

## PHL340 Handout 3: Representationalism

### §1 Representationalism and the Phenomenal Principle

An experience's *representational content* is the way the world must be if the experience is to be veridical. *Representationalism* holds that the way perceptual experience seems to a subject is exhausted by the way the experience represents things as standing in the world (i.e. the phenomenal character is exhausted by the experience's representational content)

Example: suppose I undergo a visual experience as of a red cup on my table. My visual experience will be veridical if and only if there is a red cup on my table. So the representational content of my experience is this: there is a red cup on the table. Representationalism says that the phenomenal character of my experience amounts to this: there is a red cup on the table.

Representationalists are not indirect realists, since they hold that the *direct objects* of perceptual awareness are the mind-independent objects and properties that form part of an experience's representational content (*n.b.* on p. 62 Tye restricts this content to observable properties).

Our previous accounts of perceptual experience accepted the phenomenal principle:

Phenomenal Principle: If a subject has a perceptual experience as of something having a property F, some thing of which the subject is *directly aware* actually has F.

Representationalists *deny* this principle. They exploit a fact about representation: to represent that something is F does not require the existence of an object that is F. Given this general fact about representation, perceptual experience as of a red object, say, does not require the existence of a red object.

Suppose that  $E_V$ ,  $E_I$ , and  $E_H$  are perceptual experiences indistinguishable from a subject's point of view, where  $E_V$  is veridical,  $E_I$  illusory, and  $E_H$  hallucinatory. Representationalists tend to make the following claims:

1.  $E_V$ ,  $E_I$ , and  $E_H$  have the same representational content, since a difference in representational content would result in a difference in how the experiences seem from a subject's point of view.
2. A veridical experience such as  $E_V$  represents the object with which you are in perceptual contact as having properties it in fact has.
3. An illusory experience such as  $E_I$  represents the object with which you are in perceptual contact as having properties it in fact lacks.
4. A hallucinatory experience (such as  $E_H$ ) as of an F thing represents that there is an F object before you, but in fact you are not in perceptual contact with any object.

We'll see several arguments for representationalism in §3. But many accept the view largely because it seems to be the best account of perceptual experience that both answers the arguments from illusion and hallucination and naturally accommodates *Transparency*.

## §2 Varieties of Representationalism

Representationalism admits considerable internal variation. The basic thesis – that the representational content of perceptual experience exhausts its phenomenal character – leaves a number of questions about the view open.

In the assigned reading, David Chalmers provides a canonical general taxonomy of representationalist positions. He identifies several questions whose answers separate representationalists into different camps. These questions include:

1. Is there a *manner* of representation specific to perceptual experience?
2. Can one explain the representational content of perceptual experience without appeal to phenomenal character?
3. Does the representational content of perceptual experience wholly depend upon the intrinsic properties of the perceiving subject?
4. Are the constituents of the representational content of perceptual experience ordinary objects and their properties?

Chalmers says ‘yes’ to 1 and 3, and ‘no’ to 2 and 4. These answers are responses to puzzles or problems that give rise to these four questions.

When working through these puzzles or problems, ask yourself: does a given puzzle have force against all representationalists? What about against other theorists?

1 arises in part because of putative pairs of perceptual experiences that differ in phenomenal character but not in representational content (e.g. experiences that differ only in the focus of a subject’s attention).

To explain these differences without positing a non-representational difference, representationalists often appeal to differences between the ways or manners in which perceptual experiences represent.

2 arises because we representationalists must explain the difference between conscious and non-conscious representation (i.e. representation with and without phenomenal character).

Vision scientists frequently posit non-conscious representational states to explain how the visual system carries and manipulates visual information. Even more troubling are cases of *blindsight*: perception without conscious awareness.

Chalmers (pp. 12-14) thinks the standard functionalist account of the divide between conscious and non-conscious perceptual representation (roughly: conscious perceptual representation plays a distinctive functional role within our mental economy) runs into the so-called *hard problem of consciousness* – the problem of explaining the place of consciousness within the physical world. See pp. 62-63 in the Tye chapter for the sort of functionalist account Chalmers targets.

One version of the hard problem insists that the functional facts about the mind could remain the same even if a subject had no conscious awareness.

3 arises because of a dilemma between three claims accepted by most representationalists:

1. An experience's representational content is its phenomenal character.
  2. The phenomenal character of perceptual experience wholly depends upon the intrinsic properties of the perceiving subject. ['Phenomenal Internalism']
  3. The representational content of perceptual experience does not wholly depend upon the intrinsic properties of the perceiving subject. ['Semantic Externalism']
- 1-3 are obviously inconsistent. Representationalists cannot abandon 1. So they must deny either 2 or 3. Tye, for instance, accepts 3 on pp. 64-65.

