

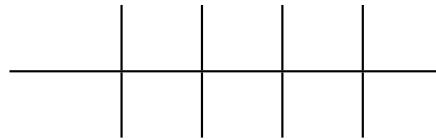
Attention and aspect shifts

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So far the following picture has emerged: every state with a phenomenal character is associated with a single propositional attitude, which I've called "sensing." Necessarily, if any two subjects are sensing the same content, then the two subjects are in states with the same phenomenal character. This is a global intentionalist claim, and one which is only one step removed from a purely intermodal intentionalism, in that it claims that just one attitude — the attitude of sensing — is a part of the supervenience base for the facts about phenomenal character.

I've already sketched the attractions of this sort of view. Unfortunately, however, certain kinds of attentional shifts show that it can't be quite right. Consider, for example, a visual experience of the following lines on a white sheet of paper large enough to fill the perceiver's visual field:



Compare two visual experiences of these lines: in the first, the perceiver's attention is focused on the intersection of the second vertical line from the left with the horizontal line; the second differs only in that the perceiver shifts his attention to the point of intersection to the right, between the horizontal line and the third vertical line from the left. It is undeniable that one's total phenomenal state differs in these two experiences; no one would say that the first experience is indistinguishable from, or seems the same to the perceiver as, the second. But do the two experiences differ in content?

A natural first thought is that if there is a difference in content between the two experiences, this must be a difference in the representation of the location, shape, or color of the figure or one of its parts; given that the background of the figure is an uninterrupted stretch of solid white, the change in focus between the two points of intersection does not bring with it a change in the representation of anything on the periphery of the perceiver's visual field. But there does not seem to be any difference in the representation of the properties of this figure. The figure does not seem to move relative to the subject when one shifts one's attention from one's point of intersection to another. And given the simplicity of the figure, it does not seem plausible to claim that one experience represents a given portion of the lines with more detail or determinacy. Nor, if the points of intersection are close enough together, is there any clear difference in

the determinacy with respect to which the locations of the points of intersection are represented.

Moreover, we can put some pressure on the intentionalist by remembering that intentionalism is a modal claim. Therefore, what the intentionalist must say about these cases is not just that, in the case of human visual experience, there happens to be a representational difference between the pair of visual experiences described above, but also that, *for any possible pair of experiences* which involve this sort of attentional shift, there is such a representational difference. This seems to me to be an extremely implausible claim. If, in the case of human beings, attentional shifts always involve some difference in the determinacy of the representation of (for example) relative location, this seems to be a contingent fact about the workings of the human visual system. Surely there could be a creature for whom attentional shifts were possible without this sort of representational difference; and the mere possibility of such creatures is enough to make trouble for the ambitious intentionalist thesis under discussion.

Maybe: we can find some other properties wrt which the two experiences differ in content.

But in this case, what visually represented properties could we be overlooking? The intentionalist might point out that it is plausible that, in perceptual experience, we often represent egocentric properties, like relative distance and relative orientation. In such cases, the subject is not just representing properties of the objects in her environment; she's representing those objects as standing in certain relations to her. This suggests a way of handling the sort of attentional shift described above: the intentionalist might be tempted to say that our two experiences differ with respect to which points of intersection are represented as *prominent* to the perceiver.

Problems with this:

1. there is a worry about trivializing intentionalism. If intentionalism is to be a substantive thesis, it surely can't be legitimate to simply slide without further argument from the premise that an experience has a certain phenomenal feature to the conclusion that the experience represents that phenomenal feature as being a property of the experience. This is the sort of built-in response to alleged counterexamples which should make us suspicious. In each case, we should require that the intentionalist should make plausible the idea that the representational property adverted to is a genuine representational property of the experience. In the present case, the idea that we not only attend to aspects of the represented scene but also, just in virtue of so doing, perceptually represent ourselves as so attending, does not seem to have much initial plausibility. It is hard to see what the intentionalist could say to make it more plausible.

2. perceptual representation of oneself as attending to an object seems to violate Fallibility. What would it be like to have a perceptual experience which represented a feature of the scene as perceptually prominent without that feature *being* perceptually prominent? This question seems impossible to answer, because it seems clear that if it

seems to me that x is perceptually prominent, then, just in virtue of that, it is. So we don't have much of a grip on what perceptual representation of perceptual prominence — as something over and above perceptual prominence itself — could be.

