

## 26 Is Experiencing Just Representing?

Representationism says that the phenomenal character of experience is reducible to its representational content. Michael Tye's book responds to two problems for this view; I will argue that these two responses conflict.

### 1 Swampman

The first problem concerns the famous Swampman who comes into existence as a result of a cosmic accident in which particles from the swamp come together, forming a molecular duplicate of a typical human.<sup>1</sup> Reasonable people can disagree on whether Swampman has intentional contents. Suppose that Swampman marries Swampwoman and they have children. Reasonable people will be *inclined* to agree that there is something it is like for Swampchild when "words" go through his mind or come out of his mouth. Fred Dretske (1995) claims that if the materialist is to have any theory of intentional content at all, he has no option other than denying it. He is committed to the view that since phenomenal character is a kind of representational content that derives from evolution, the swampchildren have no phenomenal character. Zombiehood is hereditary. (So long as there is no evolution.) If your grandparents are all swamp-people, you are a zombie.

Many philosophers hate fanciful examples like this one. Some say weird thought experiments like this one are so distant from anything we can really take in that our intuitions about them show nothing about our concepts. Others add that even if they show something about our concepts, they are ridiculous from a scientific point of view. Both are wrong, at least in the context of evolutionary views of content. The swampman example is one in which a *real* empirical possibility is stretched so as to allow us to focus on it more easily. There is a famous dispute between the adaptationists (Dawkins, Dennett, Pinker) and the anti-adaptationists (Gould, Lewontin, Eldridge). The anti-adaptationists emphasize that there may be features of the human mind and body that were not selected for but are in one or another sense accidental by-products of evolution. Both sides allow the possibility of such cases. What is controversial is

whether (as the adaptationists claim) the default assumption should be that a complex useful character is adaptive. The adaptationists are on defensible ground when it comes to intentional content, but there is far more controversial empirical issue about the adaptational value of phenomenal character. Putting the point somewhat dramatically: *in the relevant respect, we all are swamp-people, for all we know*. Hence Dretske is committed to the claim that if an open scientific question is resolved in a certain way, our experience has no phenomenal character. Philosophers should not rest basic metaphysical views on empirical claims that are as wide open as this one.

Despite his general sympathy for evolutionary representationism, Tye rejects Dretske's view of the swampman. Tye gives pride of place to optimal conditions. Optimal conditions for a mechanism obtain when it is discharging its biological function. In the case of an evolved creature, this coincides with Dretske's evolutionary account. But Tye sees optimal conditions as relative to the sort of system or creature in question. In the case of Swampman, Tye thinks not in terms of actual history, but in terms of well-functioning. Conditions of well-functioning are met when there is an appropriate match between behavior and the states tracked in the environment. If the swampman has his needs met and flourishes, then his actual environment meets that condition and can supply the representational content. Hence the swampman can have phenomenal character, and so can his grandchildren. (How bitter a pill for the poor swampman who is not flourishing to find out that precisely *because* he is not flourishing, his agony is unreal!)

I will be focusing on the incompatibility between Tye's strategy in the swampman case and in the Inverted Earth case.

## 2 Earth Inverted Earth

Inverted Earth is a variant of Putnam's famous "Twin Earth". Everything is the complementary color of the corresponding Earth object. The sky is yellow, the grass (or at least the "grass") is red, etc. In addition, people on Inverted Earth speak an inverted language. They use "red" to mean green, "blue" to mean yellow, and so forth. If you order a sofa from Inverted Earth and you want a yellow sofa, you FAX an order for a "blue" sofa (speaking their language). The two inversions have the effect that if "wires are crossed" in your visual system (and your body pigments are changed), you will notice no difference when you go to Inverted Earth. After you step off the space-ship, you see some Twin-grass. You point at it, saying it is a nice shade of "green," but you are wrong. You are wrong for much the same reason that you are wrong if you call the liquid in a Twin-Earth lake "water" just after you arrive there. The grass is red (of course we are speaking English not Twenglish here). Suppose you left Earth at age 8, remaining on Inverted Earth for the rest of your life, not as a visitor but as an immigrant; you identify with the local culture and in effect adopt the concepts and language of the

Inverted Earth language community. Then (according to me) the representational content of your experience as of red things (things that are really red) will eventually shift so that you represent them correctly. See Block 1990, 1994, 1996.<sup>2</sup>

The key features of the example are these:

1. The phenomenal character of your color experience stays the same as suggested by (though not entailed by) the fact that you don't notice any difference.
2. But the representational content of your experience, being externally determined, shifts with external conditions in the environment and the language community.

