

21 Qualia and Intentional Content: Reply to Block

I agree with most of Ned Block's illuminating and ingenious essay. I think that understanding consciousness and the nature of phenomenal aspects of experience is an important and difficult enterprise. It is not an enterprise to which I have contributed much. I hope that investigating the relations between Block's projects and mine will be fruitful.

I

In my (1979) I held that color concept-possession is subject to nonindividualist thought experiments. I also maintained that in the thought experiments the individual's "non-intentional phenomenal experience" remains the same (p. 78). I would now issue cautions about applying the term 'experience' to phenomenal awareness, and would prefer the phrase 'nonintentional phenomenal aspects of our mental lives'. But with these qualifications, I still hold these positions. I think that having certain ordinary color concepts is constitutively dependent, partly, on bearing relations to the colors in a broader environment. And I think, with Block, that there are nonrepresentational qualitative mental properties.

I did not argue for the latter view. The representationist view of sensations and their properties—the view that representational properties are the only properties of sensations¹—has long seemed to me to resist belief. Somehow it has not resisted the belief of various other philosophers. But then philosophers sometimes overcome all natural resistance. Block's ingenious and varied arguments against representationism clarify and deepen my sense of its extreme implausibility. A value of philosophy lies in scrutinizing and coming to understand what one tends to take for granted. Block's work realizes this value very richly.

What is surprising to me is that representationism has to be argued against so conscientiously. Not only does it seem to me beyond belief, I know of no forceful arguments for it. The defensive maneuvers that Block considers and criticizes seem to me to derive from philosophical strategy—an attempt to make a programmatic metaphysical ideology, encompassing a scheme for confronting the mind–body problem, “come out right”—rather than from insight into the matters at hand. I find it unfortunate that this habit, contracted in the hoary metaphysical and theological traditions, has reappeared—often joined with vague appeals to introspection—to mark currents in contemporary philosophy.

The “argument” for representationism from the diaphanousness of introspection seems to me to have no force. As an argument meant to undermine what Block calls phenomenalism, it is beside the point. As an argument for representationism, it is question begging.

Of course our attention is normally focused on the redness of the tomato when we are seeing a tomato. That is because physical objects and their properties are the primary

objects of our perceptual systems. But no one, except a philosopher who held that we only “see” sense data and have to infer the existence of physical properties from these “data,” would hold otherwise. Hardly anyone nowadays who believes in qualia rests the view on the sort of flat-footed, vaguely specified introspection that the argument from diaphanousness invites us to engage in. Diaphanousness, properly understood, and the primacy of perception of physical properties can be granted by nearly everyone.

Moreover, as Block points out, considering the situation when we close our eyes, or considering elements of awareness common to veridical perceptual experience and misperceptions or hallucinations, shifts the import of diaphanousness in ordinary perception. Diaphanousness is a normal but not ubiquitous phenomenon.

The thought experiment that centers on diaphanousness does nothing to show that someone who can conceptually distinguish the tomato’s redness from the characteristic quality of his perceptual *experience* of the tomato’s redness is unable, with appropriate prompting, to *attend* to the latter. It seems to me that doing so is no great feat.

Some philosophers, including defenders of qualia, have maintained that qualia should be seen as “postulated” by some philosophical or other explanatory theory.² This view seems to me quite mistaken. The characteristic quality of the experience is not a “theoretical” postulation. We are directly aware of qualia. Even children and nonsophisticates are directly aware of them. Distinguishing them from the objects of perception, and attending to them, does depend on having and knowing how to apply immediately the relevant concepts of qualia. Such concepts almost always enter one’s conceptual repertoire *after* concepts of physical objects of perception. Probably young children lack such concepts. But the qualia themselves are present and are conscious sensational elements in perception all along. Children start with a phenomenal consciousness of qualia, and develop an ability to introspect them and discriminate them from the physical properties that they play a role in representating, once they gain the relevant concepts. It seems to me desperate and mistaken to maintain that qualia are theoretical postulates. Such a view seems almost as strained as representationism itself.

