



The Phenomenological Negation of the Causal Closure of the Physical

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Overview

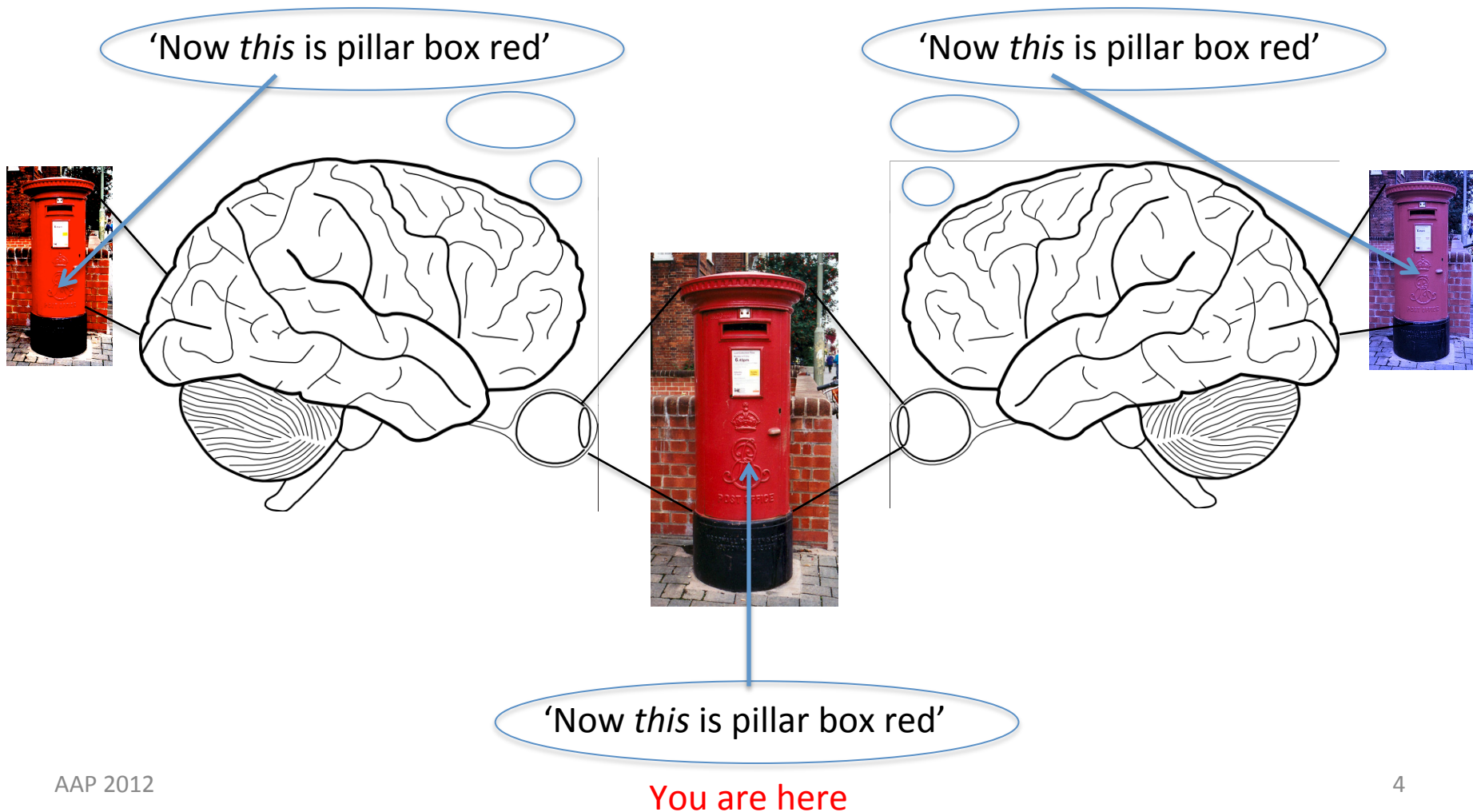
- Chalmers' Defense of Causal Closure and the Paradox and Phenomenal Judgment
- The Phenomenological Demonstration
- The Validity of the Phenomenological Demonstration

(Title image: 'Le Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp' by Georges Seurat (1885))

