



# What-it's-like talk is technical talk

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## Abstract

It is common to characterise phenomenal consciousness as *what it is like* to be in a mental state. This paper argues that the ‘what-it’s-like’-phrase in this context has a technical meaning, i.e. a meaning for which the association to the relevant expression is peculiar to a theoretical community. The relevant theoretical community is philosophy and some parts of cognitive science, so on this view, only philosophers and cognitive scientists use the ‘what-it’s-like’-phrase in the way that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness. This claim has important consequences. Firstly, I argue that the phrase says nothing informative about phenomenal consciousness. Secondly, I argue that the fact that non-philosophers use the phrase is not compelling evidence that they believe in phenomenal consciousness. These claims have further consequences for debates about phenomenal consciousness.

**Keywords** What it’s like · Technical view · Phenomenal consciousness · Ability hypothesis · Eliminativism

## 1 Introduction

It is common to characterise phenomenal consciousness as *what it is like* to be in a mental state. Some philosophers claim that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in this context has a technical meaning (Lewis, 1995; Carruthers, 2000; Byrne, 2004; Janzen, 2011; Mandik, 2016), i.e. a meaning for which the association to the relevant expression is peculiar to a theoretical community, such that this association is not widely known outside the relevant theoretical community. The relevant theoretical community is philosophy and some parts of cognitive science, so on this view, the use of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness is not widely known outside of philosophy and cognitive science. Call this the *technical view*. Others claim that the use of the phrase that is characteristic in the literature on

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phenomenal consciousness is widely known both inside and outside this theoretical community, hence that the phrase is non-technical (Hellie, 2004; Farrell, 2016; Stoljar, 2016; Chalmers, 2020; Mehta, 2022). Call this the *non-technical view*.

This paper defends the technical view. The claim that the meaning of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical is only about the use of the phrase that is *characteristic* in the literature on phenomenal consciousness, it is not about all uses of the phrase that may occur in that literature or elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

While I argue that the meaning of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical, I do *not* offer an account of what the phrase means. The question of whether the phrase is technical is distinct from the question of what the phrase means, but they are related in the sense that an answer to the first question puts constraints on an answer to the second. If the meaning is technical, then the association of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase and the meaning relevant to phenomenal consciousness cannot be one that is widely known outside philosophy and cognitive science, and if it is non-technical, then this association is widely known outside philosophy and cognitive science. So everything I say is consistent with different accounts of the meaning of the phrase as long as those accounts restrict themselves to meanings for which the association to the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is not widely known outside philosophy and cognitive science.<sup>2</sup>

The paper has two parts. In the first part, I clarify and defend the technical view. Even though several philosophers claim that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical, this is typically not supported with compelling argument. The first part of the paper tries to remedy that and offers an argument for the technical view. The argument is that the defender of the technical view can offer a better explanation of why some believe that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical and others believe that the phrase is non-technical. I also address the arguments for the non-technical view offered by proponents of that view and argue that they are unconvincing.

In the second part of the paper, I move to why it matters that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical. First I argue that the phrase says nothing informative about phenomenal consciousness and that definitions of phenomenal consciousness in terms of what it is like to be in mental states are trivial. Then I argue that the fact that lay people use the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is not evidence that they believe in phenomenal consciousness. Both these claims have further consequences for debates about phenomenal consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> The technical view is not the only alternative to the non-technical view. Instead of holding that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase has a technical meaning in the relevant context, one might hold that it has no clear meaning. These views differ since the technical view is consistent with claims involving the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase having clear truth-conditions, but the view that the phrase has no clear meaning entails that such claims have no clear truth-conditions. This view is also consistent with such claims being meaningless, i.e. having no truth-conditions, which is something the technical view is inconsistent with. I think the arguments in what follows could be modified to accommodate this view, but for the sake of simplicity, I shall focus on the technical view.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the fact that some philosophers both offer an account of the meaning of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase and claim that the phrase is non-technical does not necessarily make their account of the meaning inconsistent with my claim that the phrase is technical, since they may be wrong about whether the meaning they associate with the phrase is familiar outside of philosophy and cognitive science. I believe the accounts of e.g. Hellie (2004), Stoljar (2016) and Mehta (2022) are all examples of this, but proving that here would take me too far off topic.

Section 2 clarifies the technical and non-technical views. Section 3 discusses the ability sense of ‘knowing what it’s like’. Section 4 discusses how a defender of the technical view should interpret lay people’s use of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase. Section 5 offers an argument in favour of the technical view. Section 6 argues that the arguments for the non-technical view are unconvincing. Section 7 discusses consequences of the technical view for debates about phenomenal consciousness. Section 8 concludes.

## 2 The technical view and the non-technical view

The literature on the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase contains little discussion about the notion of technical meaning. But a minimal characterisation that captures the idea relevant to the debate is the following:

The meaning of an expression is technical if the association of the expression and the meaning is peculiar to a defined theoretical community, such that this association is not widely known outside the relevant theoretical community.

