

Imagination and Experience

Philosophical Explorations

Edited by **Íngrid Vendrell Ferran**
and **Christiana Werner**

First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-43348-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-43349-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-36689-8 (ebk)

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Julien Bugnon and Martine Nida-Rümelin

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003366898-18

The Open Access version of this chapter is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).



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14.1 Introduction: the so-called “third-person approach” and the pervasiveness of subject-presupposing thoughts

It is commonplace nowadays in analytic philosophy to distinguish between first-person and third-person approaches to mental phenomena. Within the former approach to perception, one may, for instance, wonder how perceived objects appear to the subject; within the latter one may consider how perception causally guides the subject’s behaviour. Within a first-person approach to consciousness, one may wonder about the way it is like for the subject to undergo a given kind of conscious process, whereas one may ask, within a third-person approach, what difference the occurrence of that process makes for the internal functioning of the organism at issue. The third-person approach is usually regarded as characteristic of scientific enquiry into the mind, while the first-person approach is frequently deemed typical of non-scientific explorations of it.

We consider the usual distinction between third-person and first-person approaches to be highly problematic. It is a perfectly legitimate scientific goal to enquire whether it hurts a fish to be caught in a particular way, where “hurting” is understood in the first-personal manner – that is when it is conceptualised in terms of what it is like for the subject concerned. However, this is not the point we wish to focus on here. Instead, we want to start with a critical note on the terms “third-person” and “first-person” as they are standardly used to refer to that distinction between two fundamentally different approaches to the mind. This critical note shall help us introduce the topic of this chapter. It should also help direct the reader’s attention to common and rather implicit prejudices that in our view tend to blind contemporary philosophy to a significant and fundamental feature of human thought.

The third-person approach as it is commonly understood abstracts away from how things are for the subject concerned. It often describes the organism at issue in causal terms. It aims at understanding the internal

mechanisms that supposedly explain the organism's reactions and behaviour. Let us call such an approach *subject-neutral*. It is subject-neutral because in that type of approach the fact that we are dealing with an experiencing subject, an individual who has an "inner conscious life," a "perspective" – someone who, to use another metaphor, is a "centre of their own world" – plays no role whatsoever.

We are aware that that type of approach to conscious subjects, and to the mind in general, is widely embraced in some areas of science. However, we want to stress that the term "third-person approach," as a label for such a subject-neutral attitude or practice, is highly misleading. To call such a subject-neutral approach *third-personal* suggests that it is the default approach in everyday human thought about *other people*. Yet in reality, the way we think about others is not subject-neutral at all – and this generalises to thoughts about any individual we take to be conscious (be it a dolphin, an elephant, or a bird we observe as it searches for food).

On the contrary, we typically think about other conscious beings in a way that does justice to the fact that they are conscious subjects, "centres of their own world" – that is, beings for whom there is a way it is like to live their life. The way we think about them is in that sense *subject-presupposing*, and not subject-neutral. When you wonder, for instance, if the lizard you see on the sun-baked wall feels the warmth on its back, you thereby presuppose that there is a way it is like *for the lizard* to be in its present state. This is to presuppose that the lizard is capable of having *experiential properties* as we shall call them – properties such that any of their instantiations requires the presence of someone (a human or non-human subject) *for whom* there is a way it is like to have them.¹

Whenever you wonder about someone's emotions, thoughts, or intentions, you already presuppose that you are dealing with a subject in the sense alluded to: an individual capable of having experiential properties, an individual A capable of featuring in what is said by a true sentence of the form "there is a way it is like *for A* to have property P," where that locution must be read in the well-known Nagelian sense.²

These remarks should point to an important fact concerning human conceptual architecture. Our normal thinking about others involves concepts that manifest our ubiquitous and permanent awareness of the fact that they are, like ourselves, conscious subjects, "centres of their own world." Thoughts including such concepts have what we call a *for-a-subject content*. If such a thought is true, it is true in virtue of there being something it is like for some subject to instantiate some experiential property. Indeed, the subject-presupposition – the implicit assumption of the presence of a conscious being – is deeply embedded into human cognitive architecture. Thoughts with for-a-subject content are omnipresent in our cognitive life. It is quite astonishing that such a pervasive, central, and fundamental feature

of human cognitive architecture has received little attention in contemporary philosophy of mind. This is perhaps due to the fact that this ubiquitous subject-presupposition usually remains implicit and is rarely brought to the surface in critical reflection. To think in a subject-presupposing manner about others is highly natural for us – it usually goes without saying. This is precisely why that deep feature of human thought may easily go unnoticed.

The present chapter, as well as our other chapter in this volume,³ is intended as a contribution towards filling that theoretical gap. They put thoughts with for-a-subject content at the centre of inquiry. In this chapter, we examine a first kind of such thoughts: thoughts in terms of *phenomenal concepts*. These are thoughts about our as well as other subjects' experiential properties in terms of concepts we acquire on the basis of instantiating experiential properties.⁴ A second kind of thoughts with for-a-subject content is discussed in our other contribution to this volume: thoughts about the identity of conscious subjects by (what we shall call there) *taking perspective*.

Thoughts with for-a-subject content are bearers of truth value. They can be true or false. In some cases, we know such thoughts to be true and such knowledge may be central for theoretical and practical purposes. Such thoughts thus have an important epistemic role to play.

However, thoughts with for-a-subject content are also intimately related to imagination. Their intimate relation to imagination may lead one to underestimate their epistemic role, in particular for theoretical purposes. One might indeed be tempted to think along the following lines. To aim at knowledge about mental phenomena in the context of scientific research is one thing, whereas to aim at imagining things from another subject's perspective is quite another. The former has its place within a theoretical endeavour, while the latter has its place in the practical realm, where such an imaginative capacity may, for instance, help to enhance the quality of human interactions. Following such reasoning, one may well overlook the epistemic significance of thoughts with for-a-subject content for both practical *and* theoretical purposes, especially if one confuses issues about such thoughts with issues concerning imagination. For despite their intimate relations, thoughts with for-a-subject content and imagination with for-a-subject content are distinct mental phenomena. We shall aim here at articulating how they are distinct and yet intimately intertwined in the case of thoughts in terms of phenomenal concepts and acts of imagination concerning the way it is like to have experiential properties.

