

Byrne on intentionalism

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1 Versions of intentionalism

1.1 *Minimal intentionalism*

Intentionalism (sometimes called ‘representationalism’) is in the first instance a supervenience thesis: it is the view that the phenomenal character of an experience — ‘what it’s like’ to have that experience — supervenes on its content. That is, intentionalism is the following necessitated conditional:

□ (e and e^* have the same content \rightarrow e and e^* have the same phenomenal character)

or, equivalently,

□ (e and e^* have different phenomenal character \rightarrow e and e^* have different content)

Let’s call the endorsement of these conditionals, where e and e^* are human experiences of the same sense modality, *minimal intentionalism*. We can then think of various ways to strengthen minimal intentionalism.

1.2 *Intermodal intentionalism*

One obvious strengthening is to relax the requirement that the two experiences be taken from the same sense modality. This gives us *intermodal* intentionalism. (Byrne calls minimal intentionalism ‘intramodal’ because it is restricted to single sense modalities.)

Byrne notes that most intentionalists are intermodal intentionalists. Is there anything strange about being only an intramodal intentionalist? Could two experiences of different sense modalities ever have the same content?

1.3 *Unrestricted intentionalism*

Minimal intentionalism is restricted to perceptual experiences. But many have found a similarity between perceptual experiences and bodily sensations like pains and itches. *Unrestricted* intentionalism lets the variables in the above statements of intentionalism range over bodily sensations as well as perceptual experiences.

(The choices to be an unrestricted or intermodal intentionalist are logically independent: the minimal intentionalist can adopt one without the other, or both.)

Byrne thinks (205-6) that intentionalists should be unrestricted intentionalists if bodily sensations have content at all. This seems right. We’ll return to the question of whether bodily sensations like pains and itches have content (i.e., represent the world as being some way).

1.4 *Biconditional intentionalism*

A possibility that Byrne does not discuss is adopting the converse of intentionalism, so that we’d have a necessary equivalence between phenomenal character and content:

□ (e and e^* have the same content \iff e and e^* have the same phenomenal character)

This implies Johnson’s phenomenal bottleneck principle.

One reason why one might adopt converse intentionalism: it is a plausible principle that necessary truths should get some explanation. If this is so, then the necessary truth which is minimal intentionalism should get some explanation. One might think that it could be explained if it turned out, in some sense, that the content of an experience *is* its phenomenal character. (This view is suggested by statements of intentionalism like Tye’s “Phenomenal character . . . is one and the same as a certain sort of intentional content.”)

A quick argument against this motivation for biconditional intentionalism: beliefs can have the same contents as experiences without having the same phenomenal character. But if phenomenal character really was identical to the content of experience, this would be impossible.

2 Byrne's argument for intentionalism

Byrne's argument for intentionalism basically amounts to this: Suppose that a cognitively ideal subject has two experiences which differ in phenomenal character. Then the subject will notice a difference between the two experiences. So things will seem different to the subject. But if things seem different to the subject, then the two experiences represent the world as being different. Then they have different content. So intentionalism is true.

See §3 for a (much) more careful version of the argument, and an explanation of why the idealization to cognitively ideal subjects is harmless. Perhaps it is because I am predisposed to like intentionalism, but to me the argument seems clearly correct.

3 Objections to intentionalism

However, there are a number of examples which do not fit so easily into the intentionalist mold. From p. 217 on, Byrne turns to discussion of some of these.

3.1 *Bodily sensations*

It might seem clear that visual experiences represent shapes and colors and that auditory experiences represent sounds — but what is it that pains and itches could be representing? It might seem as though there is no answer to this question, and so that bodily sensations are not intentional — do not represent the world as being a certain way.

A challenge to this view: the felt locations of bodily sensations.

In a sense, the question of whether bodily sensations have content is a side one when it comes to evaluating minimal intentionalism. If they do have content, then the minimal intentionalist should probably be an unrestricted intentionalist, but there are then no obvious cases in which two (e.g.) pains have the same content but different phenomenal character. If they do not have content, then any two pains which differ in phenomenal character are counterexamples to unrestricted intentionalism. But then the absence of content in the case of bodily experiences provides a principled reason for resisting the move from restricted to unrestricted intentionalism.

3.2 *After-images and blurry images*

Why after-images pose no special problems.

One case which is potentially more worrying, which Byrne does not really discuss, is the case of blurry vision. Some have thought that there is a phenomenological difference between a blurry visual experience of something which sharp edges, and a visual experience of an object with blurred boundaries. Suppose that this is true. Can the intentionalist find a difference in content which can explain this difference in phenomenal character?

3.3 *Zombies*

Chalmers' example of Joe and the fading inner light bulb. Why the idea that this poses a challenge to intentionalism is, as Byrne says, confused.

4 Further questions about intentionalism

One important class of objections which Byrne mentions but does not discuss are arguments from disputable but at least initially plausible philosophical theses to the falsity of intentionalism. In the next two weeks, we'll be discussing two of these: one which begins from the possibility of inverted spectrum cases without misrepresentation, and one which begins from the claim that the phenomenal character of one's experiences supervenes on one's intrinsic properties, but that the contents of one's experiences do not.

A second unanswered question about intentionalism which you should keep in mind is: given that there are no brute necessities, if intentionalism is true, what explains its truth?