

Michael Tye, ‘The puzzle of transparency’

Excerpts from Michael Tye, ‘The puzzle of transparency’, in *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, edited by Gideon Rosen, Alex Byrne, Joshua Cohen, and Seana Shiffrin (Norton, 2015).¹

Sit, facing a red apple in good light. In front of you is a particular thing—an apple. You see the apple. In doing so, you have a visual experience caused by the apple—an experience as of a red, round, bulgy shape before you. That visual experience is also a particular thing, but unlike the apple it is mental. There is, then, or so it is standardly assumed, the external thing (the apple), an internal thing (the experience), and a causal relationship between the two.

Your experience, being an experience, has a *phenomenology*. There is something it is *like* for you subjectively in seeing the apple. What it is like for you is different from what it is like for you to see a banana or an orange in good light. What it is like for you, as you see the apple, is *radically* different from what it is like for you to undergo certain other experiences. Think, for example, of the experience of sharp pain caused by accidentally stepping on a thumbtack. What it is like to undergo an experience is sometimes called the “phenomenal character” of that experience. One natural way to think of the phenomenal character of an experience is as a quality of the experience.

Since what it is like to see a red, round shape has something in common subjectively with what it is like to see a red, square shape, it is also natural to suppose that in many cases, the overall phenomenal character of an experience is made up of a number of different subjective qualities. The subjective qualities of which the overall phenomenal character of the experience is composed are often called “qualia.” There is, then, the external thing (the apple) and its qualities, and there is also the internal thing (the experience) and its phenomenal character (or qualia). Whether the experience has further qualities not connected to its phenomenal character, as the apple has further qualities not accessible to your eyes (for example, its weight or cost), is something on which we need take no stand for present purposes.

Now I want you to attend carefully to the apple you are viewing. As you do so, you will likely notice some variations of color that had not stood out before; or you may notice an irregularity in the shape. Next, place a banana

¹ Full text at <http://www.michaeltye.us/PuzzleOfTransparency.pdf>.

to the left of the apple, some distance away but still visible to you from your viewing position, and look again. You can choose to attend to the apple or to the banana or to both. You can switch your attention from one to the other. When you do this, you can attend to the color of the apple or the shape of the banana, for example.

Now I want you to switch your attention from the apple to your visual experience of it. Are you able to do so easily? As easily as you can switch your attention from the apple to the banana? If you think you can, do you notice any new quality of the experience? If these questions puzzle you, well and good. For reasons that will become clear shortly, they *should* puzzle you.

I am not asking you here to fixate your eyes upon your experience in the way that you can fixate your eyes on the apple and then on the banana. Obviously, an experience, being a mental entity, is not the sort of thing upon which you can train your eyes.²

I am not asking you to do these things because even in the visual case I take it that attention is not the same as eye fixation. To appreciate what I am getting at here, fixate your eyes upon the plus sign in the center of figure 1. As you continue to fixate your eyes on the plus sign and also to focus mentally upon it, you can tell which rectangles are grey and which are black. However, you cannot tell which rectangles have longer vertical sides. To find that out, you need to switch your attention, that is, your mental focus.

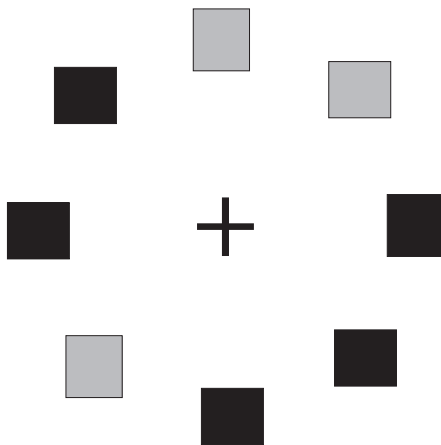


Figure 1

² Of course, if experiences are brain states then they can be viewed through cerebroscopes while the experiences are occurring. But this is not relevant to the points being made here. [Tye's note.]

As you vary your mental focus, you can attend to the rectangles, one by one, while still fixating on the plus sign, and as you do so, you can determine which have longer vertical sides. Attending to something typically (perhaps always) reveals new qualities of the thing or at least qualities you experience the thing as having, qualities of which you were not aware beforehand.

Returning to the apple and your experience of it, I can only say that in my own case I find that I cannot switch my attention from the apple to my visual experience. Indeed, I find that I cannot attend to my visual experience at all. Moreover, I cannot attend to any of its qualities. When I try to follow the instructions given above in my own case, my very strong belief is that *nothing at all* changes except perhaps that, in trying to do what is asked, I come to notice new qualities of the *apple* of which I was not aware before.

What does this show? Well, if you accept the claims of the previous paragraph in your own case (and I think that they are very hard to deny, though not everyone agrees), at a minimum they should make you extremely puzzled. If you cannot attend to your visual experience, then there is an inherently conscious thing—namely, your experience—that is not accessible to your attention. Further, if you cannot attend to any of your visual experience's qualities, then the phenomenal character of your experience is something to which you cannot attend either. How can that be?



Figure 2

To appreciate why this should be puzzling, look at figure 2 and fixate your eyes on the man resting on an elbow at the bottom in the middle. I predict

that, as you do so, you will be unable to mentally focus upon the writing implement or the notebook or the beard of the man leaning in on the far left. For you, it will be as if these items are not there, and likewise for their qualities, for example, their shapes. Because you are unable to attend to these things as you fixate on the man in the middle, they are hidden from you. You are blind to them.

Here is another example. Fixate on the plus sign in figure 3. As you do so, you won't be able to focus upon or attend to the fifth vertical bar away from the plus sign. If you think otherwise, tell me how many bars there are on the right without moving your fixation point. I predict that you won't be able to do so. The reason is straightforward: it is not the case that each and every bar on the right is clearly and individually marked out in the phenomenology of your experience. The fifth bar is one of the bars not so marked out. It is effectively hidden from you, given your fixation point. That's why you can't count the bars. This is not to say that *the bars* (plural) are hidden from you. Obviously, they aren't. You are certainly conscious of the bars. But there are individual bars of which you are not conscious. (Compare: you can weigh a bunch of marbles without weighing each marble. Having weighed the marbles, you may still have no precise idea of how much the fifth marble in the bunch weighs.)



Figure 3

The conclusion to which we seem driven is that the phenomenal character of your visual experience, as you view the apple, is *hidden* from you, as is your visual experience. You are *blind* to these things. For you, it is as if they aren't there. They are, as it were, transparent to you. You "see" right through them when you try to attend to them and you end up focusing on things outside you. But surely this cannot be right. Your visual experience is an inherently conscious thing. Its phenomenal character—what it is like for you subjectively—is inherently conscious. How can these things be hidden from you? If you cannot attend to the phenomenal character of your visual experience, then it no more contributes to your subjective, conscious life than do the shapes of some of the figures on the left of the picture in figure

2 as you fixate on the pensive man in the middle. In that case, its presence (or absence) is simply irrelevant to your consciousness.

Something has gone terribly wrong. But what exactly?

The rest of Tye's paper is concerned with answering this question. We will not have time to examine Tye's answer in lecture, but if you're interested, you can read the whole paper on Tye's website ([link in note 1](#)).