14.2 Experiences and experiential properties

Our discussion of imagination and phenomenal concepts shall benefit from settling a few terminological points at the outset. The first concerns

conscious experiences. Whenever you hear the rumble of the motorcycle speeding nearby, see it disappearing down the street and notice the smelly exhaust it left, whenever you are angry at your partner, thinking about what to cook for lunch, feeling pain in your stomach, or actively waving your hand, you are having a conscious experience. In the framework we shall be using, experiences are events: they are events that consist of a conscious (human or animal) subject instantiating an experiential property. We call that framework the subject-property framework.^{5,6}

Definition 1: Experiential properties in the broad sense

A property P is an experiential property in the broad sense if and only if (in virtue of what it is to have P) whenever P is instantiated there is a subject S such that there is something it is like for S to have P in that instantiation.

To hear the rumble of the motorcycle, to be angry, to think about lunch, to feel pain, and so on are all typical examples of experiential properties. There is something it is like for you to instantiate these properties. There is, for instance, something it is like for you to feel pain in your stomach – and this pain experience you have is an event consisting of you instantiating that experiential property. That being said, not all experiential properties are of the same kind. Some of your experiences consist in you instantiating what we call experiential properties in the narrow sense:

Definition 2: Experiential properties in the narrow sense

A property P is an experiential property in the narrow sense if and only if (in virtue of what it is to have P) the following two conditions hold:

- (a) there is some specific way it is like to have P such that whenever P is instantiated then there is a subject S for whom it is like *that* to have P in that instantiation;
- (b) having P partially consists in the way it is like to have P.

Thinking about what to cook for lunch is an experiential property, but not one in the narrow sense. Although there is something it is like for one to be thinking about lunch, there is no specific way it is like for all conscious subjects to think about lunch, or so we suggest. The way it is like for you to think about lunch might differ from the way it is like for your neighbour: even though you both instantiate the experiential property of thinking about lunch, there is no specific way it is like for both of you to have that experiential property. In contrast, actively waving one's hand arguably

is an experiential property in the narrow sense: it is part of actively waving one's hand that one is phenomenally aware of being actively involved in that bodily movement. Furthermore, there is a specific way it is like for you and your neighbour to have the agentic experience of actively waving the hand. On a view we endorse, it consists in being under the impression of being oneself the causal source of one's hand waving.⁷ This is the specific way it is like for both you and your neighbour to instantiate the experiential property of actively waving one's hand, and instantiating that property partially consists in this specific way it is like for you both. It does so only *partially* because other conditions must be met for you to instantiate that experiential property. It is not enough for you to instantiate the property of actively waving your hand that you are under the impression of being the causal source of your hand movements, because you might be under such an impression although you are not moving your hand at all, for instance, when your arm is under anaesthesia – in this case, you would not be instantiating the experiential property of actively waving your hand. This is the reason why that experiential property is not a pure experiential property:

Definition 3: Pure experiential properties

A property P is a pure experiential property if and only if (in virtue of what it is to have P) the following two conditions hold:

- (a) there is some specific way it is like to have P such that whenever P is instantiated then there is a subject S for whom it is like *that* to have P in that instantiation;
- (b) having P consists in what it is like to have P.

Typical examples of pure experiential properties include feeling a pain in your stomach or being visually presented with an expanse of pure blue. In both these cases, not only is there a specific way it is like for one to instantiate the relevant experiential properties but this specific way it is like for one to have these properties is what having them consists in. There is no further condition that must be met for you to instantiate the experiential property of being visually presented with pure blue: the specific way it is like for you just is what it is to be visually presented with pure blue – it is what having that experiential property consists in.

14.3 Phenomenal concepts as property concepts

Endorsing the subject-property framework has significant consequences for issues about phenomenal concepts. It is natural within this framework to view phenomenal concepts as being concepts that we use to attribute

experiential properties to conscious subjects. This departs from the widely shared view of phenomenal concepts as concepts that refer to a special type of entity labelled “experiences.” Here is not the place to defend our view of phenomenal concepts, however⁸ – instead, we shall presuppose and articulate the view of phenomenal concepts as property concepts in what follows.

We also want to introduce distinctions between different types of phenomenal concepts. These distinctions will prove crucial for our discussion of imagination below. First, we want to distinguish phenomenal concepts in the broad sense and the narrow sense:

Definition 4: Phenomenal concepts in the broad sense

A concept C is a phenomenal concept in the broad sense *iff* there is an experiential property P such that:

- (i) C serves to attribute P;
- (ii) to attribute P via C involves thinking of P as being experiential, that is, as being such that (in virtue of what it is to have P) there is a way it is like to have P;
- (iii) one’s capacity to think of a property as experiential is based on the acquaintance one has with experiential properties in virtue of having them.

Definition 5: Phenomenal concepts in the narrow sense

A concept C is a phenomenal concept in the narrow sense *iff* there is an experiential property P such that:

- (i) C serves to attribute P;
- (ii) to attribute P via C to a subject S involves thinking of P as being such that (in virtue of what it is to have P) there is a specific way it is like to have P common to all S having P.

For example, the concept we use to attribute to you the experiential property of thinking about lunch is a phenomenal concept in the broad but not in the narrow sense. In attributing to you that property, we assume that there is some way it is like to have it (i.e. there is some way it is like for you to think about lunch), but we do not assume that there is a specific way it is like to have it common to all subjects who think about lunch. One might think that phenomenal concepts in the broad sense are just concepts that serve to attribute experiential properties in the broad sense. This is mistaken, however. Phenomenal concepts in the broad sense leave it open

whether the experiential property attributed is broad or narrow. Narrow phenomenal concepts, on the contrary, exclude that the experiential property attributed is broad.

But using a phenomenal concept in the narrow sense does not necessarily involve that the thinker has in mind the common way it is like for all subjects to have the attributed experiential property. For instance, you can use a narrow phenomenal concept in your thought that Baldmickey the bat is perceiving a tree in having a sonar perceptual experience. In this case, you assume that there is a specific way it is like to have that experiential property (common for all subjects who have sonar perceptual experiences of trees) but you do not have that specific way it is like in mind, since you do not have sonar experiences yourself.⁹

Now, amongst phenomenal concepts in the narrow sense are those where the thinker takes the experiential property to be a *pure* experiential property. That is, the thinker takes the property attributed in using the concept to be constituted by the way it is like to have it.¹⁰

Definition 6: Pure phenomenal concepts

A concept C is a pure phenomenal concept *iff* there is an experiential property P such that:

- (i) C serves to attribute P;
- (ii) to attribute P via C to a subject S involves thinking of P as being such that (in virtue of what it is to have P) there is a specific way it is like to have P which is common to all S having P and which constitutes what it is to have P.

