**Why Sensory Consciousness Can’t be Essentially Representational**

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**1 Character and Content** When we have a sensory experience, we instantiate

(a) a conscious property—it is *like something* to have the experience—*character*

(b) a representational property—we sensorily *represent the world to be thus-and-so*—our experience is accurate iff this condition is satisfied—*content*.

What is the connection between these properties? *Representationalism* holds that they are essentially connected.

**2 Naturalist Representationalists and Phenomenal Intentionalists** Distinguish representationalists into

(a) *naturalist representationalists*, who want to explain sensory character in terms of sensory content, and the latter in terms of some naturalist account of representation

(b) *phenomenal intentionalists*, who want to explain sensory content in terms of sensory character.

**3 Essential and Contingent Representationalism** Against (both species of) representationalism, I deny that sensory character and content are essentially connected.

I accept—of course—that conscious sensory experiences *are* representations. But they aren’t essentially so.

Words provide an analogy. The typographic sentence “Sydney is the capital of Australia” represents all right. But it does so courtesy of the contingent way it is used by a linguistic community. Similarly, I say, with conscious sensory experiences. They represent, but only in virtue of the contingent way we’ve evolved/developed so they co-vary with environmental conditions. (“Contingent representationalism.”) Representationalists think that conscious experiences are not like typographical words, but have their representational contents essentially. (“Essential representationalism.”)

**4 The Need for Metaphysics** Many of the arguments offered for representationalism don’t get us past contingent representationalism.

(Thus it is said that sensory experiences:

(a) have accuracy conditions

(b) fix beliefs

(c) are described representationally

(d) represent independently of cognition . . .)

Given the different metaphysical roles of conscious character and representational content, representationalism owes some *metaphysical* explanation of why the two should be essentially intertwined. In my view, neither species of representationalism has the resources to do this.

**5 The Oddity of Naturalist Representationalism** Naturalist representationalism aims to ground sensory character in some naturalist account of representation. For Tye, Dretske and others, this will be some “tracking” account. Intrinsic brain states represent the circumstances which typically cause them, or in which the actions they prompt are successful, or with which they are biologically designed to co-vary, or some such.

Given only this, it seems perverse to equate conscious character with representational content. Why think that what it’s like for me depends on what distal state I’m tracking, rather than my intrinsic brain state?

Naïve realism similarly makes conscious character depend on extra-cranial matters. But at least it’s relatively intuitive that phenomenology should depend on *local* matters. By contrast, making it depend on correlations with distal properties that often aren’t locally instantiated seems at odds with the here-and-now nature of sensory consciousness. (Later I’ll turn this here-and-now intuition into an argument.)

**6 “Transparency”** For intuitive support, most naturalist representationalists (and some phenomenal intentionalists) turn to “transparency”.

The only properties present in experience are worldly properties like *round* and *yellow*.

If that were right, representation would arguably follow. But I can’t make any sense of the idea that worldly properties are “present in” experience. (I deny, not just that *all* experiential properties are worldly, but that *any* are.)

**7 Experiential Presence** Representationalists don’t think the worldly properties are *instantiated* in experience. They are common factor theorists. So the *roundness* and *yellowness* are somehow *experientially present* even in the bad cases where nothing nearby is round or yellow. What?

Earlier I queried naturalist representationalism for having conscious character tied to distally correlated properties. Now it’s said that this results in those uninstantiated distal properties manifesting themselves introspectibly within experience. Even more curious.

Phenomenal intentionalists who endorse transparency also have uninstantiated worldly properties in experience. Some (following David Chalmers) even have never-instantiated “Edenic” properties there. Curiouser and curiouser.

**8 Sundström’s Objection** Enough rhetoric. An argument is coming. But first I’ll consider an objection from Pär Sundström. I’ve complained that the here-and-now-ness of sensory experience is at odds with the representationalist account in terms of relations to abstract properties. Sundström points out that I too equate sensory experiences with a relation between subjects and abstract properties (eg *visually experiencing roundly*) which are by no means here-and-now.

My response is the *instantiation* of such properties by subjects (and more generally of ordinary properties by spatiotemporal particulars) yields *concrete facts* which are here-and-now—and so can enter into causal relations. But other relations to properties per se (such as having an *uninstantiated property* in mind) yield abstract facts that cannot feature as causes or effects. That’s why such relations can’t constitute sensory experiences.

**9 The Causal Role of Representation** Haven’t I argued too much? What about representational properties? Aren’t they causally significant, even though they relate subjects to abstract properties?

Up to a point. Intrinsic vehicles of representation do causally affect other vehicles and proximal behaviour, but only in virtue of their “syntactic” properties. Semantic properties as such have no direct causal role. Rather they *programme* for the causal role of their *truth-makers*.

On my favoured account of representation, the intrinsic vehicle causes the proximal behaviour, and then the truth-maker, *if it obtains*, combines with that behaviour to cause distal success.

More generally, any account of representation will leave us with a question about its causal significance. If representation is an abstract relation to a *possible circumstance*, how is it causally significant? And the answer must be that representational relations as such aren’t casually significant. It’s only when the relevant possible circumstance is *actual* that we have a concrete fact that can feature as a cause or effect.

 **10 Representation and Causation are Incommensurable** So here’s a general argument.

(1) Instantiations of conscious sensory properties yield concrete facts that have causes and effects.

(2) Instantiations of representational properties yield abstract facts that that cannot feature as causes or effects.

(3) Sensory properties are not representational properties.

**11 Paint that Points** Some self-identifying phenomenal intentionalists (Loar, Farkas, Kriegel, Mendelovici, Gow, Masrour, . . .) have a non-relational notion of “intentionality” that doesn’t involve correctness conditions. “Paint that points.”

Certainly sensory experience has a very rich structure that invites the belief that it relates us to something independent. But does that mean it is *essentially representational*?

Two quick points.

First, it is not enough that experience *seems* relational, in the sense it invites *mistaken* beliefs to that effect (perhaps via the thought that worldly properties are introspectively present in experience).

Second, it is not enough that experience *would* *relate* us to correctness conditions *if* embedded in an environment (or that it’s *well-suited* to doing do, or that it’s been *evolved for* this purpose).

After all, my “pure paint” qualitative view agrees entirely with both these points.