I do not claim that a defined theoretical community is necessary for a technical meaning. Perhaps young children’s inventions of new words and peculiar uses of existing words count as introducing technical meanings without involving a defined theoretical community. But an exact definition of technical meaning that captures all cases is not what concerns me here, as the above characterisation is sufficient for the idea relevant to the debate between the technical view and the non-technical view.

Given the above characterisation of technical meaning, the *technical view* is the view that the association of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase and the meaning of the phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness is peculiar to philosophy and some parts of cognitive science, such that this association is not widely known outside philosophy and cognitive science. Of course, lay people do use the phrase. But according to the technical view, the use of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness is not widely known outside philosophy and cognitive science.

By contrast, the *non-technical view* is the view that the association of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase and the meaning of the phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness is not peculiar to philosophy and cognitive science. In other words, the non-technical view is the view that the use of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness is widely known by lay people as well as by philosophers and scientists.

There is also an alternative formulation of these views, which appeals to the ordinary meanings or senses<sup>3</sup> of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase. But before I can formulate the views in this way, I must first clarify the senses of the phrase which (unlike the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness) are uncontroversially ordinary. I shall distinguish three ordinary senses—the evaluative-descriptive sense, the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, and the resemblance sense—and give examples of how these senses are operative in talk about mental states. All these senses are discussed

<sup>3</sup> I use ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’ interchangeably in what follows.

in the debate at some point, and under various terminology, but they are never put together systematically in the way I do here.

The *evaluative-descriptive sense* is operative when one says that what it was like to watch a film was exciting, what it was like to hear a concert was boring, and what it was like to taste decayed food was disgusting. Here the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase picks out one’s evaluative judgement, which describes the mental state, or the object of the mental state, with some evaluative term: exciting, boring, disgusting etc. (cf. Hacker, 2002).

The evaluative-descriptive sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase cannot be the sense of the phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness—regardless of whether the latter sense is technical or not. The reason is that many mental states do not prompt evaluative judgements and so are not like anything in the evaluative-descriptive sense, but realists about phenomenal consciousness believe that many (if not all) these mental states are like something in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness (cf. Snowdon, 2010, p. 16). For example, my experience of walking down the street may not prompt any evaluative judgement and so is not like anything in the evaluative-descriptive sense. If you ask me what it was like to walk down the street I may answer ‘Nothing in particular’. But realists about phenomenal consciousness plausibly believe that the experience of walking down the street is like something in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness.

The *non-evaluative-descriptive sense* is operative when one says that ‘it starts to become clearer’ after the optician asks what it is like to see the letters on the wall, or when the text book says that ‘it consists of firing of neurons in the visual cortex’ after asking what vision is like. In general, an object X being like something in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense just means that a non-evaluative property can be specified in a description of X as an answer to ‘How is X?’, or that one can describe X as being some non-evaluative way. The ‘ways’ picked out by the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in this case are not just any properties, but properties that describe *how* an object is, as opposed to where or when it is (cf. Snowdon, 2010; Stoljar, 2016; Mehta, 2022). For example, if I ask you what Norway is like or how Norway is, then you can say e.g. that Norway has fjords and mountains, or just above five million people—which is your non-evaluative description of what Norway is like, or how Norway is. (If you say it is fantastic or amazing, then that is your evaluative description of what Norway is like, or how Norway is.)

As mentioned above, a mental state can be like something in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness without being like anything in the evaluative-descriptive sense. This is why the evaluative-descriptive sense cannot be the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness—regardless of whether the latter sense is technical or not. But there is no analogous dissociation for what mental states are like in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness and what mental states are like in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense. Perhaps there are mental states that are not like anything in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness that are like something in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense. But all mental states that are like something in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness are like something in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, since all phenomenal states can be described as being some non-evaluative ‘way’. For this reason, the non-evaluative-descriptive sense of

the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase *can* be the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness, *if* the sense of the phrase is non-technical and the phrase is meant to pick out the phenomenal ‘way’ mental states are. Of course, if the sense of the phrase is technical, then it cannot be the non-evaluative-descriptive sense.

The *resemblance sense* is operative when one says that the taste of lemon is like the taste of lime. Here the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase picks out a similarity or resemblance between two phenomena (cf. Gaskin, 2019). Just as one might say that one person is like another person—meaning the former resembles the latter, so one might say that one experience is like another experience—meaning the first experience resembles the second. All states that are like something in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness are like something in the resemblance sense, since everything resembles something in some respect. Therefore, the resemblance sense—just like the non-evaluative-descriptive sense—*can* be the sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness. But it can only be the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness *if* that sense is non-technical and the phrase is meant to pick out phenomenal resemblance, i.e. resemblance restricted to phenomenal properties. If the sense of the phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness is technical, then it cannot be the resemblance sense.