Phenomenal concepts in the narrow sense that are not pure phenomenal concepts include, for instance, the concept we use to attribute to you the experiential property of actively waving your hand. In attributing that experiential property, we do not take it to be constituted by the way it is like to have it. On the contrary, we take it *not* to be constituted by the fulfilment of a phenomenal condition. In contrast, whenever we use a pure phenomenal concept to attribute an experiential property to you, we do assume that your instantiating that property is phenomenally constituted, hence condition (ii) of definition 6 is fulfilled. This is so, for instance, with the pure phenomenal concept of seeing a colour with a specific tonality, such as pure blue.

Within the class of pure phenomenal concepts, we can distinguish a further type of concepts, those concepts we call pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts:

Definition 7: Maximally specific pure phenomenal concepts

A concept C is a maximally specific pure phenomenal concept *iff* there is an experiential property P such that:

- (i) C serves to attribute P;
- (ii) to attribute P via C to a subject S is to think of S having P in terms of a specific way it is like for S to have P, thereby taking *that specific way it is like* for S to have P *to constitute* what it is for a subject to have P.

Condition (ii) implies that using the concept involves thinking of the attributed property as being a pure experiential property.

A phenomenal concept of the kind defined in definition 7 is maximally specific in the sense that any even more specific phenomenal concept would not serve to attribute the same experiential property (for instance, being presented with violet) but would serve to attribute a different experiential property (for instance, being presented with a violet of intense saturation).¹¹

It is worth noting that a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept may serve to attribute a pure experiential property which is not itself maximally specific. To be sure, for most cases of a pure experiential property *EP* we may attribute to a subject S, it is possible to find a subcase of *EP* by further specifying an aspect of what it is like for S to have *EP*. For instance, the experiential property of being presented with the colour violet admits many subcases which specify the exact saturation of the colour which is presented. A pure experiential property *EP*, we suggest, is itself maximally specific only if it is impossible to find a subcase of *EP* by further specifying an aspect of what it is like for S to have *EP*. Most pure phenomenal concepts we form serve to attribute experiential properties that are not themselves maximally specific. Yet, this does not exclude that many of those concepts are maximally specific in the sense defined earlier. For example, we have the capacity to form a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of having a visual colour experience. This is a concept that serves to attribute that property in terms of the specific way it is like to have a colour experience common to all conscious subjects who have colour experiences.

Let us now look at how the various kinds of phenomenal concepts we have distinguished are related to imagination.

14.4 Qualitative imagination

Suppose we ask you to imagine what it is like to taste a ripe strawberry which you are eagerly biting into. When you do so, you are imagining having the (maximally specific pure) experiential property of tasting

strawberries. In such a case, the content of your imagination is an instance of a for-a-subject content. You are imagining what it is like for a human subject to taste strawberries. Also, what you are imagining is, precisely, what it takes for a human subject to instantiate the experiential property of tasting strawberries. We would like to call cases in which one imagines a certain way it is like to instantiate a given experiential property cases of *qualitative imagination*.¹²

To imagine having a given property on its usual reading includes that one imagines having the property at issue oneself. On that reading, to imagine tasting strawberries is not neutral with respect to who is doing the tasting: it is to imagine an event of tasting in which the subject who is imagining has herself the property of tasting strawberries.

Arguably, not all cases of imagining having an experiential property are of that kind. In the case of experiential properties *in the narrow sense*, one can make an effort to imagine the common way it is like *for any subject* to have them. Strawberries may have a different taste for different subjects. If so, tasting strawberries, on a natural reading, is not an experiential property in the narrow sense. But of course, experiencing the particular taste of strawberries that you experience when eating that fruit *is* an experiential property in the narrow sense. Other people might experience that same specific taste. There is a common way it is like for all subjects to experience *that* specific taste (the one you are familiar with in virtue of having tasted strawberries before). One can make an effort to bring to one's mind in imagination the particular way it is like for any subject to experience that specific taste. Doing so need not involve imagining *oneself* experiencing that taste, or so we suggest. In general, for any experiential property EP in the narrow sense, one can distinguish two acts of imagination: imagining the way it is like to have EP (without thereby imagining having EP oneself) and imagining having EP on its natural reading, that is imagining having EP oneself.

The difference between these two acts of imagination is subtle. Some may doubt that there is such a difference to be drawn. After all – so one may argue against the distinction suggested – to imagine the way it is like to experience a specific taste requires that one imagines having that experiential property “from the first-person perspective.” One might think that there is no difference between imagining having an experiential property from the first-person perspective and imagining having it oneself.

We believe that the distinction suggested is real and that it can be uncovered by phenomenological reflection.¹³ However, the distinction plays no role in the claims we shall argue for. We therefore introduce, by stipulation, “imagining having an experiential property EP” as covering both cases. The following two definitions should be interpreted on that broader understanding.

Definition: Qualitative imagining (q-imagining)

A subject *S* is qualitatively imagining (q-imagining) having a given experiential property *EP* iff *S* imagines having *EP* in terms of what it is like to have *EP*.¹⁴

Accordingly, we can define an act of qualitative imagination as follows:

Definition: Qualitative imagination (q-imagination)

An act *A* is an act of qualitative imagination (q-imagination) iff *A* consists in imagining having a given experiential property *EP* in terms of what it is like to have *EP*.