Part One

Chalmers' Defense of Causal Closure and the Paradox and Phenomenal Judgment

Phenomenal Colour



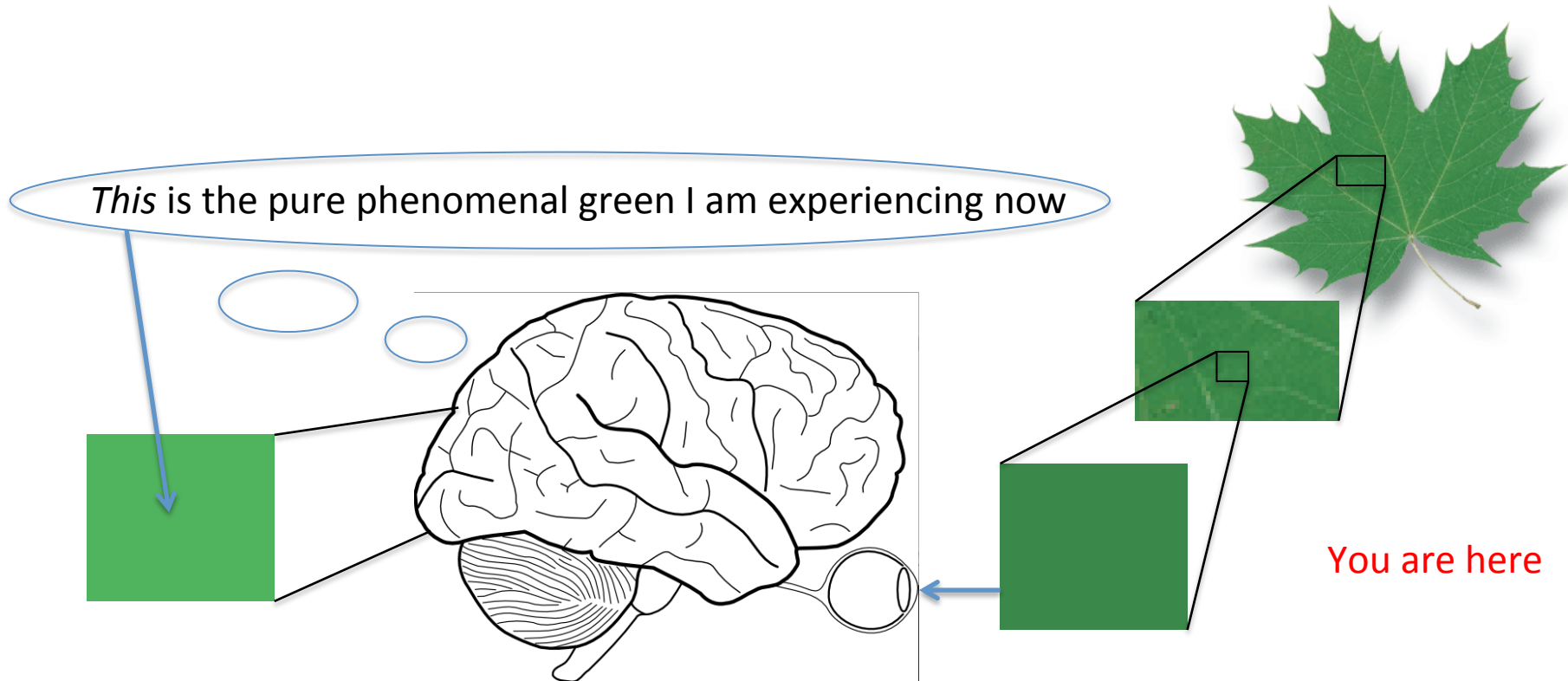
The Paradox of Phenomenal Judgment

- Basic target: Chalmers' account of the paradox of phenomenal judgment
- Phenomenal judgment discriminates between the physical and the phenomenal
- Chalmers' argues that such judgment does not require the presence of phenomenal experience

Causal Closure

- Chalmers' motivation is to save the principle of causal closure while still allowing that phenomenal experience is something 'over and above' the physical
- Causal closure: "every physical event is determined, insofar as it is determined at all, by preceding physical conditions and laws" (Montero and Papineau, 2005)
- To achieve his aim, Chalmers introduces the notion of pure phenomenal concepts whose content is causally inert phenomenal quality:

