Attention and Introspective Justification

Ernest Sosa has argued that various internalist views of epistemic justification, those embracing some form of the given, fall prey to the problem of the speckled hen. Such views are often criticized for their tendency to lead to external world skepticism; Sosa’s objection, however, is more worrisome since it threatens internalists’ ability to give an adequate account of their supposed paradigm case of justification: the justification of introspective beliefs. This paper is part of a larger project where I argue that the internalist ought to reject a variety of proposed responses in favor of what I refer to as ‘the attention strategy’. Due to space considerations I cannot argue against all of the alternatives to the attention strategy so I focus on what I label the phenomenal concepts strategy (one of the strongest alternatives to my own view).

The target of the speckled hen objection has traditionally been any view that adopts the two theses of what I call Traditional Internalism (or TI):

(i) All justification is ultimately grounded in things, properties, or facts of which one has direct awareness.
(ii) The only things one is directly aware of are mental states, facts, properties, or their relations.

A central motivation for TI is that it can end the regress of justification with items that a subject is directly aware of, and thereby provides a subject with a 1st-person assurance of the truth or likelihood of her belief. On TI, when a subject is justified in a belief, the justification contributor for the belief is right there before the subject’s consciousness. Externalist theories, however, allow the possibility of justified beliefs where the subject is completely oblivious to the justification contributor (e.g. the reliability); therefore, externalist theories allow a subject to have a justified belief while lacking the subjective assurance that some have taken to be characteristic of justification—as is so elegantly illustrated by Bonjour’s Norman case.1

TI comes in both weak and strong forms. Weak TI makes noninferential justification a matter of a belief standing in a relation of fit to the mental states of which one is directly aware, but it doesn’t require direct awareness of the fit itself. For example, my direct awareness of my pain is sufficient for having noninferential justification for believing that I’m in pain since this fits my

1 See (Bonjour, 1985) p. 41.
evidence (i.e. the pain state that I’m directly aware of) but I needn’t be aware of the fit itself. Strong TI requires direct awareness of the mental states, the belief, and the fit between the two. For simplicity’s sake, I limit discussion to weak TI, but the responses I consider could be adopted by an advocate of strong TI as well.

Assessing TI requires an understanding of both fit and direct awareness. There’ve been numerous proposals for analyzing fit: correspondence, probabilistic relations, explanatory relations, and even reliability. Nothing important will turn on the analysis of fit, so I leave it open, with one caveat: the new-evil demon objection to externalism commits internalism to characterizing the fitting relation as an internal/necessary relation (ruling out reliability).²

Attempting to elucidate the notion of direct awareness, Sosa distinguishes constitutive awareness (c-awareness) and meta-awareness (m-awareness). C-awareness piggybacks on an experience’s being conscious; this “[a]wareness is constitutive of conscious experience”.³ Consciousness is a kind of awareness. Therefore, if experience E with the intrinsic feature Φ is a conscious experience then one’s automatically c-aware of Φ. Consciously experiencing a sharp stinging pain brings with it c-awareness of the pain, its sharpness, and its stinging-ness. Sosa notes, however, there’re many things present to consciousness which escape our notice and that we’re unaware of in a stronger sense, bringing us to M-awareness, or awareness “about the experience.”⁴ M-awareness is epistemic and involves justifiably applying a concept to one’s experience; it’s naturally expressed by the locution ‘awareness that’ (as opposed to ‘awareness of’). Which of these kinds of awareness amounts to TI’s direct awareness?⁵ Appealing to an epistemic concept in analyzing

² The new-evil demon objection rests on the claim that mental duplicates of us in the Cartesian Evil-Demon world would have just as much justification for their beliefs as we do. The basic idea is that these evil-demon victims would have exactly the same evidence for their beliefs about tables and chairs being in front of them as we do, and their beliefs would fit this evidence just as well as ours. If, however, we analyze fit in terms of reliability then we’d have to deny this thesis since these experiences are reliable indicators of external world objects in the actual world but not in the evil-demon world. Similarly, if we’re analyzing fit in terms of probabilistic relations, we can’t use a frequency conception of probability that makes it equivalent to reliability. One probabilistic approach that is open to the internalist is the Keynesian view that models probability relations on entailment relations. C.f. (Keynes, 1921).


⁴ Ibid.