3. The view under discussion also violates Independence. Suppose that the the proponent of the view under discussion holds that there could be a shift in the subject's attention which the subject's perceptual experience did not represent as such. Then we would have a difference in phenomenal character corresponding to the shift in attention; after all, it is hard to see how two experiences could differ in the focus on the subject's attention without differing phenomenally. (Just try to imagine the two experiences of the line-intersections described above, but without any difference in phenomenal character.) But this attentional shift, and the corresponding phenomenal change, would correspond to no difference in content (since, by hypothesis, the shift in attention was not represented). Hence the intentionalist must admit that there can be no unrepresented shifts in attention, and Independence fails.

It's hard to see what other sort of representational difference the intentionalist might appeal to. So, if we agree that we cannot appeal to perceptual representation of perceptual prominence, then it seems that we have here a genuine example of a pair of visual experiences with the same content but different overall phenomenology.

One can see in hindsight why defenders of intentionalism have overlooked the possibility of this kind of counterexample. Intentionalists are often motivated by the transparency of experience, glossed as the view that the only things available to introspection on perceptual experience are the objects and properties that experience represents as in the environment of the perceiver. From here it seems but a short step to the conclusion that any introspectable *difference* between experiences — i.e., any difference in phenomenology, or phenomenal character — must correspond to some difference in the objects and properties presented as in the perceiver's environment, and so also to a difference in content. What this step misses — what the inference from Positive Transparency to Transparency/Difference misses — is that a difference in phenomenal character can be generated not just by a change in *what* is introspected but also by a change in *where* one's introspective gaze — i.e., one's attention — is focused.

Here we face a dilemma. We seem to have in these cases of attentional shifts a counterexample to even local intramodal intrapersonal intentionalist theses (after all, we've been talking about the visual experiences of a single subject, and we've relied on no universal claims about phenomenal states in general). On the other hand, we've already seen that these intentionalist theses are quite difficult to deny without absurdity.

In response to this dilemma, one might think that what we have here is not a difference in *perceptual* phenomenology without a corresponding difference in the content of perceptual experience, but rather a difference in the phenomenal character of the subject's attentional state — where this is thought of as a type of state distinct from visual, auditory, and other perceptual states.

One clue that this is the correct response to these cases is the isolated nature of the relevant phenomenal differences. There is a sense in which these kinds of shifts in attention are not part of specifically visual phenomenology at all: similar cases can easily be generated for any of the other sense modalities, or for bodily sensations. (Imagine listening to a duet in an otherwise silent environment while shifting your focus of attention from one voice to the other, or shifting your attention between your toothache and the itch in your foot.) So perhaps the intentionalist should respond to these cases not by trying to find some perceptual representational difference between the two experiences, but by thinking of attention as having its own phenomenology.

On this view, we could compare our two experiences of the grid to a pair of visual experiences identical but that one is accompanied by a toothache. While there will be a clear difference in the total phenomenology of the subject during the two visual experiences without a difference in the content of the two visual experiences, this is no counterexample to a local intentionalism about perceptual experience, since there is also no difference in specifically visual phenomenology. Of course, visual attention is constrained by visual perceptual experience in a way that toothaches are not, but from the point of view of a local intentionalist claim about perceptual experiences rather than a global intentionalist claim about phenomenal states more generally, the two examples are equally irrelevant.

But we've already seen that there are powerful reasons for being a global rather than a local intentionalist; and those reasons apply no less to attentional states than to perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, or other phenomenal states. Consider a pair of consecutive experiences like the ones discussed above, which differ with respect to the phenomenal character of the subject's attentional state. There will also be a difference in the properties and objects toward which the subject's attention is directed. Accordingly, there will be a difference in the content of the subject's attentional state. And, as above, we can argue from this time-restricted intrapersonal intentionalist thesis to an interpersonal thesis of the supervenience of the phenomenal character of attentional states on the content of those states.

So retreating to a local intentionalism is out of the question. Can the distinction between perceptual and attentional states come to the aid of a global intentionalist? To answer this question, we need to figure out what the contents of the relevant attentional states are.