Conscious human subjects who have eaten strawberries at some point in their life are usually capable of imagining what it is like to taste strawberries. It may initially seem that in exercising this capacity to q-imagine, human subjects are making use of phenomenal concepts. For instance, one might think that for you to q-imagine having a gustatory experience of strawberries, you would need to have cognitively singled out that relevant aspect of your overall phenomenology as an aspect that could be present at other times (and for other subjects). Yet if you have done so, then you have already formed a phenomenal concept of tasting strawberries. This would suggest a view on which the relation between being able to q-imagine having an experiential property *EP* and having a phenomenal concept of *EP* is particularly intimate and straightforward. More precisely, on such a straightforward view, having the capacity to q-imagine having *EP* would require having a phenomenal concept of *EP* and, conversely, having a phenomenal concept of *EP* would enable one to q-imagine having *EP*. Even though we believe that the relation between phenomenal concepts and q-imagination is particularly intimate, we want to argue that this relation is at the same time much less straightforward and much more complex than what the straightforward view here suggests. In what follows, we provide reasons to deny both the claim that being able to q-imagine having an experiential property *EP* requires one to have a phenomenal concept of *EP*, as well as the claim that having a phenomenal concept of *EP* enables one to q-imagine having *EP*. We shall examine each claim in turn.

14.5 Qualitative imagination without phenomenal concepts

The cognitive and conceptual constraints that the straightforward view just sketched puts on our capacity to q-imagine might seem rather undemanding. Nevertheless, they are misguided in our view. No such cognitive and conceptual consideration constrains the capacity to q-imagine *stricto sensu*. More precisely, we want to put forward the following claim:

Claim 1:

Having the capacity to q-imagine having an experiential property EP does not require having a phenomenal concept of EP.

Reflection on cases involving non-human conscious subjects proves useful for seeing why claim 1 should be accepted, in our view. Consider, for instance, Stella, a golden retriever who was administered a painful anaesthetic injection as part of a procedure she had been undergoing at the veterinarian some time ago. Upon entering the veterinarian operation room again now, Stella is certainly experiencing fear. It should also be uncontroversial that Stella's previous experience of the painful injection plays a role in the fact that she is currently experiencing fear. And very plausibly the relevant causal factors to her experiencing fear right now also include Stella's q-imagining pain in anticipation of what is going to happen to her in the room she's entering again.¹⁵ But there are at least two kinds of reasons to doubt that Stella possesses a phenomenal concept of the particular way it is like to experience the painful injection she received.

The first is that even if some animals have conceptual capacities, it is unlikely that Stella has the capacity to cognitively single out the relevant phenomenal aspect which is required to form a phenomenal concept of the experience of the painful injection. The second reason concerns more general constraints for having a genuine concept of a given property. One does not have a genuine concept of a given property unless one is capable of thinking of different individuals as instantiating that property. This is part of the influent "generality constraint" that Evans argued for.¹⁶ In order to have a genuine phenomenal concept of being in pain, Stella would have to be able to think of others as being in pain under that concept. There is reason to doubt that she has such a capacity.

The constraint just mentioned gives us a general reason for the claim that the capacity to q-imagine having an experiential property EP does not necessarily imply having a phenomenal concept of EP, a reason that also applies in the case of human subjects. The mere capacity to q-imagine having a given experiential property does not, by itself, imply the conceptual capacity to think of others as having that property. But having the relevant phenomenal concept, according to the constraint we mentioned, does require having that capacity.

The reason just given can be strengthened by a further consideration. It is plausible that in order to be able to think of other subjects as having a given experiential property, one must also already have acquired the concept of an experiencing subject. Yet it is hard to see why merely having the capacity to q-imagine, for instance, tasting strawberries would require the capacity to think of other subjects as having a gustatory experience of that type (or require the possession of the concept of an experiencing subject). This suggests that one can q-imagine tasting strawberries without having

a concept of that experiential property – and more generally that having a phenomenal concept of an experiential property EP is not required for one to q-imagine having EP.

14.6 Possessing phenomenal concepts without the capacity to q-imagine

More surprisingly perhaps, we suggest that there is no requirement relation between the capacity of q-imagination and the possession of phenomenal concepts in the other direction either. In other words: it is not required for one to possess a phenomenal concept of an experiential property EP that one be also able to q-imagine having EP. And relatedly, one might well have a phenomenal concept of EP without being thereby in a position to q-imagine having EP.

This contention is rather trivial as far as phenomenal concepts in the broad sense are concerned. It is clear, for instance, that when you use a phenomenal concept to attribute the sonar experience of perceiving a tree to Baldmickey the bat, you are not thereby in a position to imagine what it is like for Baldmickey to undergo that experience. To be sure, in using phenomenal concepts in the broad sense, one does think of the properties these concepts serve to attribute as being experiential properties: that is, as being such that there is a way it is like to instantiate them. Yet one need not have any such way in mind in using these concepts. Therefore, one might not be able to q-imagine anything specific concerning what it is like to have the experiential property attributed in using that concept.

One may expect that the claim does not apply to the case of pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts, though. Yet as we shall argue, perhaps surprisingly, it does apply to some such concepts as well. Here is the more precise claim we put forward:

Claim 2:

Possessing a maximally specific pure phenomenal concept of a pure experiential property EP does not necessarily require the capacity to q-imagine having EP.

According to claim 2, there are cases in which the possession of a concept of an experiential property EP enables the thinker to conceive of EP in terms of the specific way it is like for a subject to have it, and yet the thinker is unable to q-imagine having EP. How can that be?

Here is a situation of this type. Consider Charlie, who has never in her life seen a shade of pure blue. Charlie has however formed the phenomenal

concepts relevant for distinguishing between being phenomenally presented with a unique hue as opposed to a binary hue in colour perception. She has also acquired the phenomenal concepts of the experiential properties of seeing reddish blue and of seeing greenish blue. In that epistemic situation, Charlie has all the conceptual resources required to form a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of the experiential property of seeing pure blue. She can form such a concept by using the relevant concepts she already possesses (i.e. her phenomenal concepts of a unique as opposed to a binary hue, of seeing reddish blue, of seeing greenish blue) in combination with her understanding of how they are related to the phenomenal concept of seeing pure blue. That combination of phenomenal concepts and of the relations they bear to the phenomenal concept of seeing pure blue constitutes what we may call an abstract phenomenological characterisation of the experience of seeing pure blue.¹⁷

To be sure, the phenomenal concept Charlie forms in such a way is pure and maximally specific. It is a concept with which she can attribute experiences of seeing pure blue to other subjects by thinking of these subjects as seeing pure blue in terms of the specific way it is like for them to have that experience (and thereby assuming that this specific way it is like for them is what seeing pure blue consists in). However, Charlie might achieve to form such a phenomenal concept and yet not have the capacity to q-imagine seeing pure blue. She might of course also happen to have that capacity, but having it is not required for her to possess the pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of seeing pure blue she formed in the way we just specified.

