

SENSORY QUALITIES

Sensory qualities

Qualitative features of mental states are often called “qualia” (singular, “quale”). In recent philosophy of mind that term has been used in a number of confusingly different ways, so I shall speak of “sensory qualities”: introspectible qualitative or phenomenal properties inhering in a mental state, such as a colored region of one’s visual field, or a heard sound or an experienced smell. It is the characteristic property of what Bertrand Russell would have said was a “sense-datum.”

A paradigm of a sensory quality is the color of an after-image. For example, Bertie is experiencing a green after-image as a result of seeing a red flash bulb go off; the greenness of the after-image is the sensory quality. The after-image’s shape is also a s.q., though less vivid an example of one than is the greenness.

S.q.’s in this sense pose a problem for materialist theories of the mind. For where, ontologically speaking, are they located? It is not plausible to suggest that the greenness is exemplified by anything physical in the brain (if there is some green physical thing in your brain, you are probably in big trouble).

Here is an argument against materialism: Suppose you are experiencing a green after-image. Now:

1. There is a green thing contained or inhering in the experience.
2. There is no physical green thing in the environment outside your head. [Supposition]

But

3. There is no physical green thing inside your head either.

Yet

4. If it is physical, the green thing is either outside your head or inside it.

∴ 5. The green thing is not physical. [1,2,3,4]

∴ 6. Your experience contains a nonphysical thing. [1,5]

∴ 7. Your experience is not, or not entirely, physical. [6]

--which would refute the Identity Theory, Functionalism, et al.

Reply 1: After-imaging is the result of a well-understood physical process. Vision scientists know exactly, and in physical terms, how the after-image is produced. So the after-image is physical after all.

Rejoinder: Sure, the after-image has a well-understood physical *cause*. But being produced by something physical doesn't entail *being* physical. The problem is the green object itself, and its greenness. The green thing is still not a physical green thing.

Reply 2: Adverbialism (Chisholm). Stop right after premise 1's first four words. There is no green *thing*. There are no Russellian sense-data. It's not that your visual experience relates you to a green *object* or individual. Rather, you sense or are appeared to *greenly*; it is visually greenish as regards you. "Green" is really an adverb expressing a way or mode or style or type of sensing, not an adjective describing an individual thing to which the experience relates you.

Rejoinder (Jackson): The "many property" problem. Suppose that in your visual field there is a round yellowy-orange spot and to its right a triangular red blotch. The adverbialist will translate that as "I am appeared to roundly and yellowy-orangely and triangularly and redly." But that translation loses the fact that the roundness and yellowy-orangeness go together and the triangularness and the redness go together. It also loses the part about the triangularness+redness being to the right of the roundness+yellowy-orangeness.

The adverbialist can fix those problems by making his hyphenating move: "I am appeared to roundly-yellowy-orangely and also triangularly-redly and the-second-of-those-being rightly-with-respect-to-the-first," or some such. Jackson makes a somewhat technical semantical objection to that move, that I mentioned in class but won't pursue. I'll just note, in Jacksonian spirit, that the hyphenated version seems false to the way we think of and would talk about the contents of our visual field. The v.f. *is* subjectively a mosaic of colored patches. We would say things like, "There is a round yellowy-orange spot and to its right a triangular red blotch; above them are exactly six blue dots, and down to the left are a green spiky thing and a pink teardrop-shape." The adverbialist *may* be able to adverbialize all that, but the result would be forced and unnatural; indeed, it would sound like Pig Latin, a mere grammatical trick.

Reply 3 (the "Representationalist" reply): In some sense "there is" a green thing involved in your experience of after-imaging. But we often use "there is" without asserting *real, actual existence* ("There is something I'm thinking of that doesn't really exist: the Easter Bunny"). In order to refute materialism, the argument needs to show that there is a real, actual nonphysical thing, and it hasn't done that. Compare: You are hallucinating pink rats. An argument exactly parallel to the After-Image objection would prove that the rats are nonphysical; but rats are physical things. Now, yes, there is a sense in which hallucinated rats are not physical, but it's only that they're not *real*; if they were real they'd be as physical as bricks. The rat argument fails to prove that there are real pink rats. So too, the After-Image argument fails to prove that the green blob is real. And after all, after-images are *illusions*; your visual system tells you there's a green thing before you, when there *isn't* really one. The alleged green thing is as unreal as the rats.

Rejoinder (Russell): The blob is not real?? But you're looking right at it. You're directly acquainted with it. Try again to tell yourself it isn't real! Reply to rejoinder: Remember the rats. You're looking right at them too.

More on the Representational theory of sensory qualities

On the representationalist analysis, for Bertie to experience the green after-image is for Bertie to be visually-representing a green blob located at such-and-such a spot in the room. Since in reality there is no green blob in the room with Bertie, his visual experience is unveridical; after-images are illusions. The sensory quality, the greenness of the blob, is (like the blob itself) an intentional nonexistent.

So the Representational theory of s.q.'s is this: S.q.'s are the characteristically represented properties of real or apparent physical objects in the environment. Bertie's greenness is that of an unreal, illusory object in front of him; the pinkness of the rats is that of nonactual, hallucinated rats; the redness of the irregular patch in my visual field when looking at my son-in-law is the actual redness of his sweatshirt.

And that, again, is how the Representationalist rebuts the After-Image argument. There is a green thing that Bertie is experiencing, but it is not an actual thing. That "there is" is the same weak, lenient non-actualist "there is" that occurs in "There is something that Bertie believes in but that doesn't exist" and in "There is a mythical god that the Greeks worshipped but no one worships any more." (In defending his sense-data, Russell mistook a nonactual material thing for an actual immaterial thing.)

