

Intermodal vs. intramodal intentionalisms

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Terminological note: obviously, intermodal intentionalisms entail the corresponding intramodal intentionalisms, so every (consistent) intermodal intentionalist is also an intramodal intentionalist. For ease in what follows, I will simply talk about intramodal intentionalists when what I strictly mean is ‘intramodal intentionalists who are not also intermodal intentionalists.’

1 Problems for intermodal intentionalism

1.1 *The problem of common content, pt I*

John (2005) raises the following worry for intentionalism: whatever the content of a visual experience, there could be a belief with just that content. But the belief would not have the phenomenal character of the visual experience. Hence intermodal intentionalism is false.

One could reply by denying that beliefs can have the same contents as sense experiences. This is one of the things behind the idea that the contents of perceptual experiences are ‘nonconceptual,’ and we’ll set that possibility to the side here.

One could also be a local rather than a global intentionalist, and deny that the intentionalist thesis applies to beliefs. But then one wants to know why: something other than content must go into determining phenomenal character, if beliefs and experiences can share content but differ in phenomenology. It is natural to say that this something is fact

that the content is visually presented, rather than entertained in thought. But this is just to go for intramodal intentionalism, it might seem.

Matters are not quite this simple, though. Like local intentionalisms, there are various versions of intramodal intentionalism. In particular, one might take different views on the question of whether the modality that matters is just *perceiving that*, or whether the distinctions between the senses are relevant.

1.2 *The problem of common content, pt II*

The problem of common content can also be pressed to decide this last question. (John also discusses this point.) Some properties — like texture and shape properties — are represented by more than one sense modality. So there can be overlap in the contents of a visual experience and a tactile experience. However, there seems to be no overlap in phenomenal character. This indicates that the specific sense modality of an experience is relevant to determining its phenomenal character.

One point to be made in response to this is that it is not easy to turn this into an argument against intermodal intentionalism as such. That is a supervenience thesis, and says nothing about there being a phenomenal ‘overlap’ whenever there is a certain kind of similarity or overlap in content. (This is the familiar point that supervenience theses do not entail that a small change in the subvening properties can only bring about a small change in the supervening properties.)

Can the intermodal intentionalist rest content with this reply?

2 Problems for intramodal intentionalism

2.1 *Cross-modal effects*

O’Callaghan (2008) aptly describes a view which he calls the ‘composite snapshot’ conception of experience. According to this view, each sense modality provides a certain snapshot — a certain representation of the world — and one’s total perceptual representation of the world is the composite – the conjunction – of those contents.

This view naturally accompanies intramodal intentionalism. The intramodal intentionalist, after all, must think of each sense modality as having its own contents and its own associated phenomenology. However, certain cross-modal perceptual effects call this picture into question.

2.1.1 *Cross-modal illusions*

Some of these are cross-modal illusions, like the McGurk effect, in which information from one sense modality affects the phenomenal character and content of a simultaneous experience in another sense modality.

As O’Callaghan says, a proponent of the composite snapshot conception might handle these cases by saying that there are causal connections between the sensory systems, but that this does not by itself show that there is anything wrong with thinking of the content of a total perceptual experience as the conjunction of what is delivered by each of the senses.

2.1.2 Intermodal binding

A more difficult challenge is provided by examples of intermodal binding. Cases of perceptual binding are cases in which several properties are perceptually attributed to a single object. Intramodal examples are familiar. When I look at a tomato, I don’t just see that redness and roundness are both instantiated, but rather that both are instantiated by the same thing.

O’Callaghan points out that it is very plausible that there are also cases of intermodal binding. (A similar point is made in Tye (2007).) Sometimes we represent a sound as coming from some object which we also visually perceive to have a certain color, or feel a surface as cold that we also visually represent as blue. In these cases it seems that we are perceptually representing, not just that some object is cold and that some object is blue, but that the same object is both cold and blue. (A test for this: it seems plausible that we would say that such an experience is illusory if the blue thing turns out to be distinct from the cold thing. This is what O’Callaghan means when he says that the veridicality conditions of such experiences suggest that there is intermodal binding going on.)

Another possible example of intermodal binding comes from our discussion of smell. Suppose that olfactory experiences don’t as such represent smells as located. Still, sometimes smells do perceptually seem to be located. If so, then this content is a result of the interplay of olfaction and some other sense – perhaps visual experience of moving in a certain direction while the intensity of the smell changes.

The worry for the intramodal intentionalist is that it seems that the experience then has a content which is not the content of a visual experience, or an auditory experience, but only of the two taken together. The intramodal intentionalist thus seems forced into saying that in addition to visual experiences with content and auditory experiences with content, there is a sort of ‘common sense’ which also has a content. (Aristotle might’ve thought something like this.) But this seems forced. It seems that it is more natural to say that what really has content in the first instance is one’s total perceptual experience, and that talk about the content of a specifically visual experience is an abstraction from this.

This points in the direction of an intermodal intentionalism, since it seems that claims about perceptual content are by nature intermodal claims.

2.2 Difficulties making the distinctions between the senses

The intramodal intentionalist claims that visually representing a certain content is a distinct sort of thing from auditorily representing a content. So it seems that the intramodal

intentionalist should be able to explain the distinction between these two propositional attitudes.

This is not as easy to do as it might seem.

- One might try to explain the distinction in terms of the sense organs involved – visual experiences use the eye, etc. But this does not seem to be a necessary feature of vision; we can imagine a blind person being fitted with a device which allowed her to enjoy visual experiences, even if the device bypassed the eye.
- One might try to explain the distinction in terms of the properties represented. But this doesn't seem to help the cause of the intramodal intentionalist, who says that phenomenal character supervenes on content plus sense modality but not on content alone — one can't combine this with the view that sense modality is a function of content. Moreover, beliefs represent properties represented by all the senses — this does not make beliefs sense experiences.
- One could explain the distinctions in terms of the phenomenal character of the relevant experiences; this, at the least, would be worrying to any intentionalist who aims to explain phenomenal character in terms of representational content.
- Could 'visually representing' et. al. be primitive relations? There is no straightforward arguments against this view that I can see. But it feels unsatisfactory — especially when one thinks about the cross-modal cases, when one doesn't know what to say about which modality is the bearer of a particular content.

There's another problem here: the problem of distinguishing perceptual experiences from bodily sensations. This is a distinction on which the local intentionalist must rely, just as the intramodal intentionalist must rely on distinctions between the senses.

References

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