

Commentary on “Limited Phenomenal Infallibility and Cognitive Phenomenology”

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In response to Horgan and Kriegel’s ‘limited phenomenal infallibility thesis’, Stratman argues that we do not have good reason to hold that the type of belief the thesis requires exists, and therefore we ought to reject the limited phenomenal infallibility (LPI) thesis. Under the thesis, some beliefs can be considered infallible, because they are beliefs about the awareness of a particular mental state. Stratman points out that these kind of beliefs must be occurrent, since only occurrent beliefs have a kind of phenomenal mode of presentation. Standing beliefs, in contrast, are not present and therefore lack the kind of phenomenal mode of presentation characteristic of occurrent beliefs. However, according to Stratman, we have no good reason to hold that occurrent beliefs exist as a type of belief distinct from standing beliefs. If this is right, then the limited phenomenal infallibility thesis fails to hold, since it is reliant upon the existence of occurrent beliefs.

On Stratman’s account, all beliefs must persist beyond initial acquisition (thus being incorporated into one’s belief set) in order to count as beliefs. This qualifies them as standing beliefs, since standing beliefs are beliefs that persist. This also entails that occurrent beliefs fail to count as beliefs, as they do not meet what Stratman calls the ‘persistence condition’ – they do not persist beyond initial acquisition. If this is so, then there is no need for or evidence for occurrent beliefs as a distinct kind of belief. Because the limited phenomenal infallibility thesis requires occurrent beliefs in order to show how it is that we have phenomenal knowledge that is infallible, we ought to reject it on the basis of the absence of a good case for the existence of occurrent beliefs.

My commentary will focus on the role of the persistence condition in Stratman’s argument against the existence of occurrent beliefs. Stratman states that “for P to count as a belief, P must be a part of one’s belief set” (10). If P is part of one’s belief set, then it is entailed that P must persist through time. This seems to suggest that P must always be a standing belief, since P only counts as a belief just in case it persists through time. My concern is that this places too strong a demand on what counts as a belief. Even if we assume that persistence through time does not entail indefinite persistence, this picture necessitates that P only counts as a belief if it also is a part of one’s belief set. We might think that beliefs that are not part of one’s belief set, such as a belief we have held in the past but no longer hold, may still count as a belief, especially considering there was an occasion on which it did persist through time and thus was incorporated into one’s belief set. For example, I may have had the belief ‘today is Wednesday’ last Wednesday, and while I no longer hold this belief, it would be difficult to claim that this proposition does not take the form of a proposition expressing a belief. It would be equally difficult to claim that beliefs taking this form can never count as beliefs proper as they are only

standing beliefs for a discrete period of time and therefore are only on occasion part of one's belief set.

One strategy might be to loosen the restrictions on the persistence condition as to allow for certain instances such as these while at the same time denying ontological status to occurrent beliefs as to maintain the objection to the LPI thesis. This might be achieved by appealing to an account of modal knowledge in terms of possibility states for beliefs that are transient in nature and therefore are not fully incorporated into one's belief set. On this picture, *P* counts as a belief in virtue of its *possibility* for incorporation into one's belief set. This leaves room for beliefs that meet the strong version of the persistence condition and thus are incorporated into one's belief set (perhaps indefinitely), but also creates room for beliefs that are only incorporated into one's belief set on occasion. Importantly, these kinds of beliefs are not occurrent beliefs, because they are capable of being incorporated into one's belief set and thus held over (a period of) time. They can thus be thought of as meeting the requirements for counting as standing beliefs.

Proponents of the LPI thesis might argue that even this weaker persistence condition is too strong and does not accurately characterize beliefs in general. Specifically, more argumentation may be required for the claim that all kinds of beliefs must be thought of as being sufficiently diachronic in nature – that is, persisting beyond initial acquisition as to be incorporated into one's belief set. This requirement may rule out some kinds of mental states that may be traditionally thought of as beliefs, even if it is the case that they do not entail a corresponding cognitive phenomenology that renders them infallible. Therefore, a further reformulation of the persistence condition may be necessary. But this does not entail that Stratman's argument against the LPI thesis would not hold – presumably any account that rules out the existence of occurrent beliefs would be sufficient.

Further, proponents of the LPI thesis may argue that even if we hold that standing beliefs are the only kind of beliefs we can posit, it is still a fact about the nature of beliefs that there are times at which certain beliefs are brought to attention and therefore may have a corresponding phenomenal aspect that may render them infallible to an extent. While this fact does not require that we expand our taxonomy of beliefs, an account that fails to acknowledge this property does not accurately reflect the nature of beliefs. Stratman does address this concern in discussing Block's distinction between access-consciousness and phenomenal-consciousness, but I think there is more to be said. For example, Stratman claims “[i]f you did make the standing belief phenomenally conscious, I think that you would be thinking that the grass is green, which is an episode of a sort, not a phenomenally conscious occurrent belief” (8). But why not call this a phenomenally conscious *standing* belief, and hold that this is an instance of a belief that is phenomenally conscious and is in some way infallible as a result? Some may still wish to hold that there is an aspect to standing beliefs such that they have a phenomenal mode of presentation when attended to, and this would require some kind of cognitive phenomenology but does not require considering them to be a different kind of belief. Perhaps it is the case that this issue is

separate from the question of whether this renders them infallible in these instances only, but I hold that the issue, at the least, puts pressure on the account given in this paper.