**The Metaphysical Incoherence of Representationalism​**

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**1 Introduction**

I shall show that representationalism makes no metaphysical sense.

Not that I am a naïve realist (though we can make common cause against representationalism).

My own view is a qualitative “pure paint” view.

As a physicalist, I identify conscious sensory experiences with bodily states (say, neural activations). As it happens, I also view these neural states as representations. They are correlated with distal conditions and guide behaviour accordingly.

I’d say the same if I were a dualist. Conscious sensory experiences are intrinsic mind-stuff states which are constituted as representations by their correlations with distal conditions.

**2 Representationalism in the Philosophy of Perception**

I’d say my view is probably what most non-experts understand by “representationalism”—let’s call it vulgar representationalism. But it’s not what’s meant by the philosophers of perception. Consider these two issues.

*(i) Singular and other surplus contents.* I take it that I can perceptually represent my wife, say. But representationalists resist this. They want representational content to be fixed by conscious character.

*(ii) Mental paint.* I take it different people use different conscious states to represent the same surface colours. (Tetrochromancy, pure colours.) But representationalists resist this. They want conscious character to be fixed by representational content.

Why are they fussed? On vulgar representationalism these things are quite unproblematic.

But representationalists have bigger fish to fry. Naturalist representationalists (Tye, Dretske, Lycan, Jackson, . . .) want to *reduce* consciousness to representation. Phenomenal intentionalists (Siewert, Kriegel, Horgan and Tienson, . . .) want to *reduce* representation to consciousness. So both want to say character and content are the same thing, essentially tied together (thus leaving no room for a given conscious state to have different contents, nor vice versa).

On my vulgar view, character and content are only contingently connected. (Compare the way typographical words have their contents contingently.) But for representationalists the connection is essential. The meanings are built into the conscious states.

(**3 Complications**

Phenomenal intentionalists needn’t mind paint too much. Their view is that *some* sensory consciousness fixes content. They can allow other sensory consciousness that doesn’t. (But they won’t allow real content that’s not fixed by any consciousness—no surplus content.)

Naturalist representationalists needn’t mind surplus contents too much. Their view is that *some* representation fixes consciousness. They can allow other representation that doesn’t. (But they won’t allow consciousness that’s not fixed by any content—no paint.)

Still, once the phenomenal intentionalists put any paint character to one side, and the naturalist representationalists put any surplus content to one side, then they can agree that the remaining *conscious characters* and *representational contents* are one and the same.)

**4 Transparency**

On the face of things, conscious character and representational content are very different. One is how a state *feels*. The other is how a state *answers to some distal condition*. Not hard to see how these might be contingently connected. But essentially?

Many representationalists appeal to the supposed “transparency” of experience at this point.

Harman: “. . . the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree.” (“The Intrinsic Quality of Experience” *Phil Perspectives* 1990 667)

Tye: “It seems to me that what I found so pleasing in the above instance, what I was focusing on, as it were, was a certain shade and intensity of the colour blue….” (“The Function of Cosciousness” *Nous* 1996 295)

I grant that it’s intuitively plausible that worldly properties like shapes and colours are “present in” sensory experience, and that it’s a short-ish step from that to their being essentially representational. But I think we must resist the intuition.

Remember representationalist are common factor theorists. So they think worldly properties are present in the bad cases too. It’s hard to make sense of this. (Representationalism compares badly with naïve realism here.)

Dretske: “In hallucinating pink rats we are aware of something—the properties, *pink* and *rat-shaped* that something is represented as having—but we are not aware of any object that has these properties--a pink, rat-shaped, object. We are aware of pure universals, uninstantiated properties.” (“Experience as Representation” *Phil Issues* 2003 73)

Tye: “Along with (most) other representationalists, I am happy to say that, in the hallucinatory case, the perceiver is conscious of an un-instantiated property. This seems to me to be part of naïve commonsense.” (“What is the Content of a Hallucinatory Experience?” in Brogaard ed *Does Perception Have Content?* 2014 304)

I take their view here to be inconsistent with the here-and-now character of sensory consciousness. How can this be constituted by a relation to an abstract universal outside space and time?