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noninferential justification is circular. Thus, it seems direct awareness must be $c$-awareness. But now the problem of the speckled hen rears its speckled head.

Imagine that I have a conscious experience as of a 3-speckled hen. If $c$-awareness = direct awareness then, in virtue of this experience being conscious, I’m directly aware of the 3 speckles. The belief “I’m having an experience as of 3 speckles” fits this experience. Therefore, according to weak TI, I have noninferential justification for this belief. Unfortunately, the same reasoning applies mutatis mutandis in the case where I have a conscious experience as of a 47-speckled hen. But it’s absurd to think that (normal) humans have noninferential justification for believing his or her experience is as of 47 speckles. When the speckles get so numerous we clearly cannot tell—except via some inferential process involving counting—how many speckles our experience is of. If $c$-awareness = direct awareness then TI fails to account for obvious differences in noninferential justification between beliefs about simple and complex features of experiences.

An obvious response to the problem would be to claim that some of our experiences are indeterminate. As a matter of contingent fact, we have experiences as of 3-speckles but not 47-speckles. Most of the discussions of the speckled hen work under the assumption that the features of experience are determinate. The problem, however, arises from the weaker assumption that experiential features (whether determinate or indeterminate) outstrip what we have noninferential justification for believing about our experiences. I think this weaker claim can be supported by appealing to the famous experiments of Sperling where subjects were presented with a 3x4 grid of letters (figure 1) for 50 milliseconds and could recall at most 4 letters of the grid, but could recall all 4 letters of any row when given a cue immediately after the grid had disappeared.⁵ Due to space considerations, I will not go into further detail here. I shall make the weaker assumption for the sake of argument.

⁵ See Sperling (1960).
Richard Feldman has suggested solving the problem by restricting noninferential justification to beliefs that refer to features of experience via indexical or phenomenal concepts.\(^6\) Call this the phenomenal concepts strategy (PCS). Feldman’s strategy utilizes the following principle:

If a person is [c-aware] of property F, and believes that he is having an experience with property F, and refers to property F in this belief by means of an indexical or phenomenal concept, then this belief is [noninferentially] justified.\(^7\)

An introspective belief involving an indexical concept can be expressed by something like “I’m experiencing this” or “I’m experiencing thusly”. Introspective beliefs that refer to an experience’s features via an indexical concept can be foundationally justified because the way “this” and “thus” pick out their referent guarantees the belief’s truth. If I fail to pick anything out with the use of the indexical, then I failed to form a genuine thought with content.\(^8\)\(^9\)

A phenomenal concept, on Sosa and Feldman’s usage, is a kind of recognitional capacity. A subject \(S\) has a phenomenal concept of \(\Phi\) \iff \(S\) is able to introspectively distinguish things with \(\Phi\) from those without \(\Phi\); \(S\) can group together things with \(\Phi\) due to there being something distinctive about those things. It’s important to note that this phenomenal concept is atomic and simple. One might have the phenomenal concept of 47-speckledness in virtue of being able to group together all and only those things with 47-speckles but lack a phenomenal concept of 47 and lack a phenomenal concept of speckledness.\(^10\) Introspective beliefs that refer to features of experience via phenomenal

\(^6\) Feldman also considers a strategy that attempts to make use of the notion of attention. The strategy is along the lines of the one I’ll eventually defend below. However, there’re noticeable differences between Feldman’s and my development of the attention strategy. For one, Feldman still restricts noninferential justification to beliefs involving indexical or phenomenal concepts but I don’t. Second, Feldman seems to suggest that possession of a phenomenal concept is required prior to being able to attend to that phenomenal feature. I think such a requirement is a mistake. It seems we must be able to attend to a feature prior to our being able to grasp a phenomenal concept in order to actually acquire said concept.

\(^7\) (Feldman, 2004) p. 215.

\(^8\) Tim McGrew seems to be even more demanding than Feldman by restricting noninferential justification to beliefs that refer to experiential features via indexical concepts. C.f. (McGrew,1995). The foundations of such a view are so thin that I find it incredibly implausible that we could ever build anything substantive off of such foundations. In fact, I think it leads to an internal world skepticism akin to the problem I push for the PCS below.