Your phenomenal character stays the same but what it represents changes. Why is this a problem for representationists? Imagine that on the birthday just before you leave for Inverted Earth, you are looking at the clear blue sky. Your visual experience represents it as blue. Years later, you have a birthday party on Inverted Earth and you look at the Inverted Earth sky. Your visual experience represents it as yellow (since that's what color it is and your visual experience by that time is veridical let us suppose—I'll deal with an objection to this supposition later). But the phenomenal character stays the same, as indicated by the fact that you can't tell the difference. (An alternative will be mentioned later.) So there is a gap between the representational content of experience and its phenomenal character. Further, the gap shows that phenomenal character is not reducible to representational content, and it is easy to extend the example to show that phenomenal character does not supervene on representational content. (Compare the traveler as an old man looking at something blue (e.g., a banana) on Inverted Earth with the same person as a child looking at something blue (the sky) on Earth. Same representational color content, different phenomenal character.)

A comparison with Putnam's Twin Earth is instructive. If I emigrate to Twin Earth, the representational content of my experience of water changes (let us suppose). After a great deal of time has passed and I have committed to my new language community and new experts, I see twater as twater instead of as water (let us suppose). But I cannot tell from looking at the liquid in the oceans whether it is water or twater. My phenomenal character stays the same even though the representational contents of my experiences change. But representationists needn't be bothered by Twin Earth, since they can give the phenomenal continuity a *representational interpretation*. The common phenomenal character is a matter of representation of color, sheen, flow pattern and the like. But what will the representationist appeal to in the Inverted Earth case that corresponds to color, sheen, flow pattern, etc.? This is the problem for representationists posed by the Inverted Earth case.

Once again, many philosophers are skeptical about such fanciful examples. I will respond to only one point: feasibility. In its essential features, the Inverted Earth thought experiment could *actually* be performed with present day technology. We

could substitute large isolated buildings for the two planets. And a version of the visual “wire-crossing” could be done today with “virtual reality” goggles.

### 3 Tye’s Solution to the Inverted Earth Problem

Tye’s view of phenomenal character is that it is “nonconceptual” representational content. He concedes that the conceptual contents of the traveler’s experience eventually change. If there is reason to see the new language community as the one he relies on and defers to, we have reason to link his concepts to theirs. And the dominant causal source of his concepts shifts to Inverted Earth, as his commitments there outweigh his initial commitments. Tye allows that an externalist theory of meaning and concepts link the concept of red with the meaning of a person’s word “red.” But the *nonconceptual* contents do not shift in this way according to Tye. They are biologically based in the emigrant’s evolutionary history. According to Tye, when the emigrant looks at the sky, saying, “Very blue,” his words are correct even though his visual experience *misrepresents* the color of the sky. In sum, Tye’s view is that the phenomenal character of experience is to be identified with its non-conceptual content. That does not shift upon immigration to Inverted Earth. It is the conceptual contents of experience that shift, but they are distinct from phenomenal character.

### 4 The Swampman’s Grandchild Goes to Inverted Earth

Without inquiring further about nonconceptual content, we can now see why there is a conflict between Tye’s view of the swampman and his view of Inverted Earth travelers.

Suppose Swamp-grandchild emigrates to Inverted Earth. The environments of both Earth and Inverted Earth are well matched to the swamp-grandchild’s behavior: there is equal “well-functioning” in both cases. So on what basis could Tye choose to ascribe to the swamp-grandchild the phenomenal character that goes with representing the Inverted Earth sky as blue (as a normal Earthian emigrant, according to Tye) rather than the phenomenal character that goes with representing the sky as yellow (like normal Inverted-Earthians)? A choice here would be arbitrary. Suppose Tye chooses the Earthian phenomenal character. But what makes *that* the privileged phenomenal character for the swamp-grandchild? The fact that his grandparents materialized on Earth as opposed to Inverted Earth? But that is a poor reason. Suppose the swamp-grandchild is born on Inverted Earth while his parents are on a visit and stays there. Are his phenomenal characters determined by his birth place or by his grandparents’ birth place? There is no good reason for either choice and there is no plausibility in the idea that there is no matter of fact about what the phenomenal characters are.