There seem to be two sorts of views here: either they represent properties of the relevant perceptual experience, or they represent aspects of the scene represented by that perceptual experience.

Let's consider the first option, according to which the attentional states with which we are concerned are higher-order representational states, which represent properties of the subject's perceptual experiences. On one way of developing this view, the phenomenal difference between the two experiences of the intersecting lines is to be explained by the

fact that the attentional state which accompanies the first visual experience represents the subject's experience as representing the left point of intersection, whereas the attentional state which accompanies the second represents the subject's experience as representing the right point of intersection. (Of course, in both cases the subject's visual experience is representing both points of intersection; it's just that in each case the subject's attention only represents some of the facts about what the relevant perceptual state represents.)

But: this view also violates the principle of Fallibility, discussed above. Ordinarily, we expect types of representational states — even states which represent other mental states — to be such that some of their tokens represent their target correctly, and some incorrectly. But the present view makes attention a counterinstance to this rule. After all, how could attentional states misrepresent, on the present view? Presumably by representing the relevant perceptual experience as representing something which it does not, in fact, represent. But what would such a state be like? Suppose (for *reductio*) that an attentional state represented an experience as representing an object as purple but that the experience did not, in fact, represent the object as purple. Would the subject's total phenomenology include the phenomenal character typical of visual experiences which represent things as purple, or not? If so, then it looks like, contra our supposition, the subject's visual experience *would* be representing the relevant object as purple. But if not, then it seems that (again contra our supposition) the attentional state is *not* representing the experience as representing the object as purple. (In virtue of what would it be representing the experience as representing the object as purple, rather than as some other color?)

So the idea of attentional states *mis*representing the associated perceptual experiences of the subject seems incoherent; it appears to be a necessary truth that, if attentional states represent perceptual experiences as having certain contents, they must always represent those experiences correctly. But this is mysterious. Why should attention, lone among representational states, be incapable of false representation?

So let's consider the second option, on which attentional states are representational states, but ones which represent aspects of the scene represented by the experience rather than aspects of that experience. On this view, attention — like the various perceptual modalities — represents objects and properties as in the environment of the subject. As applied to the above case, a proponent of this view might say that in the first experience, the subject's attention represents the left point of intersection, and in the second experience, the subject's attention represents the right point of intersection.

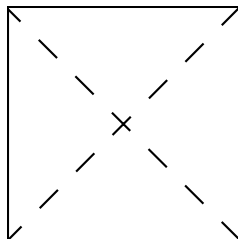
The odd thing about this is that there's a clear sense in which attention does not add anything to the total representational state of the subject. The subject already visually represents both points of intersection; so why should adding an attentional representation of one of those points make any difference to the phenomenal character of the experience? It is tempting to reply to this question by finding some property of the relevant point of intersection that is represented in attention, but not in visual experience. But there

simply are no plausible candidates for properties of the figure which are represented by the subject's attentional state but not represented by the subject's visual experience of the figure. Indeed, it seems that it is in principle impossible to attend to any aspect of the scene before one which is not represented by one's perceptual experience. (If this were possible, then it seems as though attention would be an extra modality of perceptual experience — an extra way, alongside vision, audition, etc., of gaining information about the environment. But attention just isn't independent of the senses in this way.)

So it seems that the global intentionalist who wants to avoid a higher-order view of attention has some difficulty explaining, in terms of representational content, why an attentional state whose content simply duplicates an aspect of the content of the subject's visual experience can affect the subject's total phenomenology. What she seems forced to say is that it is simply that the relevant content *is the content of an attentional state* which explains the difference in total phenomenology. But to say this is to take a step in the direction of intramodal intentionalism: it is to say that total phenomenal character supervenes not on what is sensed alone, but rather on that plus the facts about the contents of one's attentional state. In the terminology developed above, this is to claim that there is more than one phenomenal relation.

This weakening of the intentionalist thesis stated at the start of this chapter has the virtue that it can also provide a unified treatment of two other recent challenges to intentionalism.