\(^9\) Note: from the perspective of internalism, there are incredibly important differences between the nature of perceptual demonstratives and introspective demonstratives but a discussion of these differences would take us too far afield

\(^10\) I say a bit more about phenomenal concepts when I distinguish them from SGA concepts below.
concepts can be foundationally justified because being able to reliably apply the concept is constitutive of possessing a phenomenal concept.

According to the PCS, the belief that our experience is of 47 speckles lacks noninferential justification because (as a matter of contingent fact) we lack the phenomenal concept 47-speckledness (despite possessing the phenomenal concept 3-speckledness). The beliefs we form about 47-speckledness refers to this feature neither via an indexical or phenomenal concept but, rather, via what Sosa calls a simple-geometric and arithmetic (SGA) concept. Sosa says next to nothing about distinguishing phenomenal and SGA concepts, and Feldman only says a bit more. The distinction seems to be as follows: a phenomenal concept of Φ is a concept such that its content is exhausted by its phenomenal character and its possession grounds our introspective sensitivity to Φ; on the other hand, the content of an SGA concept of Φ isn’t exhausted by its phenomenal character and is independent of introspective sensitivity to Φ.

Feldman isn’t done yet. Part of the challenge posed by Sosa is to explain how we can have justification for introspective beliefs that deploy SGA concepts, otherwise the internalist won’t have a chance in hell of getting justification for beliefs beyond introspective beliefs. Sosa (correctly) assumes that the internalist cannot move from justification for introspective beliefs deploying phenomenal concepts to justification for introspective beliefs deploying SGA concepts. Feldman suggests that introspective beliefs deploying SGA concepts can be inferentially justified by an introspective belief deploying a phenomenal concept combined with background beliefs associating a phenomenal concept (e.g. of 3-speckles) with an SGA concept (e.g. of 3-speckles).

One worry for the PCS is phenomenological. Feldman’s story of how beliefs deploying SGA concepts are inferentially justified is phenomenologically plausible in cases such as the following: when 9 dots are arranged randomly I cannot immediately recognize that I have an experience as of 9 dots, but when 9 dots are arranged in a 3x3 square I can immediately recognize that there’re 9 dots because I have a phenomenal concept of that particular pattern which I’ve associated with the SGA concept 9-dots. This inferential story, however, seems less phenomenologically plausible in cases of 3, 4, or 5 dots (or speckles). It seems like we can immediately apply the SGA
concept in these cases without any need of inference (no matter how subtle)—just think of the phenomenological difference of forming the belief that there are 9 dots when the image is as of a 3×3 grid and that of forming the belief that there are 4 dots (no matter how they are arranged). Many philosophers worry about construing external world beliefs as inferentially justified via beliefs about our experiences since we rarely form any beliefs about our experiences. Our “eyes” are, so to speak, pointed towards the world. If one is at all moved by this consideration, it's even more problematic to suppose the belief that my experience is of 3-speckles (SGA concept) is inferentially justified.

An epistemological worry for the PCS is that it isn't clear how we could justifiably associate SGA concepts with phenomenal concepts. Thus, the PCS leads not only to external world skepticism but also a very disturbing form of internal world skepticism. The PCS is committed to the claim that even the SGA concepts 1-speckle, 2-speckles, and 3-speckles, are justified via this association with phenomenal concepts. How can a subject make this association? It seems we could only do this by noticing the phenomenal character of an experience, counting the speckles, and repeating this process. But this can't work! At each step of the counting process you’re applying an SGA concept! 1-speckle… 2-speckles… 3-speckles. Associating the final SGA concept of this counting process with the phenomenal concept requires being justified in the application of each of the SGA concepts applied at the earlier steps, but this application could only have been justified if the subject had already associated that particular SGA concept with a phenomenal concept. We’re stuck in a circle and a very disturbing form of skepticism.

Lastly, the solution is either ad hoc or simply abandons internalism. What’s the rationale for restricting noninferential justification to beliefs that refer to experiential features via indexical or phenomenal concepts? Even if the restriction gives intuitively correct results (provided it can deal with the previous problems), we need an explanation of why these kinds of beliefs can be noninferentially justified but not beliefs deploying SGA concepts. We can be directly aware of beliefs involving all three kinds of concepts and all three can stand in fitting relations to our experiences. What explains the restriction? It seems ad hoc. While presenting the PCS I suggested
that the reason might lie in the fact that beliefs involving these kinds of concepts are such that either
their conditions of reference or of possession guarantee that the beliefs reliably track the truth.
Internalists cannot help themselves to this distinction in explaining the justificatory difference since
the reliability of these beliefs is often outside the subject’s perspective!