With these distinctions in mind, we can now to provide a second formulation of both the non-technical view and the technical view. As the evaluative-descriptive sense cannot be the sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness, the defender of the non-technical view is left with three options. The first is that the phrase is used with the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, which picks out the phenomenal ‘way’ mental states are. The second option is that the phrase is used with the resemblance sense, which picks out phenomenal resemblance. The third option is that the phrase is used with a fourth ordinary sense: the phenomenal sense, which is neither the non-evaluative-descriptive sense nor the resemblance sense, and picks out phenomenal consciousness in the relevant context. I am not sure if all defenders of the non-technical view have the same understanding of which of these senses is the sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness. But that does not matter for present purposes, since it suffices to think of the non-technical view as a disjunction with three disjuncts: *either* the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is used with the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, *or* with the resemblance sense, *or* with a distinct but ordinary phenomenal sense.

The defender of the technical view denies all disjuncts: the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is neither used with the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, nor with the resemblance sense, nor with a distinct but ordinary phenomenal sense. According to the technical view, the phrase *is* used with a distinct phenomenal sense. But this sense is not ordinary. Rather, it is a sense for which the association to the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is peculiar to philosophy and cognitive science, i.e. a technical sense. The claim is only that the sense with which philosophers and cognitive scientists characteristically use the phrase in connection with phenomenal consciousness is a technical sense. This is consistent with lay people sometimes using the phrase with the non-evaluative-descriptive sense or the resemblance sense in connection with phenomenal consciousness. But even if lay people sometimes use the phrase that way—which I am agnostic about here—this

is not the way philosophers and cognitive scientists characteristically use the phrase in the literature on phenomenal consciousness. Or so I argue.

### 3 The ability sense

There is one more sense that needs to be introduced, namely the *ability sense*. The ability sense is not a sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase but a sense of the complex phrase consisting of a cognitive verb like ‘know’ or ‘learn’ followed by the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase. It is a distinct sense that needs to be introduced because there are arguably examples of lay people using e.g. ‘knowing what it’s like’ that cannot easily be analysed in terms of a sense of ‘know’ plus either the evaluative-descriptive sense, the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, or the resemblance sense. But these examples can be analysed in terms of the ability sense.

The ability sense can be operative in sentences such as ‘You don’t know what it’s like to experience this unless you have the experience’. To see that not all examples of sentences like this can be analysed by appealing to a sense of ‘know’ plus the evaluative-descriptive sense, the non-evaluative-descriptive sense, or the resemblance sense, we can stipulate a case where you both know what the experience resembles, what your evaluative judgement will be, and the non-evaluative property the experience has. Let’s say you want to taste a rare fruit, which you know resembles another fruit you like, and since you like the latter fruit you will find it delicious to taste the former. Let’s also say that you know the experience of tasting the rare fruit will have the non-evaluative property of consisting in such-and-such brain activity. Then you know what tasting the rare fruit is like in the resemblance sense, the evaluative-descriptive sense, and the non-evaluative-descriptive sense. One might still say that there is a different sense in which you do *not* know what the experience is like, which ‘only experience can teach you’. One thing the experience will teach you is the ability to remember, imagine and recognise the experience. Thus, one might say that one sense of ‘knowing what it’s like’ refers to the possession of these abilities (Lewis, 1988).

My claim is only that the ability sense is an ordinary sense that sometimes, not always, is the sense of e.g. ‘knowing what it’s like’. Section 3.1 defends the claim that the ability sense is *ordinary*, and Sect. 3.2 clarifies the claim that the ability sense only *sometimes* is the sense of ‘knowing what it’s like’.

#### 3.1 Why the ability sense is an ordinary sense

Some might doubt that the ability sense is really an *ordinary* sense of ‘knowing what it’s like’ (cf. Lycan, 1996, p. 93). They might think that the ordinary senses of ‘knowing what it’s like’ concern knowledge of evaluative properties, non-evaluative properties, resemblance, and perhaps phenomenal properties, but not the possession of abilities. On this view, the ability sense is a philosophers’ invention, stipulated by defenders of the ability hypothesis, according to which knowing what it is like to see red consists in possession of the abilities to imagine, recognise, and remember seeing red (Lewis, 1988). Why believe the ability sense is an ordinary sense?

One reason is the data uncovered by Gregory (2022). Gregory and colleagues conducted a study where they asked lay people unfamiliar with philosophy whether the colour-blind super-scientist Mary learns what it is like to see red after having a colour sight operation and then seeing a red tomato—closely modelled on Jackson’s (1982) original story with Mary’s release from the black and white room. To this question, most subjects tended to give positive responses. That is, subjects did not think Mary knew what it is like to see red pre-operation, but they thought she learned it post-operation. Gregory and colleagues also asked subjects to comments upon their response to the Mary scenario. Many of these comments are difficult to interpret. But some comments can plausibly be interpreted in a way suggesting that subjects understood the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in the ability sense.

