

# What Is Cognitive Access?

Gilbert Harman

May 31, 2007

Block is concerned with the question whether there are cases of *phenomenology* in the absence of cognitive access. I assume that, more precisely, the question is whether there are cases in which a subject *S* has a phenomenological experience *E* to which *S* does not have *direct* cognitive access? (*S* might have indirect cognitive access to *E* through scientific reasoning. I take it that's not the sort of cognitive access in question.)

It may be somewhat unclear what is meant by “cognitive access” in at least two ways. First, it may be unclear what cognitive access is supposed to be access to. Second, it may be unclear what makes access to something cognitive.

Let me begin my discussion with the first question about what cognitive access is supposed to be access to.

1. Suppose first that *E* is not an experience of or awareness of a phenomenal or intentional object *X*. Then it would seem that the relevant cognitive access has to be to *E* itself, that is to *S*'s having *E*.

On the other hand, suppose that the relevant phenomenological experience *E* involves being aware of something *X*, the phenomenal or intentional object of *E*, what it is that *S* is aware of in having experience *E*. In that case, would the relevant cognitive access supposed be access to *X* or to *E* (namely *S*'s experience of *X*). These are clearly different. Suppose *S* is phenomenally conscious of a certain shade of red. On the one hand, *S* might have cognitive access to that shade of red: what a beautiful color it is! On the other hand, *S* might have cognitive access to *E*, to *S*'s experience of that shade of red: what a great experience it is!

It may be that *S*'s experience of *X* is compatible with and perhaps even sufficient for *S* to cognitively access *X*, although *S*'s trying cognitively to access *E* is incompatible with *S*'s having the experience *E*. In such a case it would seem that *S* does not have (direct) cognitive access to *E*. For example, *S*'s being completely engaged in what *S* is doing—as in optimal “flow” experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)—is compatible with (and even sufficient for) *S*'s cognitively accessing what *S* is doing while at the same time at least sometimes being incompatible with *S*'s being aware of what it is like for *S* to be so engaged. In such cases it would seem that *S* does not have direct cognitive access to having such flow experiences.

So, if the relevant cognitive access is access to  $E$ , there seem to be clear cases in which  $S$  lacks cognitive access a phenomenological experience  $E$  without any need for the sort of investigation Block describes.

2. Alternatively, the relevant cognitive access might be to the (intentional or phenomenal) object  $X$  of  $S$ 's experience  $E$ .

This seems to be the sort of cognitive access Block has in mind. Consider his discussion of the subjects in Sperling's (1960) experiment who reported being aware of all the items in a briefly displayed grid even though they could identify only some of the items. The items in question are the objects of the subject's perceptual experiences.

But can one have a phenomenal experience of  $X$  without having cognitive access to  $X$ ? Indeed, can one have a phenomenal experience of  $X$  without that phenomenal experience of  $X$  being a cognitive experience of  $X$  that constitutes cognitive access to  $X$ ? Or, to put the question the other way, can there be a phenomenal experience of  $X$  that isn't itself a cognitive experience of  $X$ ? What could possibly distinguish a cognitive experience of  $X$  from a noncognitive experience of  $X$ ? Clearly, it depends on what is meant by "cognitive" experience.

Suppose that that a necessary condition of  $E$ 's being a "cognitive" experience of  $X$  is that  $E$  have a certain sort of "intentional content"—an experience of  $X$ 's being  $F$  for some  $F$ . Given this supposition, if  $S$ 's having  $E$  is a cognitive experience,  $E$  consists at least in part in  $X$ 's seeming (appearing, looking, ...) to  $S$  to be  $F$  for some relevant  $F$ .

Furthermore, it might suggested that,  $S$ 's having a *phenomenal* experience  $E$  of  $X$  need not (and maybe never does) consist even in part in  $X$ 's seeming to  $S$  to be  $F$ . If so, then given the supposition in the previous paragraph, it would seem that there could be a phenomenal experience  $E$  that is not cognitively accessible.

So it is highly relevant whether some  $S$  could have phenomenal experiences of  $X$  that did not consist at least in part in  $X$ 's seeming to  $S$  to be  $F$  for some relevant  $F$ . In Harman (1990) I argue (in effect) that the answer is "No, this is not possible." In fact, I argue that phenomenal content is the same thing as intentional content, a conclusion that is widely (but not universally) accepted in recent philosophical discussion.

In this (controversial) view,  $S$  must have cognitive access to the object of a phenomenal experience  $E$  because any phenomenal experience of  $X$  is itself a cognitive experience of  $X$ . Not only are the objects of phenomenal experience cognitively accessible, they are ipso facto cognitively accessed.

I do not see how the considerations Block raises provide any reason at all to reject this way of defending the cognitive accessibility of the objects of phenomenal experience.

## References

Csikszentmihalyi, M., (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

Harman, G., (1990). "The Intrinsic Quality of Experience," *Philosophical Perspectives* 4 (1990) pp. 31-52.