantiated by a purely sensory experience a sensory phenomenal character, and I will call a phenomenal character that cannot be instantiated by a purely sensory experience a cognitive phenomenal character. Arguments by example purport to motivate (CP) by exhibiting pairs of experiences that are the same in their sensory phenomenal character, but that differ in some phenomenal character, and so that differ in their cognitive phenomenal character. The standard pairs of experiences used to motivate (CP) are experiences of some change in linguistic understanding—from none to some, or from one kind to another. Arguments by example that appeal to felt differences in linguistic understanding invite a range of objections, deriving from the fact that changes in linguistic understanding are often associated with differences in sensory phenomenal character, such as differences in perceptual grouping of words or other elements of the representation

¹⁹ (Caurrthers and Veillet ms.) press these objections.

understood, or differences in accompanying mental imagery. It has proved difficult to find felt differences in linguistic understanding that are immune to such objections.

The phenomenal character of linguistic understanding, however, is not the only cognitive phenomenal character there is. I think that proponents of (CP) should look for other examples to support their view. What I will suggest now is that the pair of visual experiences of arrays of dots discussed above is a good example in that it is immune to the objections that beleaguer experiences of linguistic understanding. Recall: there is a visual experience of the array of dots that you have in isolation—call it (a); and there is a visual experience of the array of dots that you have as part of grasping the proof that the sum of the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$ —call it (b). I claim that the (a) experience of the array and the (b) experience of the array are the same in their sensory phenomenal character. There is a felt difference between them, however. As I reported above: the (b) experience of the array represents it as meaningful, open-ended, representative of something else, a portion of something larger. These are merely suggestive phrases. The important point is that the (b) experience of the array of dots takes on a different phenomenal character because of the role it plays in a larger intellectual achievement of grasping a proof. Further, as argued above, it is plausible that an experience of an array of dots must play such a role in order to take on that distinctive phenomenal character exhibited in the (b) experience. So what we have here is a pair of experiences apt to occur in an argument by example for cognitive phenomenology.²⁰

The objections to arguments by example that appeal to felt differences in linguistic understanding do not apply here. For one, there are no differences in the way the (a) experience and the

²⁰ It is unproblematic that the (b) experience is a sensory experience, specifically a visual experience. There are two distinctions that should be distinguished: there is the distinction between sensory and intellectual experiences, and there is the distinction between sensory and cognitive phenomenal characters. Though the (b) experience is a sensory experience, it has a cognitive phenomenal character. The reason why it can is that it is not purely sensory because it is metaphysically dependent on the larger intellectual experience of which it is a part.

(b) experience group the dots. And two, these experiences themselves are imagistic, so, while there is mental imagery in the (b) case, it is supposed to be there, and poses no problem to the argument. One might object that in the (b) case there is additional mental imagery: perhaps we tend to imagine various expansions of the array of dots that represent the first 5, 6, or whatever integers. This objection can be met by starting out with arrays of dots large enough so that any attempt to imagine expansions of them would be too much of a burden on our visual buffer.

In general, dependent parts of intellectual gestalts—whether they are themselves sensory or intellectual experiences—possess cognitive phenomenal characters. The reason is that they possess phenomenal characters that can only be instantiated by a part of an intellectual experience.

One of the vexed issues about cognitive phenomenology that phenomenal holism might bear on is the relationship between conscious thought and inner speech. Suppose you consciously think that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots. This is an intellectual experience, and it has a phenomenal character. Consider two theses about its phenomenal character. One thesis is that it is a cognitive phenomenal character—it cannot be instantiated by a purely sensory experience. Another thesis is that it is a sensory phenomenal character—it can be instantiated by a purely sensory experience, plausibly the purely sensory experience of imagining oneself *saying* “The first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots.” These views generalize:

Cognitivism: all conscious thoughts instantiate cognitive phenomenal characters.

Sensationalism: all conscious thoughts instantiate only sensory phenomenal characters.

Note that both cognitivists and sensationalists agree that there are conscious thoughts. What they disagree about is the nature of the phenomenal characters of conscious thoughts. The sensationalist

thinks that they can be duplicated by purely sensory experiences, such as episodes of inner speech, and the cognitivist denies this.

How might the cognitivist argue against the sensationalist? One strong thesis cognitivists might argue for is that any conscious thought could occur in the absence of any sensory phenomenal character. The thesis is difficult to establish. The typical stream of consciousness is filled with instances of sensory phenomenal characters, and I personally find it difficult to imagine a stream of consciousness absent all sensory phenomenal character. Let us suppose that every conscious thought is accompanied by some episode of inner speech. Cognitivists might argue that episodes of inner speech are distinct from conscious thoughts, and that if you properly focus on a conscious thought, not an accompanying episode of inner speech, you will see that it has its own phenomenal character, which cannot be duplicated in a sensory experience. Again, it is not clear how cognitivists might establish such a thesis. Suppose a sensationalist responds: whenever I have a conscious thought and introspect all I find is an episode of inner speech expressing the thought. I do not see why we shouldn't take this claim at face value. Cognitivists might at this point have recourse to variants on the standard arguments by example for cognitive phenomenology. Contrast the experience of a monolingual French speaker saying to himself "The first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots" with the experience of an English speaker saying the same to himself. The experiences are phenomenally different. But they share—the cognitivist might claim—all of their sensory phenomenal characters. So they differ in a cognitive phenomenal character, and this is the cognitive phenomenal character distinctive of conscious thought and which cannot be duplicated by a sensory experience. This argument is open to the standard worries about the standard arguments by example that appeal to changes in linguistic understanding.

While the cognitivist thinks that *all* conscious thoughts instantiate cognitive phenomenal characters, in order to refute the sensationalist it suffices to show that *some* conscious thoughts

instantiate cognitive phenomenal characters. Consider, then, the thesis that some conscious thoughts instantiate phenomenal characters that cannot be instantiated by purely sensory experiences. If this thesis is true, then sensationalism is false. Further, there are example conscious thoughts that suggest it is true, namely conscious thoughts that occur as parts of intellectual gestalts. Take, for example, the conscious thought that the first n positive integers can be represented by a triangular array of dots, which occurs as part of grasping the proof that the sum of the first n positive integers is half of $n * (n + 1)$. The phenomenal character of this conscious thought is holistically dependent on the whole experience of grasping the proof. That entails that its phenomenal character cannot be instantiated by a purely sensory experience. And that refutes sensationalism.

The upshot of this discussion is that while it might be difficult to establish cognitivism, it is not difficult to refute sensationalism. Thoughts that occur as parts of intellectual gestalts are obvious counterexamples to sensationalism.

To sum up, then, the defense of phenomenal holism and the extension of it to intellectual experiences pursued in the previous sections provides resources for defending two theses about cognitive phenomenology: first, there are phenomenal characters that cannot be instantiated by purely sensory experiences, and second, at least some of our conscious thoughts have such phenomenal characters. The argumentative resources that reflection on phenomenal holism brings into focus seem to me to have various dialectical advantages over some of the more familiar arguments for (CP).

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