

# Précis of *The Phenomenal and the Representational*

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*The Phenomenal and the Representational* takes as its starting point two theses which are familiar from much recent work in the philosophy of perception. The first is that experience is transparent, in the sense that when one introspects, one ends up focusing on features which the experience presents as in one's environment. The second is that one of the functions of perceptual experience is to make features of one's environment available for thought. The guiding thought of the book is that, once made suitably precise, these two theses can show us quite a lot about the nature of the phenomenal and representational properties involved in perceptual experience.

Part I introduces the phenomenal and representational properties which are the focus of the rest of the book. A central theme of the book is that when theorizing about the phenomenal and the representational, it is best to begin by focusing on the properties of subjects rather than (as is more commonly done) the properties of experiences themselves. We get our grip on phenomenal properties by thinking about what it is like to be a *subject* of experience; while thinking about properties of experiences may in some contexts be useful, the phenomenal properties of subjects are conceptually prior. Phenomenal properties are, to a first approximation, the determinates of the determinable property 'being phenomenally conscious.'

Similarly, the relevant representational properties are properties of subjects of experience. They are properties of bearing a certain sort of representational relation — which I call a 'sensing relation' — to a content. I call these relational properties 'sensing properties.'<sup>1</sup>

Much recent work on the phenomenal and the representational asks about the relationship between the phenomenal character of an experience and the content of an experience. I argue that shifting to a discussion of the relationship between the properties of subjects just described both avoids confusions to which the focus on properties of experiences has led, and uncovers new challenges for certain attempts to naturalize phenomenal and representational properties which the other approach obscures.

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<sup>1</sup>Occasionally, both in the book and in what follows, in order to bring my views into contact with the views of others it is useful for me to use the phrase 'content of experience.' But that is always a shorthand for talk about contents to which subjects stand in sensing relations.

In Part II, I introduce my favored formulation of the thesis that experience is transparent. Building on the work of Byrne (2001) and others, I formulate the thesis in terms of the impossibility of certain combinations of phenomenal and representational properties.<sup>2</sup> First, it is impossible to have certain sorts of rapid and dramatic changes in phenomenal properties — such as a rapid transition through the phenomenal properties characteristic of ordinary experiences of blue, red, and green — while visually sensing the color of the surface before one as a constant grey. Second, it is impossible to have certain sorts of rapid and dramatic changes in representational properties — such as a rapid transition from visually sensing a surface to be blue, to visually sensing it to be red, to visually sensing it to be green — while having throughout the phenomenal property characteristic of ordinary experiences of a grey surface.<sup>3</sup>

In the remainder of Part II, I argue from these impossibility claims to a thesis about the supervenience of the phenomenal on the representational. Roughly, the thesis is that, necessarily, any two subjects who differ in their phenomenal properties must also differ in at least one of their sensing properties.

In Part III, I turn to the question of whether (to put it loosely) the minimal supervenience base for phenomenal properties includes the representational relations in which subjects stand to contents, or just the contents to which subjects stand in some representational relation or other. This question is important because we want to know, when we turn to the task of giving a naturalistic account of phenomenal properties, whether we need to give an account just of the contents of a subject's mental states, or also a naturalistic account of the specific representational relations in which the subject stands to those contents. The latter will be the case if, for example, subjects can stand in the belief relation (or belief-like relations) to the very same contents to which they stand in sensing relations, since then there will be phenomenal differences which correspond to no difference in content, but only a difference in relations to contents.

Nonconceptualism about experience (on one usage of that term) is the thesis that the contents to which we stand in sensing relations are different in kind than the contents to which we stand in 'conceptual' representational relations like belief. If Nonconceptualism is true, no one ever has an experience and a belief which have the same content. One may argue for Nonconceptualism in either of two ways. First, one might offer a direct argument that, however we understand the nature of the contents of experience and of belief, they must be different sorts of things. Second, one might individually defend views about the contents of experience and belief which entail Nonconceptualism. The most prominent version of this indirect route to Nonconceptualism consists of arguments that the contents of beliefs are fine-grained Fregean propositions, whereas the contents

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<sup>2</sup>Though Byrne avoids the use of the term 'transparency' in his argument; see Byrne (2001), note 22.

