

Research Article

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Attentional Structure and Phenomenal Unity

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Abstract: Some authors argue that phenomenal unity can be grounded in the attentional structure of consciousness, which endows conscious states with at least a foreground and a background. Accordingly, the phenomenal character of part of a conscious state comprises a content aspect (e.g., hearing music) and a structural aspect (e.g., being in the background). This view presents the concern that such a structure does not bring about phenomenal unity, but phenomenal segregation, since the background is separated from the foreground. I argue that attention can still lead to a form of phenomenal unity that connects the foreground with the background. Experiencing oneself as controlling the focus of attention can, at least occasionally, bring about an experienced connection between the attentional foreground and the attentional background of a conscious experience.

Keywords: attention, consciousness, phenomenal unity

1 Introduction

The unity of consciousness, at least since Descartes, has been regarded as a central feature of the mind. Although it has received much attention in the last two decades,¹ there is no consensus on (1) the extent to which consciousness is phenomenally unified; and (2) how to define phenomenal unity² in the first place.³

In this article, I will not try to provide a definition of phenomenal unity that does justice to all existing accounts of the unity of consciousness. Rather, I will adopt the following general characterization by Tim Bayne and David Chalmers: two conscious experiences⁴ A and B are phenomenally unified just in case “there is not just something it is like to have each state individually: there is something it is like to have A and B together.”⁵ I will also say that there is an *experienced connection* between the contents of phenomenally unified experiences. Note that this does not mean that the subject is aware of the fact that the experiences are phenomenally unified; they need not be *experienced as* phenomenally unified. Furthermore, there might be experienced connections between contents of experiences that are not phenomenally unified. (Some inferences or associations between contents are potential examples of such experienced connections.) I will argue

¹ See Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness*; Cleeremans, *The Unity of Consciousness*; Tye, *Consciousness and Persons*; Bayne, *The Unity of Consciousness*; Bennett and Hill, *Sensory Integration and the Unity of Consciousness*; Wiese, *Experienced Wholeness*; Wiese and Metzinger, “Desiderata for a Mereotopological Theory of Consciousness”; Wiese, “How to Solve the Problem of Phenomenal Unity”; and Roelofs, *Combining Minds*.

² I shall use the term “phenomenal unity” synonymously with the term “unity of consciousness” in this article.

³ See the different accounts reviewed in Brook and Raymont, “The Unity of Consciousness.”

⁴ How should conscious experiences be individuated? Here, I follow Tim Bayne’s account, according to which experiences are individuated in terms of phenomenal properties, subjects of experiences, and the times at which the phenomenal properties are instantiated (Bayne, *The Unity of Consciousness*).

⁵ Bayne and Chalmers, “What Is the Unity of Consciousness?”, 32.

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neither for nor against this possibility. I will only assume that phenomenal unity entails an experienced connection, not that an experienced connection entails phenomenal unity. I will briefly consider alternative conceptions of the unity of consciousness in Section 2.

The term “phenomenal unity” is sometimes reserved for a particular connection between experiences, viz. one that is *global* in the sense that it connects *all* experiences had by a subject at a time, and one that is a *necessary* feature of consciousness.⁶ The goal of this article is only to characterize a type of phenomenal unity, without claiming that it is global or necessary.

According to some accounts, attention endows consciousness with a foreground–background structure.⁷ The main aim of this article is to show how the *segregation* that accompanies the separation between foreground and background can be reconciled with an experienced *connection* between experienced features. The proposed solution rests on the observation that we sometimes become aware of our ability to shift the focus of attention. So even if two objects of experience are separated in the sense that one is attended to, whereas the other is not, they can still be phenomenally unified if I experience myself as having the ability to shift attention from the former to the latter. The experienced ability to shift attention can even be regarded as “global” in the sense that it corresponds to the experienced attentional control over the entire conscious experience. However, it is not global in the sense that one experiences the ability to shift attention from A to B and from A to C, and so forth for all parts of the current conscious experience.

