***The Causal Argument Against Representationalism***

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***The central argument against perceptual representationalism in my recent*The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*was that representational properties aren’t causally efficacious in the way that perceptual states are.***

In *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience* I defended a *qualitative* view of conscious sensory experiences against *representationalism*. I agreed entirely with representationalists that sensory experiences *are* representations. But I denied their further claim that sensory experiences are Just as words only represent in virtue of the contingent way they are used by speakers, so do sensory experiences only represent in virtue of the contingent way they are correlated with features of the subject’s environment. Representationalists deny this—they hold that experiences represent in their own right, quite independently of any environmental embedding.)

I distinguished two kinds of representationalists—naturalist representationalists, who seek to explain sensory consciousness i.t.o. representation, and phenomenal intentionalists, who seek to do it the other way around. Both of them equate *conscious* *character* (the subject’s what-it’s-like sensory properties) with *representational content* (the subject’s property of representing things to be thus-and-so).

A thought that drives many representationists, of both kinds, is that experiences represent because they (“transparently”) involve worldly properties like shapes and colours, and so represent the observed world to instantiate those same properties. I objected to this, on the grounds that it made little sense that *uninstantiated* colours and shapes should be “present” in experiences in the bad cases of illusion and hallucination. This seemed at odds with the “here-and-now” nature of conscious experience.

When pressed on this here-and-now intuition (aren’t all experiences a matter of subjects being related to properties as such?—Pär Sundström), I distinguished between someone *instantiating* a first-order property, yielding a concrete fact, and someone bearing some *non-instantiation relation* to some property (eg being “aware of” uninstantiated yellow/round), yielding an abstract fact. I contended that abstract facts cannot enter into causal relations, and so that sensory experiences, which do (“here-and-now”) enter into causal relations, must be concrete facts, not abstract ones.

I then considered the worry that this proves too much. Aren’t representational properties-- representing things to be thus-and-so—themselves abstract facts (eg a relation to uninstantiated yellow/round)? Do I want to say that representational properties are causally impotent? I said that I was happy with that. Representational properties *programme* for causal explanations (of the occurrence of experiences, or their results) by *concrete* causal facts (it *is* yellow and round) that are the truth-makers in the good cases of veridical experiences.

Not all representationalists, especially in the phenomenal intentionalist camp, appeal to the idea that worldly properties are present in sensory experience (Kriegel, Siewert, Mendelovici, Farkas, Crane, . . .) But my last point, about representational properties, meant I now had an argument against even these representationalists.

(1) Instantiations of conscious properties yield concrete facts with causes and effects

(2) Instantiations of representational properties yield abstract facts that cannot have causes and effects

(3) Conscious sensory properties are not the same as representational properties.

***The general question of the causal significance of representational states***

Some have expressed doubts about (2). Mark Sainsbury: “The fact that a cry of “Help!” represents a need for help caused me to go to the rescue.”

My picture is that external circumstances (including non-veridical ones) cause internal vehicles of representation, which then cause other such vehicles, and thence behaviour and further results—and that none of this causation depends on any semantic facts, just “syntactic” ones.

The semantic characterisation of the vehicles only comes in once we focus on some distal result as the function/success condition of the behaviour the vehicle prompts. The truth condition of the vehicle is the circumstance under which the behaviour prompted will achieve that result. (You movements will kick a yellow ball iff *a yellow ball is there*. You interpret the state as signifying *a yellow ball is there—*not by forming another representation, but by acting in a way that will succeed iff that condition obtains.)

So the causal significance of representation is to do with the distal results that eventuate *in the good cases*. In those cases the truth-maker of the representation will combine with the prompted behaviour to cause success.

(This is how the story goes on my favoured output-orientated approach to representation—success semantics/teleosemantics. But similar points could be made given an input-orientated approach (eg Fodor, Neander) which equates truth conditions with some *privileged causes* of the vehicles. Semantics again programmes for the causal sequences involving truth-makers in the good cases . . .)

Back to Sainsbury. The first thing to say about his example is that it involves a *linguistic representation* and a hearer who is naturally taken to have *linguistic knowledge*. So indeed in that case the causal sequence is arguably mediated by a state in the speaker which represents that the cry “Help!” represents a need for help . . .

