

“Ancona?” *Aha! that’s her name! Tip-of-the-tongue experiences*

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1. *Do you know her name?*

Someone asks me her mother’s surname. I try to retrieve it from my memory but fail to do so. I am, however, sure that in a few moments it will come back to me. As we often say, “It’s on the tip of my tongue.” At some point, I shout: “Ancona!” The name is back, as if the obstacles blocking it had disappeared completely, although I have done nothing to remove them. The word clicks!

We often have words on the tips of our tongues: the beginning of a poem, the title of a novel, or simply a name. Users of sign language have signs on the tips of their fingers (Thompson et al. 2005). To keep things simple, I shall focus on tip-of-the-tongue phenomena (TOTs) concerning names. Let me first say that TOTs are experiences that occur after the *failed retrieval* of a particular name. The strange thing about these experiences is that when someone asks you “Do you know X’s surname?” you respond “Yes.” And if you are then asked what the name is, you are unable to answer right away, although you are certain that retrieval is imminent. Hence, there is a failure, albeit one accompanied by an anticipation of success. Finally, if retrieval does occur and the word is recognized, the click experience you enjoy (i.e., the recognition) is not simply fulfillment of the anticipation, but also an experience of familiarity—you recognize the name as a name with which you were previously acquainted.

This article focuses on TOT experiences rather than the mechanisms underpinning them. Theorists disagree about the nature of such experiences, while acknowledging their intriguing and insidious character. For example, Bennett Schwartz comments:

I suspect that the TOT is not a unitary experience, but a combination of subcomponents, relating to positive and negative emotion, and feeling of imminence, relief or strength. In some cases, these experiences may grow, whereas in others, they may diminish. How these subcomponents are formed and how they interact to create human experience and to predict cognitive processes is a riddle, the answer to which is just beginning to be unfolded (Schwartz 2002: 47).

And yet for some philosophers, the simpler the better. To wit, these philosophers have tried to reduce TOT experiences to more common states, with some considering these experiences to be beliefs about one’s state of knowledge, and still others considering them feelings about one’s state of knowledge. These two latter views are not mutually exclusive; indeed, one might

hold a mixed theory, according to which the TOT is a feeling that depends constitutively on a belief. In what follows, I will first argue against the idea that beliefs are a constitutive feature of TOTs and hence against both the pure and the mixed belief theories; next, I will address the feeling theory. Finally, I will defend a pluralist theory of TOT experiences.

2. TOTs are HOT

Rosenthal (2000) maps out the standard belief account of TOT experiences. It should be remarked that Rosenthal does not provide a fully developed account of TOT experiences. He considers them as a particular case of feelings of knowledge and discusses them in the context of his higher order thought (HOT) theory of consciousness, as a potential difficulty for it (Rosenthal 2000). Thus, I will first say something about this theory and then present the belief account that I extrapolate from what he says. In brief, for Rosenthal a mental state *M* is conscious only if it is accompanied by a simultaneous higher-order (i.e., meta-mental) state whose content is that one is now in *M*. *M* can be a belief, a desire or an emotion, while the higher order thought has as its object that state *with its intentional content*. For example, if I consciously desire chocolate, I have a higher-order thought which has as its object that I desire chocolate. Thus, having a conscious desire for chocolate involves being simultaneously in two mental states: a desire for chocolate and a HOT whose content is that I am now having such a desire. Given the distinction mode/content, the mode of this thought is assertion—I make a judgment about my first-order mental state. Rosenthal further contends that HOT about *M* occurs simultaneously with *M*, without intermediaries, such as sense data, other judgments, images or feelings. Thus, for Rosenthal, if a state is conscious, its owner is non-inferentially conscious of being in that state. It is important to note that the consciousness of the state must be independent *not* of any inference, *but* independent of any inference of which the individual is conscious. Suppose, for example, that you tell me that I want some chocolate, and I trust you. I become aware of my desire for chocolate because I take your word for it. In this case, my desire for chocolate is not conscious because my belief that I have that desire depends on your telling me that I have it—it is the result of an inference *of which I am conscious*. Here is what Rosenthal says:

