

Inverted earth

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1 Intentionalism and converse intentionalism

Recall that intentionalism is a thesis about the supervenience of phenomenal character on content, and that converse intentionalism is a thesis about the supervenience of content on phenomenal character. We saw that we can give an argument for converse intentionalism for the case of color content and color phenomenology.

Block's inverted earth case is in the first instance an argument against converse intentionalism. But, as we'll see, it can also be turned into an argument against intentionalism.

2 Traveling to inverted earth

The story of a trip to inverted earth is closely related to the story of intrapersonal inversion discussed above. We can think of it, again, in stages:

1. Nonvert has a normal day on Earth.
2. He is kidnapped in the night by color scientists, who, while he is sleeping, put permanent color-inverting lenses on his eyes, and whisk him off to Inverted Earth (where everything's color is the inverse of its color on earth),

where he is placed in a qualitatively identical environment. (Qualitatively identical, that is, so long as he is wearing the lenses.)

3. Nonvert lives the rest of his days on Inverted Earth.

The thought is that eventually, the color contents of Nonvert's experiences must change; eventually, the conditions on Inverted Earth will become 'normal' for him, and blue-feeling experiences — the experiences which feel just the same as experiences of blue things back on earth — will come to represent yellow.

This would then be a counterexample to converse intentionalism.

It can also, with some plausible assumptions, be turned into a counterexample to intentionalism. For consider Nonvert's stage 3 yellow-feeling experiences. By the above, these represent blue, and hence have the same content as his blue-feeling experiences back on earth. But these experiences surely have the same phenomenal character as his stage 1 yellow feeling experiences. (You could ask him.) But this would then be a phenomenal difference with no corresponding difference in content.

3 Evolutionary theories of content and swampman

A natural reply is to deny that the contents of Nonvert's blue-feeling experiences ever do change. To say this, it seems that one has to deny that the contents of one's experiences are traceable to their 'normal' causes, in any sense of 'normal causes' in which the normal causes of Nonvert's experiences change.

So how might the contents of color experiences be determined? Perhaps they are determined by the causes of states of that sort which led to those states being selected for in the evolutionary history of the relevant creature. Why this would help support the view that there is no content-switching after the trip to Inverted Earth.

This runs into an immediate problem: swampman, a creature who materializes in a swamp, has no evolutionary history, but is a molecule-for-molecule duplicate of a sentient being. It seems quite plausible that swampman's experiences have phenomenal character; but if intentionalism is true and an evolutionary theory of content is true, they can't.

So one might go for a mixed view (as in Tye (1995)): perhaps for evolved creatures like us, an evolutionary theory is correct, but that for creatures like swampman, some other theory is right — perhaps for him content is determined by causes in normal conditions in his present environment.

The problem, as Block (1998) points out, is that we can imagine swampman taking the trip to Inverted Earth. So it seems that we have gotten nowhere.

One might defend the ‘hard line’ response that as the contents of one’s experiences change after the trip to Inverted Earth, the phenomenal character of one’s experiences change as well. But as Tye (2000) points out, the problem is about how this transition is supposed to go. Presumably the contents of one’s thoughts change gradually. But what would be a gradual change from blue-feeling to yellow-feeling experiences? It can’t go around the spectrum, on pain of refuting intentionalism. So how could it go?

Tye tries to respond by coming up with an account of ‘optimal conditions’ under which both I and my swamp-duplicate have as their optimal conditions lens-free viewing on earth, and so that both of us misrepresent after being taken to Inverted Earth (with the lenses inserted mid-trip). Can this account plausibly be extended to the case where my swamp-duplicate materializes on Inverted Earth with inverting lenses already in place?

4 A non-functionalist intentionalist view of Inverted Earth

Is the intentionalist obliged to come up with some functionalist theory of content which has the result that our traveler’s perceptual experience never change in content? Only, one might think, if one thinks that functionalism is true. But one might think that standard inverted spectrum cases already give the intentionalist a reason to reject functionalism (depending on one’s view of the possibility of the relevant inversion scenarios).

Suppose that our traveler’s experiences never change in content. One might worry that a problem arises if the contents of his beliefs and words change after the move to Inverted Earth, even if the contents of his experiences do not change; after all, in this situation, we’d have an implausibl sort of mismatch between either perceptual content and belief content, or between belief content and belief-report content. Macpherson (2005) presses this problem; the same point (though applied explicitly to spectrum inversion rather than inverted earth) was made in Thau (2002).

The idea that belief content as well as linguistic meaning is, in at least some cases, to be explained in terms of perceptual content. Macpherson suggests (147-8) that this would involve a ‘potentially radical’ rejection of traditional externalism. But this seems wrong. Traditional externalists made existential claims about the failure of content to supervene on intrinsic properties, not universal claims.

References

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