I have structured this article as follows. After a brief discussion of background assumptions and conceptual distinctions, I will turn to existing accounts of the attentional structure of consciousness and argue that attentional structure, as such, falls short of establishing an experienced *connection* between all phenomenal properties belonging to the same conscious experience; for having a focus of attention (which constitutes part of the attentional structure) means that some phenomenal properties (instantiated by a given experience) correspond to items that lie *outside* the focus of attention, which at least *prima facie* means they are experientially *disconnected* from items one is currently focally attending to. I take up this challenge by arguing that there is a form of attention that can establish an experienced connection between attentionally segregated parts of a conscious experience.⁸

This is not only relevant to attentional accounts of the unity of consciousness. Even if there are other types of unity that unify the attentional foreground with the attentional background, it will be interesting to see that, in addition to that, there is an attentionally grounded form of phenomenal unity that connects parts of a conscious experience that are in the attentional foreground with parts that are in the background.

2 Concepts of unity

As indicated above, I do not distinguish between the unity of consciousness and phenomenal unity. This may strike some readers as too narrow. If there is a type of unity that is necessarily instantiated by all conscious experiences, then the concern that attention brings about phenomenal disunity loses its force. For instance, if all my current conscious experiences (or everything I currently experience) are unified by virtue of the fact that these conscious experiences have the same subject of experience, then consciousness

⁶ See Bayne, *The Unity of Consciousness*.

⁷ See Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness*; for more recent proposals, see Jennings, “Attention and Perceptual Organization,” 1–14; Jennings, *The Attending Mind*; Watzl, “Attentional Organization and the Unity of Consciousness,” 56–87; Yoshimi and Vinson, “Extending Gurwitsch’s Field Theory of Consciousness,” 104–23; Watzl, *Structuring Mind*.

⁸ Apart from this, there are other forms of attention that can play unifying roles (Jennings, *The Attending Mind*; Montemayor and Haladjian, *Consciousness, Attention, and Conscious Attention*). In arguing that there is a form of conscious attentional agency that can bring about a connection between the attentional foreground and background, I do not want to suggest that this form of attentional agency is implicated in all cases in which attention plays a unifying role. Nor do I want to argue that all forms of phenomenal unity are brought about by some form of attention.

is necessarily unified. We may describe this as subject-unity.⁹ Even parts of a conscious experience that seem to be segregated by attention will be unified by subject-unity. They may not be *phenomenally* unified, but that does not mean they are disunified.

What more does phenomenal unity add to the discussion? According to prominent accounts of phenomenal unity, it brings about a difference in what it is like to have different experiences: “[unified] experiences have a conjoint phenomenal character: they are not merely individually conscious but are *co-conscious*.¹⁰” So, the reason why phenomenal unity is still worth considering is that it can bring about a phenomenal difference. Even if all experiences are (trivially) subject-unified, they will display even more unity (i.e., an additional form of unity) if they are also *phenomenally* unified. In particular, it will be relevant to determine whether or not attentionally segregated experiences can be phenomenally unified (not just subject-unified).

One might concede that phenomenal unity is a form of unity worth considering, but could deny that phenomenal unity is transparent to the subject. It could be that phenomenal unity brings about a difference in what it is like to have conscious experience, without that difference being (directly) experienced by the subject. For instance, it could be that the subject can only infer that there is such a difference.

Similarly, one could argue that the difference in phenomenal character brought about by phenomenal unity is not a difference in phenomenal content, but a difference in phenomenal mode.¹¹ The idea would be that when two items are experienced together (phenomenally unified), the mode of experiencing differs. I may not experience a connection between the items (i.e., not a phenomenal content), but I experience them in a connected manner: the manner of experiencing one item depends on the manner in which I experience the other item.