Perhaps the PCS was too eager to identify direct awareness with c-awareness; perhaps this
identification is really responsible for giving rise to the problem of the speckled hen. It’s time to
consider the possibility that direct awareness is an awareness captured neither by Sosa’s notion of c-
awareness nor his notion of m-awareness.

Most of the time we’re all preoccupied with what’s happening at the center of our visual
fields. Due to this, there are often figures in our periphery that we have a conscious experience of
but fail to notice in the sense that we lack Sosa’s m-awareness. In order to gain m-awareness of the
figure in our periphery we need to form a justified (true) belief about the figure’s presence in your
experience. Now there are two importantly different ways that we might achieve this m-awareness.
You might, for example, come to justifiable believe this figure is in the periphery of your visual field
on the basis of a neuroscientist’s testimony that some configuration of neurons is firing that’s been
correlated with such a figure being present in the periphery of people’s visual experience. Needless
to say, this way and analogous ways of achieving m-awareness are rare. Often enough, a subject
focuses her mental attention (a kind of mental pointing) on the figure in the periphery (i.e. by noticing
the figure in a sense weaker than m-awareness) and thereby comes to notice the figure in Sosa’s sense
of justifiably believing it to be present in her experience. This non-epistemic sense of noticing or
attending to an experiential feature is often (probably more often than not) what explains our
becoming m-aware of the feature. This selective or focused attention on our experience and its
features is a kind of awareness between c-awareness and m-awareness.

11 In fact this particular way of achieving m-awareness probably has never occurred. However, there are more
plausible ways that are analogous. Perhaps the presence of the figure in your visual field is the best explanation of some
of your behavior (perhaps combined with testimony of a friend that there is such a figure off to the side and justified
beliefs that figures places in such places usually reflect light that is received by the retina and process by the visual
system). These ways of achieving m-awareness of experiential features are still rare and there certainly seems to be a
more common way of achieving m-awareness.
The previous gives phenomenological motivation for positing a non-epistemic notion of attention, but there’re also theoretical reasons for so doing. Many think that we can have what Chalmers calls ‘pure phenomenological concepts’, such that the concept’s content is actually constituted by, and exhausted by, its phenomenological content. For instance, I have one kind of concept of what it’s like to see red that’s purely about a certain kind of phenomenological character and is not constituted by any relational description such as “the kind of experience that I usually have when looking at roses under white light and disposes me to use the word ‘red’”. The best account of how I acquire these pure phenomenal concepts is empiricist and claims that I have experiences with a certain phenomenal character, red*, and from with this experience I’m able to form a concept red* where the phenomenological content of the experience (or a less determinate aspect of the experience) is actually embedded in the concept. But we need some mechanism that actually performs this embedding act, thus giving us motivation for positing the current notion of attention. I don’t get the phenomenal concept red* simply in virtue of having a red* experience; clearly I could have the experience without forming the concept. It seem we acquire the concept red* by attending to the phenomenal character while undergoing the concept. To further motivate the idea, consider figure 2 borrowed from Michael Tye. While focusing on the plus sign of figure you’re able to mentally ostend each of the three bars to the left; you likely can’t mentally ostend the third bar to the right but, rather, you can only mentally ostend the entire group of bars to the right. Due to your ability to mentally ostend each of the bars to the left, you can also form a de re thought about each bar and its color. You can think [this is black] where you pick out either the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd bar to the left’s color via the ostensive act rather than via any sort of description. Alternatively, you cannot form the de re thought [this is black] about the third bar to the right’s color. You can only form a de dicto thought, something akin to [the third bar to the right’s color is black] where that particular bar’s color is picked out by a definite description.12 I take

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12 My discussion here is heavily inspired by Tye (2011) discussion of this kind of example. He says many things similar to what I say here about de re thought and mental ostension.
attentive awareness to just be this mental ostensive act, an act that I take to be a mental primitive.¹³
I do hope, however, that the preceding helps gesture at the phenomenon I have in mind (similar to
how Sosa’s discussion of c-awareness gestures at but doesn’t give an analysis of a certain kind of
awareness). We now have another theoretical reason to posit a non-epistemic attentive awareness:
it’s what explains our ability to form de re thoughts!

