

Arguments for intentionalism

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1 Intentionalism

The basic intentionalist thesis is a supervenience claim: it is the claim that there can be no difference in the phenomenal character of two perceptual experiences without a difference in their content.

Many intentionalists also endorse stronger theses, such as the converse of this supervenience claim or a claim about the identity of phenomenal character and perceptual content. And this formulation leaves a number of questions unanswered – for example, is the thesis supposed to apply to bodily sensations, as well as perceptual experiences? But we can set these points to the side for the moment in order to get a handle of the way some philosophers argue for the supervenience of phenomenal character on content.

2 Byrne's argument

Byrne (2001) gives an argument for intentionalism with the following two premises:

- A. If a subject with no cognitive shortcomings — in particular, with a perfect memory — has two consecutive experiences which differ in phenomenal character, then that subject will notice a change between the two experiences, and will be able to tell that the two experiences differ in phenomenal character.
- B. If a subject is aware of a difference in phenomenal character between two experiences, then the way things perceptually seem to her when she has the first experience differ from the way things seem to be her when she has the second experience — i.e., the two experiences differ in content.

(These are slightly simplified — see §3 of the Byrne paper for more details.)

Of the two premises, (B) is obviously the more controversial. Byrne supports (B) with a discussion of the nature of our knowledge of phenomenal character. The idea is that if we are asked to detect the phenomenal character of our experience, we do so by examining the way the world is presented by the experience. For example, if I am asked to attend

to the phenomenal character of my experience of a red wall, I do so by attending to the color of the wall: I attend to the color that the wall seems to have.

This is one of the things that is meant when people say that experience is ‘transparent’: when we try to examine our experiences, we end up ‘looking through’ the experiences to the worldly items that those experiences are experiences of.

If Byrne is right that this is how we arrive at claims about the phenomenal character of our experiences, then (B) looks plausible. After all, (B) just says that if we take there to be a difference in phenomenology, then we must also take there to be a difference in how the world seems — and this must be right if all we know about phenomenology comes from our knowledge of how the world seems.

From (A) and (B) it follows that

- C. If a subject with no cognitive shortcomings — in particular, with a perfect memory — has two consecutive experiences which differ in phenomenal character, then the way things perceptually seem to her when she has the first experience differ from the way things seem to be her when she has the second experience — i.e., the two experiences differ in content.

This is a claim about the experiences of a single subject, and is a claim only about the experiences of idealized subjects. Byrne argues, however, that if (C) is true then the corresponding interpersonal claim, without the idealization, holds as well.

Argument for non-idealized version: this relies on the premise that if a non-idealized subject can have a pair of experiences with a certain content and phenomenal character, then an idealized subject can as well.

The use of a principle of recombination to argue that if the intrapersonal version is true, then the interpersonal version must be as well. Why the principle of recombination might be controversial in this context.

3 The argument from the transparency of experience

I agree with Byrne’s idea that we can give an argument for intentionalism based on the transparency of experience. However, I think that the argument can be simplified a bit if we focus on a different formulation of the transparency claim.

To see how, consider the following oft-quoted gloss on Moore’s transparency claim, from Gilbert Harman:

“When Eloise sees a tree before her, the colors she experiences are all experienced as features of the tree and its surroundings. None of them are experienced as intrinsic features of her experience. Nor does she experience any features of anything as intrinsic features of her experiences. And that is true of you too. There is nothing special about Eloise’s visual experience. When you see a tree, you do not experience any features as intrinsic features of your

experience. Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree. ...” (Harman (1990), p. 667)

Harman’s idea is that introspection reveals nothing which is not an aspect of how the scene before one is presented as being; we notice only the objects that are represented as being in one’s environment, and the properties those objects are represented as having. This claim can be stated as follows:

Transparency

Nothing is available to introspection other than the objects represented as in one’s environment, and the properties they are represented as having.

This is a principle about what we notice when we introspect our experiences. It seems to entail the following principle about introspectable differences between experiences:

Transparency/Difference Principle

If there is an introspectable difference between two experiences, then there is a difference in the objects and properties those two experiences represent as in one’s environment.

If the only objects of introspection are the objects and properties presented as in the environment of the perceiver, then any introspectable difference between two experiences must correspond to a difference in the represented objects and properties. (There are complications here involving shifts in attention — we’ll come back to this next week.)

This gives us the makings of an argument that there is a necessary connection between content and phenomenology. If we think of the phenomenal character of an experience as ‘what it’s like’ to have the experience, then it is plausible that any difference in phenomenal character between two experiences must be introspectable (even if not actually introspected). Any difference between the two experiences which was in principle not noticeable by the subject would not be a difference in what it is like for the subject to have those experiences. This link between phenomenal character and introspection suggests the following argument:

1. If two experiences differ in phenomenal character, there is an introspectable difference between them.
 2. If there is an introspectable difference between two experiences, then there is a difference in the objects and properties those two experiences represent as in one's environment. (Transparency/Difference Principle)
 3. If there is a difference in the objects and properties two experiences represent as in one's environment, there is a difference in the content of the two experiences.
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- C. If two experiences differ in phenomenal character, they differ in content.

The third premise of this argument for minimal intentionalism will hold on any plausible view of content; but one might have a reservation about the first premise. Perhaps if two consecutive experiences of a single subject differ in phenomenal character, there is a clear sense in which there must be some introspectable difference between them. But if the two experiences are separated by a period of years, for example, are we so sure that a difference in phenomenal character must be introspectable? And if we are comparing the experiences of two different subjects, in which case there is no subject to do the introspecting, what does it even mean to say that a difference in phenomenal character between two experiences must be introspectable?

These questions bring out the fact that there are three importantly different versions of the first premise of this argument, and so also three corresponding versions of intentionalism, some more stronger than others:

Intrapersonal, time-restricted intentionalism

If two consecutive experiences of a single subject differ in phenomenal character, then they differ in content.

Intrapersonal, time-unrestricted intentionalism

If two experiences of a single subject (whether consecutive or not) differ in phenomenal character, then they differ in content.

Interpersonal intentionalism

If two experiences (whether of a single subject or two subjects) differ in phenomenal character, then they differ in content.

Whether the above argument supports anything stronger than intrapersonal, time-restricted intentionalism depends in part on whether we can make sense of comparisons of phenomenal character across times and across subjects. This is an issue to which we will return next week.

For another, similar argument for intentionalism based on the transparency of experience, see Tye (2002).

References

- Alex Byrne, 2001. Intentionalism Defended. *Philosophical Review* 110:2:199–240.
- Gilbert Harman, 1990. The Intrinsic Quality of Experience. *Philosophical Perspectives* 4:31–52.
- Michael Tye, 2002. Representationalism and the Transparency of Experience. *Noûs* 36:137–151.