

## Limited Phenomenal Infallibility and Cognitive Phenomenology

In “Phenomenal Epistemology: What Is Consciousness That We May Know It So Well?” (2007), Terry Horgan and Uriah Kriegel [here on H&K] defend what they call *the limited phenomenal infallibility thesis* (LPI), which claims that some “beliefs that are singular, present, phenomenal in mode of presentation, and bracketed”, can be infallible.<sup>1</sup> According to H&K, if LPI is true, this would show that that some of our knowledge, what they call “phenomenal knowledge”, is superior to other forms of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Thus, LPI would have philosophically significant implications for a number of debates in epistemology.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I argue that LPI is false.

The paper is divided into two parts: In § 1, I clarify the restrictions H&K place on LPI. Then, in § 2, I show that LPI requires conscious beliefs, what is sometimes described as cognitive phenomenology regarding “occurrent” beliefs. I argue that, necessarily, if *P* is to count as a belief, then *P* must be able to persist beyond the initial moment *P* was acquired. In other words, beliefs are dispositional mental states. If an occurrent belief *P* lacks this necessary condition of being a dispositional mental state, then *P* will not count as a belief at all. Since LPI requires that occurrent beliefs exist and are in fact a type of belief, we have good reason to reject H&K’s LPI thesis.

### I.

If LPI is true, then there is a special kind of knowledge—phenomenal knowledge. H&K suggest this is “a special kind of knowledge of one’s concurrent phenomenal experiences”.<sup>4</sup> For instance, you are currently reading these words on either a screen or a piece of paper. There are certain

---

<sup>1</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 128

<sup>2</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 123

<sup>3</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), pp. 123-124, 139: they do not explore these implications, but offer a promissory note to do so in future work.

<sup>4</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 123

phenomenal properties of this experience such that there is something it is like for you to undergo this experience. And insofar as these phenomenal properties are of your mental state, you are presumably aware of them. According to H&K, this kind of phenomenal knowledge pertains to the phenomenal character of a belief about a particular mental state—your awareness of the state.<sup>5</sup> And this is so even if it turns out that the belief, your awareness of the mental state, is non-veridical because you might be a brain in a vat.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, not all phenomenal knowledge is infallible, only a belief about one's present (occurrent?) phenomenal experience can be infallible, and this means that only knowledge that involves this specific type of belief can be infallible knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Most of our knowledge is not of this secure type, but we cannot infer from this that all knowledge is fallible, according to H&K. The inferential leap from the fact that most of one's beliefs about one's phenomenal experience are fallible to the claim that no beliefs about one's phenomenal experiences are infallible is unwarranted and without justification, on their view.<sup>8</sup> H&K contend that arguments against the infallibility of some of our phenomenal knowledge tend to make this fallacious inference. They then explore reasons why one might think that some knowledge can be infallible, even if it is exceedingly limited. As such, it is important for us to consider how LPI is limited.

The basic strategy H&K employ in defending LPI is to articulate the required restrictions, which would show that some knowledge can be infallible, even if most knowledge is not. As they suggest, what is needed is to “formulate an increasingly restricted thesis of infallibility, ending with a thesis whose denial we take to defy credulity”.<sup>9</sup> Once these restrictions have been made

---

<sup>5</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 130

<sup>6</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 130

<sup>7</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 125

<sup>8</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 125

<sup>9</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 125

clear, I will then argue that consideration of these restrictions will show that the beliefs in question are no beliefs at all.

First, infallible knowledge only applies to phenomenal knowledge, and this type of knowledge only applies to “beliefs about experiences and their phenomenal properties”.<sup>10</sup> What this means is that the belief involved in the knowledge that H&K claim can be infallible must be an occurrent belief, since there is nothing that it is like to have a standing belief. Only occurrent beliefs have a phenomenal character associated with it. Additionally, the content of the belief involved, what the belief is about, must be an experience of some kind. As such, the infallible belief must be about an occurrent experience. Second, LPI is restricted “to singular (logically atomic) beliefs whose singular and predicative constituents employ phenomenal modes of presentation— a singular phenomenal mode of presentation and a predicative phenomenal mode of presentation”.<sup>11</sup> Third, LPI must be restricted to “beliefs about *present* phenomenal experiences, as opposed to past or future ones”.<sup>12</sup> Intuitively this seems right: Beliefs about the future and beliefs derived from memory seem obviously fallible, and it is the *content* of the logically atomic belief that will be our primary concern. As such, these restrictions tell us that LPI applies to phenomenal beliefs about very specific phenomenal properties of an experience, and no other beliefs. Since standing beliefs are not present or occurrent in the requisite way, and since they lack a mode of presentation, only occurrent beliefs can be infallible.

