

The transparency of experience & intentionalism

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Moore's statement (in "The refutation of idealism") of the transparency intuition:

that which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us; it seems, if I may use a metaphor, to be transparent — we look through it and see nothing but the blue ... the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous.

One way of understanding Moore's claim is as a positive phenomenological claim about introspection. The idea is that when we attend to, for example, some aspect of a visual experience, what we find is always either some thing which is represented as in one's environment, or a quality which is represented as belonging to some aspect of the external environment. This thesis might be stated as follows:

Positive Transparency

Nothing is available to introspection other than the objects represented as in one's environment, and the properties they are represented as having.

Moreover, and crucially for our purposes, **Positive Transparency** seems to be not just true, but necessarily true.

Positive Transparency seems to entail the following principle about introspectable differences between experiences:

Transparency/Difference Principle

If there is an introspectable difference between two experiences, then there is a difference in the objects and properties those two experiences represent as in one's environment.

If the only objects of introspection are the objects and properties presented as in the environment of the perceiver, how could there be an introspectable difference which was not a difference in one of the presented objects and properties?¹

¹ There are complications here involving shifts in attention, to which I return below in Ch XXX.

The Transparency/Difference principle says that there is a necessary connection between introspectable difference and a difference in the objects and properties represented. Intentionalist theses assert a necessary connection between differences in phenomenal character and differences in content. To get from Transparency/Difference to intentionalism, then, we need there to be (i) a necessary connection between differences in phenomenal character and introspectable differences and (ii) a necessary connection between differences in objects and properties represented and differences in content.

But it is quite plausible that there are necessary connections of the sort described in (i) and (ii).

In defense of (i): the phenomenal character of an experience as ‘what it’s like’ to have the experience, then it is plausible that any difference in phenomenal character between two experiences must be introspectable (even if not actually introspected); any difference between the two experiences which was in principle not noticeable by the subject would not be a difference in what it is like for the subject to have those experiences.

In defense of (ii): the content of an experience is that way that experience represents the environment of the perceiver as being. Any change in the objects and properties represented as in that environment is a change in the way that environment is represented as being; hence any such change is sufficient for a change in content.

This gives us the following **basic argument for intentionalism**:

- 1 Necessarily, if two experiences differ in phenomenal character, there is an introspectable difference between them.
 - 2 Necessarily, if there is an introspectable difference between two experiences, then there is a difference in the objects and properties those two experiences represent as in one’s environment.
(Necessitation of the Transparency/Difference Principle)
 - 3 Necessarily, if there is a difference in the objects and properties two experiences represent as in one’s environment, there is a difference in the content of the two experiences.
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- C Necessarily, if two experiences differ in phenomenal character, they differ in content.

Given the above remarks about the plausibility of premises (1) and (3), it seems that Transparency/Difference provides the basis for a powerful argument in favor of our intentionalism. But which variety of intentionalism is it an argument for? This is

equivalent to the question: over which pairs of experiences do the premises of this argument quantify?

If we restrict the relevant pairs of experiences to consecutive perceptual experiences of a single subject in a single sense modality, then, I think, each of the premises is extremely difficult to reject. Given this restriction, the conclusion of the argument states our weakest intentionalist thesis: local, intramodal, intrapersonal time-restricted intentionalism. A natural question is then whether, by relaxing this restriction on pairs of experiences, we might also be able to use this argument to defend a stronger intentionalist thesis.

Possible objections:

1. Attentional shifts. (A topic to which we will come back later.) These might make you think that even if Transparency/Difference holds for some experiences, it does not hold for every pair of experiences.
2. Doubt about (1): What does it mean for there to be a noticeable difference between experiences of distinct subjects?
3. Doubt about (3): Suppose that the contents of color experiences, for example, are not color properties but modes of presentation thereof, and suppose further that these modes of presentation do not rigidly designate the relevant color properties. Then two experiences separated by a sufficient interval, or of different subjects, may differ in the circumstance of evaluation relevant to the determination of the color property designated by a single mode of presentation—which in turn could make possible a difference in color property represented which does not entail a difference in mode of presentation, and so does not entail a difference in content.

Reply: argue from a weaker transparency principle. If, as Moore says, “[w]hen we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue,” one thing that this suggests is that certain combinations of phenomenal properties (the ‘sensations’ we introspect) and properties represented are impossible. So, for example, if when we introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue, it is hard to see how a series of visual experiences of the same shade of blue could yield wildly different introspectable sensations. And, conversely, it is hard to see how a constant introspectable sensation could be at one moment of blue, and at the next moment of red — this would indicate, contra Moore, that when we introspect the sensation of blue, we can’t ‘see’ the blue, but rather see something else.

This is a negative rather than a positive approach to the transparency of experience. Rather than trying to establish a general necessary truth about experience which can be

used directly in the derivation of one or more intentionalist thesis, we begin with certain more modest claims about certain sorts of experiences which are **not** possible.