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Précis of *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*

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My book defends the *qualitative* view that conscious sensory experiences are intrinsic states of people that are not essentially related to any further objects or properties.

There are affinities between my view and the defence of "qualia" by philosophers like Ned Block and Christopher Peacocke. But my position is more thoroughgoingly qualitative than theirs. Block and Peacocke argue that there are non-relational qualitative aspects to colour and shape experiences—Block calls them "mental paint"—*in addition* to the relational aspects of those experiences. As I see it, however, the qualitative aspects of experience are not add-ons to putatively relational features of experience. Rather they exhaust the nature of experience. In my view, *it's all paint*.

In defending the view that experience is qualitative, I set myself at odds, not only with such explicitly relational views as naïve realism and sense datum theories, but also with *representationalist* theories that equate experiential states with the relational possession of representational contents.

I make it clear, though, that I do not deny that sensory experiences *are* representational. I certainly accept that conscious sensory experiences are typically caused by environmental conditions, and that they guide subjects' behaviour in ways appropriate to those conditions. And, given that I accept a broadly naturalist view of representation, I take those systematic correlations with environmental conditions to suffice for those conscious experiences to *represent* those conditions.

However, those who identify themselves as "representationalists" in the philosophy of perception hold far stronger commitments than this. They maintain that the representational contents of sensory experiences are *essentially* tied to their conscious nature. They don't think, as do I, that this connection derives from the way certain intrinsic conscious properties are

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contingently correlated with environmental conditions. Rather they hold that the contents and the conscious characters necessarily go together.

I offer an analogy with words. The sentence "Elvis once visited Paris", taken as a sequence of marks or sounds, represents a certain possible circumstance all right. But it doesn't represent that circumstance essentially. It could well have represented something different, or nothing at all. I view conscious sensory experiences as akin to sentences. They represent contingently. But representationalists in the philosophy of perception deny this. In their view, it is built into the nature of conscious experiences, though not of sentences, that they represent as they do.

Chapter 1

I explain these general features of my position in the Introduction to the book. Chapter 1 then maps out the ground in more detail. I discuss both sense datum theories and naïve realism, and give my reasons for laying them aside. Sense datum theories are dealt with relatively briefly and dismissed as difficult to reconcile with physicalism. Naïve realism is treated at greater length. After making some general points about the explanatory differences between factive and non-factive mental states, I offer three objections to naïve realism: first, it has difficultly with the timing of perceptions of temporally distant events; second, similarities between sensory states seem to go with intrinsic cerebral similarities rather than with similarities in objects perceived; and, third, naïve realism seems unable coherently to maintain its fundamental commitment to the possibility of conscious differences that are not apparent to introspection.

In chapter 1 I also explain that representationalists fall into two quite different camps, which I distinguish as *naturalist representationalism* and *phenomenal intentionalism*. Naturalist representationalists aim to explain sensory consciousness in terms of representation, and then to explain representation in naturalist terms, by reducing it to correlations between internal states and environmental conditions. The phenomenal intentionalists reverse the direction of explanation, and aim to explain sensory representation in terms of sensory consciousness. As they see it, naturalist correlations with environmental conditions can only account for mechanical relations of "detection", where representation properly so-called needs to derive from the inherent structure of consciousness.

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Chapter 2

Chapter 2 is devoted to a critique of representationalist views. It begins by putting pressure on the assumption, common to both naturalist representationalism and phenomenal intentionalism, that the conscious characters and representational contents of sensory experiences are necessarily tied together. I observe that conscious character—how an experience feels—and representational content—the accuracy condition of the experience—are very different things, and that most of the arguments normally offered in support of representationalism suffice at best to show that sensory experiences contingently happen to be representations, not that they possess their representational contents essentially.

I then turn to naturalist representationalism. At first pass, I observe, this seems a counter-intuitive view. According to naturalist representationalism, the conscious character of a sensory experience is fixed, not by the relevant intrinsic state of the subject, but by whatever distal environmental condition that state happens to be correlated with—with the implication that a given intrinsic state would feel different if it had a different distal correlate, while a different intrinsic state would feel the same if it had the same distal correlate.

Despite the oddity of this stance, naturalist representationalists typically commandeer the support of intuition by appealing to the "transparency" of experience, that is, to the way that introspection apparently shows worldly properties like *yellowness* and *roundness* to be constituents of experiences (from which it is then taken to follow that experiences essentially represent the environmental presence of such properties).