That is to say that there are cases, such as Charlie's, where you are able to form a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of a given experiential property EP (a concept that enables you to understand what it is to have EP) in terms of abstract phenomenological characterisations – and this makes being acquainted with EP unnecessary for your acquisition of the concept. In other words, acquaintance with EP (by instantiating it) is not a necessary precondition for the acquisition of a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of EP.

If, like Charlie, you have formed a phenomenal concept in terms of abstract phenomenological characterisations, then you are normally (although not necessarily, as just argued) also able to q-imagine having the experiential property in question. Your capacity to q-imagine having a given experiential property EP therefore need not require acquaintance with that property by having instantiated it yourself. In consequence, while it is true that being able to q-imagine having a certain pure experiential property EP typically requires being (or having been) acquainted with EP, this is not always the case.

14.7 Structural phenomenal concepts and cognitive transparency

The discussion of Charlie's case in the last section suggests, more generally, that there can be two distinct manners of conceptualising the specific way it is like for someone to have a given experiential property EP, where both conceptualisations are maximally specific and capture what it is to have EP. Forming a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of EP usually requires that you are acquainted with EP by instantiating it (or very similar experiential properties). Yet, in some situations as in Charlie's, you may also be able to form a concept allowing you to understand what it is (i.e. what it is like) to have EP in terms of more abstract phenomenal characterisations that make it unnecessary for you to be acquainted with EP. We would like to call concepts of that latter kind structural phenomenal concepts:

Definition: Structural phenomenal concepts

A pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept C of an experiential property EP is a structural concept *iff* C is acquired by understanding the way EP is embedded into a wider phenomenal structure.

Here we conceive of a phenomenal structure as a net of relations obtaining between experiential properties (or, in other words, the way it is like to have them) by their nature – that is, not contingently.¹⁸ Typical examples of phenomenal structural relations are to be found, for instance, in colour perception (e.g. between experiencing orange, yellow, and red), in audition (e.g. between hearing one tone, another tone, and an interval composed of them), and in spatial perception (e.g. between seeing a shape of a certain size at a distance, seeing a shape of a bigger size at a closer distance, and seeing something as approaching). In these types of cases, you have the ability to form structural phenomenal concepts of the relevant experiential properties by understanding how these properties are embedded into a net of structural phenomenal relations.

It is worth pausing at this point to emphasise an immediate and important consequence that the definition of structural phenomenal concepts we just endorsed brings about. Namely, it implies that you can have two pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts of one and the same pure experiential property EP – yet two concepts that are nevertheless distinct, because they involve distinct manners of conceptualising the same specific way it is like for someone to have EP. This would be the case when one of your concepts is a structural concept of EP while the other is the pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of EP that you formed in virtue of being acquainted with EP by instantiating EP.¹⁹

This consequence is significant for recent discussions of principles of cognitive transparency that have featured centrally, for instance, in some anti-physicalist arguments concerning the ontology of consciousness,²⁰ such as the argument from phenomenal essentialism. The argument from phenomenal essentialism has been defended elsewhere²¹ – here we shall only rehearse its main tenets to discuss the consequences of the existence of structural phenomenal concepts. The two main premises build on two crucial definitions we introduced earlier, and allow us to reach the conclusion of phenomenal essentialism:

Premise 1 [Nature of pure experiential properties]

The nature of any pure experiential property EP is exhausted by its contribution to the overall phenomenology of the state of any subject instantiating it.

Premise 2 [Access to pure experiential properties via maximally specific pure phenomenal concepts]

A thinker who has acquired a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of a pure experiential property EP thereby fully understands what having EP contributes to the phenomenology of a subject's overall state.

Conclusion: Phenomenal essentialism

A thinker who has acquired the maximally specific pure phenomenal concept of a pure experiential property EP thereby fully understands the nature of EP.

The direct consequence of this argument is that, in our example earlier, both your structural and non-structural pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts of the experiential property EP provide access to what it is to instantiate EP. In other terms, they are both nature-revealing concepts, in the sense that by acquiring them you are in a position to fully understand the nature of EP. Would such a situation constitute a violation of the following principle of transparency, which the argument from phenomenal essentialism has to presuppose?

Principle of cognitive transparency

If a subject S has two distinct nature-revealing concepts C1 and C2 of the same property P, then C1 and C2 are not cognitively independent – that is, S can in principle discover a priori that they serve to attribute the same property.

In the situation where both C1 and C2 are phenomenal concepts, we suggest that there should be no conflict to expect with such a principle of cognitive transparency. The reason is that a perfectly rational epistemic subject who possesses both phenomenal concepts should indeed be in a position to discover a priori that they serve to attribute the same experiential property. Saying this is of course compatible with the possibility that someone who possesses two distinct phenomenal concepts of the same experiential property might fail to notice it.

But what is going on when, on the contrary, one discovers that two phenomenal concepts serve to attribute the same experiential property? If the principle of cognitive transparency formulated earlier is to hold – as we think it does for independent reasons – then whatever is going on must be confined to the realm of a priori reasoning. Yet surely, it is not by mere conceptual analysis in the usual sense that you find out that two distinct phenomenal concepts serve to attribute the same experiential property.²² To find this out, we submit, you must engage in phenomenological reflection.²³ We shall say more about this in the next section and address the question of the a priori status of phenomenological reflection, while keeping the focus of the discussion on the important role that qualitative imagination plays in this context.

14.8 The role of qualitative imagination in phenomenological reflection

The results of our discussion in the last section have led us to a broad view of a priori reasoning – one that would include phenomenological reflection within its bounds. Here is not the place to engage in a detailed articulation and defence of such a view, however. We shall aim for a more modest goal instead, that of lending the view some initial plausibility by clarifying further the epistemic situation we considered last: the situation where two distinct (pure and maximally specific) phenomenal concepts C1 and C2 serve to attribute the same experiential property. Recall Charlie's phenomenal concept of the experiential property EP of seeing pure blue, and contrast it with the pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of EP that her brother Paul has formed on the basis of seeing pure blue himself. Say C1 is the concept Charlie possesses (the structural concept of EP) and C2 is the concept of EP formed on the basis of seeing pure blue (the one Paul has). Here are two different types of cases to consider.

