

Three views of the relationship between representational and phenomenal properties

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We've arrived at the view that the strongest true intentionalist thesis is a global, intramodal, interpersonal intentionalism, which consists of the following two supervenience claims (as above, I use "sensing" as a general term for the single propositional attitude associated with perceptual experience and bodily sensation):

Necessarily, for any two subjects, if both subjects are sensing that p , then the phenomenal character of those acts of sensing are the same.

Necessarily, for any two subjects, if both subjects are attending to the same objects & properties, then the phenomenal character of those attentional states are the same.

and the further claim:

Necessarily, for any two subjects, if both subjects are sensing that p and both subjects are attending to the same objects & properties, the overall phenomenal character of the two subjects are the same (what it is like to be one subject is just what it is like to be the other subject).

Let's now switch topics from the question of which supervenience theses of this form are true, to the question of how the truth of the preceding supervenience theses could be explained.

The standard way to explain a supervenience thesis is with an identity claim. The idea is that phenomenal character supervenes on content because what it is for a subject at a time to be in a certain phenomenal state *just is* for that subject to be representing the world in a certain way. The examples of belief and attention show that "for that subject to be representing the world in a certain way" can't just mean "is in a state with a certain content"; what it must mean is that the subject must be standing in the propositional attitude of sensing to a certain content and the relation of attending to certain objects and properties.

But if this sort of identity claim promises explanatory gains, it also carries with it an important commitment. Because identities are symmetric and necessary if true, if some identity claim of this sort is true, it must be the case not just that the phenomenal

character of certain states supervenes on their content, but also that their contents supervene on their phenomenal character. But is any such thesis true?

One reason to think not: I argued that the contents of (veridical) perceptual experiences are Russellian propositions which have the objects perceived as constituents; and there I also noted that the contents of perceptual experience sometimes contain natural kinds among their constituents. But there can be perceptually indistinguishable objects, and perceptually indistinguishable natural kinds. Consider two such objects — like our example of two new golf balls. A veridical experience of one, it seems, needn't differ in phenomenal character from a veridical experience of the other — wouldn't, after all, what it's like to have an experience of one of the golf balls be just the same as what it's like to have an experience of the other (so long, of course, as we hold fixed the lighting and other features of the experience)? But if the contents of veridical experiences of objects typically have those objects as constituents, the two experiences will differ in their content, which gives us an example of a pair of perceptual experiences which differ in content, but not in phenomenal character. And from this it follows that content does not supervene on phenomenal character, which rules out any identification of the relevant representational and phenomenal properties.

There are, broadly speaking, three different replies to this problem:

- (i) the view that, although it is possible for a pair of phenomenally identical experiences to differ in content, any such pair of experiences still has some part of its content in common, and that we can use this “part of its content” — the content which does supervene on phenomenal character — to formulate a true identity claim between phenomenal and representational properties.
- (ii) the view that, while phenomenal properties supervene on representational properties, there is no true supervenience thesis going in the other direction; hence our intentionalist supervenience claims can't be explained by the identity of representational and phenomenal properties
- (iii) the view that, although two experiences can differ only in which external particular they represent, the subjects of any two such experiences will also always differ in their phenomenal properties.