<sup>3</sup>What does the impossibility of these scenarios have to do with transparency theses formulated in terms of introspection? The rough idea is that if in introspection we always focus on properties presented as in our environment, then certain sorts of big changes in those properties will be easily introspectable, and easily introspectable differences entail a difference in phenomenal properties.

of experience are less fine-grained Russellian propositions.

I argue that the central direct arguments for Nonconceptualism fail. I then argue that the indirect route to Nonconceptualism is at least half right: the contents to which we stand in sensing relations should be understood in a Russellian rather than a Fregean way. I argue that Fregean views of experience either run afoul of the transparency thesis mentioned above, or make the Fregean senses which figure in experience unacceptably mysterious. But the case for Nonconceptualism still fails, because the central argument for a Fregean treatment of the contents of beliefs — the argument from Frege’s puzzle — is a failure. Others have argued for this claim by trying to show that the differences in informativeness on which Frege’s puzzle rests can be explained using resources available to the Russellian. I argue for the somewhat more surprising result that these differences in informativeness cannot be explained via differences in Fregean sense.

So, I conclude, a Russellian treatment of belief as well as experience is the way to go, and Nonconceptualism (as stated above) is false. The result is that two subjects can differ phenomenally and yet be alike with respect to the contents in which they stand in representational relations, if, for example, one is standing in a sensing relation to that content and the other is standing in the belief relation (or a belief-like relation) to that content. So any theory of phenomenal properties which runs via an account of representational properties must provide, not just an account of mental content, but also an account of what distinguishes sensing relations from other representational relations like belief.

Part IV asks how we should understand the nature of the representational properties involved in experience — the properties of standing in sensing relations to Russellian contents. I defend the view that Russellian propositions are best understood as a certain sort of monadic property. But, I argue — for reasons having to do with the perspectival nature of experience — the contents to which we stand in sensing relations are not Russellian propositions, but are instead distinct but closely related monadic properties which subjects of experience self-ascribe.

Supposing that the foregoing is correct, this still leaves pretty much open the question of what sorts of Russellian contents can be the objects of sensing relations. Can, for example, these contents include objects and natural kinds, or are they limited to ‘general’ contents involving colors, shapes, and other paradigm sensible properties?

In Part V, I attempt to answer this question by bringing to bear the second main thesis about experience mentioned at the outset: the role of experience in making contents available for thought. Sometimes, following an experience, one is able to have thoughts whose contents involve some object or property about which one was not able to have thoughts prior to the experience. Following the lead of Johnston (2004), I think that this fact can be used to formulate a sufficient condition for two subjects to differ in the contents to which they stand

in sensing relations.<sup>4</sup> Roughly, the idea is that if (holding fixed other conceptual capacities) two experiences make available different thoughts to their subjects, then those experiences must differ in their contents. If two experiences present just the same objects and properties as in the environment of their subjects, how could one but not the other make a certain content available for thought?<sup>5</sup>

I then argue that this principle (which I call ‘Availability/Difference’) entails that the contents to which we stand in sensing relations can include objects and natural kinds. This is because two otherwise similar experiences can make available for thought distinct objects and kinds, and in many cases this can be explained in no other way than by letting those objects and kinds be parts of the relevant content.

In Part VI, I introduce the notion of a phenomenal relation. Roughly, a phenomenal relation is a relation  $R$  such that two subjects who differ only in the contents to which they stand in  $R$  can nonetheless differ in their phenomenal properties. The question raised in this section is: how many phenomenal relations must we recognize to provide a supervenience base for phenomenal properties?

The importance of this question is parallel to the importance of the question about belief and sensing discussed in Part III. Once we see that phenomenal properties are properties of subjects, we see that any account of phenomenal properties in representational terms must be an account, not just of content, but of the relations in which subjects stand to those contents. Part III argued for the result that any account of phenomenal properties will need to involve an account of the distinction between sensing and (for example) belief. But this leaves two questions unanswered: Do we also need to give an account of the distinction between various kinds of sensing (e.g., visual sensing and auditorially sensing)? And are there other phenomenal relations, in which case we will need to provide an account of the distinctions between sensing and those other phenomenal relations?