The first is the case of someone possessing both C1 and C2 and wanting to find out if both serve to attribute the same experiential property – let us call her Flore. We suggest that there is no route for Flore to do so that does not rely on her capacity to q-imagine. In order to understand that C1, the structural concept, serves to attribute the same experiential property – namely

seeing pure blue – that C2 does, she certainly needs to have in mind what it is like to see pure blue. She needs, more specifically, to consider attentively what it is like to see pure blue and reflect on whether that is precisely the phenomenology that her structural concept C1 captures.

Yet, in order to consider attentively what it is like to see pure blue, we typically need to use our q-imagination: we need to q-imagine having that experiential property. Of course, Flore could also instantiate that property instead of q-imagining having it; she could put herself in the situation of actually seeing pure blue and engage in phenomenological reflection on that basis. Most of the time, however, we engage in phenomenological reflection about experiential properties without having them at the time when we do so. If we were not able to do that, phenomenological reflection would be greatly impaired and its philosophical significance much impoverished.

Moreover, even if Flore relies on actually seeing pure blue to reflect and tell that C1 and C2 serve to attribute the same property, she would still need to use her q-imagination. For when she reflects on whether what it is like for her to see right now is in fact what is captured by her structural concept C1, she needs to use her q-imaginative capacities concerning what it is like to see a unique hue as opposed to a binary hue, or what it is like to see greenish blue as opposed to reddish blue, etc.

A similar reasoning applies to the case of Charlie, who only possesses the structural concept C1 of seeing pure blue, when she wishes to acquire the concept C2. Charlie has the ability to form that concept (the pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept that Paul has, having experienced pure blue himself) if she uses her conceptual and imaginative capacities in order to q-imagine experiencing pure blue. In this case, she would not be q-imagining seeing pure blue in virtue of having the relevant phenomenal concept C2, but she would form that concept in virtue of q-imagining having that experiential property (as opposed to forming it in virtue of being acquainted with that property by instantiating it herself). This is a situation where q-imagining plays a crucial role in forming that concept and not the other way around. Short of having a pure blue experience herself, there is no possibility for Charlie to form that concept (the one that Paul has) in a way that does not involve any act of q-imagination. Indeed, she has to use her conceptual capacities and the relevant structural concept she already possesses in order to try, and succeed, in q-imagining having an experience of pure blue. Charlie can then form the other phenomenal concept C2 on the basis of her q-imagination of EP.

More generally, we can thus accept that if a subject S has a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept C of an experiential property EP, then S has all the “conceptual material” one needs in order to be able to q-imagine having EP. But still: having the capacity to q-imagine having EP is not a condition for possessing C, nor is it what possessing C consists in.

Both cases, the one involving Flore and the one involving Charlie, emphasise the importance and pervasiveness of q-imagination in phenomenological reflection. There is no route that does not rely on q-imagination for either Flore to discover that both of her pure and maximally specific concepts are concepts of seeing pure blue, or for Charlie to form the pure and maximally specific concept C2 on the basis of her structural concept of seeing pure blue.

It is more generally very common, we submit, that pieces of phenomenological reflection require the use of q-imagination, simply because they often involve that the thinker holds in mind different phenomenological aspects – different aspects of the way it is like for a subject to be in the mental state reflected on – to understand what relations these different aspects bear to one another.

All this might sound like bad news for our claim that phenomenological reflection is part of a priori reasoning broadly construed, which we relied on to deal with the issue of cognitive transparency earlier. And especially so since we argued that the mere possession of a phenomenal concept of a given experiential property EP, even of a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept, does not imply the capacity to q-imagine having EP. Therefore, we cannot just say that q-imagination comes for free with the possession of phenomenal concepts, and that might seem to weaken the case for the a priori status of phenomenological reflection.

But such a reasoning would be too quick, we suggest. While it is true on our view that you can have a structural phenomenal concept of an experiential property EP without having the capacity to q-imagine having EP, that does not imply that no q-imaginative capacity is required in order to possess that structural concept. It is surely hard to see how you could retain the possession, for instance, of the structural phenomenal concept of seeing pure blue without the capacity to q-imagine seeing a unique hue as opposed to a binary hue, seeing reddish blue as opposed to greenish blue, etc. Those are q-imaginative capacities included in the possession conditions of the structural phenomenal concept of seeing pure blue. And they are the capacities required for Charlie to be able to engage in phenomenal reflection and form the non-structural concept C2 of seeing pure blue. As for that non-structural concept C2 of EP, its possession conditions certainly include the capacity to q-imagine having EP. If you are unable to q-imagine having EP, it is even harder to see why you would still qualify as possessing concept C2: we cannot see how you could attribute EP in terms of the specific way it is like to have it and yet be entirely unable to q-imagine that specific way it is like.

Therefore, the possession of pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts of experiential properties does come with the q-imaginative abilities that are relevant to engaging in phenomenological reflection about

these properties. It is accordingly coherent and well-motivated to endorse a wide conception of the a priori realm which includes phenomenological reflection and analysis of the experiences that one has or q-imagines having.

14.9 Exercising one's capacities to imagine qualitatively and to use phenomenal concepts

We have discussed so far the dependence relations there are between various kinds of capacities: capacities of qualitative imagination and conceptual capacities associated with the possession of phenomenal concepts.

But you might now wonder whether there are also dependence relations when it comes to *exercising* those capacities, as opposed to the mere possession of them. You might think that replies to questions about necessary relations between the exercise of capacities follow trivially from claims about necessary relations between having the capacities at issue. But to think so would be a mistake. It may well be, for instance, that having a given capacity Q necessitates having a different capacity Q' without it being the case that any concrete exercise of Q requires exercising Q' as well.

What is required in terms of q-imagination when you make actual use of phenomenal concepts in thoughts to ascribe phenomenal properties? Consider again Stella's painful anaesthetic injection at the hands of the veterinarian. When you attribute in thought to Stella the experiential property of a stinging pain, do you thereby also necessarily have to q-imagine what it is like for Stella to undergo the injection? Suppose your concept of having a stinging pain is a phenomenal concept in the broad sense, as defined earlier.²⁴ This means that in attributing that experiential property via this concept you take there to be a way it is like to have it, without necessarily having in mind a particular way it is like to have it. In that case, there is no reason to assume that your concept application involves q-imagining having the relevant property in terms of what it is like to have it.