The fourth restriction is crucial. It introduces the notion of “bracketing” in order to avoid worries concerning the causal and functional roles of beliefs, as well as the classifications of experiences a knower’s beliefs are typically about. That is, how the content of a knower’s

---

<sup>10</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 125

<sup>11</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 126

<sup>12</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 126

experiences and beliefs about the phenomenal character of her present experiences and beliefs are integrated in her belief set such that it does justice to a reasonable kind of holism regarding her mental states in general.<sup>13</sup> H&K describe this restriction in the following way:

Let us introduce the idea of a bracketing mode of presentation of phenomenal character. Such a mode of presentation suspends any such presuppositions, so that their truth or falsity does not affect the content of the specific belief that employs such a mode of presentation. This is a mode of presentation that brackets out all relational information about the experience and its phenomenal character, including how experiences of this sort are classified by oneself on other occasions, what their typical causes are, etc. It focuses (so to speak) on how the experiences appears to the subject at that moment.<sup>14</sup>

Given this restriction of basic, singular, bracketed, phenomenal beliefs, H&K state LPI as follows:

Necessarily, if a subject S has a singular phenomenal belief  $\mathbf{B}_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at a time  $t$  whose singular and predicative constituents are the bracketed phenomenal modes of presentation  $e$  and  $p$  respectively, and if there is a time  $t^*$  that (i) is roughly simultaneous with  $t$ , and (ii) is such that S has the belief  $\mathbf{B}_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  at  $t^*$ , then  $\mathbf{B}_{\text{now}}[e, p]$  is true at  $t^*$ .<sup>15</sup>

H&K think that LPI is true, and therefore not all knowledge is fallible. But what reasons do we have to think that LPI is true? H&K suggest that we consider whether there are any plausible counterexamples on the offing to show why we have good reason to accept LPI as true.

Interestingly, H&K claim they have not encountered a case that would satisfactorily show that LPI is false.<sup>16</sup> They use a case, originally offered by Shoemaker (1996), as a quintessential counterexample to any claim of infallibility to that there are no good counterexamples to LPI:

Suppose that, blindfolded, you are told that a particular spot on your neck is about to be cut with a razor...then an ice cube is placed on that spot. At the very first instant, you are likely to be under the impression that you are having a pain sensation—when in reality you are having a coldness sensation. That is, at that instant, you have a *present singular phenomenal belief* to the effect that you are having a pain experience.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 128

<sup>14</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 128

<sup>15</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 128

<sup>16</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 128

<sup>17</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 128; my emphasis added.

Intuitively this should count as a plausible counterexample to infallible knowledge, since one falsely believes they are undergoing the experience of pain. But H&K claim that it fails as an adequate counterexample? Why? Because of the bracketing constraint on LPI.<sup>18</sup>

If a belief is bracketed in the way demanded by LPI, the phenomenal modes of presentation rules out cases where one mistakenly believes that they are in pain when they are not. The purpose of bracketing is to isolate the belief, to abstract it from one's belief set. This will insure that even if one is mistaken about the classification of the belief as being about such and such, they will not be mistaken about their judgment concerning how the belief feels (i.e., the phenomenal character of the belief itself).<sup>19</sup> Since everything has been bracketed away from the raw phenomenological feeling of pain here and now, this bracketed belief that, *I am in pain*, will be infallible.<sup>20</sup> So, according to H&K, the counterexample fails to show that LPI is false.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, then, LPI requires cognitive phenomenology regarding occurrent beliefs, not simply that there is something that it is like to undergo an experience of judging that such and such is the case, or thinking about one's experience, which is diachronic episode of some kind.