Not every way of being conscious even of our own states makes those states conscious. I may be conscious of being in a state by applying a theory to myself or because somebody whose judgment I trust tells me. We can, however, readily, rule out such counterexamples by positing that a HOT results in the target state's being conscious only when the HOT is not based on any conscious inference, that is, not based on any inference *of which* one is conscious. This does not mean that a state's

being conscious hinges on a HOT's having some particular etiology [...]. It is only *apparent* aetiology that counts: if it subjectively seems that we are conscious of a state *only* by inference, that state is not a conscious state (Rosenthal 2000: 207).

Let's turn to TOT experiences now. As I said, Rosenthal considers them as a potential difficulty for his HOT theory of consciousness. This is why. A fundamental aspect of mental states, and particularly of conscious states, is their content, that is, the information they carry. TOTs are a problem because when we are in a state that we describe as having a name on the tip of our tongue, we are not conscious of the content of our knowledge, namely what the name is. Yet Rosenthal thinks that TOTs are also HOT and their peculiarity is that, despite the fact that their content is one's first-order knowledge, the content of that first-order knowledge is not part of their content. This means that if I have a name on the tip of my tongue, I am conscious (i.e., I judge) *that* I know that name, but I am not conscious of *what* the name is. Thus, I can answer "Yes!" to the question "Do you know X's surname?" without being able to answer the question "Do you know X's surname?" Here is one such case. At some point in the past, I learned Mark Twain's real name. You ask me what it is. I am conscious that I know the name, that is, I judge that I know it. Since judgments are expressions of beliefs, I believe that I know it. But I cannot tell you what it is, that is, I cannot tell you what the content of my knowledge is. According to Rosenthal, this means that I am in a belief state that carries information about the name without having access to the information that the state carries:

When I have Mark Twain's real name on the tip of my tongue, I must be conscious of the particular state that carries that information. But I am not conscious of that state in respect of the specific information the state carries; rather, I am conscious of the state only *as* a state that carries that information (Rosenthal 2000: 204).

Moreover, given the above characterization of HOT consciousness, if I am in a TOT state, although I believe that I possess a piece of knowledge, *it does not subjectively seem to me that I believe by inference to possess it*. Rosenthal roughly defines TOTs as follows:

(R) X has a word on the tip of her tongue iff (a) X is *non inferentially conscious* that X presently knows the word, but (b) X is not conscious of what the word is.

Herein lies my preoccupation about (R). Consider the following, slightly different version of my "Ancona" example. I immediately recall that the initial letter is an A, and that the bearer of the name is Jewish. I ponder the possibilities. Since she is Italian and Italian Jews often have the name of a city, I compose a list of cities: "Asti, Ascoli, Arezzo? I know it!" In this

case, I am aware of both a phonological and a semantic cue, and it appears to me that I would not possess these bits of information, unless I knew the name. In other words, it appears to me that I am making some kind of inference, namely an inference to the best explanation as to why I have that information. If this is the case, I do not have the name on the tip of my tongue because according to (R) if X is inferentially conscious that X knows the word, then X does not have the word on the tip of her tongue. Thus, if my experience depends on the presence of conscious cues, there is no TOT. Yet this is utterly implausible.¹

One way to respond to my objection is by making a distinction between cues to obtain conscious knowledge that one knows the name and cues for obtaining conscious knowledge of what the name is. The idea is that if I have a name on the tip of my tongue, and have phonological as well as semantic conscious cues, these are cues for responding to the second question only, that is, cues for obtaining conscious knowledge of what the name is; they are not cues for responding to the first question (i.e., whether you know the name). But suppose that in this particular case, I say: “The name starts with ‘A’. I am sure I know it.” It may be that my belief that the name starts with ‘A’ prompts my knowledge claim. At least in this one case, the cue is a cue for answering the first but not the second question. Clearly, (R) needs revision. By dropping the condition about unconscious inference, we obtain the following:

(R*) X has a word on the tip of her tongue iff (a) X is *conscious* that X presently knows the word, but (b) X is not conscious of what the word is.