Of course, attention is one thing; awareness, another. The argument that centers on attention gives no reason to think that the quality of the perceptual experience is not an element in one’s awareness when one is having an ordinary perception of a tomato. One need not have conceptualized the awareness, or be able to make it a discriminated object of attention, in order to have the awareness. But it seems quite possible to conceptualize it and make it an object of attention so as to discriminate it from the physical objects and properties that are the objects of vision. The representationist may disagree with all this. But the argument from diaphanousness provides not the slightest reason to do so.

The argument from diaphanousness is hardly better than one that would claim that we cannot be perceptually aware of the surface of an object because no matter how hard we

try to inspect the surface, we end up inspecting the object. Of course, there are disanalogies. Everyone agrees that we see, and have from the beginning different perceptual representations for, both surface and object. Nearly everyone agrees that we see physical color and do not see—or otherwise perceive in the ordinary sense of ‘perceive’—qualia. And we do not have perceptual or conceptual representations from the beginning that take the qualia as objects. We gain conceptual representations for our phenomenal awareness only later.

But the issue is not about seeing or perception. It is about attention and awareness. The fact that the qualia and the redness of the tomato are indistinguishable to attention in an introspection that abstracts from conceptualizing a difference is not at all relevant to whether there are two properties one can be aware of—either nonconceptually, or through attentive, introspective, conceptually guided representation and discrimination.

An individual can through perception be aware of an object’s surface without attending to the surface or distinguishing it from the object. Perhaps an individual could be aware of an object’s surface without even having conceptualized it as a surface. But in the absence of conceptualizing it, the individual is not going to be able to attend discriminatively to a difference between seeing the object and seeing its surface. Once the distinction is conceptualized, one can attend to one or the other property in visual experience.

Thus the argument from diaphanousness does not come to grips with what Block calls phenomenism. It argues from premises that are, or should be, accepted by the opponent of representationism. It does not provide an illuminating argument from these premises. It simply takes them to defeat or embarrass phenomenism. The conclusion amounts to *assuming* that phenomenism is false. So it begs the question as a positive argument for representationism.

I am sympathetic with Block’s belief that there are qualia that have *no* representative function. The representationist view of orgasm would be apt for future joke books about analytic philosophy. The less risqué example of visual blur—which has been discussed by others, including Block elsewhere, and Loar in this volume—also seems telling. The fuzziness in near-sighted perceptual experiences does not normally represent blur in the object. Nor need it represent anything else, such as some defect in the visual system. It is a defect or a noise in the medium of representation, not an application of a perceptual category by the perceptual system. It *can be taken* to indicate a defect in the medium. But it need not be so taken, or used in any way. That is, neither the system nor the individual need compensate for the noise or do anything with it. Insofar as this is so, I think that there is no case to be made that it must have representational content or function.

So granting that such noise is an unattended element in one’s awareness does not require granting that the awareness need have a role or content in some representational system, much less be an object of representation. Even if it is used to indicate something about

the visual field, the phenomenological quality of blurriness is the relevant property that is represented as a feature of the visual field. Appealing to the representation of this property to support representationism is to give up opposition to the phenomenist. No phenomenist claims that qualitative properties cannot be represented, or that they are not properties of something—the visual field, sensory awareness, the medium of representation, the mind.

Taking the awareness always to involve representation of some *further* property (e.g., some physical defect in the visual system or blur in the object) has no functional plausibility. For the distinction between the awareness of the noise and something that it represents is not one that always has a role in the cognitive economies of unsophisticated perceivers, especially those who do not have to compensate for the “noise.” It is simply not true that individuals with visual blur are always aware that their eyes are unfocused, or that there is a defect in their visual system. The blur might be an element in their phenomenal awareness, without their being aware of it as blur, much less having any *awareness that*, with respect to it.

When one changes the angle of one’s vision as one looks through progressive bifocal lenses, one’s visual system does not represent a nearby object as changing from having clear markings to having blurred markings. Visual representation of blurred objects (where the blur is either in the objects or in the intervening physical conditions) is normally, I think, phenomenally as well as functionally different from blurred vision. One’s visual system represents the surface well and then badly. There is a particular phenomenal quality to the bad representation, which need have no intentional characteristic in itself. One has no inclination to find blurriness on the edges of the relevant object. It would be incorrect to take blurriness as some other objective property that happens not to be instantiated in any object. Nor is the blurriness normally *about* defects in the system. As I have noted, the individual may not make any use of the blur, even compensatory use. The blurredness is a feature that constitutes a subjective distortion in the mode of representation of objective properties.

