

The Phenomenal and the Representational

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Preface

As its title indicates, this book is about two kinds of properties of perceiving subjects: their phenomenal properties, and their representational properties. In particular, it focuses on three questions: What are phenomenal properties? What are representational properties? What is the relationship between phenomenal and representational properties?

My answers to these questions are guided by two ideas, which have both been around for a long time. The first is that experience is transparent, in the sense that attention to one's perceptual experiences is, or is intimately involved with, attention to the objects and properties those experiences present as in one's environment. Though the label is due to Moore, versions of this idea can be found in earlier philosophers as well, and it has played a central role in recent work in the philosophy of perception.

The second is that one of the roles of perceptual experience is to make objects and properties available to the perceiver for thought. The idea that perception must play this role is of course explicit in empiricists like Locke, and in recent work it has been emphasized by, among others, John McDowell and Mark Johnston. The term 'availability' is taken from Johnston's paper, 'The Obscure Object of Hallucination.'

These two ideas are central enough to the book that it used to be called 'Transparency and Availability'—until an anonymous referee pointed out, reasonably, that no one would have any idea what a book with that title was about. If there's anything original in this book, it's the idea that, suitably formulated, these two ideas can go quite a long way in revealing the nature of the contents of experience, and the way in which those contents are related to phenomenal properties. Most of the book is concerned with tracing this argumentative path. The rest is concerned with some problems which arise from conclusions reached along the way. These problems are mainly metaphysical, and take us into questions both about the nature of propositions and the nature of phenomenal properties.

As is true of any book like this, one can question the starting points, as well as some of the assumptions—often assumptions about whether certain sorts of experiences are possible or, about their veridicality conditions—made throughout. This book is the attempt to think through the consequences of certain assumptions which seem to me plausible starting points for thinking about

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perception. It isn't that I think that these assumptions are certain, or even, in some cases, immune from empirical refutation. They just seemed to me to be the best place to get started.

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This book, while not unusually long, does contain unusually many chapters. The book came together as a result of my thinking about how to put together into a coherent picture various short arguments which seemed individually convincing to me; so this seemed to be the most natural way to present it. But, given the number of chapters, a kind of roadmap for the reader might be useful.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the two sorts of properties mentioned in the title: phenomenal properties, and representational properties. These chapters emphasize a guiding theme of the book: that when theorizing about these properties, it is best to begin by focusing on the properties of experiencing subjects, rather than on the properties of experiences that those subjects undergo.

Chapters 3–8 introduce a number of theses: various versions of intentionalism—roughly, the thesis that phenomenal properties supervene on representational ones—and the thesis that experience is, in a sense to be explained, transparent. They then argue from the latter thesis to a weak intentionalist thesis. Chapter 9 then extends this argument from the base case of visual experience to other types of phenomenal states.

Chapters 10–13 ask whether it is possible for distinct states of different types—for example, a visual experience and a belief—to have the same content, but differ phenomenally. I argue that this is possible—a conclusion that rules out certain strong versions of intentionalism. This argument takes us (in Chapter 12) into questions about whether the contents of experience are best understood according to a Russellian or a Fregean view, and (in Chapter 13) into questions about whether a Fregean view of the contents of thought and language is well-supported by Frege's puzzle. The somewhat involved argument of Chapter 13 can be skipped without much loss by readers who are less interested in questions about the contents of thought and language than in questions about specifically perceptual representation (though, as I argue in these chapters, the former does have some consequences for the latter).

The upshot of the argument to this stage is that phenomenal properties supervene on properties of bearing a certain representational relation (or relations) to Russellian contents. This raises the questions: what are these relations, and what sorts of things are Russellian contents? Chapters 14 and 15 offer initial answers to these questions, identifying the relevant contents with properties of a sort, and the relevant relation with a kind of specifically perceptual self-ascription.

The defense of the sort of supervenience thesis just sketched raises the central question of whether phenomenal properties might be identified with representational properties. For reasons which become clear later, this question seems to me intertwined with questions about the scope of perceptual representation: questions about what sorts of things can be constituents of the contents of experience. Chapters 16–23 engage with the latter question. Chapters 16 and 17 introduce the idea that experiences make certain objects and properties available for thought, and attempt to refine this idea into precise principles which, in Chapter 18 and Chapters 20–23, are put to use arguing for specific views about the nature of perceptual contents. Chapter 19 engages with a problem in the metaphysics of propositions to which these views give rise. (Like Chapter 13, this chapter can be skipped without much loss by readers who wish to focus on issues about perception.)

So far the argument of the book will have aimed to establish the claim that phenomenal properties supervene on certain relational representational properties. This raises a question which is crucial to attempts to give a physicalist reduction of phenomenal properties: do these relational representational properties all involve the same relation? Chapters 24–27 argue that they do not, and that certain sorts of attentional shifts force us to distinguish between at least two phenomenal relations.

In Chapter 28, I turn at last to the question of whether phenomenal and representational properties can be identified. I suggest that there is strong reason to believe that they can be, and discuss two different ways in which such an identification might run—one which accepts the existence of distinct but indiscriminable phenomenal properties, and one which does not. In Chapters 29–33, I introduce the notion of a ‘phenomenally sneaky’ content as a way of arguing for the former option.

In the concluding Chapters 34–37, I ask how the investigation of the relationship between the phenomenal and the representational carried out in Chapters 1–33 bears on the two main attempts to give a reductive physicalist account of phenomenal properties: functionalism and identity theory. I argue that the argument to this point presents some serious challenges for functionalist theories, but that the status of identity theories is less clear. And, on that somewhat inconclusive note, the book ends.

Some readers of the manuscript suggested that I add a ‘summing up’ chapter at the end. Since I couldn’t think of a way to do this without just repeating what I’ve said here or what I go on to say, I’ve stuck with the admittedly abrupt ending to which you can look forward there.

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I've developed many of the views defended in this book over a period of years, and owe an intellectual debt to more people than I can remember. Though my views were influenced by the writings of many philosophers about perception, I owe a special intellectual debt to the work of Alex Byrne, Mark Johnston, and Michael Tye. I owe something more to Scott Soames—though this book does not have much to do with the dissertation I wrote under his direction ten years ago, Scott provided me with a model of rigor and clarity in philosophy that I hope, to some degree, informs my work. I'm grateful for the comments and questions I've received after talks covering versions of parts of this material at Auburn, McGill, NYU, Oklahoma, Oxford, Rice, Rutgers, Western Michigan, and a Central APA session organized by Colin Klein. In addition to these groups, I owe thanks to my colleagues Robert Audi and Leopold Stubenberg, who gave me comments on the manuscript. I also owe special thanks to Antony Eagle, Daniel Immerman, Casey O'Callaghan, and Adam Pautz. Though he probably doesn't know it, conversations with Antony had a big influence on the way I end up developing my positive view of the relationship between phenomenal and representational properties in the last third of the book. Daniel read through every page of a draft of the book in the spring of 2013; virtually every page of the book has benefited from his eye for unclarity and ability to spot confusion. He's saved me from mistakes both silly and serious, and deserves much of the credit for what is good in the book. Casey has taught me more about perception than anyone else, and is a big part of the reason that I decided to work in the philosophy of perception in the first place. I benefited greatly from his comments on an earlier draft, and his influence will be obvious in many parts of the book. Adam's characteristically incisive comments on an earlier draft showed me, among other things, the need to add Chapter 2 of the book, and to think through much more seriously than I had what it means to say that experience is representational. The book is, I hope, much better as a result of the changes made in response to his comments.

Most importantly, I thank Elyse, Amelia, and Violet, the sources of more happiness than I could have imagined.

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