There is one direct argument for the Representational theory, Gilbert Harman's Transparency argument: We normally "see right through" perceptual states to external objects and do not even notice that we are *in* perceptual states; the properties we are aware of in perception are attributed to the objects perceived. "Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree, including relational features of the tree 'from here'."

The Transparency argument can be extended also to the purely hallucinatory case. Suppose you are looking at a real, richly yellow lemon in good light. Suppose also that you then hallucinate a second, identical lemon to the right of the real one. (You may be aware that the second lemon is not real.) Phenomenally, the relevant two sectors of your visual field are just the same; the appearances are just the same in structure. The yellowness involved in the second-lemon appearance is exactly the same property as is involved in the first. But if we agree that the yellowness perceived in the real lemon is just the yellowness of the lemon itself, then the yellowness perceived in the hallucinated lemon—the yellow s.q. involved in the second-lemon appearance—is just the yellowness of the hallucinated lemon itself.

The appeal to transparency makes it immensely plausible that visual experience represents external objects and their apparent properties. But that weak representationalist thesis is no longer very controversial. What the transparency argument as it stands does not show, but only claims, is that *no* experience has *any* other properties that pose problems for materialism. The argument needs to be filled out, and typically is filled out by a further appeal to introspection. The obvious additional premises are: (i) If a perceptual state has relevant mental properties in addition to its

representational properties, they are introspectible. But (ii) not even the most determined introspection ever reveals any such additional properties.

(ii) is pretty clearly false; one thing we can introspect about the tree experience or the lemon experience is what it's like to have that experience. But the latter is a higher-order property of the experience itself, not a sensory quality figuring in the experience. The antirepresentationalist must show that there is a sensory quality of some kind that figures in the experience but is not merely a representatum.

Objections to the Representational theory

Objection 1. So *there are green blobs that do not exist?* That sounds nearly contradictory—too close to “There exist green things that do not exist,” or “There are green things that aren't.” At the very least it's weird metaphysics, a desperate lunge to save materialism. Reply: No; we are all stuck with things that do not exist, strange as that can be made to sound. We can list some of them: the Easter Bunny, the free lunch, hallucinatory rats, the planet Vulcan. It's a plain fact that there are things that don't exist, whatever metaphysical account may then be given of them.

Objection 2: The mere representation of greenness does not suffice for phenomenal green, for something's looking green to a subject. One could say the word “green” aloud, or semaphore it from a cliff, or send it in Morse code, or write the French word “vert” on a blackboard, or point to a color chip. Where's the qualitiveness in any of those things? Reply: Remember, the representation must be mental, specifically a visual representation. And it must be produced by either a normal human visual system or by something functionally like one. (Thus, the representational theory of s.q.'s cannot be purely representational, but must appeal to some further factor, such as (here) appealing to an underlying functionalism.)

Objection 3: The Representational theory seems to require color realism. In this discussion, “green” has meant the objective, public property that inheres in some physical objects. But many people reject color realism. And not just any realist theory of color would serve, either: One could not, without circularity, explicate phenomenal greenness in terms of represented real-world color and then turn around and construe real physical greenness as a disposition to produce sensations of phenomenal greenness. What sort of real-world property is an “objective,” physical color? There is a variety of realist answers, though none of them is uncontroversial or even very plausible. Reply: The theory does not in fact require color realism. All it requires is that the colors we attribute (truly or falsely) to objects are conceptually prior to phenomenal color. (Though the latter thesis is itself controversial.)

Objection 4: Mental states can have qualitative character without being intentional or representational at all. It's not obvious that pain represents, or itch. Moods such as free-floating anxiety or general elation don't seem to represent at all. Reply: Actually such states do have a bit of not-very-interesting intentional content. Anxiety, e.g., represents that something bad is about to happen.

(Even if that's true, it's not a very strong reply to the objection. Why not?)

Counterexamples: The Representational theory entails that there can be no qualitative difference between experiences without a representational difference, which generalization invites proposed cases in which two experiences share their intentional content and differ in their sensory qualities. Christopher Peacocke gave several examples of that kind. In the leading one, your experience represents two (actual) trees, at different distances from you but as being of the same physical height and other dimensions; “[y]et there is also some sense in which the nearest tree occupies more of your visual field than the more distant tree.” That sense is a qualitative sense, and Peacocke maintains that the qualitative difference is unmatched by any representational difference.

Michael Tye and others have rejoined that there are after all identifiable representational differences constituting the qualitative differences in the trees example. Tye points to the fact that one of the trees subtends a larger visual angle from the subject's point of view, and he argues that this fact is itself (nonconceptually) represented by the visual experience. I don't think that's very plausible, but at least one of the trees is represented as being *farther from the subject* than the other.

Another of Peacocke's examples is that of the Necker reversible-cube. (Or consider the famous duck-rabbit.) A single and unchanging figure that seems to be univocally represented by vision nonetheless gives rise to differing visual experiences when we flip from seeing it as one thing to seeing it as another.

Representationalists of course respond by trying to specify distinct properties as characteristic representata in the differing experiences. For example, a “duck” experience of the duck-rabbit will represent the property of being a bill without representing that of being an ear; the “rabbit” experience will do the opposite.

A (here) final counterexample offered by Ned Block: blurry vision. If I am looking at a real duck and my vision blurs slightly, there is a qualitative change in my visual experience. But I am not representing the duck as having gotten blurry.