It’s clear that each of these theoretical motivations requires the notion of attention under
consideration to be non-conceptual and non-epistemic. This attention explains phenomenal
concept acquisition and therefore must be prior to the application (and even formation) of said
concepts. This attention is used to form de re thoughts and must be able to pick out the experiential
state, feature, or fact, without the need of any (explicit or implicit) conceptual description of its
object.

If we identify the direct awareness relevant to noninferential justification with attention, this
will allow TI to avoid the problem of the speckled hen. In both the case where we have an
experience as of a 3-speckled hen and as of a 47-speckled hen we are c-aware of the 3-speckledness
and 47-speckledness respectively, but this doesn’t give us noninferential justification. We have
noninferential justification only for the 3-speckled belief since (as a matter of contingent fact) we
can attend to the feature of 3-speckledness but not 47-speckledness.

How does this compare to the PCS? The current view seems more phenomenologically
plausible since it can retain the intuition that many of our introspective beliefs (including those
deploying SGA concepts like 1-speckle) are noninferentially justified¹⁴, which also alleviates the worry
that introspective beliefs with SGA concepts won’t be able to be justified. Finally, the view avoids
the problem of ad hocness because there is a natural explanation of why we would have justification

¹³ By mental primitive I just mean that the mental state cannot be reduced to any complex of simpler mental states.
I leave open the possibility that the mental act of attention might be reduced to some non-mental phenomenon; thus
leaving open the possibility of physicalism.

¹⁴ But it also leaves room for some of these introspective beliefs being inferentially justified in the way that I
suggested that I might be inferentially justified in believing I’m having an experience as of 9 dots when they are arranged
in a 3x3 pattern. In such a case I can’t attend to the 9-dotness feature of my experience but I do have a phenomenal
concept of that particular pattern of dots, which I may have associated with 9-dotness in the way Feldman imagines.
for beliefs about features we can attend to but not those that we cannot; in attending to the features of our experience this information is made available to us in forming and assessing various beliefs. Attention gives us the ability to actually use the information, and how could information that we lack any ability to use be relevant to justification.15

One worry for the current approach, however, is that it too will lead to a disturbing form of skepticism. Why? Well we rarely ever actually attend to features of our experience. In which case, on the current approach, we would also lack justification for beliefs about these features of experience. There are three possible modifications one could make to the current proposal to deal with this worry. First, one could say that we have dispositional justification for these beliefs since we could attend to the features. Second, one might say that we have propositional justification (justification you have for a belief even if you don’t form that belief) for the beliefs merely in virtue of being c-aware of the feature but build attention into the basing requirement so that we could only gain doxastic justification (you can only have doxastic justification if you properly base your belief on your evidence/justification) for beliefs about those features of experience we can attend to. Finally, you might say that we have propositional justification for beliefs about features of experience that are available to attention; in which case, the actual act of attending wouldn’t be required for propositional justification.16 I prefer the third option but, sadly, a dedicated discussion to these developments must await another occasion.

15 Another advantage (in the eyes of some philosophers) is that it gives a role to empirical research in determining which proposition can be noninferentially justified, in that we can perform studies regarding the mechanisms of attention. In fact current research by Pylyshyn and Storm suggest that subjects can simultaneously track up to five dots moving in random paths. Cf. (Pylyshyn & Storm, 1988). This would seem to track our intuitive judgments pertaining to which beliefs are noninferentially justified. It’s easy to identify 3, 4, or 5 dots, and a credence approaching certainty seems appropriate. Around 7, 8, or 9 dots and it gets more difficult to identify; in such cases a credence lower than certain seem appropriate. Note: these empirical studies aren’t (except by way of eliminating defeaters) playing a role in the justification of the object level beliefs themselves, e.g. the belief that the experience is as of 5 speckles, but rather they are playing a role in justifying the belief “such-and-such belief is noninferentially justified”.

16 Jesse Prinz seems to suggest this notion of being available to attention is essential to understanding consciousness. He also thinks that working memory is responsible for the different acts of attention and thus one might analyze direct awareness into the notion of information being made available to working memory. This would be one way to naturalize a kind of acquaintance theory about epistemic justification. Cf. (Prinz, 2007).
FIGURES

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Figure 1

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Figure 2
Works Cited