To see this, consider the following comments subjects wrote to explain why they did not think Mary knows what it is like to see red pre-operation:

Although she knows the theory behind it, it’s not a concept she can truly visualize.

It is impossible to imagine a color you have never seen.

No. Mary is having someone purposely give her a red tomato when she wakes up so that her brain will lock that color in and it will be memorized forever.

She never actually saw it so I do not think she can imagine it. I think it has to be experienced.

Consider also the following comments subjects wrote to explain why they thought that Mary learns what it is like to see red post-operation:

She will learn in her mind what red looks like so it can register when she sees something else red.

The red tomato would give her proof about the true color of red which she can store into her long term memory to know that the tomato is a form of red.

This will be her first time ever seeing the color red so after seeing the tomato and knowing that it’s red, she will be able to identify the color red.<sup>4</sup>

The first set of comments explains Mary’s ignorance of what it is like to see red pre-operation by appealing to her lack of the ability to imagine and remember seeing red. The second set of comments explains Mary’s learning what it is like to see red post-operation by appealing to her gaining the ability to recognise and remember red. My argument for the claim that the ability sense is an ordinary sense is that subjects’ understanding ‘knowing/learning what-it’s-like’ in the ability sense best accounts for why they wrote the above comments. For not knowing what seeing red is like in the ability sense *is* just to lack these abilities, and learning what it is like *is* just to acquire them. Therefore, the above comments suggest that the subjects who wrote them understood ‘knowing/learning what it’s like’ phrase in the ability sense, and since these subjects are lay people unfamiliar with philosophy, the ability sense is plausibly an ordinary sense.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Daniel Gregory and colleagues for sharing the data from which these comments were taken.

### 3.2 The ability sense and knowing what it's like

My claim that the ability sense is an ordinary sense only commits me to the claim that lay people *sometimes* use e.g. 'knowing what it's like' in this sense, it does not commit me to the claim that 'knowing what it's like' should *always* be understood in the ability sense.

For example, I do not claim that the ability sense is operative in philosophers' claim that Mary learns what it is like to see red when she is released from the black-white room. For given that I defend the technical view, I am committed to saying that 'Mary learns what it is like to see red'—in relevant philosophical contexts—involves the technical sense of the 'what-it's-like' phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness. Thus, it does not involve the ability sense of 'knowing what it's like', which I claim is an ordinary sense.

At this point, one may wonder what the relation is between my hypothesis that the ability sense is ordinary, and the ability hypothesis, which, as mentioned above, is the claim that knowing what it is like to see red consists in possessing the abilities to imagine, recognise and remember seeing red (Lewis, 1988). The relation between these hypotheses depends on how one understands the 'ability hypothesis'.

The ability hypothesis is sometimes taken to be an objection to the claim that Mary learns what it is like to see red in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness (e.g. Lycan, 1996). But the mere claim that Mary learns what it is like to see red in the ability sense (i.e. that she gains some abilities) is consistent with Mary learning what it is like to see red in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness. So if the ability hypothesis is supposed to be an objection to the latter claim, then the ability hypothesis is not merely the claim that Mary gains the abilities to imagine, recognise, and remember seeing red, or that *a* sense in which Mary learns what it is like to see red concerns the acquisition of these abilities. Rather, it is the claim that, once one knows all physical facts, *the only* sense in which one can learn what it is like to see red is by acquiring the abilities to imagine, recognise, and remember seeing red, i.e. that *the only* sense in which Mary learns what it is like to see red is in the ability sense.<sup>5</sup> My claim that the ability sense is ordinary entails that *a* sense in which Mary learns what it is like to see red concerns the possession of the abilities to imagine, recognise, and remember seeing red. But this does not commit me to the claim that *the only* sense in which Mary learns what it is like to see red is that she gains these abilities. The claim that the ability sense is ordinary is consistent with Mary learning what it is like to see red in senses of 'learning what-it's-like' other than the ability sense.

We can add many more examples where 'knowing/learning what it is like' should not be understood in the ability sense. But that is consistent with my claim that the ability sense is ordinary, since this claim only commits me to the claim that the ability

<sup>5</sup> I find Lewis (1988) difficult to interpret on this point. That is, I am not sure whether he intended the 'ability hypothesis' to be an objection to the claim that Mary learns what it is like to see red in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness. If he did not intend the 'ability hypothesis' to be an objection to that claim, then his opposition to that claim stems from his eliminativism about phenomenal consciousness (cf. 1995, p. 143) rather than claims about abilities. If this is the case, then his discussion about abilities is perhaps only meant to point out the sense in which he, as an eliminativist about phenomenal consciousness, nevertheless thought that there is a sense in which it is true to say that (a) experience is the best teacher and (b) Mary learns what it is like to see red.



sense is *sometimes* the sense of ‘knowing/learning what it’s like’, it does not commit me to the claim that it is *always* the sense of ‘knowing/learning what it’s like’.