Of course, one could always object by claiming that H&K have not sufficiently conjured up a good case. After all, the advantage of arguing by counterexamples is that you can always cook up another one. However, H&K claim: "Arguments by counter-example are helpless against the simple move of revising down the scope of one's thesis".<sup>22</sup> Thus, my suspicion is that no

---

<sup>18</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 130

<sup>19</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 130

<sup>20</sup> Objections concerning the nature of the indexical "this" could be raised, but I will ignore these here.

<sup>21</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 131; Another case H&K considered is Chisholm's (1957) speckled hen case. One has a visual perception of a hen with, say, 49 speckles, but comes to believe that the hen has 48 speckles. According to H&K "this fact nowise undermines one's ability to form a belief that one's percept has this feature, where 'this feature' bracketingly denotes the phenomenology one is presented with, however bespeckled". It seems their reason for rejecting the speckled hen case is the same as their reason for rejecting Shoemaker's case. The belief in question is bracketed.

<sup>22</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 125

matter what case one might be able to envisage, H&K would simply appeal to the notion of bracketing in order to avoid the conclusion that LPI is false. If the bracketing constraint is accepted, then of course their intuitions concerning the utter inability to actually find a successful counterexample must be right. Consider, for example, another paradigmatic example of how one can plausibly be wrong about their own phenomenology: the speckled hen case.<sup>23</sup> Here, it seems, one has a visual perception of a hen with, say, 49 speckles, but comes to believe that the hen has 48 speckles. Intuitively, such a case seems plausible. However, according to H&K “this fact nowise undermines one’s ability to form a belief that one’s precept has this feature, where ‘this feature’ bracketingly denotes the phenomenology one is presented with, however bespeckled”.<sup>24</sup> Attacking LPI by offering apparently plausible counterexamples is therefore not an advisable strategy in attempting to show that the thesis is false. As such, I will take a different approach.

## II.

I think that it is common to assume that there is a distinction between standing and occurrent beliefs, and then to argue on the basis of this distinction for some other substantive claim. This seems to be what H&K do regarding LPI, since the targeted belief here must be an occurrent belief, rather than a standing belief. In this section I will argue that this assumption is false, because there are no occurrent beliefs.

Consider the following conditional:

- (a) *If LPI is true, then cognitive phenomenology exists.*

---

<sup>23</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, 2007, p. 131; see Chisholm, 1957

<sup>24</sup> Horgan and Kriegel, 2007, p. 131; this response might help to clarify the indexical nature of “this”.

Given the way H&K restrict LPI, we might think that (a) is true. But this will depend on what is meant by cognitive phenomenology.<sup>25</sup> We might also think cognitive phenomenology is simply the claim that there is something it is like to believe, desire, hope, etc., that *P*.<sup>26</sup> But this would only make sense on the assumption that there is a distinction between standing and occurrent beliefs, since only the latter can plausibly be phenomenally conscious. One might also construe cognitive phenomenology as claiming that there is something that it is like to undergo the experience of thinking that *P*, where thinking that *P* is an episode that occurs over time.<sup>27</sup> If this is what is meant, then it is not clear how LPI could still be true, given the restrictions place on LPI.

Now consider the following conditional:

(b) *If LPI is true, then occurrent beliefs exists.*

Unlike (a), which involves an ambiguity regarding what is meant by cognitive phenomenology, (b) better represents the restrictions H&K place on what type of belief can be infallible; namely, some occurrent belief that is present, has a phenomenal mode of presentation, and is bracketed. But, I think there are good reasons to deny that occurrent beliefs actually count as beliefs at all.

Although we often talk as if there are occurrent beliefs, I think that term ‘belief’ should be treated as a technical term. Beliefs are theoretical posits employed by our folk-psychology to help explain human behaviors, and there is no phenomenology associated with these theoretical posits, there is only a phenomenology of thinking. If this is right, then it seems plausible that one could deny that occurrent beliefs exist, though standing beliefs exist.

