

## Intentional Theories of Consciousness

### 1. The Story So Far

A lot of what we've been reading and discussing assumes that we can distinguish between the functional role of a conscious state, and *what it's like* to be in that conscious state...

- E.g. Block's distinction between access and phenomenal consciousness
- Chalmers' distinction between the easy and hard problems of consciousness, and zombie thought experiments.
- Jackson's Mary thought experiment: she knows all the functional information about colour vision but doesn't know *what it's like*.

**Today we ask:** what if that's all BS? What if we can't separate of qualitative conscious *feels* from their functional roles? What if you can just take at face value the intuition that conscious states play a functional role *in virtue* of what they feel like?

### 2. Question we're asking this week

**Is the phenomenal character of experience reducible to its representational content?**

Intentional theories of consciousness say: YES.

(Wait, does anyone remember all that fascinating stuff about Kathleen Akins' objection to Nagle's bat example...where she argues that we *can* know a bit about what it's like from knowing about the intentional / functional role of the bat's states.... Seems like she was endorsing a view like this!)

- More specifically, they say that representation of a certain kind suffices for a sensory quality.
- They want to account for representation in functional or otherwise materialism terms that avoid introducing any new or controversial ontology.
  - o That's sounds nice! It'd make consciousness a lot easier to understand!
  - o Hang on, that'd make consciousness suspiciously easy to understand. Can it really be right?

Why would this seem like a sensible view to endorse?

- Qualia are hard to square with materialism. Representationalism is a bit less hard to square with it. So if qualia are really representational, we're in a better place...
- There *does* seem to be a representational aspect to e.g. colours, feelings etc. They have, e.g. *veridicality conditions*. They can *misrepresent* what the world is like.
- Changes in intentional content seem to make a phenomenal difference: e.g. the difference in the experience of hearing a language when you don't understand it, versus when you do.

This requires that *all* conscious states exhibit intentionality.

(Wait, does anyone remember all that fascinating stuff about *Brentano* from the intentionality and mental representation lectures?)

- The usual counterexamples: pains, diffuse anxiety / depression / elation, orgasm etc.

It also requires that intentionality *exhaust* the sensory character of conscious states.

- In favour of that (Harman 1990) **the Argument from Transparency**. We "see through" perceptual states. Introspection reveals no non-representational properties.
  - What about blur?
  - Block (2010): there's "mental paint" in addition to representational properties, as revealed by attentional effects etc.

- What about the feel of *the sense modality itself*? (You can experience something as overhead in both auditory and visual modalities but they don't feel the same...)
- 3. Challenges for the programme more generally:
  - Not *all* representation has any kind of sensory feel associated with it. What's special about this kind?
    - Oh no that's worrying it's going to be hard to reduce this to just ordinary non-conscious sorts of representation.
    - Great, this approach will respect the way in which there's something special and possibly non-reducible about conscious states.
  - What about unconscious representation? What makes it unconscious? What's the difference between consciously seeing a red letter box and unconsciously noticing a red letter box?
    - It has different representational qualities...
      - Sorry like what exactly?
        - Well the sensory ones...
    - Maybe we need to appeal to higher order representation?
      - No that's NEXT WEEK's lecture!
  - What explains the limits on certain forms of sensory conscious representation? Why can't I see something as both round and square?
    - There are limitations imposed by the *format* of representation...

#### 4. Inverted Spectra Cases

The motivating thought: Could the colour qualia you experience be flipped to different colours, whilst the intentional content of your colour experience remains the same?

Intentionalism says NO. The colour qualia just *are* intentional contents...

“[W]hen you and I have experiences that have the intentional content *looking red*, your qualitative content is the same as the qualitative content that I have when my experience has the intentional content *looking green* (and we are functionally identical).” (Block 1990)

Important premise: an experience has the intentional content of looking red if it functions in the right way – if it is caused by red things in the right circumstances, and used appropriately in thought and action about red things...

**Block's Inversion #1:** flip the qualia, wait for intentional contents to catch up.

1. Take a functionally normal person with regular colour qualia
2. Give them colour inverting lenses, so that grass looks red, and blood looks green, according to that individual.
3. After a period of confused use of colour terms, the person adapts to the point where they are using colour language normally, i.e. naturally and immediately describing blood as 'red' and grass as 'green'.  
He recalls the period before the insertion of the lenses as a period during which “grass looked to me the way blood now looks.”

4. Induce amnesia about the period before the lenses were inserted. The person is now functionally, totally normal....

Block's intuition: In the early part of phase 3, their qualia are flipped whilst their intentional state remain the same. That's what their verbal reports at the time and in retrospect reveal.

Where (if anywhere) do you get off the bus?

**Block's Inversion #2:** invert the intentional content whilst keeping the qualitative stuff the same. Inverted Earth differs from normal earth in 2 crucial respects:

- a. Everything has the complementary color of the color on earth. The sky is yellow, grass is red etc.
- b. The vocabulary of the residents is also inverted. If you ask what color the yellow sky is, they truthfully say "blue"!
  - As a result, the intentional contents of attitudes and experiences are also inverted: "When he looks at the sky...the experience he has that he would describe as the sky looking "blue" is actually the experience of the sky looking yellow."
  - These differences cancel out: talk on inverted earth *sounds like* talk on earth.

You won't believe what happens next!!

"A team of mad scientists knock you out. While you are out cold, they insert color inverting lenses in your eyes, and change your body pigments so you don't have a nasty shock when you wake up and look at your feet. They transport you to Inverted Earth, where you are substituted for a counterpart who has occupied a niche on Inverted Earth that corresponds exactly (except for colors of things) with your niche at home. You wake up, and since the inverting lenses cancel out the inverted colors, you notice no difference at all." (p.63)

- Qualitative content of experience remains the same thanks to the inverting lenses
- What about your intentional content....
  - Their causal rooting is home on earth... so intentional contents remain the same
  - But after enough time has passed you would become embedded in the physical and linguistic environment of Inverted Earth so your intentional contents would shift.

"If I am right about this case, the distinction between the intentional and qualitative content of experience is vindicated, and the functionalist theory of qualitative content is refuted." (Block 1990:63)

The core problem here is the coupling of *externalism* about intentional contents (they depend on physical and social context) and *intentionalism* about qualia. Unless we are *externalist* about qualia (which few find to be a palatable position) this seems like an awkward combination...

#### Recommended Reading:

- \*Block, Ned, 'Inverted Earth', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4 (1990): 53-79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214187>. Reprinted in Block, above.
- Harman, Gilbert, 'The Intrinsic Quality of Experience', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4 (1990): 31-52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214186>.
- Kind, Amy, 'Transparency and Representationalist Theories of Consciousness', *Philosophy Compass*, 5, no. 10 (2010): 902-13. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2010.00328.x>.