I will not argue against the coherence of these claims. However, I doubt that attentional structure makes a positive contribution to phenomenal unity in this way. To envision this, consider what would be the case if conscious experiences did not have an attentional structure (no phenomenal background). That is, assume that everything outside of one’s focus of attention right now does not contribute to the phenomenal character of a person’s current experience. Would one’s experience be less phenomenally unified because of that? I submit that it would be at least equally phenomenally unified, if not more so. Hence, even if there is an indirect connection between items of an attentionally structured experience, or a connection in the manner of experiencing, it is not the case that this connection can phenomenally unify an experience that lacks attentional structure: it is just the case that attentional structure does not phenomenally *disunify* a conscious experience, if the two options mentioned above are on the right track (i.e., if attention brings about an indirect connection or a connection in the manner of experiencing).

I will argue that there is a form of conscious attention which does bring about a more direct experienced connection between items in the attentional foreground and background. It does not have to be inferred and is not exhausted by the manner of experiencing, at least in some cases. Even if other instances of phenomenal unity are not similar, it will still be interesting to learn that there are instances of a stronger form of phenomenal unity, in which there is not just a difference in (the manner of) experiencing, but actually an experienced difference.

3 The attentional structure of consciousness

Some things we are currently experiencing are in the focus of our attention, while others are not (although one is still experientially aware of them).¹² Hence, the least one can say about the attentional structure of

⁹ Hill, “Unity of Consciousness,” 5.

¹⁰ Bayne, “Précis of *The Unity of Consciousness*,” 202; Bayne, *The Unity of Consciousness*; and Bayne and Chalmers, “What Is the Unity of Consciousness?”

¹¹ Or in the manner of experiencing, see, for instance, Bayne, *The Unity of Consciousness*, 32; and Chudnoff, “Gurwitsch’s Phenomenal Holism,” 559–78.

¹² Note that this is compatible with views according to which consciousness requires attention. I only presuppose that there be a focus of attention; i.e., one can pay more or less attention to something. For more about the relationship between consciousness and attention, see, Montemayor and Haladjian, *Consciousness, Attention, and Conscious Attention*.

conscious experience is that it establishes a distinction between foreground and background. This feature of conscious experience has been emphasized by Aron Gurwitsch.¹³

[E]very total field of consciousness consists of three domains, each domain exhibiting a specific type of organization of its own. The first domain is the *theme* – that which engrosses the mind of the experiencing subject, or as it is often expressed, which stands in the ‘focus of his attention.’ Second the *thematic field*, defined as the totality of those data, co-present with the theme, which are experienced as materially relevant or pertinent to the theme and form the background or horizon out of which the theme emerges as the center. The third includes data which ... comprise in their totality what we propose to call the *margin*.¹⁴

In fact, Gurwitsch’s analysis of the structure of conscious experience mentions not just a foreground–background structure, but a more complex, tripartite structure. What matters here is not how the structure is best characterized, but just that it makes sense to speak of the attentional structure of conscious experience. Furthermore, it is a feature that is experientially manifest (shifting the focus of attention changes the phenomenal character of your experience).

4 Grounding phenomenal unity in attention

To what extent does attentional structure establish phenomenal unity? A first hurdle that needs to be overcome is that an experiential foreground–background structure, which entails a certain *segregation*, is at least *prima facie* in tension with the idea that there is an experienced *connection* (Figure 1).

One could argue that an experiential foreground–background structure exemplifies a form of unity. Therefore, the hurdle just mentioned does not even exist. For instance, Carolyn Dicey Jennings¹⁵ argues that attention brings about a particular form of organization, viz. an organization that reflects the subject’s current interests. In its basic form, it organizes a conscious experience into a foreground and background. Jennings regards this attention-based organization as a non-trivial form of subject-unity, which structures experience in terms of the meaning that different items have for the subject.¹⁶

We can concede that such an organization brings about a form of unity, as compared with a completely unorganized experience. However, there is still some residual disunity, because the foreground and background are not unified. To illustrate this, consider forms of perceptual organization, such as the perception of objects or gestalt groupings. These involve unity, because objects and gestalts are experienced as wholes. In particular, one can attend to the entire object or gestalt grouping. However, this is not the case for an attention-based structuring into foreground and background: one cannot attend to all parts of the foreground–background structure, because that would mean it ceases to be attentionally structured; that is, the background would no longer be differentiated from the foreground.