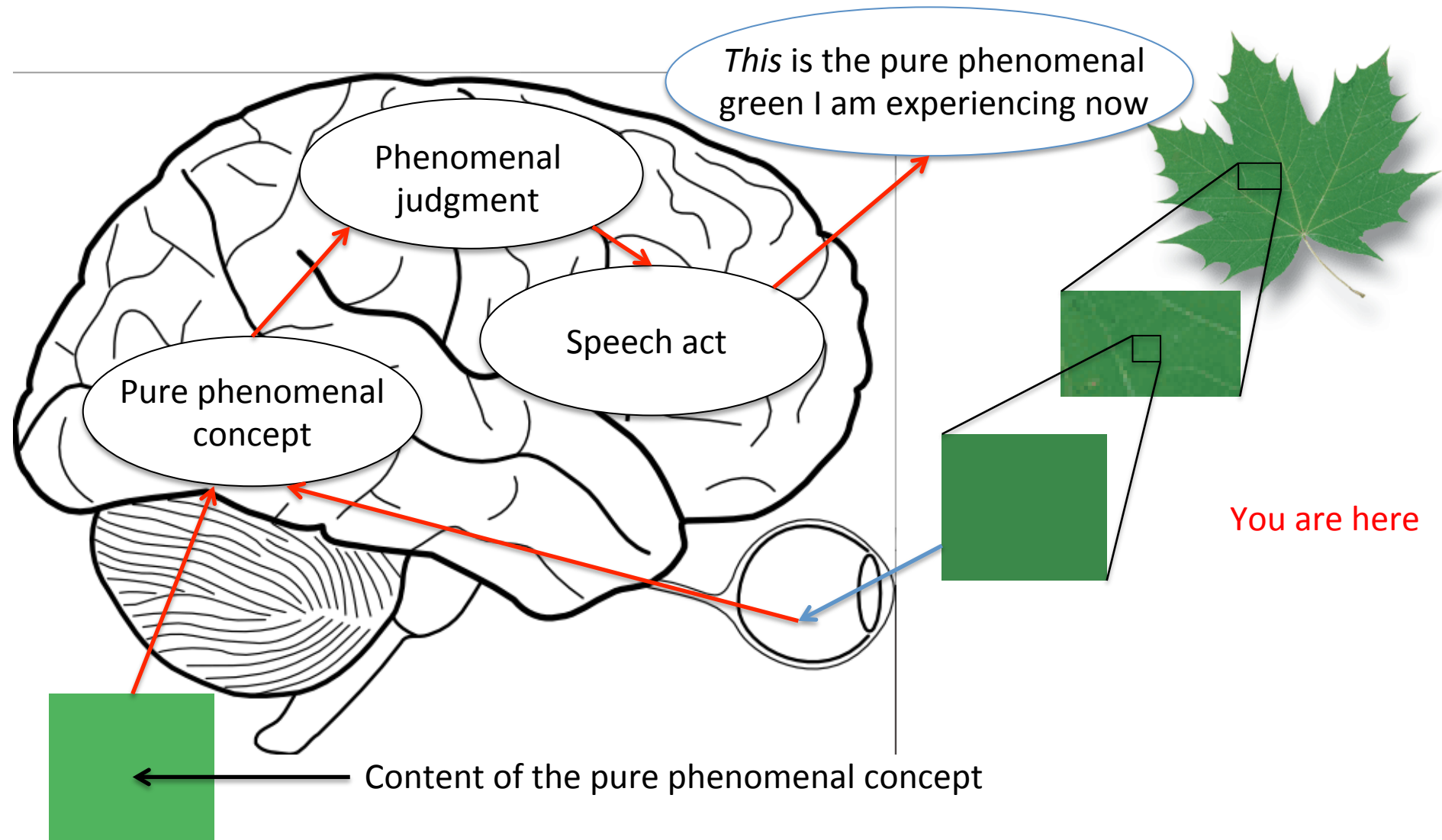
Pure Phenomenal Concepts



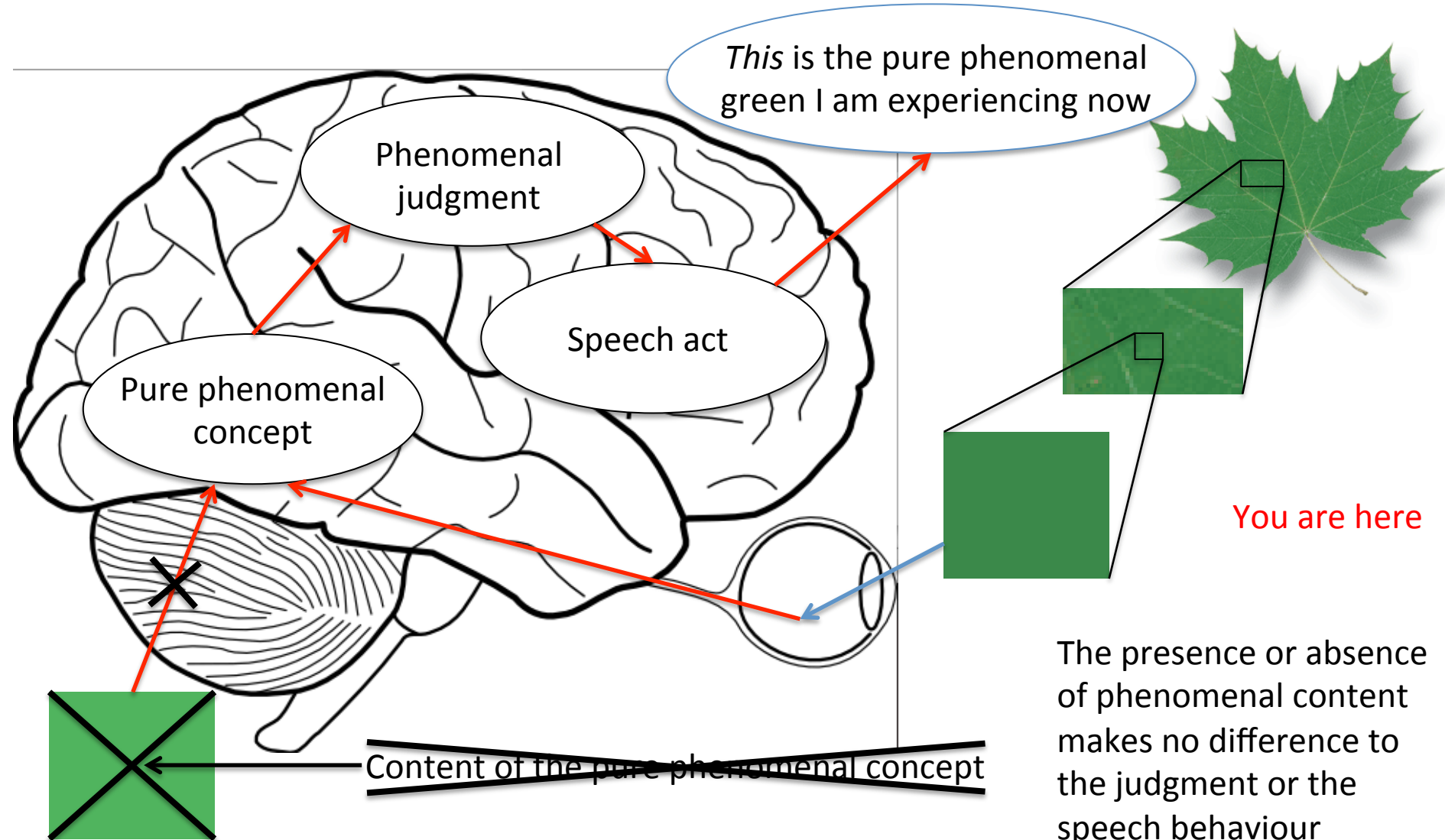
Pure Phenomenal Concepts

- My pure phenomenal concept picks out my phenomenal experience of a particular colour (now)
- The concept refers to the colour quality itself independently of any physical conditions that may obtain
- I employ the such concepts when I imagine a spectrum inversion – they draw a distinction between the quality and the physical conditions, i.e. my brain state

Phenomenal Judgments



Chalmers' Thesis



The Acquisition of Pure Phenomenal Concepts

- The question is: if I did not acquire my ability to form pure phenomenal concepts on the basis of my consciousness of pure phenomenal experience, then how did I come to possess such concepts in the first place?
- Chalmers' answer is to show how an unconscious entity could form physical structures that correspond to our phenomenal concepts using the idea of an information space

From the Conscious Mind:

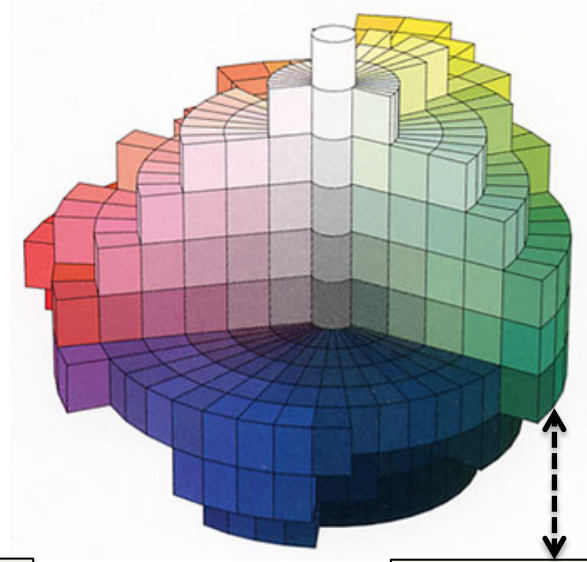
The crucial feature here is that when the system perceives a red object, central processes do not have direct access to the object itself, and they do not have direct access to the physical processes underlying perception. All that these processes have access to is the color information itself, which is merely a location in a three-dimensional information space.

... Indeed, as far as central processing is concerned, it simply finds itself in a location in this space. The system is able to make distinctions, and it knows it is able to make distinctions, but it has no idea how it does it. We would expect after a while that it could come to *label* the various locations it is thrown into - "red," "green," and the like - and that it would be able to know just which state it is in at a given time. But when asked just how it knows, there is nothing it can say, over and above "I just know, directly." If one asks it, "What is the difference between these states?" it has no answer to give beyond "They're just different," or "This is one of those," or "This one is red and that one is green." When pressed as to what that means, the system has nothing left to say but "They're just different, qualitatively."