#### 4 How should we interpret lay people’s use of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase?

On the technical view, the use of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness is not widely known outside philosophy and cognitive science. How should a defender of this view interpret lay people’s use of the phrase? This section discusses available interpretations. All the examples I discuss are taken from Hellie (2004) and Farrell (2016), who take the examples to support the non-technical view, since they believe these examples involve the use of the phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness (Hellie, 2004, p. 339; Farrell, 2016, pp. 59–60). But the fact that the interpretations I offer are available shows that these examples provide no support for the non-technical view.

The first example is from The Beatles’ song ‘She Said, She Said’:

She said ‘I know what it’s like to be dead’ (Lennon & McCartney, 1966, quoted by Hellie, 2004, p. 369).

This can be interpreted as involving the ability sense, since the ‘she’ of the song is arguably expressing her rich life experience with the exaggeration that she knows what it is like to be dead, and her life experience is something the protagonist might not be able to imagine, given his lack of life experience. It can also be interpreted in the non-evaluative–descriptive sense restricted to the non-phenomenal ‘ways’ it is to be ‘dead’. For example, if being ‘dead’ consists of having bad fortune, then what it is like to be ‘dead’ might be making one realise the contingencies of life, which is a non-phenomenal ‘way’ being ‘dead’ is. On this interpretation, she is saying that she knows how bad fortune makes one realise the contingencies of life.

The second example is this:

Neither does he know what it is like to be scorched by lightning, but he has experienced the shrivelling effects of unrequited longing’ (Unknown, 1891, p. 541, quoted by Farrell, 2016, p. 59).

This can be interpreted as involving the evaluative-descriptive sense, as what it is like to be scorched by lightning is contrasted with the effects of unrequited longing, one of which might be one’s evaluative judgement, e.g. one finding it dreadful. It can also be interpreted in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense restricted to the non-phenomenal ‘ways’ being scorched by lightning are. For example, a ‘way’ to be scorched by lightning is making one’s heart stop, in which case what it is like to be scorched by lightning is making one’s heart stop. On this interpretation, the above says that he does not know that being scorched by lightning makes one’s heart stop.

The third example is this:

Drug-inspired psychedelic art tried to portray what it's like to 'see sounds' and 'taste colours' while on an LSD trip (Cain, 1969, p. F17, quoted by Farrell, 2016, p. 60).

This can be interpreted as involving the resemblance sense restricted to non-phenomenal resemblance, since artists tried to portray what it is like to see sounds and taste colours by creating an artwork that presumably resembles the seeing of sounds and taste of colours in some way, which may be non-phenomenal. For example, the artwork may resemble the seeing of sounds and taste of colours in the sense that it prompts a reaction similar to that prompted by seeing sounds and tasting colours.

This illustrates how a defender of the technical view can interpret lay people's use of the 'what-it's-like' phrase as involving either the evaluative-descriptive sense, the non-evaluative-descriptive sense restricted to the non-phenomenal 'ways' things are, the resemblance sense restricted to non-phenomenal resemblance, or the ability sense. None of these senses concern phenomenal consciousness. This means that examples of lay people's use of the 'what-it's-like' phrase—even those examples proponents of the non-technical view appeal to in support of their view—is no obstacle for the technical view.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the fact that the above examples *can* be interpreted as involving senses of the 'what-it's-like' phrase that are not concerned with phenomenal consciousness does not show that these examples do not involve the use of the phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness, since examples of lay people's use of the 'what-it's-like' phrase *can* also be interpreted in the sense relevant to phenomenal consciousness. More generally, when there are two competing interpretations available for certain locutions, then the fact that one interpretation can accommodate the relevant locutions does not show that that interpretation is more plausible than the other. Thus, the fact that examples of lay people's use of the 'what-it's-like' phrase *can* be interpreted in senses that are not concerned with phenomenal consciousness is no reason to prefer the non-technical view. The reason to prefer the non-technical view is the argument I offer in the next section, and *that argument* supports the claim that the above examples do not involve the use of the 'what-it's-like' phrase that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness, but rather alternative senses, such as those proposed in this section.

## 5 The argument for the technical view

The argument for the technical view is that a defender of this view can offer a better explanation of why some believe that the 'what-it's-like' phrase is technical and others believe that it is non-technical.

Here are some statements demonstrating that some philosophers believe that the 'what-it's-like' phrase has a technical meaning in the literature on phenomenal consciousness:

<sup>6</sup> Hellie, Farrell, and Stoljar provide further examples, which I do not have space to discuss. But I think these examples can be interpreted in a way similar to the examples discussed above.

'What it's like' or 'how it seems' are ordinary enough – but when used as terms for qualia, they are used in a special technical sense (Lewis, 1995, p. 140).

[T]he terminology of 'subjective feel' and 'what-it-is-like' are quasi-technical in nature, having been introduced by philosophers (Carruthers, 2000, p. 14n11). [I]t is doubtful that 'There is something it's like for so-and-so to  $\phi$ ' has some 'special use to describe subjectivity' (dialects of analytic philosophy aside) (Byrne, 2004, p. 215).