In his original discussion of traveling to Inverted Earth, Tye was happy to say that the nonconceptual contents of experience remained fixed, agreeing with me that the

phenomenal character of experience remains the same on Inverted Earth after emigration. But there is no way he can say this about the traveling swamp-grandchild, for he has no reason to choose the nonconceptual content of a native Earthian as opposed to the nonconceptual content of a native Inverted Earthian. Unable to choose either option, he is forced to go environmental, postulating that these nonconceptual contents of the traveling swamp-grandchild change. And hence the phenomenal characters change.

So he is forced to recognize changes in phenomenal character that are due solely to changes in the external determiners of content (and when I raised this problem in correspondence, Tye took exactly that line). We all can agree that there are some possible changes in intentional content due solely to changes in its external determiners. But it is another matter to allow that there can be changes in phenomenal character that are due solely to changes in external determiners of content. To claim this is to cut phenomenal character loose from its conceptual moorings. (See Shoemaker's contribution to this symposium.)

Lycan (1996a, 1996b) responds to the original (nonswampman) Inverted Earth Problem in the same way. He puts it in terms of memory. According to him, memories of the color of the sky, for example, are necessarily defective in cases of purely external change like the Inverted Earth Immigration case.

## 5 Perception of Change

I believe that the postulation of externalist memory to defend externalist perception begs the question, but I won't argue that here. (See Block 1996.) Instead, I'll stick to some points about perception. In certain circumstances, externalist representational content can change without the subject, the person whose representational content is changing, having any possibility of noticing it, no matter how big the change is or how fast it happens. But *it is a necessary feature of phenomenal character that if a change is big enough and happens fast enough, we can notice it*. It follows that phenomenal character cannot be externalist representational content.

We can be concrete about this point. Differences in the hue wheel can be thought of in terms of degrees of separation. For example, a 180 degree difference separates blue from yellow and red from green. For a given person in given circumstances, there will be color changes that are just fast enough to notice. Let's say, just guessing, that 10 degrees per second is fast enough to notice for most people in normal circumstances. If color changes of 10 degrees per second are noticeable, so are changes in the phenomenal character of color experience corresponding to 10 degrees per second. But purely external representational changes (changes that do not affect physical properties of the body that do not involve relations to things outside the body) of more than 10 degrees per second, if they could happen, would not be noticeable.

What is the likelihood that independent externalist considerations about the nature of representation would converge on 10 degrees per second as the maximum rate of change for purely external change? But this is precisely what would be required for the externalist to explain why purely externalist change in phenomenal character is not noticeable to the subject. The burden is on the representationist to show how externalism yields this result without begging the question by assuming that phenomenal character is reducible to representational content.

Let us see how these points apply to Inverted Earth. Suppose that I am looking intently at a blue sky on Earth; then I am beamed (as in Star-Trek) to Inverted Earth (the matter transmitter also is programmed to switch wires in my visual system) where I am looking at a yellow sky (but my wires have been switched so I don't notice the difference). The transition is so seamless that I don't notice any change at all. Eventually, my representational contents shift half way across the color wheel. How long does this take? We can put this question to one side for the moment. The important point is that there is nothing in the nature of externalist representational content that precludes a fast change. But there is something in the nature of phenomenal character that precludes a fast change half way across the color wheel, because that's a big change, one that could not happen in a short time without my noticing it. In short, the problem for Lycan and Tye is that they are committed not only to an ad hoc externalist theory of memory, but also to an ad hoc restriction on noticing phenomenal change.