I argue that the answer to the first question is ‘No’; for the purposes of providing an account of phenomenal properties, the distinctions between the senses do not matter, and we need recognize only a single sensing relation. But I argue that the answer to the second question is ‘Yes.’ Here the argument focuses on certain sorts of attentional shifts. In some cases, subjects can differ in their phenomenal properties as a result of differences in the contents to which they attend, even if there are no corresponding differences in the contents to which they stand in the sensing relation. The upshot is that an account of phenomenal properties owes an account, not just of the distinction between sensing and non-phenomenal relations like belief, but also between the distinct phenomenal relations of sensing and attending.

So far the focus of the book has been on the task of clearly spelling out the minimal representational supervenience base for phenomenal properties. In

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<sup>4</sup>Though Johnston puts the point in terms of the objects rather than the contents of experience.

<sup>5</sup>I now think that this kind of argument requires a significant qualification; see §V of my Reply to Critics.

Part VII, I turn to the question of whether phenomenal properties might simply be identified with representational properties.

Setting aside for now the complications raised by attention, the simplest view would simply identify phenomenal properties with the sensing properties described above, which are relational properties to contents whose constituents include objects and natural kinds. But this leads to an immediate problem. Consider two sensing properties which differ only with respect to the object they represent as before the perceiving subject. According to the simple view just sketched, these subjects would be, because instantiating distinct sensing properties, also instantiating distinct phenomenal properties. These phenomenal properties would be indiscriminable from the subject's point of view. But, according to a very widely held view, phenomenal properties are distinct iff they are discriminable — and this entails the impossibility of the scenario just sketched.

One response would be to identify phenomenal properties with (in effect) classes of sensing properties, so that to instantiate a phenomenal property is to instantiate some member of the class or other. Instead, I argue that the widely held view just described is false, and that phenomenal properties can be distinct even if genuinely indiscriminable. I give a few different lines of argument for this conclusion. One turns on the well-known case of the phenomenal sorites; one turns on certain sorts of examples involving perceptual constancy; and one turns on the perceptual representation of change. This clears the way for the view that phenomenal properties are identical to sensing properties, and hence are properties of bearing relations to contents which have objects and kinds, as well as other properties and relations, as constituents.

In Part VIII, I examine the consequences of the views argued for in Parts I-VII for functionalist and identity-theoretic attempts to give naturalistic theories of consciousness.

I argue that many of the most promising versions of functionalism conflict with the transparency of experience (understood as the thesis that the scenarios described in Part II are impossible). But perhaps the most serious problems for the functionalist come from the difficulty of giving any functionalist theory of phenomenal relations. It is easy to miss the fact that a functionalist theory of consciousness owes an account of these relations if one thinks of the primary task of a theory of consciousness as the attempt to give a theory of the 'phenomenal character of experience.' For one might then think that phenomenal characters have contents as well as phenomenal characters, and that we can simply identify phenomenal characters with contents. But once we remember that we are fundamentally interested in properties of subjects, it becomes obvious that we cannot identify phenomenal properties with contents. Any reasonable representationalist theory of phenomenal properties must instead identify them with the relational properties of standing in certain phenomenal relations to contents.

The bearing of the view of phenomenal properties defended in the book on identity theories of consciousness is less direct. But here too phenomenal relations are a stumbling block, and I argue that some of the examples of perceptual

constancy discussed in Part VII are difficult to accommodate on the view that phenomenal properties are identical to intrinsic physical properties.

Many have thought that an identity between phenomenal and representational properties opens the door to a naturalistic account of the phenomenal. The moral of Part VIII is that, once one sees exactly which representational properties are candidates to be phenomenal properties, the task of naturalizing the representational — and hence also the phenomenal — looks much harder than one might have thought.

#### REFERENCES

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- Johnston, M. (2004). The obscure object of hallucination. *Philosophical Studies* 120, 113–183.