

Intentionalism and the ‘other’ senses

PHIL 93507

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September 7, 2009

The literature about intentionalism, like the literature on perception more generally, has focused on visual experience. But the claims intentionalists make are about all perceptual experiences (and all states with a phenomenal character, in the case of global intentionalists). One therefore wants to know whether intentionalist claims are plausible in the case of other sense modalities, and whether they can be given the same kind of motivation.

1 Smell

It may seem initially less plausible that smell is representational than that vision is; the phenomenology of smell might seem more like the phenomenology of pain or other bodily sensations than of vision. In particular, it is not obvious that our sense of smell represents particulars as instantiating smell-relevant properties.

Batty says out that this is in large part because the human sense of smell does not locate smells. You might smell cigarette smoke, but you do not smell it as located at a particular point in your environment. (We do have the ability to locate smells, but this seems to come from changes in smell intensity as we move about a space.) But this is compatible with olfaction being representational; it may just be that the contents of olfactory experiences are less ‘complete’ than of visual experiences. For example, perhaps olfactory experiences simply represent certain properties as instantiated, rather than particular objects as instantiating those properties.

Moreover, there is a clear sense in which we can give the same kind of transparency-based argument for smell as for vision. Imagine any noticeable change in your olfactory experience; there will be a corresponding change in the way that the world around you is represented as being, and hence a corresponding change in content.

Another interesting argument (also from Batty) for the representational character of smell: animals with very developed senses of smell clearly seem to represent their environment with their olfactory experiences. But it would be odd if lack of acuity evacuated olfactory experiences of any content, rather than just impoverishing the contents of the relevant experiences.

2 Hearing

Smell and taste are perhaps the hardest cases for a representational view of perceptual experience. Hearing and touch are a bit easier, in part because each seems to give us more determinate information about our environment. In particular, as ? emphasizes, because we hear sounds as located, we can perceive distinct auditory qualities as qualities of distinct things. This seems to be a point of contrast with smell.

On one plausible view, the contents of auditory experiences represent certain events — sounds — as instantiating certain properties, including pitch, loudness, and timbre, and relative location. Again, it is plausible that a transparency-based argument for intentionalism about audition can be given: any noticeable change in auditory experience will involve a change in how one's environment seems to be.

References

Casey O'Callaghan, 2007. *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.