However, this appeal to transparency raises its own difficulties. In what sense can naturalist representationalists take properties like *yellowness* and *roundness* to be constituents of experience? I point out that this idea is far less straightforward for naturalist representationalists than it is for naïve realists or sense datum theorists. At least the latter views hold that worldly properties like *yellowness* and *roundness* feature in experiences in virtue of being *instantiated* by the objects or sense data that the experiences involve. But naturalist representationalists are "common factor theorists", and so hold that the same conscious sensory properties obtain in "bad cases" of illusion and hallucination as well as in "good cases" of veridical perception. So they must hold that worldly properties like *yellowness* and *roundness* are constituents of experiences even when uninstantiated, and so feature in experience as pure properties abstracted from any objects that might

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possess them. And this, I then argue, is surely inconsistent with the concrete causal nature of conscious states. Conscious states are here-and-now, concrete facts with causes and effects. This seems incompatible with their being constituted by some non-instantiation relation to abstract properties with no local embodiment.

At the end of chapter 2 I generalize this form of argument so that it is directed, not just at those who think that uninstantiated worldly properties are present in experience, but at any representationalists who equates the conscious character of a sensory experience with the experience's possession of accuracy conditions. I point out that the possession of accuracy conditions is itself an abstract state, a relation to a possibly uninstantiated *possibilium*, and so cannot constitute a concrete conscious state with causes and effects.

At this point I note that a number of philosophers who are normally placed in the phenomenal intentionalist camp, including Brian Loar, Uriah Kriegel, and Angela Mendelovici, are prepared to abandon the claim that conscious sensory character relationally determines accuracy conditions without the assistance of contingent environmental embedding, and to content themselves with the claim that sensory consciousness is at least intrinsically *directed*, somehow pointing to a world beyond itself. It is a nice question, I point out, how far this "non-relational phenomenal intentionalism" differs from my own qualitative view, and I postpone further discussion until I have developed my qualitative view further.

Chapter 3

I begin the positive elaboration of my qualitative view in chapter 3. I start by pointing out that my view evades many of the challenges facing representationalism; in particular, since it does not aspire to any necessary connection between sensory character and sensory content, it is happily free to ascribe "broad contents" to sensory experiences.

In the light of these advantages, I ask why there seem to be no other defenders of my straightforward qualitative view in the contemporary literature. I suggest that this might be due to the way that those writers who are prepared to countenance "qualia", like Block and Peacocke, also tend to run "functional" properties together with "representational" ones, and so misguidedly take the functional nature of many sensory properties to show that they are related to representational contents.

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I then stress that my own qualitative view does not deny that sensory experience has a rich internal structure. Following Katalin Farkas (2013), I note how certain experiential properties, such as those correlated with shapes and colours, display a coherence and predictability that distinguishes them from those associated with pains, say, or after-images. Moreover, I observe, our experience is further characterized by stable clusters of such properties that behave in an object-like manner. I suggest the terminology of "quasi-objects" and their "quasi-properties" for these features of experience.

Farkas observes that the constancy and coherence of these "quasi-objects" and their "quasi-properties" makes it attractive to think of them as somehow *mind-independent*. I do not deny this attraction. But in truth—and Farkas does not claim otherwise—there is nothing in her observations to show that sensory experience is genuinely related to anything mind-independent. She is pointing entirely to structures *within* experience, and that alone is not enough to show that experience is related to anything outside it.

The temptation to view sensory experience as essentially relational, however, is compounded when Farkas's observations are combined with the notion that sensory states have "intentional objects". A commitment to "intentional objects" is one response to the challenge of understanding the manner in which representational mental states are *about* objects (whether essentially or contingently). At first pass, if you are *thinking of King Arthur*, or *visually experiencing a white rabbit*, it looks as if your mental state is related to an object, namely, King Arthur, or a white rabbit. But what if there is no such king or rabbit? Some philosophers say that in such cases your mental state is still related to an object—albeit one that doesn't exist. As they see it, representational mental states always point beyond themselves to their "intentional objects." In most cases, these will be ordinary constituents of reality, but sometimes they will be non-existent items. (After all, who would deny that people sometimes think about things that don't exist?)

While I myself would opt for a different account of the structure of representational mental states, I have no great objection to the doctrine of possibly non-existent intentional objects as such. However, once intentional objects are on the table, it is very tempting to take the further step of identifying them with the "quasi-objects" present in sensory experience—and this can then be the source of great confusion. Brian Loar expresses the temptation perfectly:

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> 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… (2003: 54)

Loar here invites us to start with the "quasi-object" ("the phenomenology gives you the feel") and then to identify that with the "intentional object" at which the experience is directed ("may or may not exist"). But once we succumb to this invitation, we are inevitably seduced into a relational view of experience. For the identification implies that in the good cases, where we are really seeing a lemon, the quasi-object is identical to a real lemon, and so will enjoy such worldly properties as yellowness and lemon-shapedness. But the quasi-object will be no less part of experience in the bad cases as well, and so these worldly properties will be displayed there too, although in those cases they will not be instantiated by any real object…

And thus we end up with the "transparency" view, the focus of much of my chapter 2, according to which possibly uninstantiated worldly properties are present in experience, and thereby represent themselves to be instantiated in the subject's environment. (It is noteworthy how many of those who trade in "transparency" seek to assuage worries about the experiential presence of uninstantiated worldly properties by appeal to their supposed possession by non-existent "intentional objects".)

