

Conflicts between internalism about phenomenal character, externalism about content, and intentionalism

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1 Internalism about phenomenal character

The following thesis generates some trouble for certain sorts of intentionalism:

Internalism about phenomenal character: the phenomenal character of a subject's experiences supervenes on the subject's intrinsic properties + the laws of nature.

To many people, this thesis seems extremely plausible; but it is not easy to see how to argue for it. Others see it as the last vestige of internalism about the mind, which should be cast out with the rest of it.

Any thoughts on how one might defend this thesis against a skeptic?

2 A tension between externalism about content, internalism about phenomenal character, and conditional intentionalisms

I am the sort of person who thinks that the above internalist thesis is obviously true; I also think that a very plausible case can be made for externalism about perceptual content.

There is obviously a (very) quick argument which shows the joint inconsistency of biconditional intentionalism, internalism about phenomenal character, and externalism about content. But externalism about content and internalism about phenomenology can also be used to argue against conditional intentionalist theses

2.1 *The argument from content inversion*

Andy Egan and James John in “A Puzzle About Perception” give an argument of this sort by strengthening the relevant externalist thesis. What people usually mean by ‘externalism about perceptual content’ is equivalent to the following:

Weak externalism

$\exists p$ (a subject could be having an experience involving content p even though his molecule-for-molecule duplicate is not)

It seems plausible that the truth of weak externalism can only be explained by the fact that sometimes the content of a subject’s experience is shaped by facts external to him. This might suggest the following view: what it is for a subject to represent the world in a certain way just is for him to be connected to, or embedded in, his environment in a certain way. But then it might seem that we can advance a stronger claim than the bare externalist thesis above; perhaps it’s not just the case that some contents of experience fail to supervene on the intrinsic properties of perceivers, but that *all* such contents fail to supervene on intrinsic properties of perceivers. We can express this stronger externalist view as follows:

Strong externalism

$\forall p$ (a subject could be having an experience involving content p even though his molecule-for-molecule duplicate is not)

Let’s suppose that this is true. Then it seems as though two perceivers might be such that the correlations between their internal states and certain of the contents of their perceptions are inverted. So, for example, it might be that when I am in intrinsic state I I am representing o as red, but when the agent content-inverted relative to me is in state I , he is representing o as green. (It is important to see that this is different from the usual *spectrum* inversion cases, which are inversions of phenomenal character, not content.)

Supposing that content inversion is possible, we then argue as follows. Let Nonvert be a perceiver who is normal (by our lights), and let Invert be content-inverted relative to Nonvert. At time t_1 , let Nonvert have intrinsic properties I and be having a perceptual experience which has the content that some object o is red. At time t_2 , let Nonvert be having an experience which represents o as green. It then seems clear that Nonvert’s experience will have different phenomenal characters at t_1 and t_2 , since when we have an experience which represents an object as red, it differs in phenomenal character from an experience which represents that object as green. Now suppose that Invert is having a perceptual experience, and is an intrinsic duplicate of Nonvert at t_1 . Because Invert is content-inverted

relative to Nonvert, his experience will represent *o* as green. By minimal intentionalism, Invert's experience will have the same phenomenal character as Nonvert's at t_2 . But then since Nonvert's experiences at t_1 and t_2 have different phenomenal characters, it follows that Invert's experience has a *different* phenomenal character than Nonvert's experience at t_1 . But this contradicts internalism about phenomenal character, since Invert has exactly the same intrinsic properties as Nonvert at t_1 .

2.2 *The argument from particular externalist functionalist theories of content*

The following are all well-known versions of externalist functionalism, as applied to the case of perceptual experience:

1. *Indication theories*: the content of a perceptual state is determined by what would cause the subject to be in that state, were the subject in optimal conditions.
2. *Asymmetric dependence theories*: a mental representation represents a property if the law *L* connecting instantiations of the property with tokenings of the representation is such that all other laws governing tokenings of that representation depend on *L*, and *L* depends on none of them.
3. *Teleological theories*: the content of a perceptual state is determined by the state of affairs which is such that the state was evolutionarily advantageous because of its being triggered by that state of affairs.