[I]n philosophical discussions of consciousness – talk of what it is like for S to V is to be understood in a relatively technical or specialized sense (Janzen, 2011, p. 279).

'[W]hat-it's-like' [...] is yet another technical term shedding no light on the term 'phenomenal' (Mandik, 2016, p. 142).

Most of these philosophers do not provide explicit arguments for these claims. But even though they use slightly different formulations, it seems clear that they take the association of the 'what-it's-like' phrase and the meaning of the phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness to be peculiar to philosophy. They thereby believe that the meaning of the phrase is technical in the relevant philosophical context. By contrast, other philosophers (Hellie, 2004, pp. 336–339; Farrell, 2016; Stoljar, 2016, p. 1183; Chalmers, 2020, pp. 237–238; Mehta, 2022, p. 215) claim that the 'what-it's-like' phrase has a non-technical meaning in the literature on phenomenal consciousness.

A defender of the technical view can say that the reason some believe that the 'what-it's-like' phrase is technical is that it *is* technical. And the reason others believe that it is non-technical is *either* because there are several ordinary uses of the phrase, in combination with the fact that philosophers typically do not clarify what they mean by the phrase—*or* because they are too entrenched in philosophy.

A defender of the non-technical view can say that the reason some believe that the 'what-it's-like' phrase is non-technical is that it *is* non-technical. But the defender of the non-technical view does not have a plausible explanation available for why some believe that the phrase is technical.

As far as I can tell, there are two options. The first option is to say that defenders of the technical view are misled by the context-sensitive meaning, or the ambiguity, of the phrase. But this just pushes the problem further back, for why should context-sensitivity or ambiguity mislead these philosophers to believe that the phrase is technical? Context-sensitivity or ambiguity does not generally seem to make philosophers claim that ordinary expressions are technical. When 'bank' is used in philosophy, that does not make philosophers claim that 'bank' is technical, even though the expression is ambiguous, or has a context-sensitive meaning. So why should ambiguity or context-sensitivity make philosophers claim that the 'what-it's-like' phrase is technical when in fact it is (according to the defender of the non-technical view) ordinary?

The second option for the defender of the non-technical view is to claim that some philosophers say that the 'what-it's-like' phrase is technical because they have ideological motives forcing them to deny the non-technical view. But defenders of the non-technical view have not provided any evidence for the explanans figuring in this explanation, i.e. defenders of the technical view being committed to an ideology or

several ideologies, which make them deny the non-technical view. The relevant ideology cannot be the commitment to the technical view, since then one would explain the commitment to the technical view by appealing to the commitment to the technical view, which is circular. By contrast, the defender of the technical view has solid evidence for the explanans figuring in the explanation for why (according to defenders of the technical view) some mistakenly believe that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is non-technical. For there is evidence that the phrase has several meanings, that philosophers typically do not explain what they mean by the phrase, and that philosophers are entrenched in philosophy. And as mentioned above, these are the things a defender of the technical view can appeal to in explaining why some believe that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is non-technical. Thus, the defender of the technical view can offer a better explanation of why some believe that the phrase is technical and others believe that the phrase is non-technical.

## 6 The arguments for the non-technical view and why they are unconvincing

The previous section offered an argument in favour of the technical view. But if there is equal support for the non-technical view, then there would be no reason to prefer the technical view. This section discusses the arguments for the non-technical view offered by defenders of that view and argues that they are all unconvincing. Thus, we should prefer the technical view.

### 6.1 First argument

The first argument is that philosophers do not seem to be aware that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical when used in relevant philosophical contexts, which one would have expected if it really was technical (Farrell, 2016, pp. 56–57; Stoljar, 2016, p. 1184). But as noted above, there are several philosophers who explicitly claim that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical. Several others use scare quotes (e.g. Block, 1995, p. 230; Levine, 2001, p. 4). That some are not aware that the phrase is technical could be because they conflate the philosophical use of the phrase with other uses, or because they are too entrenched in philosophy to reliably distinguish technical from non-technical language. So the fact that some philosophers are unaware that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase has a technical meaning does not show that it has a non-technical meaning.

### 6.2 Second argument

The second argument for the non-technical view is that we should not multiply technical meanings unless it is necessary (Mehta, 2022, p.: 215). This argument can be understood in different ways, for as noted in Sect. 2, the defender of the non-technical view holds either that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is to be understood in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense restricted to the phenomenal ‘ways’ mental states are,

or in the resemblance sense restricted to phenomenal resemblance, or in a distinct ordinary sense—the phenomenal sense.

