Down the “Preferred Path”: Dispositional Flexibility Constitutes Phenomenal Character

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> Upshot • We agree with Kirchhoff and Hutto that phenomeno-physical identities have to be motivated to approach the hard problem of consciousness. We propose that REC will do a better job in motivating these identities if intentionality and phenomenality are considered inseparable. We suggest that the notion of dispositional flexibility motivates these phenomeno-intentional identities and opens up a practical avenue for neurophenomenology.

1 Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

for engaging practically in neurophenomenology.

2 We generally agree with REC’s conceptual readjustment. However, our pivotal concern is that REC might do an even better job of motivating phenomeno-physical identities by rendering phenomenality and intentionality inseparable. In line with the suggestion of Hutto and Erik Myin, “re-conceiving the nature of phenomenality by adjusting our conceptual filters” (Hutto & Myin 2013: 176), we suggest that this might be done by motivating a notion of dispositional flexibility. In short, “dispositional flexibility” denotes flexible modes of extensive engagement that embody the “openness” of these engagements. Thus, in contrast to Hutto and Myin (2013), in our view there is no separation between basic cognition (exhibiting intentionality) and basic mentality (exhibiting intentionality and phenomenality) – there are only degrees of basic mentality varying with the degrees of an agent’s dispositional flexibility.

Intentionality, phenomenality, and dispositional flexibility

3 Some philosophers argue that intentional aspects of the mind possess intrinsic qualitative features, and vice versa (e.g., Zahavi 2003). In other words, there is something it is like to be in an intentional state. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) rejected the possibility of distinguishing intentionality and phenomenality. He rejects “any attempt to define sensation as pure impression” and holds against it, “quality is not an element of consciousness, but a property of the object” (ibid: 5). The phenomenal character of experience is thus nothing more than how we engage with objects – how we enact an experience (cf. Noë 2004). REC fosters Merleau-Ponty’s spirit in rejecting both content and phenomenal character conceived as qualia. Why then not collapse phenomenality (construed as phenomeno-physical activity) with intentionality (construed as teleo-physical activity) in order better to motivate phenomeno-physical identities?

4 Let us start by considering whether there would be something it is like to engage with an object if that engagement was carried by habitual body schemata. Clearly, these cases of habitual movements do not necessarily come with a phenomenal character (Gallagher 2005). In contrast to such mere re-enactments, the development (or adaptation) of habits is deemed a period of increased conscious awareness of one’s engagement. By the same token, the flexibility of engagement or similar notions, such as openness and plasticity, have been considered essential in these periods of change (cf. Noë 2012; Barandiaran & Di Paolo 2014; Rossmanith & Reddy 2016). In such analyses, however, usually no claims are made about the phenomenal character of these flexible and conscious engagements. With this in mind, why not consider the possibility that objects appear to us if and only if there is a certain flexibility with respect to one’s dispositions to act upon the object? Phenomeno-physical activity, and thus basic mentality, would not be just any sort of embodied activity but would be constituted by what we might call its dispositional flexibility.

5 To illustrate, let us turn to the “what”-question posed in the target article: What is it like to undergo an experience of something, such as holding a book? As Kirchhoff and Hutto point out, what you are experiencing when you are holding a book can be described quite subtly as an embodied interaction, e.g., “the way you are applying finger pressure to prevent the book from slipping out of your hands” (§40). Beyond these quite ephemeral aspects of actual embodied interaction, we want to stress that the phenomenal character of holding the book might be captured more completely – if you additionally consider the ways you are currently disposed to handle it.

6 Kirchhoff and Hutto might have something similar in mind when they indicate that “[y]ou are feeling the texture of the book and even though you are only holding parts of the book you have expectations about the book’s orientation, its size, and so on” (§40, our emphasis). However, in our view the term “expectations” is somewhat misleading here. For expectations might easily be taken as a sort of knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies – an action-representation of the book, implying specifiable conditions of satisfaction. Instead we suggest a radical enactivist reading.