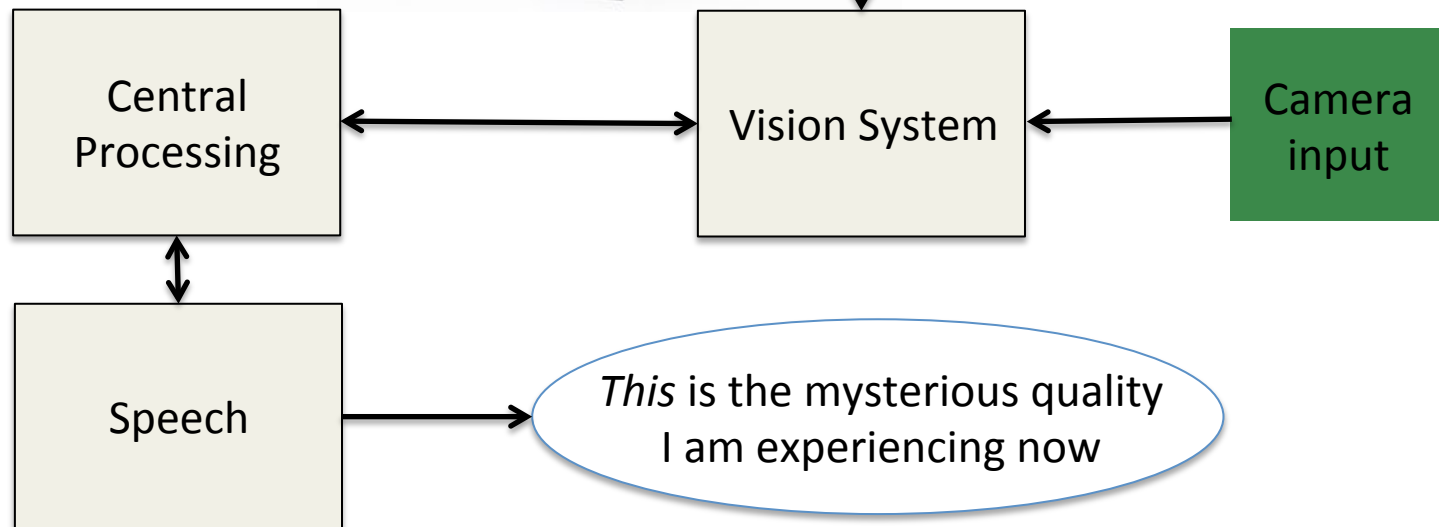
... Given this kind of direct access to information states, then, it is natural to expect the system to use the language of "experience" and "quality" to describe its own cognitive point of view on perception. And it is unsurprising that all this will seem quite strange to the system: these immediately known, ineffable states, which seem so central to its access to the world but which are so hard to pin down. Indeed, it is natural to suppose that this would seem odd to the system in the same sort of way that consciousness seems odd to us.

So this is the beginning of a potential reductive explanation of our judgments about consciousness: these judgments arise because our processing system is thrust into locations in information space, with direct access to those locations but to nothing else. The direct knowledge will strike the system as a brute "quality": it knows that the states are different, but cannot articulate this beyond saying, in effect, "one of those." This immediate access to brute differences leads to judgments about the mysterious primitive nature of these qualities, about the impossibility of explicating them in more basic terms, and to many of the other judgments that we often make about conscious experience. (Chalmers 1996, pp. 290-291).

Information Spaces



A visualisation of the colour states the vision system can distinguish

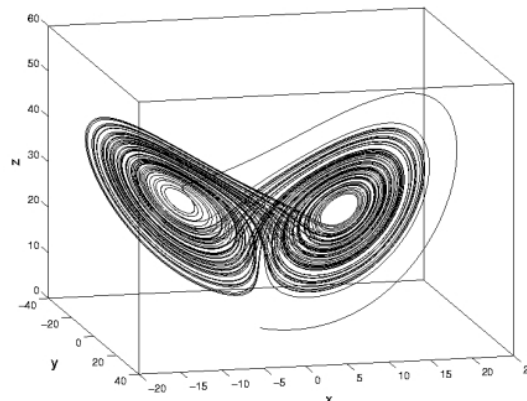


But What is an Information Space?

- An information space can be understood as a set of higher level features of a dynamical system
- These features are realised by the behaviour of a set of relevantly chosen state space variables
- For example, consider the sub-system of neurons in my brain whose activities determine my ability to effectively distinguish between the surface colours of objects
- Suppose we can capture the relevant activity of these neurons and model this activity using a set of variables that are related according to a set of (nonlinear) equations
- Given such a model we can represent the behaviour of the system in **phase space** by plotting the trajectories taken as the system moves through that space...

Attractors

- Each point in phase space represents a particular instantiation of the complete set of variables and a **trajectory** is the path taken as the complete system moves through the space
- The trajectories form patterns that can provide a high level characterisation of the system's state - an important class of such patterns is known as an **attractor**
- If a system falls into a **basin of attraction** around an attractor then, according to the form of the attractor, the subsequent behaviour of the system can be predicted in general or qualitative terms (even though precise calculations of the path a system will follow are impractical)
- In a complex dynamical system these basins of attraction tend to form and remain **stable** for a certain period of time and then disappear as other basins are formed during the evolution of the system