Remember that the belief theory states that there is a constitutive relation between the belief and the TOT experience. I have rejected the one based on (R), but, as we shall now see, the new version based on (R*) is not commendable either. Suppose that I am asked the name of a street. The question itself may prompt a TOT experience and perhaps the belief that I know the name. But this means that the TOT can occur prior to the belief since it can in fact cause it.²

A different case is as follows. I hear the Xhosa-language word for the knocking beetle when I hear Miriam Makeba sing the click song. I try to say it, I have it on the tip of my tongue, but I do not succeed in saying it correctly because the pronunciation is too difficult for me. So, I cannot honestly say that I know the word. I do not believe I know the word. Yet I hear someone say *Qongqothwane*, and it clicks. I realize that this is the word for which I was searching. Thus, I believed that I *did not know* the word because I underestimated my capacity for recognition. And yet I had the word on the tip of my tongue: when I heard it pronounced, it clicked.

1 Rosenthal (2000) also admits unconscious inferences for TOTs, that is, inferences based on unconscious cues. In my example, however, cues are conscious.

2 For this objection, see Dokic (2012: 305).

Let me take stock of my argument thus far. I argued that there is no constitutive relation between the second order belief and the TOT experience. For one thing, it is possible that the subject did not acquire the belief that she knows the name prior to the question and she has the TOT experience *just because* she was asked the question. In this case, the TOT experience prompts the belief that she knows the answer. The other case shows that it is possible that the subject believes that she does NOT know the word, and yet still has the TOT experience. Either way, TOTs do not depend constitutively upon beliefs. I suggested at the beginning that belief theory and feeling theory are not necessarily in competition with one another—one might hold that the TOT qua feeling of knowledge, constitutively depends on a belief. But having argued that the TOT does not constitutively depend upon a belief, neither the pure belief theory nor the mixed theory is a viable option. Having rejected both, the pure feeling theory is the second best option. According to it, the subject feels that she knows the answer to the first question, although this feeling does not depend on the belief that she knows the answer. Thus, for example, I feel that I know the name of the street as soon as I hear the question.

3. *James vindicated?*

The main motivation for the pure feeling theory is phenomenology. There is something it is like to have a name on the tip of one's tongue, which I do not confuse with any other experience: "if the word is on the tip of the tongue, it feels like we can taste the word, sense it with our tongues, but just cannot get our tongue completely around it" (Schwartz 2002: 50). James originally advocated the feeling theory and recent versions of it appear in studies by Koriat (2000), Koriat and Lieblch (1974), Mangan (2000), Schwartz (2002), and Dokic (2012). For James, TOTs are the feeling of a lexical gap that ought to be filled and whose filling is imminent. He says that, on the one hand, TOTs have a phenomenology that makes them unlike other states, and, on the other, each TOT is different from any other TOT:

Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness and then letting it sink back without the longed-for term. If wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not *feel* like the gap of another, all empty of content, as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps (James 1890/1950: 251–252).

One could object that the expression "feeling" is an umbrella term for many different things: there are feelings of pleasure/pain, feelings of heat/cold,

feelings of easiness/uneasiness, familiarity/strangeness as well as affective feelings. We could perhaps also add to the list another, indeed special type called a “feeling of knowledge of words.” As far as the objection goes, we would need to have a substantial enough theory of feelings to explain what feelings of knowledge are and, in particular, the feelings about one’s knowledge of a name. Dokic acknowledges that “in advance absence of a substantial theory of feeling” it is hard to classify certain feelings as “noetic feelings”, but according to him there are feelings that are clearly noetic, and TOTs are among them (Dokic 2012: 303). He calls these feelings “seeds of knowledge” and suggests that they are “diffused affective states registering internal physiological conditions and events. Unlike bodily sensations, though, noetic feelings need not have precise locations in external bodily parts. At a phenomenological level, they often have a spreading, blurred quality.”³

