

Alleged counterexamples to intentionalism

PHIL 93515
Jeff Speaks

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1 Phenomenology without content

Sometimes ‘intentionalism’ is used as a name for the view that, quite generally, phenomenology can be reduced to, or explained in terms of, content. This strong view seems to require that every mental event which has a phenomenology — a ‘what it’s like’ — also has a content.

Here are some cases that have been given as counterexamples to this view:

- ‘Objectless’ moods, like generalized anxiety.
- Bodily sensations: pains, itches, orgasms.
- Odd visual experiences like phosphenes and after-images.

2 Counterexamples to minimal intentionalism

Suppose that we take (minimal) intentionalism to be the claim that there is an internal connection between perceptual content and phenomenology of the following kind:

If two experiences (of the same sense modality) differ in phenomenal character, then they differ in content.

A counterexample to minimal intentionalism will then be a pair of experiences of the same sense modality that have different phenomenologies but are alike with respect to content. Here are some pairs of experiences which have been claimed to be examples of this sort:

- Looking at a square vs. looking at the same shape rotated 90 degrees.

- Looking at a coin from above vs. looking at the coin from an angle.
- Looking at a 10m tall tree which is 100 meters away vs. looking at a 10m tall tree which is 150 meters away.
- Blurred vision vs. vision of something blurry (double vision vs. vision of two things).
- Gestalt shifts: seeing that shape as a duck vs. seeing that shape as a rabbit (cube example).

I don't think that any of these are convincing; in each case I think it is plausible that there is a difference between the contents of the two experiences.

An alleged counterexample of a quite different sort comes from cases of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation. We'll talk about these next week.

Another sort of counterexample is, I think, more convincing. Consider the phenomenological differences that result from attentional shifts: foreground/background changes, and shifting your attention from one line in a pattern to another one. What can plausibly be claimed to be the difference in content here?

It seems to me that these cases are somewhat isolated, and do not undermine the view that there is some internal connection between phenomenology and content; but it is hard to see how they could fail to undermine the attempt to reduce phenomenology to content.