

Externalism, biconditional intentionalisms, and phenomenal content

PHIL 93507
Jeff Speaks

November 23, 2009

1	Biconditional vs. conditional intentionalism	1
2	Three problems for biconditional intentionalisms	2
2.1	From liberal views about the scope of perceptual content	2
2.2	From cases of ‘mixing’	2
2.3	From the representation of change	3
3	Phenomenal content	3

1 Biconditional vs. conditional intentionalism

One of the (many) distinctions between various intentionalist theses which we made at the start of the semester was the distinction between conditional and biconditional formulations of intentionalism. If we stick to an interpersonal intramodal local intentionalism, the relevant formulations are:

Conditional:

Necessarily, if two perceptual experiences of the same sense modality differ in phenomenal character, then they differ in content.

Biconditional:

Necessarily, two perceptual experiences of the same sense modality differ in phenomenal character iff they differ in content.

The difference between these is important because, at least on the face of it, it seems that the second is needed to support the claims about phenomenal character being *indentical* to a certain sort of representational content which intentionalists often want to make. Over the last few decades, most intentionalists have been biconditional intentionalists, whatever their views on the other choice points — intramodal vs. intermodal, global vs. local.

2 Three problems for biconditional intentionalisms

Here are three problems for biconditional intentionalisms, all of which are attempts to produce pairs of experiences which differ in content but not phenomenal character.

2.1 *From liberal views about the scope of perceptual content*

An obvious one comes from any view about the scope of perceptual content liberal enough to let in external particulars or natural kinds (or, if you prefer individual essences to the objects themselves, liberal enough to let perceptual experiences of perceptually indistinguishable objects to represent the individual essences of the relevant objects).

Or, think about the Caplan & Schroeder article on the representation of space and time. If you think that I represent not just that yellow is instantiated somewhere but also that it is instantiated in this place at this time, and that there can phenomenally indistinguishable places and times, we can get pairs of experiences of the right sort.

Probably the same can be said of any externalist theory of perception, so long as we are internalists about phenomenal character. We will always be able to generate counterexamples to biconditional intentionalism by getting the differences in content from purely external changes.

2.2 *From cases of ‘mixing’*

Recall the cases of color contrast and color constancy that we discussed earlier. One way of accommodating cases of color constancy is to say that our visual representation of surfaces represents not just color, but also illumination; cases of color constancy are then described as cases in which we represent as constant the color of the relevant object, but represent its illumination as changing. But that kind of view makes a case in which two color/illumination pairs conspire to create a pair of experiences with the same phenomenal character.

Suppose, for example, that I am looking at a yellow banana and that the light illuminating the banana is slowly changing from white to red. One might say that I represent the color of the banana as constant, but the lighting as changing. Now contrast that with a case in which I am out banana picking and come across a (quite rare) orange banana. Presumably I can represent the banana as orange. Couldn’t some experience in the first series match the second in phenomenal character? If so, we would have a pair of experiences which differed in content but not phenomenal character.

It seems as though we might be able to generate experiences of this sort whenever, intuitively speaking, one ‘phenomenal aspect’ of our experience involves the representation of two different properties. Another possibility: an experience of a coin on its side and the perception of a very narrow elliptical figure.

2.3 From the representation of change

One question I have is whether these sorts of examples of mixing depend essentially on having one of the experiences be a part of a certain kind of series. If so, then it seems that the content of an experience at a time depends upon the contents of previous perceptual experiences. If the phenomenal character of an experience at a time does not, then exploiting this could also be a way to generate counterexamples to biconditional intentionalism.

One way to do this might be to think about perceptual representation of motion. Suppose I am playing a carnival game where I have to shoot a duck which moves slowly from left to right. But the game is broken, so that the duck moves very, very slowly (though visibly). In fact, it might move slowly enough that were I to quickly open and shut my eyes, it would be impossible for me to tell that the duck was moving at all.

So imagine some experience $e1$ in the series which is short enough that it has the same phenomenal character as the open-and-shut eyes case.

Now imagine another series of experiences the next day, when the game is really broken, and I am staring at a stationary duck, and select an experience $e2$ of the same duration as $e1$.

If the foregoing is correct $e1$ and $e2$ could be alike in phenomenal character. But doesn't $e1$ represent the duck as moving? If so this would be a counterexample to biconditional intentionalism. Similar examples could be generated for any sort of represented change.

How plausible is it for the biconditional intentionalist to deny that $e1$ represents motion? Perhaps not so bad. But one worry here is that we could divide the whole series up into $e1$ -sized chunks. Would it then be OK to say that no experience in the series represented motion, but that the whole series of experiences together did? This sounds a bit weird to me, but perhaps there is nothing really wrong with it.

3 Phenomenal content

One phrase often seen these days in the literature on perception is 'phenomenal content.' Though some writers are more careful, it is often simply introduced by definition as 'the kind of content that supervenes on phenomenal character.'

One worry about this is — if we accept the above arguments that perceptual content does not supervene on phenomenal character — it is just not obvious that there is such a thing as phenomenal content. From the fact that everyone who has an experience with phenomenal character C perceptually represents some proposition or other, it does not follow that there is one which everyone represents.

Let's suppose that we have three people having experiences with C and they, respectively, have experiences with contents P1, P2, and P3. One might want to say: They have in common that each of them perceptually represent that the disjunction of P1, P2, and P3 is the case. But this just does not follow (unless we have a very coarse-grained view of propositions, as in possible worlds semantics). There's no reason that perceptual

representation should be closed under disjunction (or closed under disjunction for a certain restricted class of propositions).

Or one might say that phenomenal contents are existentially quantified claims. So, for example, take two experiences of indistinguishable golf balls. Perhaps these differ in content; but surely both perceivers represent it as the case that there is something which is white and dimpled. But this does not seem obvious to me either; it seems to me that this is something that I will believe in the standard case based on the experience, but it is not at all obvious that I represent these kinds of general propositions as well as particular object-directed propositions.

It also gets more difficult to see how this strategy can be carried out if we think about cases of mixing. What would the existentially quantified proposition be in the above case?

How could this be applied to the representation of change? Would we say that we represent the duck as moving in some direction at some speed, where '0 in/s' counts as a speed?

This is a problem for theorists who want to say that, even if biconditional intentionalism is false, *phenomenal character is identical to a certain kind of content, namely phenomenal content*. More needs to be said that there is such a kind of content.

There's also a lesson here for narrow content theorists. One can't just say that narrow content is 'the kind of content that intrinsic duplicates have in common' because it is far from obvious that there is such a thing.