And yet, despite the attractiveness of the feeling theory, we should consider it with some caution. We already know that sometimes a TOT occurs in the presence of conscious phonological information and that the phenomenology of TOTs is such that each TOT is different from any other one. Having the name “Ancona” on the tip of my tongue is unlike having the name “Treves” (another Jewish Italian surname) there. In what sense are these two feelings different? The lingering preoccupation is that these feelings, which have “a spreading, blurred quality,” are not fine-grained enough to capture and reflect the differences between the two experiences. There remains, however, a different hypothesis about the nature of the TOT experience, which has not been yet considered in the literature: in such cases, the TOT experience is the *perception* of a word stored in memory.⁴ This hypothesis explains the difference between having “Ancona” as opposed to “Treves” on the tip of one’s tongue.

4. *The perception theory*

The perception hypothesis rests on analogies between TOT states and perceptual states, particularly, visual states.

- (1) When I look at an object, even very limited visual information allows me to become visually aware of the object itself. In a TOT experience, information may be about the first letter of the target word, its gender (in a language whose words are assigned a gender), the number of

3 Dokic (2012: 307).

4 As I described in the “Ancona” case, I vocalize the letter “A”. Hence I perceive it. Of course, in other cases someone may be aware of the initial letter of a name by means of a thought (e.g. as the first letter of the alphabet). If one refers to it by means of a description, one’s TOT experience would be even more inferential than Rosenthal is willing to accept.

- syllables, or the syllabic stress. According to this hypothesis, phonological information allows me to become aware of the word itself.
- (2) Visual information about an F grounds the perceptual judgment that there is an F with which I am acquainted even I do not have full access to it and—at least in some cases—the judgment that its recognition is imminent. Similarly, in a TOT experience, phonological information supports both the claim that I am acquainted with the name itself (and hence the perceptual judgment that there is a word with such and such features that I know), without having full access to it, and the claim that its recognition is imminent.
 - (3) The standard view on perception says that perceptual experience is truth-tracking—that is, it allows us to keep track of external objects. By virtue of its truth-tracking function, perceptual experience is the main source of empirical knowledge. The psychological literature generally supports the idea that TOT phenomenology correlates with phonological and/or semantic representations of words. In the hypothesis under consideration, TOT states are also truth tracking, in that they allow us to keep track of words stored in our memory.
 - (4) When there is representation, misrepresentation is also possible. In the case of perceptual experiences, failure amounts to illusion and hallucination. Misrepresentation is also possible for TOTs. Veridical TOTs are experiences that represent a word stored in memory. Illusory TOTs are experiences whereby it is as if the target word were there, despite the fact that this word is unavailable, has been forgotten or was never acquired (Schwartz 2002: 112). In this case, TOTs are sensuous imaginings (of parts of words).

The Perception Theory has straightforward advantages over its competitors. Unlike the Belief Theory in any of its versions, it explains the Miriam Makeba case; unlike the Feeling Theory, it explains why having one word on the tip of one's tongue is unlike having another word. Yet, even this theory is not sufficient to account for all TOT experiences, because it does not explain those in which the TOT experience is the result of a conscious inference. The reason is that, as most theorists about perception nowadays acknowledge, perceptual experiences are not the result of a conscious inference. For TOTs which are the result of a conscious inference, the theory based on R^* offers the best explanation. Yet, this is not the end of the discussion yet, because even with this restriction, the hypothesis that in the presence of phonological cues TOT experiences are perceptions of words raises the following objection: at least in the normal cases, a word must be uttered in order to be perceived, but obviously tip-of-the-tongue experiences are not caused by the utterance of the word. My answer to this objection is that for words stored in our memory conscious phonological cues suffice to perceive them, as much as sparse visual cues suffice to see objects. Of course, in the absence

of phonological or semantic cues, there is no reason to reject the feeling hypothesis.