Awareness of such qualitative “noise” is not accounted for by regarding it as representation of something further. It is not accounted for by claiming that it has no other properties than its representational ones. Such awareness normally does not have representational properties, at least not representational properties of something further. Even when the qualitative character is noticed and taken to be noise, its representational properties tend to consist in its being used to represent itself. The normal reference is to the visual blur—the qualitative property itself. Only individuals who use the noise in some intentional way for some positive purpose (for example, compensating for the defect)—and not even all such individuals—use it as a way of referring to something beyond the qualitative feature.³

II

Block develops a number of ingenious inversion cases. I agree with him that the reply to the inversion cases that appeals to failures of memory is desperate and in effect question begging. I do not think that these implausible responses have an exclusive claim on the title “externalism about memory.” The content of a memory is normally fixed by the content of what the memory preserves. Normally, the states whose content memory preserves are externalistically individuated.

I am broadly sympathetic with Block’s view that reflection on aspects of inversion cases tell against representationism. But I am interested in certain details of a particular case that he elaborates. I would like to discuss his response to the second main line of objection that he considers to the inverted earth case. This is the worry that the intentional content of the representations of color does not shift when the individual’s environment changes.

Let us suppose that a person is transported to inverted earth with inverting lenses. Let us further suppose that no matter how long he stays, the person is correct in noticing and remembering no phenomenal change. The person’s original conceptual and perceptual representations of blue are causally tied to physical instances of blue in the person’s original environment. The causal ties are linked to recognitional abilities, which are cued by the qualitative nature of the experiences. That qualitative nature remains unchanged. And the person’s memories of blue objects in the original environment, and his recognitional abilities relative to the original environment, remain unchanged—even though the person is transported to a situation in which those abilities cannot without correction be successfully exercised. It seems to me therefore that it is doubtful that the person loses the original conceptual or perceptual representations of blue. Those representations make recognitional use of the phenomenal quality of the original experiences of blue.

Indeed, this tie is almost surely innate in us. The qualitative nature of the experience probably gets its meaning and reference not through the individual’s experience of blue things but through the perceptual system’s having evolved to register blue in things. The system does this as a response to the occurrence of perceptual states with the relevant qualitative feature (or a limited range of qualitative features, which might differ among individuals with the same basic perceptual equipment), given the normal association of this feature with blue objects in the evolution of the system. If this is so, it seems doubtful that a change in the *individual’s* environment, even for a very long period, would suffice to change the *normal* environment that is relevant to fixing the representational content of the phenomenal aspects of his experience. The normal environment seems to be fixed by the evolution of the perceptual system that the individual has, not by the context of the individual’s learning history.

So it is not clear that normal observational representations of colors are conceptual or perceptual representations that can be lost through resettlement, no matter what inversions occur in the environment. Thus the yellow sky will continue to look blue and in a standard sense be represented as blue even for a transfer who remains on Inverted Earth and accommodates to it. In memories of how the sky used to look, for example, the imagined or occurrent perceptual experiences will still apply to blueness.⁴

Of course, the individual could learn by other means that the new sky is yellow, not blue. The individual could then learn to take his phenomenal experience to indicate yellowness. If this learning were embedded thoroughly enough in the individual's automatic perceptual reactions, I suppose there might develop a sense in which sky "looked" yellow to the individual. But this sense would go through a route of inference—however automatically it might come to be sublimated and embedded in the individual's cognitive procedures. So it would not have the same innate base purely in perceptual categories that underlies and warrants the perceptual use of the phenomenal experience to represent blue. So the cognitive way in which the sky looked blue would remain different from the way in which it "looked" yellow. I see no difficulty in allowing both sorts of representation in the same individual.

Thus the relative constancy, under environmental changes, of the innate representational content of phenomenal types need not force a denial that the transfer will *gain* a new meaning and reference for experiences with the relevant qualitative character. The individual's perceptual system could come to function in *normal* perceptual situations—as opposed to memory situations, or situations that made essential use of past recognitions of blue objects—to use perceptual states with the relevant phenomenal quality as indicators of yellowness, not blueness. The individual's belief system could be geared to the "yellow" representational content, not the "blue" one. Whether yellow-representing or blue-representing states, or both sorts of states (all with the same phenomenal character) occur would, I think, depend on the details of the case.