If the non-technical view is the view that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is used in the non-evaluative-descriptive sense or the resemblance sense, then it is true that a defender of the technical view ends up accepting more meanings of the phrase than a defender of the non-technical view. The reason is that the technical view posits a technical sense distinct from the three uncontroversially ordinary senses discussed in Sect. 2, while (this version of) the non-technical view says that the phrase is to be understood in either the non-evaluative-descriptive sense or the resemblance sense, which are both among the three ordinary senses discussed in Sect. 2. But the argument was that we should not multiply meanings *unless it is necessary*. And in this context, it is necessary to take the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in a technical sense that is distinct from the non-evaluative-descriptive sense and the resemblance sense, since otherwise we cannot offer a plausible explanation of why some believe that the phrase is technical and others believe that it is non-technical.

If the non-technical view is rather the view that the phrase is used in a distinct ordinary sense—the phenomenal sense—then defenders of both the technical and non-technical views end up accepting the same number of meanings. For in this case, both views posit a sense that is distinct from the three uncontroversially ordinary senses discussed in Sect. 2, it is just that the technical view claims that this sense is technical while the non-technical view claims that it is non-technical. But then it is not clear what the argument for the non-technical view is, since it is not clear why it is better to multiply non-technical meanings rather than technical meanings.

### 6.3 Third argument

The third argument for the non-technical view is not stated in the literature, but the argument I have in mind is a natural one in this context, so I will discuss it nevertheless. The argument is that the non-technical view explains why philosophers started using the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in the way that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness, but it is not clear why they did this if it is technical.

However, I think there is an explanation. Those who started using the phrase in the way that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness were familiar with the idea of phenomenal consciousness. One feature of this idea is that there is a gap between third-person knowledge and knowledge of phenomenal consciousness: one cannot know a phenomenal property unless one has had a mental state instantiating the property. In other words: experience is the best teacher. Another thing they knew was the expression ‘you don’t know what it’s like before you have the experience’, which, as discussed in Sect. 2, can be understood in the ability sense that is not concerned with phenomenal consciousness. In any case, the expression seems to describe the epistemic gap that is part of the concept of phenomenal consciousness—that experience is the best teacher. My hypothesis then, is that philosophers started using this expression to describe the epistemic gap that is part of the concept of phenomenal consciousness. And since ‘what-it’s-like’ refers to the object of knowledge (i.e. phenomenal consciousness) in this use of the above expression, they

also started to use the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in isolation—without being preceded by cognitive verbs like ‘know’—in the way that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness.

Were the philosophers who started using the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase this way aware that they were introducing a technical sense? It depends on what they thought about the expression ‘you don’t know what it’s like before you have the experience’. Given the technical view, lay people’s use of this expression does not involve the sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase that is relevant to phenomenal consciousness. Rather, it involves an ordinary sense, plausibly the ability sense. I am neutral about whether the philosophers who started using the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in the way that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness were aware that the above expression ordinarily involves the ability sense of ‘knowing what it’s like’ and not the sense of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase relevant to phenomenal consciousness. If they were aware of this, then they were likely aware that they were introducing a technical sense, but if they were not aware of this, then they were not aware that they were introducing a technical sense.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up then, none of the arguments for the non-technical view offered in the literature are convincing. Given the argument for the technical view, we should believe that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical.

## 7 Why the technical view matters

I have now argued that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase has a technical meaning. But why care whether it is technical or not? This section offers two reasons why the technical view matters.

### 7.1 First reason

The first reason the technical view matters is that if it is true, then the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase says nothing informative about phenomenal consciousness. However, the phrase is sometimes used in a way that makes it look as if it says something informative. For example, Kriegel says that ‘[p]henomenal consciousness is the property mental states, events, and processes have when, and only when, there is something it is like for their subject to undergo them, or be in them’ (2006, p. 58). The fact that Kriegel uses the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase on the right-hand side of this biconditional suggests that he takes the phrase to say something informative about phenomenal consciousness, since it is uncommon to state biconditionals that are completely trivial or uninformative.

But if the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase has a technical meaning here, then it says nothing informative about phenomenal consciousness. A biconditional in which token technical expressions occur on both sides *can* be informative *if* (a) the expressions are not co-extensional, or (b) the technical meaning of one of the expressions is more

<sup>7</sup> Who were these philosophers? I do not know, but the earliest uses of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase exemplifying the use that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness, which I have come across, are in Farrell (1950, p. 181) and Sprigge (in Sprigge & Montefiore, 1971, pp. 167–168).

widely known than the technical meaning of the other expression. For example, if I say ‘S conveys an implicature with an utterance U if and only if S conveys a proposition with U that is not part of the literal meaning of U’, then I use a technical term on both the left (‘implicature’) and right (‘proposition’) side. This is an informative biconditional, since ‘implicature’ and ‘proposition’ are not co-extensional terms. And if I coin a new technical term ‘schneomenal’ by saying that ‘a mental state *m* is schneomenally conscious if and only if *m* is phenomenally conscious’, then I use technical expressions on both sides. This is also an informative biconditional, since the technical meaning of ‘phenomenally conscious’ is more widely known than the technical meaning of ‘schneomenally conscious’.