This whole path to "transparency", however, is quite broken-backed. It makes no sense to assimilate "quasi-objects" to intentional objects. The former are items *within* experience, and as such definitely exist, both in the good veridical cases and in bad hallucinatory cases. The latter are putative items *beyond* experience, which might or might not exist, depending on whether the case is good or bad. Something which definitely exists cannot be identified with something that might or might not exist.

It should be said that Brian Loar does not endorse this identification. The passage quoted above is not intended to show that experience is essentially related to anything beyond itself, but only that, even so, it is inherently *directed*—in Loar's phrase, it is "paint that points". As Loar sees it, this pointing is inherent in the way that the structure of experience "strongly tempts" us to view it as reaching beyond itself.

Still, is there anything in the structure of conscious experience to show that it is *really* essentially directed outwards? Experience is certainly

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organized in a way that renders it suitable for representing aspects of our environment, and this structure has no doubt been selected by evolution for this purpose. But does this mean that the conscious experiential state is essentially directional, even in abstraction from these environmental connections?

Farkas might show that the constancy and coherence of "quasi-objects" and their "quasi-properties" creates an intuitive impression that they are "mind-independent." And Loar might show that this impression is reinforced when we are "strongly tempted" to identify "quasi-objects" with the putative worldly referents of sensory experiences. However, none of this shows experience is genuinely directed beyond itself. After all, as Farkas and Loar both allow, they are offering reasons why people *mistakenly* come to view experience as relational. But that experience is such as to induce people to *mischaracterize* it as relational is scarcely enough to show that it is really somehow inherently directed beyond itself. In the end, I argue, we have been given nothing to substantiate the "non-relational phenomenal intentionalism" considered at the end of chapter 2.

Chapter 4

In the final chapter of the book I explore the implications of my qualitative view for a range of related issues.

First, I return to "transparency", and in particular to the psychological circumstance that we seem unable to shift our introspective focus onto the specifically qualitative elements in our experience. I observe that this is scarcely surprising, given my view that sensory experience contains nothing but qualitative "paint". I explain that introspection is a *cognitive* act, and that (once we put some complications about the workings of sensory attention to one side) we should not expect our sensory consciousness to be altered just by our starting to think about it.

Having invoked the possibility of sensory introspection, I then address the question of how it works. I suggest that in the general run of cases we cognitively characterize our sensory experiences by noting what beliefs they incline us to form. This of course leaves us with questions about how we introspectively know what beliefs we have and what experiences they stem from, but I note that the literature already contains well-developed answers to these questions.

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I then consider whether this model of sensory introspection is consistent with the "phenomenal concept" response to Frank Jackson's "knowledge argument" against physicalism. Phenomenal concepts are normally introduced as directly recognitional ways of introspectively identifying sensory states. But my suggested account of sensory introspection implies that it characterizes sensory states indirectly, in terms of the representational contents of the beliefs they prompt, which are in turn characterized in terms of the worldly properties they involve. In response, I observe that this more complex account is still able to preserve the general spirit of the phenomenal concept response to Jackson's argument, by appealing to the way that new experiences will lead to subjects forming new directly recognitional *perceptual* concepts of worldly properties (like *redness*), and hence derivatively to forming new *phenomenal* concepts of *experiences of redness*.

There are affinities between my qualitative view and the "adverbialist" view of sensory experience defended in the middle of the last century. Given this, I discuss some issues about sensory experience *reports* that are widely viewed as invalidating adverbialism. I first survey the range of rough-and-ready devices that everyday discourse uses to characterize sensory states. I then consider the prospects for a more regimented language that is faithful to the qualitative nature of sensory states. It turns out that some of the traditional challenges to adverbialism correspond to ways in which such a language would be constrained, but I argue that these constraints are indeed ones that should be respected by a regimented language for sensory reports.

Finally, I explore the implications of my view for the debate about "rich sensory contents". I note that nearly all participants in this debate assume that sensory contents derive from the "presence" of worldly properties in conscious experience, and so do not countenance the possibility of consciously similar subjects enjoying different sensory contents. Since my qualitative view is not constrained in this way, I am happy to allow some very rich sensory contents indeed, including sensory representation of biological kinds and particular people. I show that there is plenty of independent reason to accept such strongly rich contents, once we free ourselves from the idea that sensory content is essentially tied to conscious sensory character. I point out that, once we recognize the full range of rich sensory contents, we face a number of further empirical questions about the workings of sensory representation. Rather than pursuing these further, however, I content myself with the observation that any answers should respect the metaphysical independence of sensory content and conscious sensory character.

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