Chalmers rejects 3. And he's spent much of his career trying to explain how this move doesn't run afoul of extremely powerful arguments (cf. Burge, Kripke, Putnam) for the claim that representational content almost always depends upon more than the intrinsic properties of representing subjects.

*Question:* would denying 2 lead to scepticism about our knowledge of phenomenal character? Many think so, tempted by the following argument:

- i. Introspective knowledge of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience must be both *certain* and *infallible*.
- ii. But if a fact does not wholly depend upon a subject's intrinsic features (e.g. it concerns some external object), knowledge of the fact is *not* both certain and infallible.
- iii. So either introspection provides no knowledge of phenomenal character, or 2 is true.

Versions of this argument can be run using epistemic features other than infallibility and certainty, as long as those features aren't also characteristic of knowledge of the sorts of fact mentioned at (ii).

Chalmers introduces 4 because he thinks it possible for two subjects to undergo *veridical* perceptual experiences with the *same* phenomenal character that nevertheless involve perceptual contact with distinct properties (e.g. one sees a red chair, the other a green one).

If the representational content of perceptual experience were purely composed of ordinary objects and their properties, this scenario would be impossible (or so Chalmers claims): at least one experience would have to be non-veridical, since these experiences must represent their respective objects as having the same properties.

A good question: how might someone defend the 'yes' answer to 4, *contra* Chalmers? Keep this question in mind for next class.

### §3 Arguments for Representationalism

The philosophical literature on perceptual experience contains innumerable arguments for (and against) versions of representationalism. Here are a few.

#### §3.1 *Argument From Transparency* (Tye §3.1)

In the assigned reading, Michael Tye provides something like the following argument:

1. A right account of perceptual experience ought to respect *Transparency*.

2. Only representationalism respects *Transparency*.
3. So we ought to accept representationalism.

2 requires a particular *Transparency* claim. Representationalism isn't compatible with the existence of direct objects of perceptual awareness other than those perceptual experience represents. So the argument requires the relatively strong *Transparency* claim that introspective attention to perceptual experience reveals *only* what seem to be ordinary objects (and their properties) as direct objects of awareness.

Tye goes to great lengths to establish this strong version of *Transparency*. Are you convinced by his discussion? Also, to what extent do transparency considerations support the representationalist accounts of illusory and hallucinatory experience?

*Transparency* becomes harder to accommodate if, following Chalmers, one denies that the representational content of perceptual experience includes ordinary objects and their properties. In fact, Chalmers later revised his account to better accommodate *Transparency* (cf. Chalmers 'Perception and the Fall from Eden').

### §3.2 *Argument from Naturalism* (Dretske 1995 and Tye 1995)

Early representationalists were partly motivated by a demand to accommodate perceptual experience within a *naturalistic* worldview. Broadly speaking, an account is naturalistic only if it makes no essential appeal to 'spooky' properties (e.g. consciousness properties, semantic properties, etc.).

Since these theorists thought that representation and representational content were notions that admit naturalistic explanation, they believed that representationalism, with its identification of phenomenal character and representational content, promised the best naturalistic account of phenomenal character (and thus of perceptual experience).

Note: Chalmers defends non-naturalistic representationalism, so this argument will not help him.

Objection: recent work has put pressure on the prospects of a naturalistic account of mental representation. Advocates of *phenomenal intentionality* insist that perceptual experiences possess at least some of their representational content in virtue of their phenomenal character (cf. Chalmers pp. 6-7). Others defend non-naturalistic accounts of how we manage to represent objects in thought (cf. the Campbell, Smithies, and Dickie readings from Week 11).

### §3.3 *Argument from the Explanatory Role of Perceptual Experience* (Sturgeon 2000; Pautz 2010)

Many argue for representationalism by appeal to claims about the explanatory work done by perceptual experience. They appeal to apparent symmetries between the explanatory roles of introspectively indistinguishable veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences.

1.  $E_V$  and  $E_I$  (or  $E_H$ ) successfully perform some of the same explanatory roles.

Candidate Roles: the experiences (a) *justify* the same beliefs about the external world; (b) provide the same *reasons* for action. And (c) any perceptual experience as of an F object *enables a subject to think about F* (e.g. an experience as of a red thing enables a subject to think about the colour red).