---

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough review of debates concerning the existence of cognitive phenomenology, see Bayne and Montague (2014); for a specific account that denies cognitive phenomenology is importantly different from perceptual phenomenology, see Pautz (2013)

<sup>26</sup> For arguments in support of cognitive phenomenology, see Horgan and Tienson, (2002); Kriegel, (2007); Pitt, (2004); and Strawson, (1994)

<sup>27</sup> Crane, (2013), pp. 167-171

To see why one might deny that occurrent beliefs exist, let us consider Block's (1996) distinction between *access-consciousness* (AC) and *phenomenal-consciousness* (PC).<sup>28</sup> The latter involves something-it-is-like to be in that mental state, but the former pertain to representations and play a causal and functional role in reasoning.<sup>29</sup> Block was concerned to show that we needed to distinguish between a present conscious state and our ability to access (or call to mind) a conscious mental state. But, the fact that AC requires ability to bring to phenomenal consciousness some mental state like a belief, clearly it does not follow that we always make such a mental state phenomenally conscious. In fact, most of the time we simply do not. Presumably, you have a standing belief that grass is green at this very moment, but most of the time you do not bring this standing belief to phenomenal consciousness. If 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. Therefore, AC is best understood as a dispositional state, and it is not obvious that this dispositional standing belief can be a conscious occurrent belief. Thus, we should not simply assume that such a distinction is obvious. Otherwise, it seems that the kind of distinction Block appealed to would make consciousness widely unified and disjointed.<sup>30</sup>

We can access standing beliefs, making them phenomenally conscious, but it does not automatically follow from this that they then become some other kind of belief. Nor is it clear that calling a standing belief to mind can be adequately understood independently from the more basic notion of phenomenal consciousness.<sup>31</sup> In fact, AC seems to presuppose PC.<sup>32</sup> This makes the apparent disjointedness of Block's distinction all that more problematic. A better approach, one

---

<sup>28</sup> Crane, (2013), pp. 159-162; see also Block (1996)

<sup>29</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 160

<sup>30</sup> Crane, (2013), pp. 156-157, 171

<sup>31</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 160

<sup>32</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 160

that attempts to unify the phenomenon of phenomenal consciousness, is simply to deny the distinction between standing and occurrent beliefs.<sup>33</sup>

Since a belief must be the sort of thing that can persist beyond the moment one initially acquires it, beliefs seem to be importantly dispositional.<sup>34</sup> Similar to AC, if one has a standing belief *P*, one could call *P* to phenomenal consciousness, though they need do so. But, an occurrent belief is not dispositional—you just simply have it here and now. If at this present moment you have the occurrent belief *P*, it cannot be stored away in memory (so to speak) and still be an occurrent belief. And presumably, this is one reason some have thought that only occurrent beliefs can be phenomenally conscious, since a standing belief is importantly dispositional.<sup>35</sup>

Now, insofar as standing and occurrent beliefs are both types of belief, if *X* is a necessary condition for one type of belief, then *X* should be a necessary condition for the other type too. Could *X* be a necessary condition for one type of belief, but not the other? I think no. To see why, let us consider what seems to be a necessary condition for *P* to be a standing belief, and then ask whether it makes sense for this necessary condition to be applied to occurrent beliefs too.

Typically, we say that for *P* to count as a belief someone must entertain that *P* is the case. We might think that the entertaining that *P* is the case is a necessary condition for the acquisition of *P* into one's belief set.<sup>36</sup> But why think that *ipso facto* entertaining (which is a diachronic) should be a necessary condition for *P* to count as a belief as such? When one undergoes an episode of entertain the possibility that *P* is the case, this entertaining could terminate without *P* ever entering one's belief set. Indeed, it seems that this happens all the time.

---

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps one could argue that there is a distinction between beliefs as dispositional and the disposition to belief. See for example, Audi, (1994); Crane, (2013) suggests in footnote 1., that this might be a useful distinction. I grant that it could help clarify some of the issues covered here, but that further consideration will have to wait.

<sup>34</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 164

<sup>35</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 164; see also Horgan and Kriegel, (2007), p. 125

<sup>36</sup> Horgan and Kriegel (2007) suggest that we can explain LPI in terms of belief acquisition; see pp. 135-138

For  $P$  to count as a belief,  $P$  must be a part of one's belief set, which suggests that  $P$  is able to persist beyond the initial moment when one undergoes a diachronic episode of entertaining whether  $P$  is the case. Therefore, the following is an essential feature for  $P$  to count as a belief:

The Persistence Condition: *Necessarily, if  $P$  is to count as a belief, then  $P$  must be able to persist beyond the initial moment that  $P$  was acquired.*