Hence, as long as an experience has an attentional foreground–background structure, there is a segregation between some experienced items. Or is there another way in which attention itself can bring about an experienced connection between such items?

¹³ Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness*; among others – contemporary, though slightly different, versions of this idea can be found in Jennings, “Attention and Perceptual Organization;” Watzl, “Attentional Organization and the Unity of Consciousness;” Yoshimi and Vinson, “Extending Gurwitsch’s Field Theory of Consciousness;” Watzl, *Structuring Mind*.

¹⁴ Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness*, 4.

¹⁵ Jennings, *The Attending Mind*.

¹⁶ Ibid., 104–5, 114–5.

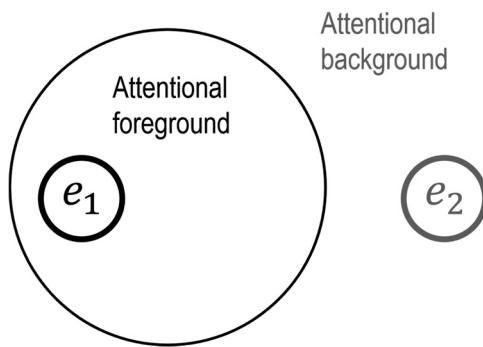


Figure 1: Segregation between the attentional foreground and the attentional background. e_1 denotes an experience as of an object that is attended to, while e_2 denotes an experience as of an object that is not attended to. Is there an experiential connection between e_1 and e_2 ?

4.1 Experienced attentional peripherality does not suffice

According to Sebastian Watzl¹⁷, the attentional structure of consciousness can be characterized by the phenomenal relation “is more central in experience than.”¹⁸ This centrality relation is shaped by attention and partly determines the phenomenal properties instantiated by a given experience. Based on this relation, Watzl defines a relation he terms “Peripherality.” An experience¹⁹ is peripheral to another if the latter is more central in experience than the former.²⁰ All parts of a conscious experience are directly or indirectly connected through this relation. It may not be the case that for any two experiences P and Q, had by the same subject at the same time, P is *experienced* as peripheral to Q (or *vice versa*); but it is at least the case that every experience²¹ (had by the same subject at the same time) is peripheral to another (unless both are in the focus of attention), and we can find a chain of thus related experiences, with P and Q at the two ends of the chain.

If there is such an experientially manifest relation, it connects some experiences only indirectly, and thereby entails a good deal of segregation, or even disunity: all experienced objects belonging to the focus of attention are experienced together;²² but the fact that they stand out in front of the attentional background means that they are not experienced together with objects outside of the focus of attention. More specifically, “is peripheral to” is not an experienced transitive relation: if P is peripheral to Q and Q is peripheral to R, then it does not follow that P is peripheral to R, because P need not be peripheral *in experience* to Q. In order to turn this into an account of phenomenal unity (not an account of phenomenal segregation), one would have to show that there is an experiential connection between elements of the attentional foreground and the background – i.e., between what Gurwitsch called the *theme* and the *thematic field* (and the *margin*).

¹⁷ Watzl, *Structuring Mind*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹ Watzl defines this relation with respect to what he calls “qualitative parts;” however, a qualitative part is just a part of an experience that has phenomenal properties that are exhausted by their “appearance properties,” i.e., no reference to phenomenal structure is required to specify what it is like to have such an experience (see Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 166). But this just means a qualitative part is a particular type of experience, as defined here (see footnote 4).

²⁰ Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 192.

²¹ More specifically, every experience that is a qualitative part (see footnote 19 and Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 166).

²² They are experienced as “co-central,” see Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 192.