But now let us assume that your concept of experiencing a stinging pain is pure and maximally specific. Typically, you will have acquired that concept by undergoing a stinging pain yourself, by cognitively singling out the way it is like to have such a pain, and then by forming on that basis an understanding of what all subjects instantiating that particular experiential property have in common. The question about whether an application of such a concept necessarily involves q-imagination now amounts to the following question. Is it possible for you to use your so-acquired understanding of what all subjects instantiating a particular experiential property have in common in a concrete thought, without q-imagining the way it is like to have that property? To give a negative response here would be to claim that you cannot keep in mind (in the way required for property

attribution) a specific way it is like to have an experiential property without also q-imagining that particular way it is like.

We should carefully distinguish two issues here though. The first is about whether it is possible for us human beings to attribute an experiential property EP via a pure and maximally specific concept (acquired on the basis of acquaintance with EP) without q-imagining having EP. It might well be that one normally simply cannot help q-imagining the way it is like to have EP when one has a thought containing such a concept of EP. The second issue is about whether the attribution of EP via a pure and maximally specific concept is actually an attribution of that very property *in virtue of* the co-occurrence of such a q-imaginative act. Even if it was psychologically necessary that such a q-imaginative act of having EP co-occurs with any of our attributions of EP via a pure and maximally specific concept of EP, this would not yet establish that our thought containing that concept is about the property EP *in virtue of* that co-occurring q-imaginative act.

Let us first note that q-imaginative acts are not in principle required for the attribution of an experiential property EP via a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept to be an attribution of that very property EP. There are cases where the experiential property attributed is not picked out by a q-imaginative act accompanying the use of a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept. We already encountered an example of that kind: someone can have a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of experiencing pure blue and yet be unable to q-imagine seeing pure blue. In such a case, it is obvious that the person having the concept can attribute the relevant experiential property without any q-imaginative act singling out that property, simply because no such q-imaginative act occurs at all.

But still, one might think, things might be different when one uses pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts which are not structural: in such cases, q-imaginative acts might be required in order to pick out the relevant experiential properties those concepts attribute. However, we believe that this view of attributions of experiential properties is mistaken. Pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts which attribute experiential properties that are themselves maximally specific constitute only a subtype of such concepts.²⁵ Most pure and maximally specific phenomenal concepts we form serve to attribute experiential properties that *are not* maximally specific. We can form, for instance, a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept of seeing blue (as opposed to seeing a particular shade of blue), or the concept of seeing colours (as opposed to seeing a particular colour, such as blue or green). These are concepts that we form by cognitively singling out phenomenal commonalities, that is, by singling out what subjects having the relevant experiential properties have in common. Likewise, we can single out, on the basis of our various pain experiences, what subjects who are in pain have in common.

However, there does not seem to be any way to q-imagine being in pain without q-imagining being in a specific kind of pain, such as having a headache. Now here is the crucial point: your q-imagination of having a headache can only serve to pick out that more specific experiential property, not the less specific experiential property of being in pain. What then is it that establishes the relation between your concept of being in pain and being in pain, which constitutes that in using that concept you attribute the property of being in pain as opposed to any other experiential property? It must be, or so we want to suggest, your cognitive capacity to understand the common feature shared by all subjects who are in pain – and not the potentially (or even necessarily) co-occurring q-imaginative act of having some specific kind of pain.

Other examples can be used to make the same point. One may have a maximally specific pure phenomenal concept of listening to a Stradivari violin, but one cannot q-imagine listening to that wonderful instrument without q-imagining hearing some specific tone or melody. So in that case too: that in virtue of which a subject attributes the experiential property of listening to a Stradivari violin via the relevant pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept must be the capacity to grasp the auditory phenomenal commonality shared by subjects hearing that instrument.²⁶

What about the reverse direction? Does any exercise of the capacity of q-imagination require that the subject makes actual use of phenomenal concepts in that imaginative act? We have already seen a counterexample: when Stella q-imagines experiencing pain as she enters the veterinarian's room, she is likely not making use of any phenomenal concept. Similarly, there is no reason to suppose that when one exercises one's capacity to q-imagine what it is like to taste strawberries, for instance, when considering what type of dessert to bake, one necessarily needs to make use of a phenomenal concept of that experiential property. To use a phenomenal concept of tasting strawberries is to think of oneself or another subject as tasting strawberries under that phenomenal conceptualisation. But simply imagining the way it is like to taste strawberries does not necessarily involve, or so we suggest, entertaining any such thought.

14.10 Concluding summary

We have argued that the relationship between qualitative imagination and the possession of phenomenal concepts is less straightforward than it might initially seem by defending three different claims. First, a subject may well have acquired a phenomenal concept of a given experiential property and yet not be able to imagine the way it is like to have it. This is so, quite trivially, since having a phenomenal concept of an experiential property only requires that the thinker conceives of the property as being experiential, which obviously does not involve any capacity to imagine what it is like

to have the property at issue. More interestingly, however, the claim also holds in the case of maximally specific pure phenomenal concepts. The example we used to illustrate the point is that of a person who has acquired a maximally specific pure phenomenal concept of experiencing pure blue and yet is unable to imagine experiencing pure blue. Second, having the capacity to imagine the way it is like to have a given experiential property does not necessarily imply having the capacity to use a corresponding phenomenal concept. For instance, a cat may have the capacity to imagine the way it is like to drink milk in her joyful anticipation just before she starts drinking it. But she is likely to have no phenomenal concept of the experiential property cats instantiate when they drink milk. Third, one may think of another subject as having an experiential property in terms of a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept and yet not engage, in that act of thinking, in imagining the way it is like to have that property. For instance, you may attribute to Nella the dog the (less than maximally specific) experiential property of being in pain without *q*-imagining the way it is like for her to have that experiential property.