The first of these is Mach's example of seeing a box as a square, and then as a diamond. There is a clear difference in phenomenology between the two experiences, but no obvious difference in representational content. The natural first line of response for the intentionalist is to say that some properties of the shape are represented by the experience in which the subject sees it as a square, but not in the experience in which the subject sees it as a diamond, and vice versa; for example, one might say that when the figure is seen as a square one's visual experience represents a symmetry about the bisectors of the sides of the shape, whereas when the figure is seen as a diamond one's visual experience represents a symmetry about the bisectors of the angles of the shape. However, as Fiona Macpherson has pointed out, it is possible to see a box as a square while visually representing the symmetry in the bisectors of the angles of the shape, as is shown by the example of a perceptual experience of the following figure:

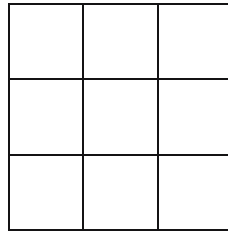


This figure can be seen as a square or a diamond, despite the fact that, in both cases, the symmetry about the bisectors of the angles is perceptually represented (thanks to the dotted lines).

I suggest that the intentionalist should respond to this case in the same way as she should respond to the example of the intersecting lines: she should say that the difference between seeing the box as a square and seeing it as a diamond is not a difference in visual phenomenology, but rather is a difference in the phenomenology of attention. When the box is seen as a square, one is *attending* to symmetries involving the sides, whereas when it is seen as a diamond one is attending to symmetries involving the angles.

Against this suggestion, one might argue that one can see the box as a square even while attending to the symmetry in the bisectors of the angles. But this seems not to be the case. If we attend to the angle bisector symmetry by attending to the intersecting dotted lines, this shift in attention generates the Gestalt shift to seeing the figure as a diamond. This is strong evidence that the difference in phenomenology between seeing the box as a square and seeing it as a diamond is, like the difference between the two experiences of the intersecting horizontal and vertical lines above, due to a shift in attention.

The second proposed counterexample to intentionalism is due to Bernard Nickel, who asks us to consider two perceptual experiences of a 3 x 3 grid of squares like the following:



which differ only in which groups of squares appear as prominent. In one such experience, the corner and center squares appear prominent, and in the other the remaining four 'side' squares appear as prominent. There is, as Nickel says, a clear difference in phenomenology here, and Nickel argues convincingly against a number of different attempts to find a difference in content between the two experiences. Intuitively, though, it seems that we have the same phenomenon here as in the case of the intersecting lines and the case of the square/diamond: the relevant phenomenological difference is generated by a shift in attention from one group of boxes to the other. So, as above, if we can think of attentional states as non-perceptual states with their own phenomenology, this sort of example need not worry the intentionalist who is willing to make the distinction between sensing and attentional states part of the supervenience base for facts about phenomenal character.

One might worry that this way of handling the cases runs the risk, discussed above, of trivializing intentionalism; we don't want the appeal to the phenomenology of attention to

be an unprincipled way for the intentionalist to simply relabel any proposed counterexample as a mere shift in the phenomenology of attention without any change in the phenomenology of the relevant perceptual experiences.

Two responses:

1. Each of the three cases really do seem to essentially involve attention. It is difficult even to describe the initial example of the intersecting lines without describing it as a shift in attention. The same is true of the two experiences of the box pictured above with dotted lines marking bisectors of the shape's angles; to generate the two different experiences, one directs a subject "to change his focus of attention" from the dotted lines to the symmetry of the sides, and back. Analogous remarks apply to the 3 x 3 grid. It is also telling that in each case it is natural to describe the two experiences by talking about what aspects of the relevant figure are "prominent." By contrast, it would *not* be natural to extend this model to other putative counterexamples to intentionalism.

2. The second line of response involves the voluntariness of at least some attentional shifts. Typically, changes in, for example, visual phenomenology cannot be brought about at will; one cannot go from a view of the coin in which it has a round appearance to one in which it has an elliptical appearance simply by deciding to do so. But in each of the cases above, we can effect the relevant phenomenal change without bringing about any such "external" change in the scene perceived; this makes it more plausible that these changes are due to attentional shifts since, in at least many cases, we can shift our attention from one element of a represented scene to another at will.

So there is a reason to believe that a principled line can be drawn between perceptual phenomenology and the phenomenology of attention. Attentional shifts are not counterexamples to intentionalism as such; but they are counterexamples to an intentionalism which places only a single phenomenal relation in the supervenience base for the facts about phenomenal character.