But now this linguistic-knowledge state could itself be viewed syntactically, and I say that at first pass its semantic content is irrelevant to the sequence of events giving rise to Mark’s reaction. It only matters when we are focused on . . . [it’s getting too complicated, but my idea is Mark’s reaction will only *succeed* if “Help!” does indeed generally represent a need for help (and in addition in this case there is a particular need for help).]

Let’s skip to a case where there’s no language and so no meta-representation. Cheyney et al’s vervet monkeys will do. Consider the signal that means *leopard*. Or consider the state in an individual monkey’s brain that is prompted by signs of leopards. Do I really want to deny that this state prompts the behaviour it does because it represents *leopards*? That seems counterintuitive.

Here I think we can appeal to an idea of Dretske’s. He has a different account of the causal significance of representation from the one I have given. It matters for *structuring* causes even if not *triggering* ones.

So Dretske agrees with me that, in the immediate circumstances, the semantic significance of the monkey state isn’t why it causes behaviour. Its relation to the abstract possibility of leopards doesn’t help it to make the monkey climb a tree. Given the way the monkey’s wired, the physical properties of the vehicle are all that’s needed to get it up the tree.

But we can ask why the monkey’s wired like that. And then the answer is that, in past ancestral and ontogenetic cases where that state sent the monkeys up trees, those monkeys were fitter/rewarded precisely in those case where leopards were present. So an association with (actual) leopards was causally responsible for the wiring structure of the monkey.

I suggest that this is the implicit thought behind the intuition that the monkey climbs the tree because its state represents leopards.

***The prospects for holding that perceptual states metaphysically determine representational properties while remaining distinct from them***

Some phenomenal intentionalists seek to escape my argument by saying they don’t *equate* representational properties with sensory ones. They just hold that the latter metaphysically determine/ground the former without being identical with them.

In the book I said that’s a cop-out. Conscious character and representation content are metaphysically very different. Why should they be necessarily tied together? Their identity was supposed to be an explanation of that. But once we abandon the identity we have not explanation, but are just assuming what needs to be explained.

Unfortunately my phenomenal intentionalist opponents haven’t conceded.

As I see it, they face two challenges. What representational contents are determined by sensory character? And why are they so determined?

The first challenge is familiar. Sensory character can’t determine singular contents. My visual experience doesn’t fix that it’s *my particular wife* being represented as having green eyes. My Australian doppelganger with the same experience can be representing a different wife.

Kati Farkas has said fine—who said that representational contents have to be complete truth conditions. Why not say the sensory consciousness determines the *semantic character* (Kaplanian, watch the terminology) common to all with that conscious visual experience?

OK. But the rot doesn’t stop there. Ned Block’s “inverted earth” shows that we’ll then need some demonstrative characterlike element in predicate place too. Something like “whichever property plays the green role *round here*/is disposed to produce *these* sensations *in me/ . . .”.* (And Matrix-like scenarios argue that we need something like this for spatial properties too.)

So now we end up with sensory experience determining (very) “gappy contents”.

What now about about the “why?” challenge. *Why* do our sensory experiences essentially determine these gappy contents? They’re just local goings-on in the brain (or in local mind-stuff if you like). What magic ensures that they are *true* just in case . . . something like: *whichever object* is before me *has whichever property* plays the P role round here?

I can think of one possible answer. For some experiences (shape experiences but not colour ones) there are arguable built-in connections to behaviour. Part of the *conscious experience* of a circle is how *you should move* to touch it. This might allow one to argue that the experience *represents* the presence of whatever property needs to be present for those movements to succeed.

By this point the distance between me and my opponents is not great. I too say that contents are determined as the circumstances required for prompted actions to succeed. And my opponents are now allowing that you can’t read the *referential* values of the experience off from its conscious nature—that depends on the environment—the experience is just pointing outwards to whatever’s there, so to speak.

True, I haven’t previously been committed to the idea that the disposition to prompt behaviour is part of the *conscious nature* of the vehicle. But I have no objection to this idea, especially in connection with spatial experience.

So at this point I am happy to agree with my (very-watered-down) phenomenal intentionalist opponents.

But it does require me to withdraw something I pushed in the book. I resisted Brain Loar’s idea of sensory experience as “paint that points”. I didn’t see that he had given any good account of why it points. But now I have offered him such an account. Sensory (spatial) experience does indeed point, but without determining referential values, because of its built-in connection with behaviour.

***The End***