As Crane suggests:

Belief is not just a matter of taking something to be the case for the duration of (e.g.) a perceptual experience. Rather, it is essential to beliefs that they persist through changes of in current consciousness. Beliefs are stored in memory and can be called upon when future action is needed. It is crucial that they do this is they are to guide the actions of organism in the way they do.<sup>37</sup>

It seems right to think that  $P$ 's persisting beyond one's initial episode of entertaining if  $P$  is the case is explanatorily crucial, if  $P$  is to play the functional role beliefs are thought to play in accounting for human behaviors. If  $P$  lacks this necessary condition,  $P$  is not a belief.

Perhaps this is a necessary condition only for standing beliefs. If one insists that this is the case, one would have to accept and explain a wildly ununified and disjointed conception of phenomenal consciousness. A more reasonable position is the persistence condition applies to all types of beliefs. Of course, this would imply that occurrent beliefs are not really beliefs at all, since they lack the persistence condition. This is not a denial of cognitive phenomenology, however, since one could still accept that there is a phenomenology of conscious thought, which employs standing beliefs as theoretical posit when one undergoes an episode of entertaining whether such and such is the case. Since only occurrent beliefs can be phenomenally conscious, there is no phenomenology of belief. Therefore, we have good reason to deny that LPI is true.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 164

<sup>38</sup> Of course, I have not pursued the distinction Audi (1994) considers between beliefs as dispositional and one's disposition to believe; Crane (2013), suggests that this distinction could be worth considering in footnote 1. I have not considered this option any further here, because I do not think it represents an objection to the argument presented in this paper, rather I think it would support and help clarify the view of cognitive phenomenology I have presented and endorse.

Is this merely a verbal dispute? I think there are reason to think it is not. The fact that philosophers have appealed to occurrent beliefs, typically to identity conscious beliefs, suggest it is not a mere verbal dispute.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the bracketing restriction is what was doing all the work in avoiding counterexamples. But, if what I have argued is right, then there will be no way to avoid these counterexamples. This hardly seems to be a verbal dispute. And, if what I have argued is right, this tells us something important about cognitive phenomenology itself, which is not a trivial matter either.

I have argued that a belief is a theoretical posit required for explaining human behavior, and that it must be able to persist beyond one's initial acquisition of it. However, H&K's bracketing restriction on LPI makes the belief in question no belief at all, since it lacks this essential feature of persistence. Therefore, we have good reason to think that LPI is false.

---

<sup>39</sup> Crane, (2013), p. 163; see also Kriegel, (2004), p. 108

## Bibliography

- Audi, Robert. "Dispositional Beliefs and Dispositions to Believe." *Noûs* 28, no. 4 (1994): 419.
- Bayne, Tim, and Michelle Montague. *Cognitive Phenomenology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Block, Ned. "Mental Paint and Mental Latex." *Philosophical Issues* 7 (1996): 19-49.
- Chalmers, David John, et al. "The Intentionality of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Intentionality." *Philosophy of Mind Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, pp. 520–533.
- Chisholm, Roderick. *Perceiving*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1957
- Crane, Tim. "Unconscious Belief and Conscious Thought." Edited by Uriah Kriegel. In *Phenomenal Intentionality*, 156-73. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Horgan, Terry, and Uriah Kriegel. "Phenomenal Epistemology: What Is Consciousness That We May Know It So Well?" *Philosophical Issues* 17, no. 1 (2007): 123-44.
- Kriegel, Uriah. "Consciousness as Intransitive Self-Consciousness: Two Views and an Argument." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (2003): 103-32.
- Kriegel, Uriah. "Moore's Paradox and the Structure of Conscious Belief." *Erkenntnis* 61, no. 1 (2004): 99-121.
- Kriegel, Uriah. "Cognitive Phenomenology as the Basis of Unconscious Content." *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2014, pp. 79–102.
- Pautz, Adam. "Does Phenomenology Ground Mental Content?" Edited by Uriah Kriegel. In *Phenomenal Intentionality*, 194-234. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Pitt, David. "The Phenomenology of Cognition Or What Is It Like to Think That P?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69, no. 1 (2004): 1-36.
- Strawson, Galen. *Mental Reality*. MIT Press, 1994.