2. Representationalism provides the best account of these explanatory symmetries between  $E_V$ ,  $E_I$ , and  $E_H$
3. So we ought to accept representationalism [from 1 and 2]

*Obvious questions:* must anti-representationalists accept 1(a)? And do we need a view as strong as representationalism in order to capture the symmetries? See pp. 112-113 of Brewer.

§3.4 *Argument from 'Looks'* (Jackson 1977; Tye §3.3)

A number of philosophers argue that representationalism best explains a particular 'phenomenal' use of perceptual verbs such as 'looks'.

*Comparative:* 'o looks F to S' roughly means the same as 'o *looks like* an F to S'

*Epistemic:* 'o looks F to S' roughly means the same as 'o *looks as if* it is F to S'.

*Phenomenal:* a use that is not equivalent to either the comparative or the epistemic use.

Tye admits a phenomenal use of 'looks', and argues that its features are best explained by a view that explains how things look in terms of the representational content.

*Question:* do you think there are non-comparative/non-epistemic uses of 'looks'? Are these uses best explained by representationalism? Charles Travis, in the paper assigned as optional, evinces considerable scepticism about the phenomenal use.

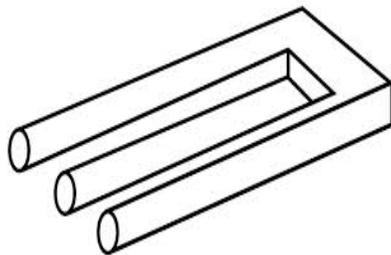
## §4 Objections to Representationalism

### §4.1 *Counterexamples*

Some opponents reject representationalism's identification of phenomenal character and representational content because they think there are clear counterexamples. Chalmers, for instance, introduced an influential counterexample on p. 10 when he discusses experiences that seem to differ only in the focus of perceptual attention (and hence differ in phenomenal character but not representational content).

#### Perceptual Experience of 'Impossible' Objects

Perceptual experiences as of an 'impossible' objects like the 'devil's pitchfork' (pictured below) do not represent a way that the world might be. So these experiences have a phenomenal character without a corresponding (consistent) representational content.



*Standard representationalist reply:* the experience's representational content is composed of consistent representational contents by the visual system. So there are representational contents that individually explain aspects of the phenomenal character of the experience.

*Nice Question:* to believe both p and not-p (an inconsistent proposition) would render a subject rationally incoherent. But what could be wrong with having a perceptual experience whose representational content is similarly inconsistent?

#### §4.2 *Limits of Illusion* (cf. Brewer §4.2)

According to representationalism, an illusory experience represents the object with which you are in perceptual contact as having properties it in fact lacks. Brewer argues against this account of illusion (and thus against representationalism) as follows:

1. A perceptual experience is illusory iff it represents that o is F, but o isn't F  
[*Representationalist Account of Illusion*]
2. There are limits on the nature and extent of error in illusion due to the fact that illusory experiences must put subjects in contact with particular objects.  
[*Phenomenological Datum*]

The limits Brewer has in mind are particular to perception, and do not occur in thought. For example, we might entertain the thought that a triangle is circular. But what would it be for a subject to be perceptually aware of a triangle and yet for it to look circular?

3. Representationalists must explain the limits of error in illusion. [From 2]

3 poses a non-trivial challenge. Thought has a much wider scope for error than perception, and so absent an account of representation driven by the limits of perceptual experience, representationalism has a slim chance of answering Brewer's challenge. So given 1, representationalism likely cannot explain the limits of error in illusion.

#### §4.3 *Problem of Other Sensory Modalities*

We encounter the external world through a number of sensory modalities: vision, audition, touch, etc. Some modalities reveal properties about which the other modalities remain silent: we see colours, but don't hear or taste them, and we taste flavours, but don't see or hear them. Other properties are accessible to multiple sensory modalities: shapes, textures, etc.

A representationalist must therefore say that, for some properties F, when a subject both touches and sees an F object, she undergoes tactile and visual experiences whose respective representational contents include: something is F (e.g. something is round).

But these experiences differ in their phenomenal character without an obvious corresponding difference in representational content. As a result they pose a threat to the representationalist identification of phenomenal character and representational content.

*The standard representationalist reply:* insist that there exist representational differences between the two experiences. For instance, tactile experience might represent F in combination with purely tactile properties, while a visual experience as of something F will not represent F in combination with any purely tactile properties (instead combining it with colour properties).