

Attention shifts and intentionalism

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1 Three apparent counterexamples to intentionalism

1.1 *Crosshairs*

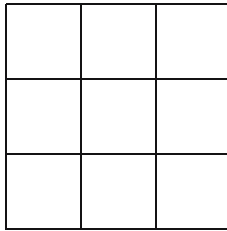
Consider a visual experience of the following lines on a white sheet of paper large enough to fill the perceiver's visual field:



Compare two visual experiences of these lines: in the first, the perceiver's attention is focused on the intersection of the second vertical line from the left with the horizontal line; the second differs only in that the perceiver shifts his attention to the point of intersection to the right, between the horizontal line and the third vertical line from the left. To make the case clearer, we can imagine that this shift in attention does not involve any eye movement. It is undeniable that one's total phenomenology differs between these two cases. So it seems that the intentionalist must find some difference in content to correspond to this difference in phenomenology. But it is hard to see what this representational difference could be. Given that the background of the figure is an uninterrupted stretch of solid white, the change in focus between the two points of intersection does not bring with it a change in the representation of anything on the periphery of the perceiver's visual field.

1.2 Nickel's box

Nickel (2007) asks us to consider two perceptual experiences of a 3 x 3 grid of squares like the following

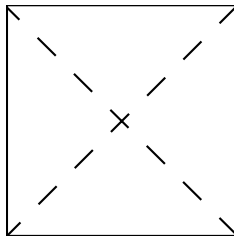


which differ only in which groups of squares appear as prominent. There is a clear difference in phenomenal character – but is there any difference in content?

1.3 The square/diamond

One more case: seeing a figure as a square and as a diamond. The natural line of response for the intentionalist is to say that some properties of the shape are represented by the experience in which the subject sees it as a square, but not in the experience in which the subject sees it as a diamond, and vice versa. For example, Peacocke suggests that when the figure is seen as a square one's visual experience represents a symmetry about the bisectors of the sides of the shape, whereas when the figure is seen as a diamond one's visual experience represents a symmetry about the bisectors of the angles of the shape. (See Peacocke (1992).)

However, as Macpherson (2006) points out, it is possible to see a box as a square while visually representing the symmetry in the bisectors of the angles of the shape.



It is plausible that, as Macpherson says, visual experiences of this figure represent the angle bisector symmetry and that it is possible to see this figure as a square. So, as she says, it is hard for the intentionalist to find some representational difference corresponding to the phenomenal difference between seeing this figure as a square and as a diamond.

2 Straight responses for the intentionalist

Let's say that a 'straight' response for the intentionalist is one which tries to find some difference in the contents of the relevant visual experiences to correspond to the phenomenal differences

discussed above. The natural straight response is to say that the visual experiences differ in what aspects of the represented seen are represented as prominent to the perceiver. (This would be the representation of an egocentric property like relative distance or relative orientation.)

Some reasons to be skeptical of this sort of straight response:

1. It looks like cheating. It seems that we are simply relabeling an aspect of phenomenal character in representational terms.
2. It runs counter to the principle that any property which can be perceptually represented veridically can also be perceptually misrepresented. Try to imagine a scenario in which it visually seems to you that the left point of intersection is prominent, but it really is not. I suggest that you will find yourself imagining a scenario in which that point of intersection really is prominent.
3. It runs counter to the principle that any property which can be perceptually represented can be instantiated in the environment of the perceiver either perceived or unperceived. Imagine a shift in attention which is not represented as such. Either it would make a phenomenal difference — in which case the intentionalist response under discussion fails — or it would not. But in the latter case, it is hard to see how it could be a genuine shift in attention.

3 The distinction between perception and attention

A different response that the intentionalist might make is to say that while there is a difference in overall phenomenology in the above cases, there is no difference in specifically visual phenomenology. Attention is distinct from visual experience; so a difference in the phenomenology of attention with no difference in visual content is akin to a difference in a stomachache which accompanies a visual experience.

Why it is plausible to regard attention as a distinct state in this way: (i) attention shifts can occur across all the sense modalities, so are not plausibly regarded as specific to one; (ii) voluntariness of attentional shifts as opposed to other changes in the phenomenal character of experiences. One can't, e.g., change the color an object visually seems to have at will. (Of course you can put on colored glasses. But this seems different than attention shifts at will, in part because the prop is indispensable.)

3.1 *Why this helps the intentionalist*

Applying this point to the three cases above.

The trickiest of these is the square/diamond. Let's consider the idea that the intentionalist should say that the difference between seeing the box as a square and seeing it as a diamond is not a difference in visual phenomenology, but rather is a difference in the phenomenology of attention. When the box is seen as a square, one is attending to symmetries involving the sides, whereas when it is seen as a diamond one is attending to symmetries involving the angles.

Against this suggestion, Macpherson seems to argue that one can see the box as a square even while *attending* to the symmetry in the bisectors of the angles. (This is suggested by her claim that "it seems perfectly possible to see a square as a square while focusing intently on its angle bisector symmetry." (103))

Look at the figure above and attend to the angle bisector symmetry by attending to the intersecting dotted lines. This shift in attention generates the Gestalt shift to seeing the figure as a diamond; one cannot see it as a square while attending to these lines. (At least I can't.) This is strong evidence that the difference in phenomenology between seeing the box as a square and seeing it as a diamond is, like the difference between the two experiences of the intersecting horizontal and vertical lines above, due to a shift in attention. If this is correct, and if (as suggested above) it is legitimate to regard attention as a type of non-perceptual state with its own associated phenomenology, the square/diamond example is no threat to minimal intentionalism.

3.2 Global and intermodal intentionalisms

At this point, I think that the local intentionalist is out of the woods. But what about the global intentionalist? It looks like the idea that attention is a distinct state with its own phenomenology is just a way of pushing the bump in the rug. The global intentionalist must hold that attentional states have contents as well as phenomenal characters, and that there can be no change in the phenomenal character of such a state without a change in its content.

There are two main ideas about what the content of an attentional state could be: either it could be a higher-order state which represents a subject's experience as being a certain way; or it could be a state which represents some aspect of the scene before a perceiver.

Two problems with this idea: (i) it seems unnatural, especially if one takes transparency intuitions seriously. When I shift my attention, it seems to me that I am shifting my focus from one aspect of the environment to another, not from one aspect of my experience to another. (ii) it runs into the same problem about infallibility mentioned above. One cannot imagine a case in which one's attentional state represents one's visual experience as representing an object as purple but in which one's visual experience does not so represent an object. But if attentional states do have contents, why should they be incapable of error?

So let's suppose that attentional states represent aspects of the scene before the perceiver. The main point here is that then contents of such states will then just be part of the overall content of the visual experience. But then it is hard to see how attentional shifts could explain differences in phenomenology, since the changes in content will not be changes in what the subject is, overall, representing about his environment. Rather, the phenomenal changes will have to be explained in terms of the fact that there is a change in the content of the attentional state. Why this involves giving up intermodal intentionalism.

Result: either global intentionalisms are false, or intermodal intentionalisms are false (or both).

This seems to imply that the view, which intentionalists often endorse, that phenomenal character just is a certain sort of content, must be false.

References

- Fiona Macpherson, 2006. Ambiguous Figures and the Content of Experience. *Noûs* 40(1):82–117.
- Bernard Nickel, 2007. Against Intentionalism. *Philosophical Studies* 136:279–304.
- Christopher Peacocke, 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.