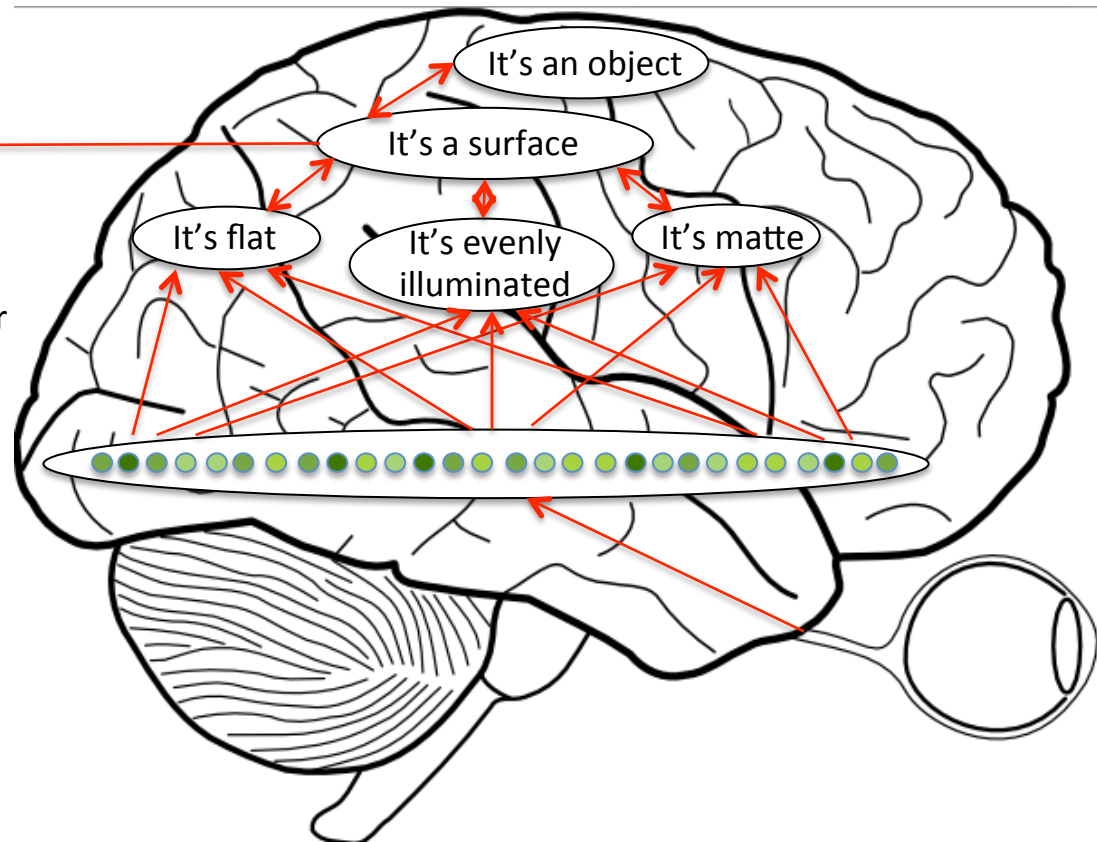
Colour Intentions

- The perception of a coloured surface involves an entire perceptual system forming an intention to the effect that there is a coloured surface in front of me now:



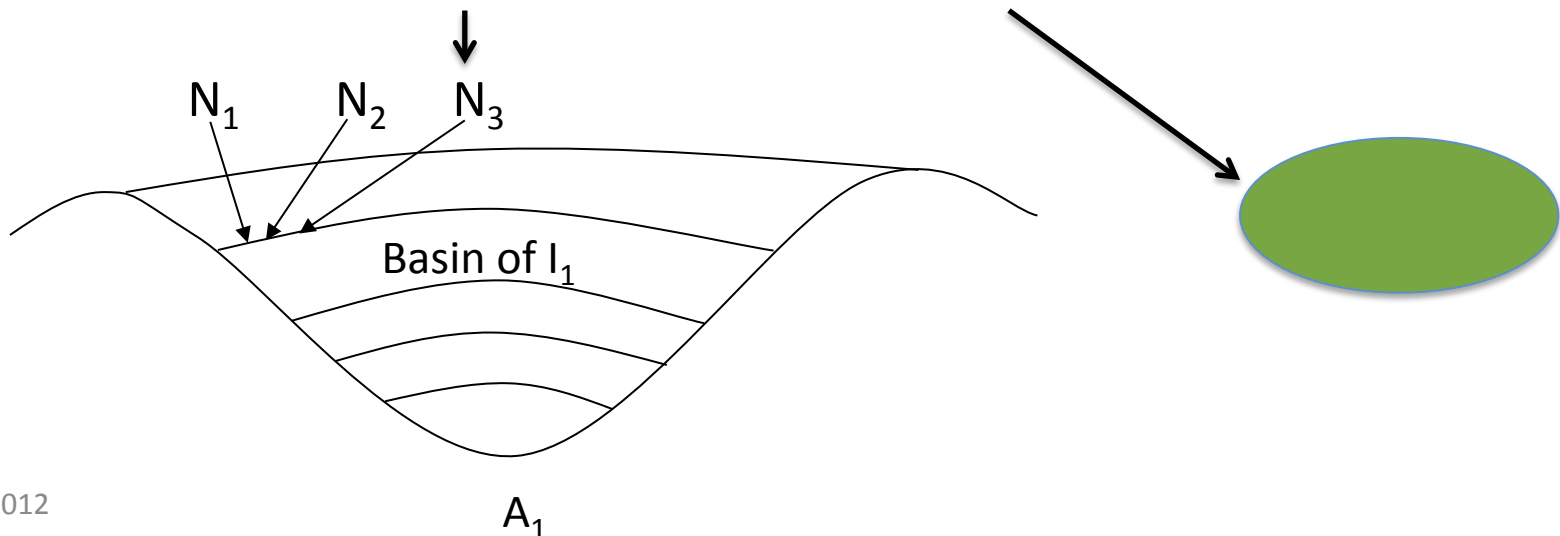
Perceptual Intention: it's a flat, evenly illuminated, matte surface of **this** colour

Notice: the quality of the colour **expresses** the intention (more on this later)