4.2 Structural holism does not help

A first option that suggests itself is to note that the very fact that something's being *outside* of the focus of attention (i.e., in the background) depends on another thing's being *inside* (i.e., in the foreground). Hence, it seems there is a (mutual) dependence between things in different parts of the attentional structure. A related suggestion has been made by Elijah Chudnoff.²³ Similar to Watzl, Chudnoff defines an experiential relation between parts of a conscious experience. However, he does not explicitly relate this to attention. Furthermore, he assumes that the structure brought about by this relation has a unique center.²⁴ Chudnoff presents a valid argument to the effect that every part of a conscious experience depends for its existence on all other parts of that experience.²⁵ He terms this *phenomenal holism*.

One can object to this argument in that it does not establish a connection *qua* phenomenal content, but only *qua* structure, and that this can at best support a rather deflationary notion of phenomenal unity, a *structural holism*. Put differently, it may at most establish an experienced connection between different parts of the attentional structure itself, but not between the objects that are experienced as parts of that structure. For instance, when I attend to the saxophone player of a jazz trio, the way I experience the saxophone may partly be determined by the fact that I experience the other players in the attentional background; but whether the background is occupied by experiences of a piano player and a drum player, or by experiences of a trumpet player and a bass player, may not affect the way I experience the saxophone music.²⁶

Apart from that, we can, for the sake of argument, even assume that there is a constitutive dependence between all parts of a given experience. For instance, we can grant that the way I experience the saxophone player (in the foreground) when I experience a piano player in the background is necessarily different from the way I experience the saxophone player when I experience a trumpet player (and not a piano player) in the background. However, this would not amount to an *experienced* dependence. The dependence would make a difference in experience, but would not bring about a direct experienced connection. Hence, we would not have an instance of (strong) phenomenal unity.

As noted above, one could argue that the notion of phenomenal unity I have in mind is too strong, in that it presupposes that phenomenal unity must bring about a phenomenal difference that is not just manifest in the manner of experiencing. This may be correct. However, I argue that there *are* cases in which attention brings about a stronger form of phenomenal unity that connects the attentional foreground with the background.

4.3 Conscious attentional agency to the rescue

I suggested above that a phenomenally manifest relation like “is peripheral to” does not establish an experienced connection between phenomenal properties that are not directly connected by such a relation. But perhaps there is an additional experienced relation, which does connect parts of the attentional foreground with parts of the attentional background.²⁷

²³ Chudnoff, “Gurwitsch’s Phenomenal Holism.”

²⁴ The *theme*; see Chudnoff, “Gurwitsch’s Phenomenal Holism,” 577, fn. 37, for some remarks on the relation between Chudnoff’s and Watzl’s views.

²⁵ Chudnoff, “Gurwitsch’s Phenomenal Holism,” 572.

²⁶ For further discussion, see Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 208.

²⁷ The view presented here is more or less independent of Watzl’s proposal in *Structuring Mind*. That is, it would be possible to accept Watzl’s account and, based on the points made in Section 4.3, argue that some parts of an experience that are indirectly connected via the relation *is peripheral to* can also be directly connected by a phenomenally manifest relation. Or one could argue that the connection between two parts of an experience referred to in Section 4.3 is only experienced if the relation *is peripheral to* is phenomenally manifest with respect to the two parts.

First, we can note that the focus of attention frequently shifts, and often does so rapidly. Yoshimi and Vinson²⁸ suggest that such shifts of attention not only happen, but that we often anticipate shifts in attention, and that such anticipations may link items in the attentional background with items in the foreground. They refer to this as *predictive relevance*:

Peripheral items which are highly predictively relevant to the theme are experienced as a kind of *sense of what's coming next*, i.e., what Husserl and Gurwitsch called “adumbrations” or “protentions.”²⁹

The predictive relevance of part of the attentional background can be characterized as an experienced connection between two distinct parts of an experience: P-is-predictively-relevant-to-Q. If such an experienced relation exists, it can connect even experiences that are not directly connected by the relation “is peripheral to.” However, is “predictive relevance” really an experientially manifest relation? I will leave this question open here, because there is a similar relation that might even capture the idea underlying predictive relevance as well. This relation is the experienced *ability* to shift one’s focus of attention, a form of *attentional agency*.³⁰