7 In line with REC, “expectation” might also be understood as disposition, i.e.,

1 http://constructivist.info/11/2/346.kirchhoff
the mere readiness to act upon aspects of the book that are relevant to you at the moment. Importantly, with respect to our suggestion, if your disposition is flexible, what actions are relevant might change quite spontaneously and profoundly, enabling ways of engagement with an object that exceed the habitual. This flexibility might enable the embodied agent to cope with (and adapt to) the changing demands of its environment. We might as well say, your dispositional flexibility embodies the openness of your engagement – and, as we suggest, it constitutes its phenomeno-intentional character. Thus, the specifics of your dispositional flexibility towards the object might be what determines the specific phenomenal character of your engagement with it.

But how to determine one’s state of dispositional flexibility practically? Assuming there are no (action-)representations, it certainly will not suffice merely to inspect neurophysiological activity. In line with Kirchhoff and Hutto’s claim of embodied activity in general, one might suggest that what actions are currently relevant, and can thus be disposed, is determined by the ever-changing demands of the situation, how you have enacted it to this point and where you want to go with it. Thus, as an REC-ish neurophenomenologist, in order to deduce an agent’s dispositional flexibility, your method of choice will be to analyze etiologically cases of extensive engagement.

Yet, there is more evidence to be collected to that end, beyond behavioral or neurophysiological data. Hutto (2015) points out that your engagement with the book might be accompanied by so called basic sensory imaginings, defined as non-contentful mental images. For example, when holding a book, you might have basic imaginings of what else you could possibly do with the book. Clearly, these imaginings can be counted as momentary expressions of your dispositional flexibility towards the book. Given this, such experiential data – when conceived of in terms of embodied activity and not as qualia – might give valuable sneak peeks into the dispositional flexibility of an agent.

Along these lines, Oswald Wiener and colleagues (Raab & Eder 2015) observe a similar phenomenon in several introspective case studies on the psychology of thought. They elaborate that our orientation (a notion akin to what we so far have called disposition) is merely a readiness to act upon the object. In the course of changing dispositions, the object remains transient, ephemeral and incessantly preliminary – in fact, it is never constituted. Such figurative aspects of the object do not emerge as “static” representations but merely appear in dispositional alterations. They are conceived as embodying the phenomenal, quasi-sensory character of an engagement. In sum, in line with the observations of Wiener and colleagues, we propose that there is reason to believe that dispositional flexibility might constitute the appearance of objects plus their phenomenal character qua their appearance.

Conclusion

We have followed Kirchhoff and Hutto down their “preferred path” for neurophenomenology in rejecting a non-reductive metaphysics. In line with REC, we thus hold that the “phenomenal character of experiences is ultimately grounded in interactions between experiencers and features of the environment” (§44). However, going beyond REC’s original claim, we have suggested that intentionality might be identified with phenomenality, and hence, that basic cognition might be identified with basic mentality. We have motivated this phenomeno-intentional identity with reference to the openness of experience. In our view, the phenomenal character of experience is, more specifically, grounded in the dispositional flexibility of dynamic, embodied activity. By proposing to understand basic imaginings as dispositional alterations, instead of contentful mental images, we have indicated an experiential avenue for neurophenomenology to determine dispositional flexibility practically.

Michael Kirchhoff and Daniel Hutto (K&H) advance a metaphysical proposal to diffuse the hard problem of consciousness based on the radical enactive-embodied approach to cognition (REC) (Hutto & Myin 2013), with whose general outline I wholeheartedly agree. Both their assessment that the root of the hard problem is its dualistic metaphysics and their suggestion to dissipate it by adopting “a view of consciousness as a dynamic activity” seem to be on the right track. The hard problem has not been the most popular topic among recent discussions on enactivism despite its popularity among philosophers of mind in general and also despite Francisco Varela’s interest in it, most visible in his 1996 paper, which K&H discuss in detail. I admire their effort to bring this topic back into the context of...