We started out with a critical note about commonplace terminology: to refer to subject-neutral approaches to people, consciousness, or mentality as “third-personal approaches” is highly misleading. We are now in a position to add the following. The distinction between the so-called first-personal and third-personal approaches, when one (mis)interprets the latter as characterising the typical approach when we think about *others*, suggests that there is a fundamental difference where in reality there is none. Acts of thinking and imagining with for-a-subject contents are ubiquitous in our everyday conscious lives, and they concern other subjects as much as ourselves. Whenever we think about experiential properties of other subjects in terms of phenomenal concepts, we are having thoughts with for-a-subject content. And whenever we imagine what it is like to have experiential properties, both for ourselves and for others, our acts of imagining also have for-a-subject contents. In engaging in these acts of thinking and imagining with for-a-subject content, we are aware of being confronted with genuine experiencing subjects. This is one way in which what we have called the subject-presupposition plays a central role in our cognitive life. Our approach to others is therefore not subject-neutral at all. For these reasons, the use of the term “third-personal” to mark a fundamental difference from a “first-personal” approach, although widespread, should perhaps simply be abandoned altogether.²⁷

Notes

- 1 See Section 2 for definitions of experiential properties.
- 2 The famous Nagelian locution is introduced in Nagel 1974. However, Nagel does not talk of the way it is like to have certain properties (as we do here) but of the way it is like to be a given organism (e.g. famously, a bat).

- 3 See our “Identity of Conscious Subjects in Thought and Imagination,” this volume.
- 4 See Section 2 for our definitions of different types of experiential properties.
- 5 The subject-property framework has been defended elsewhere (see Nida-Rümelin 2018), as well as by others (see, e.g. Taylor 2020).
- 6 The definitions presented in Section 2 stem from discussions between the authors on earlier versions of Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 of Nida-Rümelin (forthcoming).
- 7 For that view, compare, for example, Horgan et al. (2003) and Nida-Rümelin (2007).
- 8 For a defence of the view of phenomenal concepts as serving to attribute experiential properties to conscious subjects, see Nida-Rümelin (forthcoming), Chapter 6.
- 9 This of course alludes to Nagel’s famous claim in Nagel (1974) that we lack phenomenal knowledge about the bat’s sonar experiences.
- 10 We assume here that having an experiential property can be constituted by the way it is like to have it only if there is a common way it is like to have it for all subjects instantiating that property.
- 11 An example of a pure phenomenal concept that is not maximally specific would be the phenomenal concept someone with standard colour vision uses to attribute the experiential property of seeing red to an achromatic person. In that case, the thinker assumes that there is a specific way it is like to have the attributed property which constitutes having it and yet does not have that specific way in mind.
- 12 Regarding our choice of terminology, see Note 14. Our definition of qualitative imagination comes later in this section.
- 13 By phenomenological reflection here we mean roughly the activity of attending to the phenomenal character of our own actual, remembered, or imagined experience, with the theoretical aim of arriving at general insights into the structure of human conscious experience. For more on what attending to the phenomenal character of one’s experience involves, see Bugnon (2020). For more on phenomenological reflection or analysis, compare, for example, Siewert (2016).
- 14 What we define as *q*-imagination here might sound close to phenomena discussed by other authors under the heading of “experiential imagination.” It is however difficult to simply identify *q*-imagination with experiential imagination, or any of its subcases, as there is no consensus on a univocal definition of the latter in the literature. For instance, Amy Kind explicates what it is to engage in experiential imagination as follows: “we project ourselves into an imagined situation and imagine the experiences – visual, auditory, emotional, and so on – that we would have” (Kind 2016: 5). Contrary to this, in *q*-imagination (in both cases discussed earlier in the main text), you simply imagine the way it is like to have a given experiential property without imagining any situation in which you would have that property. For instance, you may *q*-imagine having a visual experience in terms of what it is like to have it, without imagining any particular situation in which one would have that experiential property. Other accounts of experiential imagination might prove closer to our notion of *q*-imagination though, without coinciding unequivocally with the definition we offer here: compare, for example, Dorsch (2012); Dokic and Arcangeli (2015); Vendrell Ferran (2023).
- 15 Stella presumably also remembers what it was like to undergo the painful injection, but this is not what we are interested in here. Our point is that it is plausible that she uses that memory in order to *q*-imagine what will happen to her.
- 16 See Evans (1982: 75).

- 17 See the next section for refinement of this notion and the definition of structural phenomenal concepts.
- 18 Although we shall not be defending those suggestions here, it seems likely to us that most if not all experiential properties are embedded into phenomenal structures, but that not all experiential properties are such that they allow for one to form a structural phenomenal concept of them.
- 19 We actually think that cases where one has two distinct maximally specific pure phenomenal concepts of one and the same experiential property can only occur when at least one of the two concepts is a structural concept, but we shall not be arguing for this here.
- 20 See, for example, Goff (2011).
- 21 See Nida-Rümelin (2007, forthcoming: Ch. 8).
- 22 On conceptual analysis, see, for example, the essays in Braddon-Mitchell and Nola (2008).
- 23 See Note 13.
- 24 See Section 3.
- 25 On maximally specific experiential properties, see the discussion after definition 7 in Section 3.
- 26 One might reply that even if the q-imaginative act is not itself responsible for a thought containing the concept at issue to be about the relevant experiential property, such an imaginative act might still be required for the thinker to be able to keep in mind the commonality of all subjects sharing the experiential property. We would like to reply in the following way. First, if this is so, then it is at best a contingent psychological fact about those thinkers we are familiar with – that is, about us, human subjects. Second, since it is presumably acquaintance with several subcases of being in pain which grounds our capacity to think of the general common feature of subjects being in pain, it is hard to see why any simultaneous q-imagination of a specific (and arbitrarily chosen) kind of pain should be required for a thinker to make the common feature of all cases of being in pain the object of her thought.
- 27 We would like to thank Ingrid Vendrell Ferran and Christiana Werner for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter. Our gratitude goes to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) for its generous support in funding the project “The Subject of Experiences: The Significance of Its Metaphysical Nature in the Philosophy of Mind” (100012_189031), as well as the project “Essential Indexicality and Thoughts about Experience” (100012L_212635). Our research for this publication was conducted mainly during the former project and achieved during the latter. We also extend our thanks to the French National Research Agency (ANR) for funding the France-based part of that latter research project (ANR-22-CE93-0004).

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