To argue against views of this sort, we need the familiar assumption that the following scenarios are both impossible:

SCENARIO A

Psychedelic phenomenology + constant representation of color properties

A subject is looking intently at a well-lit surface which occupies the whole of the subject's visual field. Over the course of a few seconds, his experience goes from being (as we would put it, were we to describe the phenomenal character of the experience) bright-red-feeling to being bright-green-feeling to being bright-blue feeling, and constantly repeats this pattern. But, the whole time, he is visually representing the wall as yellow; it visually seems to him throughout that the wall is yellow; according to his experience, the wall is yellow throughout.

SCENARIO B

Constant phenomenology + psychedelic representation of color properties:

A subject is looking intently at a well-lit surface which occupies the whole of the subject's visual field. The only thing notable about the phenomenology of his experience of the surface is its monotony. The

experience is charcoal-gray-feeling, and remains so for the duration of the experience. Nonetheless, the subject is visually representing the color of the wall as constantly changing from bright red, to bright green, to bright blue; it visually seems to him that the wall is changing from bright red, to bright green, to bright blue; according to his experience, the wall is changing from bright red, to bright green, to bright blue.

Focus on the impossibility of Scenario A, and consider the physical state S_{RED} which underlies my experiences with phenomenal character RED, and the physical state S_{GREEN} which underlies my experiences with phenomenal character GREEN. We may suppose that, for me, S_{RED} indicates redness, that its tokening asymmetrically depends on instantiations of redness, and that it was selected for thanks to its being triggered by redness; and analogously for S_{GREEN} and the property of greenness. But be that as it may, there is no reason why a pair of states *cannot* indicate the same state of affairs, asymmetrically depend on the same property, or be selected for thanks to their reliable indication of the same state of affairs; and, in particular, it seems that there is no reason why there cannot be a subject for whom both S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} bear these relations to the same color — say, the color orange. Were such a subject possible, psychedelic phenomenology + constant content would be possible; we need only imagine the subject as alternating between the two states S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} . Given internalism about phenomenal character, the phenomenal character of his experience would rapidly switch back and forth between RED and GREEN; and given the truth of any of the three externalist functionalist theories above, he would be representing the scene before him as orange throughout. But this is impossible; hence the three theories of content above must be false, at least for the case of perceptual representation.

Although the three views above entail the possibility of Scenario A, a fourth externalist functionalist theory shows that this result is not general:

4. *Covariational theories*: the content of a perceptual state is determined by the state of affairs with which the state would covary, were the subject in optimal conditions.

By insisting on *covariation*, theories of this sort block the possibility that our pair of physical states S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} could both represent a single color for a single subject at a time. This is a good thing. But other odd consequences result.

Simply moving to a covariational theory does nothing to remove the intuition that the sort of case described is possible: one in which both S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} indicate a single color — say, redness. This would then be a case, if the covariational theory were true, in which neither S_{RED} nor S_{GREEN} would covary with a color, and hence would be a case in which neither represents a color. But now imagine, what is surely possible, that some other states, which we can call S_{ORANGE} and S_{YELLOW} , do covary with colors — with orange and yellow, respectively. But in this kind of case, if the covariational theory is to be believed, if the subject is looking at a screen with colors being projected upon it, and her experience switches from yellow phenomenology to orange phenomenology to red phenomenology, what has happened is that the screen first visually seemed yellow to the

subject, then visually seemed orange to the subject, and then ceased to seem to have any color at all. This is hard to believe. Surely the switch from orange phenomenology to red phenomenology can't be a switch from representing the relevant surface as having a color to simply failing to do so.

It seems to me plausible that some problem of this sort will arise for every externalist functionalist theory of perceptual content, though I have not offered any argument for that general conclusion here. This seems to pose a general problem for functionalism about perceptual representation, since even more 'internalist' versions of functionalism, like conceptual role semantics, typically appeal to versions of one of the four theories sketched above in giving their account of the content of perceptual experience.

3 A limited externalism about content

Three distinctions between possible components of the content of experience:

phenomenology affecting vs. phenomenology silent
externalist vs. internalist
hallucination available vs. hallucination unavailable

Why it is plausible to think that all of these distinctions line up. The result is a moderate externalism about perceptual content which is inconsistent with all of the functionalist theories just mentioned and which rejects strong externalism.