But neither (a) nor (b) are satisfied in Kriegel’s biconditional above. States in which there is something it is like to be are all phenomenal states and all phenomenal states are states in which there is something it is like to be, so ‘having phenomenal consciousness’ and ‘being like something’ are co-extensional. And even though the *non-technical* meanings of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase are more widely known than the technical meaning of ‘phenomenal’, the (assuming the technical view) *technical* meaning of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is not more widely known than the technical meaning of ‘phenomenal’. Rather, those within the relevant theoretical community who know the technical meaning of the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase typically know the technical meaning of ‘phenomenal’ too. So formulations like that of Kriegel satisfy neither (a) nor (b), and thus they are not informative. In fact, Kriegel’s biconditional only says that mental states have the property phenomenal consciousness when and only when they are phenomenally conscious.

One might think the fact that people use the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in a way suggesting that it says something informative about phenomenal consciousness is evidence that the phrase is non-technical, since it is difficult to see why people would make statements like that of Kriegel if those statements are completely trivial. But a defender of the technical view can deny this and claim that it is rather evidence that those who use the phrase this way *believe* that it is non-technical. A similar point can be made about defenders of the technical view who do *not* use the phrase in a way suggesting that it says something informative about phenomenal consciousness. That is, the fact that these philosophers do not use the phrase in a way suggesting that it says something informative about phenomenal consciousness is not evidence that the phrase is technical. Rather, it is just evidence that these philosophers believe that it is technical. And as argued in Sect. 5, a defender of the technical view can offer a better explanation of these beliefs than a defender of the non-technical view. So philosophers (not) using the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase in a way suggesting that it says something informative about phenomenal consciousness does not add any data that count in favour of either view other than the data discussed in Sect. 5.

In any case, the fact that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase says nothing informative about phenomenal consciousness is not just interesting in its own right, it also has a further consequence. Some worry that a lack of an informative description of phenomenal consciousness impedes serious theorising about the alleged phenomenon. As Mandik (2016) comments with regard to realism vs. eliminativism about phenomenal consciousness: ‘the terms ‘qualia’, ‘phenomenal properties’, etc. lack sufficient content for anything informative to be said in either affirming or denying their existence.

Affirming the existence of what? Denying the existence of what?’ (2016, p. 148). And as Rosenthal (2019) comments with regard to the hard problem: ‘Having no informative description matters. The hard problem is ‘why and how do physical processes in the brain give rise to conscious experience?’ Without a clear, tolerably accurate description of what conscious experience is, we cannot begin to address that question or even evaluate whether doing so would be difficult’ (2019, p. 202). If these authors are right, then the lack of an informative description of what phenomenal consciousness is impedes serious theorising about phenomenal consciousness. This is a serious worry and raises the following challenge for philosophers who theorise about phenomenal consciousness: *either* explain what phenomenal consciousness is *or* explain why the above worry is misplaced. One may have thought that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase would suffice for an informative description, but since it is technical, it will not do the job and the challenge remains.

Of course, the claim that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical does not entail that this challenge cannot be answered. One proposal is to take the semantics philosophers suggest for the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase (e.g. Hellie, 2004; Stoljar, 2016; Mehta, 2022) as an explanation of what phenomenal consciousness is. A different proposal is to claim that we all have a prior understanding of what phenomenal consciousness is and that this understanding is sufficient to engage in serious theorising about the phenomenon (Block, 1995; Chalmers, 1996). I shall not evaluate these proposals here, however. The present point is that merely appealing to the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is *not* an answer to the challenge.

## 7.2 Second reason

The second reason the technical view matters is that the fact that lay people use the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is not evidence that they believe in phenomenal consciousness. The question of how widespread belief in phenomenal consciousness is, is not just an interesting sociological question but has consequences for the debate between realists and eliminativists about phenomenal consciousness, since realists typically claim that the idea of phenomenal consciousness is something ordinary and innocent. But if the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical, then the fact that lay people use the phrase is not evidence that they believe in phenomenal consciousness. There may of course be other sources of evidence that lay people believe in phenomenal consciousness. But it is controversial that there is any other evidence (Sytsma, 2014; Sytsma & Ozdemir, 2020). And if there is no compelling evidence that lay people believe in phenomenal consciousness, then one cannot dismiss eliminativism merely on the ground that it denies common sense. This might make eliminativism a more credible view than what is often assumed.

## 8 Conclusion

I have argued that the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase has a technical meaning when it is used in the way that is characteristic in the literature on phenomenal consciousness. This



has important consequences. Based on this claim, I have argued that the phrase says nothing informative about phenomenal consciousness. I have also argued that the fact that lay people use the phrase provides no evidence that they believe in phenomenal consciousness. These consequences have further consequences for the debate about whether the notion of phenomenal consciousness is sufficiently clear for theorising, and the debate between realism and eliminativism. So the question of whether the ‘what-it’s-like’ phrase is technical is not just a linguistic curiosity but has significant consequences for the philosophy of mind.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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