As I mentioned above, a natural response on behalf of Tye would be that nonconceptual representational contents can't shift so fast as to be problematic. A blue to yellow shift would take years, and no one could notice a chameleon changing from blue to yellow if it took years. Such a reply raises the question of what it is that determines the rate of change of non-conceptual contents. As mentioned above, one plausible view of change in conceptual content appeals to the notion of a dominant causal source. The Spanish explorers originally named the island of Puerto Rico "San Juan," and the potentially rich port of San Juan was called "Puerto Rico." But the cartographer mixed up the labels on the way back to Spain. What makes our "Puerto Rico" refer to the island, not the port? The dominant causal source of our word is the island. Let's apply this idea to nonconceptual content.

Our swampman materializes on Earth where he is looking intently at a blue sky. After a total of one minute of life there, he is beamed (without noticing it) to Inverted Earth where he is looking at the yellow sky. (Again, the wires in his visual system are crossed by the transponder, which is why he notices no difference.) After 10 minutes of looking intently at the Inverted Earth sky, the dominant causal source of the phenomenal experience linked to his word "blue" is yellow, since 10 of his 11 minutes of existence has been on Inverted Earth. So on the dominant causal source view, the representational content of his experience changed during that 10 minutes. But he didn't

notice it. Indeed, he couldn't have noticed it. No matter how fast it happened, he couldn't have noticed it.

But perhaps the dominant causal source view isn't right. Or perhaps it applies to conceptual content but not to nonconceptual content. Never mind: its role in my argument is to serve as an example of an independently motivated account of change in representational content, one that arguably allows big fast changes. The main point is that the burden is on anyone who claims that there is something in the nature of representational content that excludes big fast unnoticeable changes. Since there is something in the nature of phenomenal character that precludes big fast unnoticeable changes, we should conclude that phenomenal character can't be representational content.

#### Notes

Reprinted from *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (3): 663–670, 1998. Reprinted in John Heil, ed., *Philosophy of Mind: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

1. The Swampman example is usually attributed to Davidson (1987) but it was commonly discussed in the early 1980s. My (1981) uses an example of a swamp-machine.

2. I make use of Harman's (1982) Inverted Earth example. Block (1980) uses a cruder example along the same lines (pp. 302–303 of Block 1980—reprinted pp. 98–99 of this volume, on p. 466 of Lycan 1990 and p. 227 of Rosenthal 1991). Instead of a place where things have the opposite from the normal colors, I envisioned a remote Arctic village in which almost everything was black and white, and the subject of the thought experiment was said to have no standing color beliefs of the sort of "Grass is green". Two things happen to him: he confuses color words, and a color inverter is placed in his visual system. Everything looks to have the complementary of its real color, but he doesn't notice it because he lacks standing color beliefs. Harman used the Inverted Earth example to motivate a very different point from that made here: that the representational content of experience does not supervene on the brain.

#### References

Block, Ned, 1980. "Troubles with Functionalism." In Block (ed.), *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Block, Ned, 1981. "Psychologism and Behaviorism." *The Philosophical Review* 90, no. 1, January 1981, 5–43.

Block, Ned, 1990. "Inverted Earth." In James Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 4, Action Theory and Philosophy of Mind*, 53–79. Atascadero: Ridgeview.

Block, Ned, 1994. "Qualia." In S. Guttenplan (ed.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford: Blackwell, 514–520.

Block, Ned, 1996. "Mental Paint and Mental Latex." In E. Villanueva (ed.), *Perception, Philosophical Issues 7*. Atascadero: Ridgeview.

Davidson, Donald, 1987. "Knowing One's Own Mind." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 60, 441–458.

Dretske, Fred, 1995. *Naturalizing the Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Harman, Gilbert, 1982. "Conceptual Role Semantics." *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 23.

Lycan, William G., 1990. *Mind and Cognition: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lycan, William G., 1996a. "Layered Perceptual Representation." In E. Villanueva (ed.), *Perception, Philosophical Issues 7*. Atascadero: Ridgeview.

Lycan, William G., 1996b. *Consciousness and Experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Rosenthal, David, 1991. *The Nature of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tye, Michael, 1995a. "Blindsight, Orgasm and Representational Overlap." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18, 268–269.

Tye, Michael, 1995b. *Ten Problems of Consciousness*. Cambridge: MIT Press.