To put it vividly, I am against the idea that one size fits all. Ultimately, I think that a pluralist theory, according to which TOT experiences are perceptions, beliefs or feelings of knowing, offers the best option. Of course, feelings, beliefs and perceptions are different states, and one might wonder why should we give them the same label. The answer is because of their phenomenology.⁵ Take the distinction between emotions and quasi-emotions. Theorists who make this distinction, while acknowledging that emotions and quasi-emotions are different states, say that they have a similar phenomenology (Walton 1978). My hypothesis is that this is consistent with TOTs—different states but similar phenomenology. There is a common felt quality to any state in which one accesses some lexical information incompletely. Going back to James’ “gap” metaphor, the picture provided by it is incomplete at best. However, he was at least right in saying that each TOT is a unique experience.

5. *A coda on cognitive phenomenology*

My conclusion impinges upon the current debate in cognitive phenomenology in the following way. Cognitive phenomenologists contend that thoughts, such as having a belief or understanding a joke, have a phenomenology—there is something it is like to have conscious thoughts of the sort mentioned above. Pure cognitive phenomenologists further claim that this something is non sensuous, that is, that phenomenology of thought is unlike phenomenology of perceptual experience. Some theorists extend this claim to TOTs and contend that TOTs have a proprietary phenomenology which is also non-sensuous.⁶ If I am correct, there is no reason to consider TOTs as *sui generis* experiences, or to exclude the possibility of their having a sensuous phenomenology. At this point, one might be tempted to argue that TOTs do not enjoy a proprietary phenomenology, contrary to the claim of pure cognitive phenomenologists. But drawing this conclusion would be taking too much of a leap. Pure cognitive phenomenologists generally focus on simple states like beliefs, and typically argue that these states have a *sui generis* phenomenology. Then they extend this claim also to other states such as TOTs.⁷ However, from the fact that TOTs are not *sui generis*

5 This does not oblige me to say that beliefs have a proprietary phenomenology. I am simply saying that beliefs may be associated to some kind of phenomenology (more on this in § 5).

6 By “proprietary” I mean *sui generis*. On this see Pitt (2004).

7 Note also that cognitive phenomenology theorists generally overlook the question what kind of states TOTs are. For example, Bayne and Montague (2011) assert that “we need to address the question as to whether tip-of-the-tongue experiences [...] are states with a

experiences it does not immediately follow that TOTs do not have a proprietary phenomenology. Suppose that a particular case of TOT is a combination of perception and belief. Many mental states that are a combination of other states are such that their phenomenology is a byproduct of the whole. Take fear—it is a combination of bodily changes, beliefs, desires, etc. Quahole, fear has a proprietary phenomenology (or so many theorists say).⁸ The same could hold true for TOTs. But we can only argue for this if we take into account the relation between a state's nature and its phenomenology. The current debate on cognitive phenomenology is not particularly interested in the relation between the *nature* of a cognitive state and the phenomenal properties of our mental life. Albeit there are some notable exceptions (e.g. Carruthers and Veillet 2011) theorists generally either accept or reject the claim that cognitive states have a proprietary phenomenology and they do not address the issue as to what the relation is between the nature of a cognitive state and its phenomenology. To address this problem also lies beyond the scope of the present paper.⁹

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distinctive cognitively-structured phenomenology” without acknowledging that the answer to the phenomenological question requires that we already know what kind of states TOTs are. I address this question here.

8 One notable exception is Kriegel (2015).

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Save the children!

ARTŪRS LOGINS

In a recent publication Travis Timmerman has claimed that sometimes it is morally permissible to not prevent something bad from happening, even if it is in one's power to do so without sacrificing anything nearly as important.¹ To defend his point, he has proposed a thought experiment and based his claims on putative common-sense morality intuitions. To aid in the subsequent discussion, Timmerman's case is reproduced as follows.

Drowning Children: Unlucky Lisa gets a call from her 24-h bank telling her that hackers have accessed her account and are taking \$200 out of it every 5 min until Lisa shows up in person to put a hold on her account.

1 He also argues that the claim (c), '[i]f it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so', defended by Singer's *Drowning Child* thought experiment (Singer 1972: 231) is not positively supported by our intuitions. According to Timmerman, *Drowning Child* is irrelevant to the truth of (c). I will focus only on Timmerman's positive argument; namely, the claim that common intuitions regarding his own thought experiment support the negation of (c).