The type of agency at issue here must be distinguished from moral and practical agency. It is a type of *epistemic agency*,³¹ because it allows one to focus on information that is relevant to one’s current goals and interests, ignoring information that is irrelevant.³² Furthermore, it is *personal* (as opposed to subpersonal) and *controlled* (voluntary), because it is attributed to the subject if it intends to maintain or shift their attention.³³ Attention can be conscious or unconscious, i.e., also non-consciously processed stimuli can be attended to.³⁴ In this context, only conscious attention is relevant (because I do not claim that all forms of attention bring about an experienced connection).

Conscious attentional agency makes a phenomenal contribution. There are competing accounts of the phenomenology of attention; in particular, it is debated whether conscious attention has a uniform phenomenology, and whether it is best described in terms of phenomenal qualities (phenomenal salience) or in terms of phenomenal structure.³⁵ As already mentioned above, I focus on the view that at least some forms of conscious attention go along with a phenomenally manifest distinction into an attentional foreground and background.³⁶ Conscious attentional agency makes an additional phenomenal contribution. At least sometimes, when a conscious subject actively controls their attention, they will experience a specific *mental affordance*,³⁷ viz. the ability to shift attention from one part of an experience to another. I do not claim that this experience is ubiquitous; for the purposes of this article, I shall only claim that it occurs occasionally.

A particularly clear example of attentional agency can be found in certain forms of meditation,³⁸ when a meditating person has just realized that they have been distracted by a spontaneous thought, and now

28 Yoshimi and Vinson, “Extending Gurwitsch’s Field Theory of Consciousness.”

29 *Ibid.*, 117.

30 Metzinger, “The Myth of Cognitive Agency;” Metzinger, *Being No One*, sec. 6.4.3; Metzinger, “The Problem of Mental Action,” sec. 2.3.

31 Metzinger, “The Myth of Cognitive Agency.”

32 Fairweather and Montemayor, *Knowledge, Dexterity, and Attention*, 6; Jennings, *The Attending Mind*, 107.

33 Wu, “Attention as Selection for Action,” 103; and Wu, *Attention*, 30–3.

34 Jiang et al., “A Gender- and Sexual Orientation-Dependent Spatial Attentional Effect of Invisible Images,” 17048–52; and Norman et al., “Object-Based Attention Without Awareness,” 836–43.

35 Wu, *Attention*, 127–31; and Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 184–6.

36 Jennings, “Attention and Perceptual Organization;” Jennings, *The Attending Mind*; Watzl, “Attentional Organization and the Unity of Consciousness;” Yoshimi and Vinson, “Extending Gurwitsch’s Field Theory of Consciousness;” and Watzl, *Structuring Mind*.

37 McClelland, “The Mental Affordance Hypothesis,” 401–27.

38 This does not mean that it can *only* be found in meditation or under special circumstances. On the contrary, it is an ability that we also have in ordinary conscious states. However, the example of meditation is especially useful because some forms of meditation revolve around – directly or indirectly – noticing how the ability to control one’s attention (and the associated phenomenology) varies. It therefore illustrates the phenomenal difference brought about by conscious attentional agency.

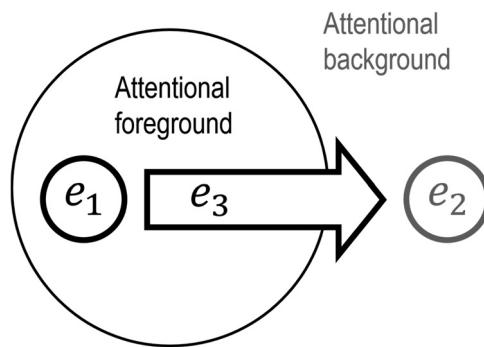


Figure 2: e_3 denotes an experienced connection between e_1 and e_2 . e_3 is itself part of the attentional foreground.