I myself deny that *any* worldly properties are ever present in experience. (It’s not just that experience has some extra paint properties. *It’s all paint*—intrinsic properties of subjects with no built-in representational contents.)

(**5 Intentional Objects**

Lycan: “It is, after all, no surprise to be told that mental states have intentional objects that may not exist . . . And that is why we can consistently admit that phenomenal-color properties qualify individuals without granting that there exist individuals that are the bearers of phenomenal-color properties” (“Phenomenal Objects” *Phil Perspectives* 1987 519).

Harman: “It is very important to distinguish what are experienced as intrinsic features of the intentional object of experience from intrinsic features of the experience itself” (op cit 1990 39).

Jackson: “we have shown that minimal representationalism plus diaphanousness implies that the properties of the experience are properties of an intentional object” (“The Knowledge Argument, Diaphanousness, Representation” in Alter and Walter eds *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge* 2007 61)

But none of them spell out a theory of intentional objects.

First point. Experience has a rich internal structure, with many constancies that naturally create an impression of mind-independence (Farkas). We might speak of the “quasi-objects” present in experience, and their quasi-properties.

Second point. Some (Lycan, Crane, Priest . . .) want to embrace the idea that people often see and think about things that don’t exist (pink rats, King Arthur). Their mental states have *intentional objects* that might or might not exist.

Both points are fine on their own. But it’s tempting to combine them and identify quasi- and intentional objects.

Loar: “Now imagine having one of the lemon-experiences without knowing whether it is veridical. You are strongly tempted to say ‘that object’ . . . you seem both to commit yourself, by using a demonstrative, and to take it back at the same time: ‘that object may or may not exist’. The phenomenology gives you the feel of a sort of ontologically neutral object that could have the property of existing or not-existing; and directedness is phenomenologically very like a relation to that neutral object, which could turn out to be real. Suppose you then discover that it is real.” (“Phenomenal Intentionality as the Basis of Mental Content” in Hahn and Ramberg eds *Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge* 2003 254)

Now, given the identification, we can reason that, if the quasi-object is real, then it will have a real colour and shape; but it has just the same properties when it’s not real; so those worldly properties are also present in experience in the bad cases, albeit only possessed by an intentional object.

But this is all a muddle. The quasi-object can’t be the intentional object. The quasi-object certainly exists in experience even in bad cases. The intentional object might or might not exist depending on the world beyond. They can’t be the same.)

**6 An Argument**

I can do better than the “here-and-now” rhetoric.

*Premise 1* Conscious states have causes and effects.

*Premise 2* The relata of causation are concrete facts, as when a concrete object has some first-order property or relation to other concrete objects.

*Premise 3* A person bearing some relation to (“attending to”, “focusing on”) an abstract worldly property outside space and time does not compose such a concrete fact.

*Conclusion* Conscious sensory states cannot be comprise such non-instantiation relations to abstract worldly properties. (Rather they must involve people instantiating first-order conscious properties.)

**7 The Argument Generalised**

Not all representationalists appeal to transparency. (For Kriegel it violates “the explanatory closure of the concrete”.)

But the above causal argument also blocks any identification of conscious properties with *representational* properties. A person representing something itself involves a non-instantiation relation to an uninstantiated worldly property outside space and time. (Consider the case when I *visually represent* something to be *round*, when nothing nearby in fact is.) So as before, conscious sensory states cannot be comprised of non-instantiation relations to uninstantiated worldly properties.

If representational facts are not concrete, what is the causal significance of representation? Good question.

For my own part, I’d say that representational talk points to a not-intrinsically-representational vehicle, which does have ordinary causes and effects, and then in addition “programmes” for further effects by indicating how proximal behaviour will have successful distal results *when* the truth condition obtains.

Perhaps a more input-orientated Fodor-style account of representation might say representational talk “programmes” for how the vehicle will be canonically distally caused *when* the truth condition obtains.

And maybe other accounts of the causal significance of representation are possible.

Still, that is everybody’s problem. It does not affect the prior point that representational facts, comprising non-instantiation relations to uninstantiated properties, are simply the wrong metaphysical shape to constitute conscious sensory states.