Information Spaces as Colour Basins

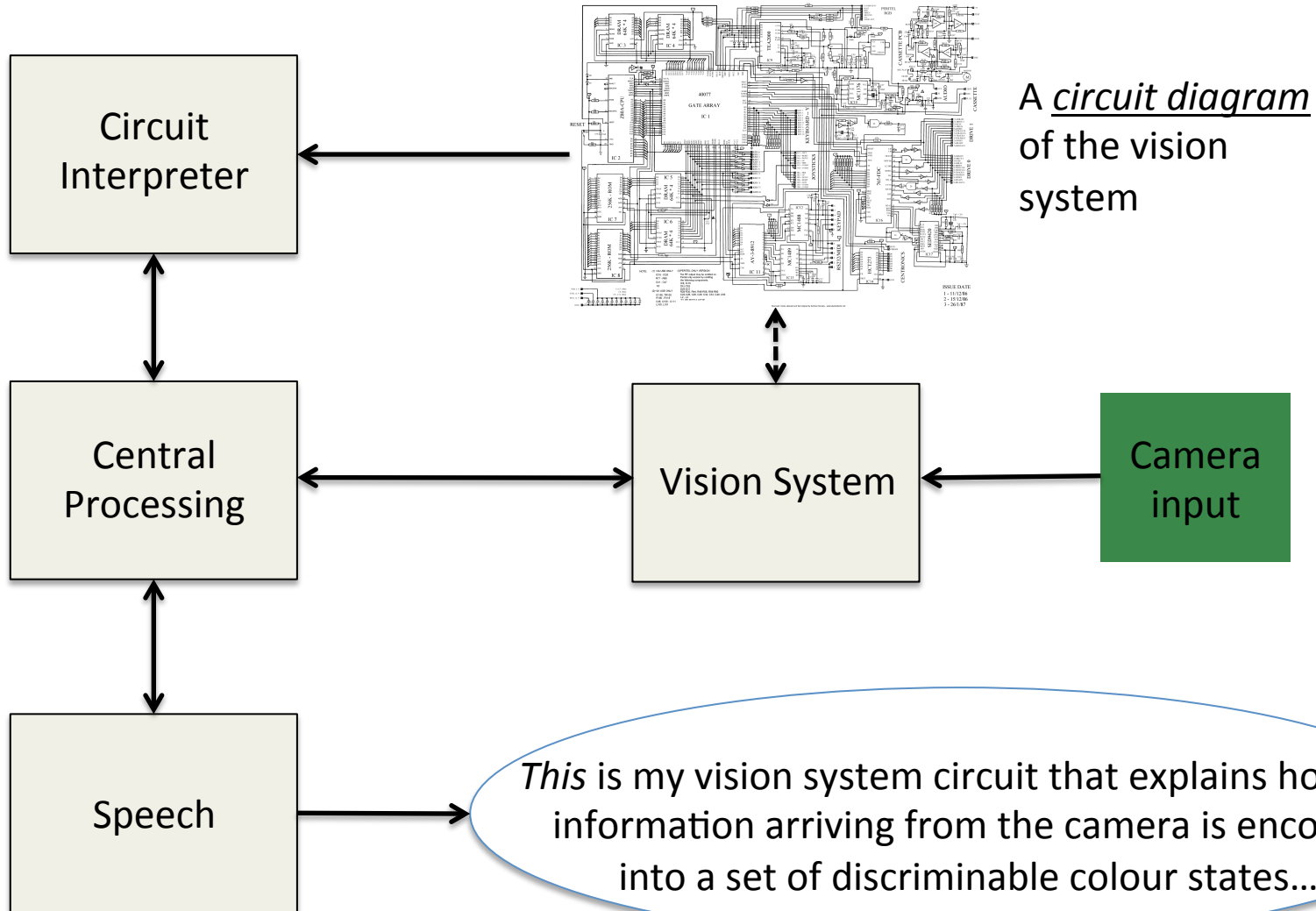
- Understood in dynamical system terms, having an intention is a matter of **moving** in a certain basin of attraction, so that while we can understand the **intention as a persisting state**, the neural behaviours on which it supervenes are continuously **changing** according to lower level cause and effect relations
- On the basis of this model, my colour intention (*it's a flat, evenly illuminated surface of this colour*) will be associated with a particular basin of attraction in the landscape of a dynamical system that perfectly captures my behavioural abilities to distinguish between **this** particular colour and any other colour that I would perceive as different
- This basin not only determines my colour discrimination behaviours, it also determines the pure phenomenal quality I experience, in that, so long as my brain state remains in **this** basin I will experience **this** pure phenomenal quality



Functional and Phenomenal Mysteries

- For Chalmers' central processing unit the mystery is that it can correctly discriminate between colours without being able to give an explanation of what it is doing
- This view remains functional: the mystery for central processing does not concern an experience of pure phenomenal colour, it concerns a lack of access to the processes that discriminate between objective information concerning the colours of physical surfaces
- Such a mystery is easily solved, i.e. by giving central processing access to a functional description of the vision processing system and to a reasoning system capable of mapping the behaviours of that system onto the higher level colour discrimination behaviours of the system as a whole:

The Solution of the Mystery



Hard and Easy Problems

- To use Chalmers' own terminology, for the machine to derive a functional explanation of its ability to discriminate colours is an easy problem
- Once the machine has such a functional explanation it should no longer talk of mysteries attaching to colour perception but will refer us to Dennett's eliminativist treatment of this (supposed) problem
- The reason the machine will treat pure phenomenal experiences as illusions is firstly because it is unconscious and so has no such experiences and secondly because it has been constructed in such a way as to correctly report on the state of the world and itself according to the information that it has available
- The issue that Chalmers fails to address is the hard problem of explaining how such a machine could maintain that there is phenomenal colour experience after it has arrived at a functionally complete explanation of its colour discrimination abilities
- For that is the situation that Chalmers believes he inhabits, i.e. he takes the behaviour of his own brain to be functionally determined on the basis of causal closure while still maintaining there is a distinction between his functional/physical brain behaviours and his phenomenal experience

The Pre-Understanding of Phenomenal Quality

- In order to defend causal closure Chalmers assumes a pure phenomenal concept comes into play whenever I (correctly) direct my attention onto a pure phenomenal quality
- But, in order to direct my attention in this way, I must already have a **pre-understanding** of what it is I will find
 - i.e. in forming the intention to demonstrate a pure phenomenal quality I must already possess the ability to discriminate and deploy pure phenomenal concepts
- The central question is how I can acquire this pre-understanding of pure phenomenal quality, and not my subsequent deployment of pure phenomenal concepts
 - i.e. Chalmers has taken this pre-understanding of phenomenal quality for granted

The Passive Onlooker

- So: if my phenomenal experience is causally determined by the operation of physical law then how am I to first form a concept that refers to such experience?
- I may be passively (implicitly) aware of a green quality (as, perhaps, animals are aware), but, according to causal closure, that experience of greenness, as a pure (non-physical) phenomenal quality, can have no independent (physical) effects on the operation of my brain
- More generally, I should be unable to coherently think that there is more to my experience than the physical functioning of my brain
 - if such a proposition were introduced to me, I should treat it as a simple contradiction (on the basis of deduction from the physical evidence) – as if something could be physical and not physical at the same time
 - I should be trapped within physical concept structures and reasoning processes determined by physical laws, having pure phenomenal experience, but powerless to form concepts with which to indicate that such experience is happening (even to myself)
- And yet, the fact is, this is not the world I actually inhabit...