experiences the ability to redirect the focus of attention to, for example, the sensation of breathing.³⁹ While having a distracting thought, a person experiences their breathing as part of the attentional background. The experienced ability to shift the focus of attention from the thought to the breath therefore connects part of the attentional foreground with the background. This example also illustrates that not all conscious experiences involve the phenomenology of attentional agency. In fact, the ability to control one's attention as well as the experience of this ability is likely absent during large parts of our conscious lives.⁴⁰ This absence is usually only noticed in retrospect, when the ability to focus one's attention is regained (and consciously experienced). For instance, when we are mind-wandering during an activity such as reading, we may not even notice that we have stopped paying attention to the text. This only happens when we “catch ourselves” mind-wandering. In such moments, attentional agency makes a phenomenal contribution that can experientially connect items in the attentional foreground with items in the background.

There are at least two potential problems with this view. The first is that the ability to shift the focus of attention to an item in the attentional background need not involve any items in the attentional foreground. In other words, it may not be an experience of a possible shift from P to Q, but just an experience of a possible shift to Q. But then it cannot be an experienced connection between P and Q. This problem can be solved by arguing that (i) co-attending to two items is sufficient for an experienced connection⁴¹ and (ii) the experienced ability to shift the focus of attention is itself in the attentional foreground. Hence, there is an experienced connection between P and the experienced ability to shift to Q (because both are in the focus of attention; Figure 2). And since the experienced ability to shift attention to Q involves Q, it thereby establishes an experienced connection between P and Q.

This leads to a second potential problem: it is not obvious that experiencing the ability to shift attention to Q can be in the focus of attention without thereby also attending to Q (Figure 3).

For instance, assume I experience the taste of an apple I am eating at the present moment as being in the attentional foreground, and the sound of the music I am hearing as part of the attentional background. Call the former experience e_1 , the latter experience e_2 . Now assume I have a further experience, e_3 , which corresponds to the experienced ability to shift the focus of attention from e_1 to e_2 . Is e_3 part of the attentional foreground or part of the background? If it is part of the background, then it is unclear how it can experientially connect e_1 and e_2 , because its being in the background means that I am not focusing my attention on it. If it is experienced as part of the foreground, however, it is unclear how I can simultaneously experience e_2 as part of the background, because e_3 involves e_2 (recall that e_3 is the experienced ability to shift the focus of attention from e_1 to e_2).

³⁹ For a model of these dynamics, see Hasenkamp et al., “Mind Wandering and Attention During Focused Meditation,” 750–60; and Hasenkamp, “Catching the Wandering Mind,” 539–51.

⁴⁰ See the references in Metzinger, “The Myth of Cognitive Agency,” 6.

⁴¹ A version of this idea has been defended by Prinz. According to his theory, perceived features are unified when they are co-attended; and when two features are introspected at the same time, they are co-attended (according to Prinz), which means that they are unified (see Prinz, “Attention, Atomism, and the Disunity of Consciousness,” 221).

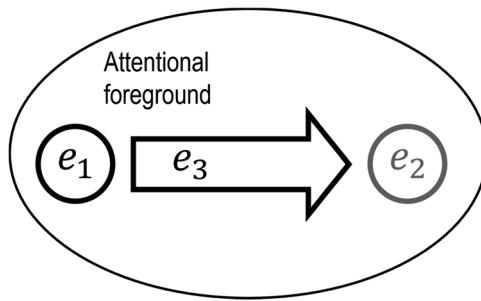


Figure 3: If e_3 connects e_1 and e_2 , does this mean that both e_1 and e_2 have to be in the foreground? If so, it cannot connect items in the foreground with items in the background.

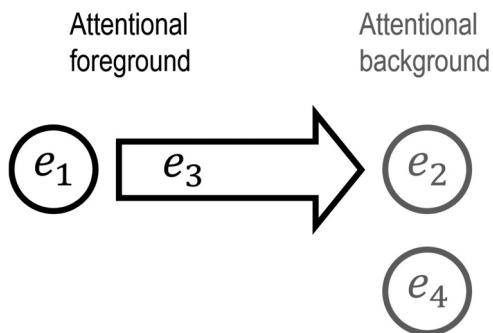


Figure 4: If the difference between items that are attended to and items that are not attended to consists in the fact that items outside the focus of attention are represented as being determinable, then e_3 can connect e_1 and e_2 , without requiring that both be attended to, i.e., without requiring that both be determinate representations.

This problem can be solved by adopting a particular view of what it means to attend to an item: if attention makes contents more determinate,⁴² then e_3 will be an experience to the effect that I can make the content corresponding to e_2 (which is currently represented in a somewhat indeterminate, but determinable way) more determinate. This allows us to specify the description of my conscious experience as follows. When I do not experience the ability to shift my focus of attention from the apple to the music, I have an experience that determinately represents an apple, and an experience that represents music in a determinable way. When I experience the ability to shift my focus of attention from the apple to the music, I have an experience that determinately represents an apple, an experience that represents music in a determinable way, and an experience that *determinately* represents the ability to make the represented music more determinate. Both the apple and the ability to shift the focus of attention are experienced determinately, i.e., they are co-attended. As assumed above, this means there is an experienced connection between them.⁴³ And since the ability refers to the experienced music, without representing it determinately, there is an experienced connection between the apple and the music, without presupposing that the music is thereby experienced as part of the attentional foreground (Figure 4).⁴⁴

We can even relax the assumption that co-attention is sufficient for an experienced connection. The experienced ability to shift the focus of attention from P to Q may be a different way of experiencing both P

⁴² Nanay, “Attention and Perceptual Content,” 263–70; and see also Stazicker, “Attention, Visual Consciousness and Indeterminacy,” 156–84.

⁴³ If there are many experienced connections of this sort at any time, one could also call this a “field of determinability.” I am grateful to Thomas Metzinger for this suggestion.

⁴⁴ Perhaps one could argue that there is *vicarious attention* to the music (for the notion of vicarious attention, see Lopez, “Vicarious Attention, Degrees of Enhancement, and the Contents of Consciousness”).

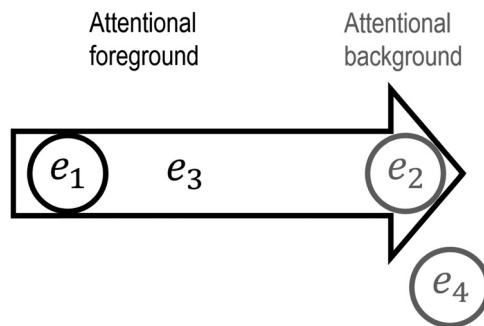


Figure 5: e_3 denotes the experienced ability to shift one's focus of attention from P to Q. It is a fusion between e_1 (which represents P) and e_2 (which represents Q). Hence, it constitutes an experienced connection. e_4 is an experience in the attentional background that is not connected to other experiences the subject currently has (at least not via attentional agency).

and Q. That is, if e_1 is a determinate conscious representation of P, and if e_2 is a determinable conscious representation of Q, then the experienced attentional ability may be a determinate representation e_3 that comprises (or replaces) both e_1 and e_2 (Figure 5).

5 Conclusion

I have considered to what extent the attentional structure of consciousness (which partitions an experience into an attentional foreground and a background) can bring about phenomenal unity, establishing an experienced connection between different parts of an experience. If we assume that there is an experienced connection between all parts that are in the focus of attention, it still seems that attentional structure mainly brings about disunity: it segregates parts in the attentional foreground from parts in the attentional background. I have argued that experiencing the ability to shift the focus of attention overcomes the experiential segregation. We do not always have (and experience) this form of attentional agency. However, when we do have it, it can bring about a form of phenomenal unity that connects the attentional foreground with the background.

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