Part Two

The Phenomenological Demonstration

The Logic of Experience

- The basic distinction:
 - **Colour-as-objective-property**: I take colour to be a property of the objects that appear in my world of intentional experience, e.g. it is the pillar box that is red not my experience of the pillar box – we shall call this **objective colour**
 - **Colour-as-quality**: Given the pillar box is red, how is it that I am consciously aware that it is red? I am aware the pillar box is red because when I look at it I have a conscious experience of redness – we shall call this **phenomenal colour**
- To be clear: the phenomenal colour is not a property of an object, it is that by means of which I become consciously aware of the objective colour of an object
- Speaking *analogously*, phenomenal colour is a **sign** of the objective colour – it **tells** me what the colour is

Phenomenal Colour Experience is not a Sensation

- My normal experience is an experience of intentional objects, such as my experience of there being a physical table in front of me now
- I can also shut my eyes and experience a coloured image after looking at a bright light source and I can interpret that experience as a sensation of colour
- The important point is that the sensation is still an intentional object – the experience is intended-as a sensation
- The sensation is not an example of something's being directly phenomenally coloured – the sensation is objectively red, just as a pillar box is objectively red, i.e. objective red is a property of the sensation that again is only known consciously on the basis of a phenomenal colour experience
- The objectivity of an intentional object does not reside in its being an external physical object, it resides in its being an object for a subjectivity or consciousness

The Non-Objectivity of Phenomenal Colour

- The phenomenological situation is that my conscious experience of the colour of an intentional object is an experience of a quality that is **not objective**
- The phenomenological fact that phenomenal colour is not objective simply means we cannot make phenomenal colour, as phenomenal colour, into an object of an intentional experience
- Phenomenal colour is a property of experience **itself** and as such it cannot be a property of any object appearing in experience
- Or, to put it another way, phenomenal colour, taken to include darkness and lightness, or blackness and whiteness, is a **medium** within which visual experience is constituted
- As a **medium of experience**, phenomenal colour cannot be objectified within experience – we can only speak of it **analogously**, e.g. our attempt to speak of phenomenal colour is analogous to an attempt to express what paint is, within the medium of a painting

The Experience of Phenomenal Colour

- The significant point – the point of the entire demonstration – is that although phenomenal colour is not objective, I still have an experience of phenomenal colour whenever I consciously attend to the objective colour of a coloured intentional object (**test this!**)
- Because this experience of phenomenal colour is not an experience of an intentional object, or a property of an intentional object - I cannot point it out directly - neither with a gesture or a word
- However, neither can I deny it – for, in the absence of phenomenal colour experience, I would have no conscious visual experience whatsoever, as my entire visual field, as a visual field, is an experience of phenomenal colour (**test this!**)

Direct Intuition

- Phenomenal colour experience is inescapably subjective and for this reason phenomenal colour cannot become an object of public reference
- This does not mean phenomenal quality is an illusion – my not being able to refer directly to a phenomenal quality is an indication that I am not experiencing something that is separate from me, I am rather experiencing something, as it is, **in itself**
- Another way to put this is to say that my experience of the **blueness** of an object has **no hidden sides or aspects** – I have the **blueness** in its entirety – there is nothing more that I can discover – my experience of the **blueness** is an experience of the **essence** of this **particular blue**
- Put another way again: I have an **immediate** or **direct intuition** or **knowledge** of the **blue quality** – it is immediate because it is not mediated – there is no intervening object any more – I have gone through the object to the quality itself

Language and the Phenomenological Reduction

- As Wittgenstein pointed out, insofar as a language is used objectively, we cannot talk of phenomenal experience
- But, as Fink saw, that only means we must use a language of analogy - i.e. we must play a **phenomenological language game**
- A phenomenological language game only works within a community of phenomenologists – i.e. individuals who have agreed to suspend the normal objective language references and who have brought the phenomenological dimension of experience to direct consciousness
- For the purposes of this demonstration, that means **noticing** that a direct intuition of colour-as-quality is present whenever I contemplate a coloured object – for such noticing to occur, all interpretation of colour as inhering in intentional or physical objects must be suspended
- This represents a kind of simplified or partial **phenomenological reduction**
- If such a reduction is not enacted, i.e. if the recognition of an immediate knowledge of essence is not present, then the language being used here will appear to be the very kind of nonsense that Wittgenstein criticised

Direct Knowledge

- Direct intuition is direct knowledge of phenomenal colour essence and is not something constructed – it appears as a knowledge of ‘something’ already present and already implicitly known
- What makes the intuition a direct knowledge is that it carries within itself a warrant of its own self-evidence
 - i.e. because the knowledge of colour essence is not a knowledge of something external or objective, it does not depend on anything but itself in order to demonstrate its own validity - cf. Russell’s account of acquaintance
- The nature of this self-evidence is revealed within the experience, in the same way that any experience carries the self-evidence that it is the experience that it is
- Ordinarily, self-evidence is the recognition of the identity of an intention and the thing intended – i.e. it occurs when the intention corresponds to its object
- However, when considering phenomenal colour, there is no ordinary object, there is the pure knowledge of the essence of colour – so we only have the *analogy* of an intention corresponding to its object

Direct Intuition of Phenomenal Quality is not Directly Conceptual

- If pure phenomenal quality is not something that can be identified with an intentional objectivity then, insofar as thinking is the entertaining of intentional objectivities, you cannot think about pure phenomenal quality *directly*
- This puts Chalmers' notion of a pure phenomenal concept in question: if you cannot intentionally objectify pure phenomenal quality, then to what does a pure phenomenal concept refer?
- Chalmers thinks that it refers to a certain pure phenomenal content that is immediately present
- But this pure phenomenal content is the essence of colour as it is revealed in direct intuition
- The intuition itself is not a conceptual experience, i.e. it is not known on the basis of comparing a certain experiential content with a certain intentional objectivity – it is known directly – that is what it means to be a direct intuition – it bypasses the concept to reveal the 'thing itself', the essence of the colour
- The pure phenomenal concept has no role to play in direct intuition – it is only needed after the fact, in order to make direct intuition into something that can be thought of and spoken of
- That makes a pure phenomenal concept something that refers indirectly, i.e. it refers via the direct intuition that reveals the essence of the colour
- If the intuition reveals the phenomenal content, my demonstrating 'this phenomenal colour' is already a secondary or derivative event, I mean 'this phenomenal colour as it is already being revealed to me in direct intuition'

The Moment of Noticing

- As long as my eyes are open and I am seeing coloured objects there is direct intuition of phenomenal colour: this is occurring* continuously
- The crucial moment is my **noticing** that such direct intuition is occurring*
- No unconscious system or entirely physically determined entity can notice the occurrence* of direct intuition because no such intuition is occurring* (for it)
- But what about me? Do I notice a direct intuition of colour quality?
- The answer (for me) is: Yes
- Do I find that despite this noticing, I am unable to form a concept that expresses this noticing? Am I somehow trapped within a net of inexorable physical law that remains unresponsive to my noticing?
- The answer (for me) is: No

*Occurring is starred to indicate it is being used as a phenomenological analogy: direct intuition cannot properly be thought of as an event occurring in time - that would make it into a physical objectivity – the only relevant events occurring in time are those physical processes in my brain associated with my perception of a coloured world

Explicit Consciousness

- The moment of noticing brings a direct intuition to **explicit consciousness**
- Such a bringing to consciousness is effected by a one-pointed contemplation of the phenomenal quality within a phenomenological reduction (i.e. by abstaining from the normal and habitual intentional objectification of phenomenal qualities)
- This moment of consciousness is crucial for the negation of causal closure: it is where the direct intuition of phenomenal quality crosses over from being a passive experiencing to being something that makes a difference in the physical world
- The essential point is that what is brought to explicit consciousness cannot itself be identified with the action of a physical process – a physical process cannot ‘notice’ or represent an experience of phenomenal quality as an experience of phenomenal quality, it can only ‘notice’ or represent phenomenal quality as an objectivity
- In other words, the kind of noticing-of-phenomenal-quality intended here is only possible for a consciousness, because only a consciousness can have an implicit experience of phenomenal quality in the first place

The Phenomenological Negation of the Causal Closure of the Physical

- The conclusion is: insofar as the principle of the causal closure of the physical denies any independent causal efficacy to pure phenomenal quality, then the causal closure of the physical is false
- I know this on the basis of my immediate phenomenological experience, which can be propositionalised as follows:
 1. A difference making cause of my direct intuition of pure phenomenal quality is that there is pure phenomenal quality
 2. A difference making cause of my noticing that I experience direct intuition is that there is direct intuition
 3. A difference making cause of my thinking and speaking of my noticing that I experience direct intuition, is my noticing
 4. 1-3 are true on the basis of phenomenological demonstration
 5. My thinking and speaking of my noticing are physical events
 6. On the basis of 1-5, pure phenomenal quality is a difference making cause of physical events
 7. Therefore the causal closure of the physical is false

Part Three

The Validity of the Phenomenological Demonstration

Chalmers' Argument

- Chalmers argues that our phenomenal judgments are determined by the physics of the brain and it just turns out that conscious entities, such as ourselves, have the experience of pure phenomenal content whenever we attend (correctly) to our phenomenal experience
- The contradiction in Chalmers' position is that *if* pure phenomenal content is not able to independently cause any event in the brain, then there is no mechanism whereby we can be caused to notice that there is such content
- Whereas we do notice that there is such content, and our noticing has physical effects, viz. our thinking and speaking of such content

The Question of Error

- The first retort is to argue that there is no such thing as phenomenal quality, i.e. it is an illusion and I am in error (cf. Dennett)
- As far as I can see there is no way to rationally respond to such a position – it has a certain logical consistency but it denies what is self-evident (to me)
- Dennett's motivations are at least understandable, because, if phenomenal qualities are real then causal closure falls and with it our paradigmatic understanding of the nature of the universe
- Another option is to argue, with Chalmers, that certain complex physical systems that have no experience of phenomenal quality, will, in and of themselves, act as if they were experiencing such qualities (cf. Chalmers' central processor)
- In the case of our brains, this means our neurons, having no access to phenomenal experience, obeying physical law alone, will signal one another in such a way as to control our mouths and vocal chords to pronounce that there is such a thing as phenomenal experience
- This approach needs to explain why our neurons, as physical systems, are inclined to conclude falsely (from a physical perspective) that there is such a thing as phenomenal experience - Chalmers has not addressed this question directly although there is certainly room for more philosophical maneuvering...

Mimicry and False Belief

- Chalmers' account of phenomenal judgment does explain how an unconscious entity could mimic the behaviour of a conscious being – it only lacked a credible account of how such an unconscious entity could come to notice there are phenomenal qualities in the first place
- So, I am not saying that an unconscious computational device could not come to mimic our use of phenomenal language purely on the basis of observing the language behaviour of conscious subjects
- In fact, it is quite possible that many conscious subjects are in this situation and have yet to notice or explicitly distinguish that there are phenomenal qualities
- To such a person it will appear quite reasonable to assert that there are no pure phenomenal qualities and that all such talk has developed on the basis of mimicry and false belief
- It is no good arguing that we could not have developed a concept of pure phenomenal quality unless there were such qualities – the history of the human race is littered with such illusions and false beliefs
- The **only** basis for the assertion that there is pure phenomenal quality is my direct intuition of pure phenomenal quality

The End of Physicalism?

- **To conclude**: the fall of causal closure is not necessarily the fall of physicalism, it is only the fall of a certain conception of the physical
- If we allow that the physical encompasses everything that can act as a difference making cause of physical events, then phenomenal qualities themselves become something physical
- Such a physical monism survives the phenomenological demonstration given here – the only question is whether such a conception of reality can still be considered *physical*
- To answer that question I invite you to attend the very next session with Galen Strawson...