Here I think we should probably acknowledge perceptual and conceptual representations of yellowness in the shifted individual that are analogous to representations of color in a color-blind person. A red-green color-blind person frequently uses perceptual representations that are usually appropriate in normal beings for brown or gray to represent green. But they represent that color in what is, at least for the perceptual system that they share with other members of the species, a deviant way. They cannot discriminate the color purely by the look in a good light. They need to rely on supplementary, contextual cues. Suppose that the shifted individual gains a perceptual and conceptual representation of the color of the inverted-earth sky as yellow. His representation of yellow makes use of a phenomenal quality that is innately appropriate to—and still means, in some uses—*blue*. Then the representation of yellow has the same referent as, but I think different intentional

content from, our perceptual and conceptual representations of yellow. His representations of yellow are analogous to color-blind representations of green. The individual may not always have to rely on contextual cues in quite the way color-blind people do. That is a disanalogy. But like the color-blind person, he will have had to rely on testimonial or inferential activity to establish the referent in the first place.

These points do not undermine Block's conclusions. There may be ways to produce examples in which the evolutionary ties are somehow broken between Earth and Inverted Earth. (And I think that it is an empirical hypothesis that the individuation of representational content of our color perception depends on evolutionary history.) But they seem to me very tough and durable ties. I am doubtful that merely adding that the person who shifts to Inverted Earth is afflicted with amnesia will suffice to deal with the objection. For the supposition is that the individuation of states representing color depends fundamentally on the evolutionary history of the perceptual system, not on anything about the individual's memory.

It is still well to reflect on constancies of phenomenal character despite shifts in representational content within these more complex cases, even though the cases do not involve simple inversions. The individual who gains representations that refer to yellow, but who represents yellow by having phenomenal elements innately associated with blue, has a different intentional content (a "color-blind" content) for those representations. His intentional content is different from the content that we have in our visual representations of yellow—even though he and we share a referent. It is different because it is fundamentally associated with different cognitive procedures, psychologically different modes of recognition. He has a different referent from our normal visual representations of blue. But it has the same phenomenal character.

The shifted individual's visual representations of yellow are associated with a different functional organization, inasmuch as the representation of yellow does not derive from simple exposure to yellowness through individual or evolutionary history, but through learning that the sky is yellow by other means and then using those means to affect his interpretation of his perceptual contents. Still, the example does seem to be one in which the same phenomenal qualitative features are associated with different reference and different intentional content. So, as Block claims, representational content changes without any corresponding change in phenomenal character. I see no plausibility in the idea that the phenomenal character originally associated with blue perceptions must undergo some change under the shifts.

Block mentions the possibility of appealing to Swampmen analogues that lack any evolutionary history. So instead of moving a given person from Earth to Inverted Earth, one considers a person on Earth and a Swampman with compensating lenses on Inverted Earth. I think that such an appeal is legitimate, though I find that such cases are less compelling

to many people than cases involving ordinary persons. The idea underlying the appeal is that the phenomenal qualities of experience are more nearly dependent on their biochemical substrate, whereas the representational characteristics associated with phenomenal qualities are dependent on functional usage and on certain relations to an appropriate normal environment beyond this substrate. These particular relations are not relevant to biochemistry—whether or not biochemistry is itself nonindividualistic. I am sympathetic with Block's conclusion for a variety of reasons. But I believe that the complexities that I have been discussing are interesting in themselves, quite apart from their role in arguments over representationism.

The point I wish to emphasize is that the individual who represents a color (yellow) by having phenomenal qualia that are normally evolutionarily associated with blue would normally have a different intentional content from someone who represents the same color (yellow) by having phenomenal qualia that are normally evolutionarily associated with that color. The reference is the same, but the intentional visual content—the analogue of meaning or sense—is different. Since the individual's recognitional ability is so closely tied to and cued by the qualitative character of the experience, and since mode-of-presentation commonly types such cognitive abilities as perhaps innate recognitional ability, the intentional content or mode of presentation will commonly differ, intrasubjectively, if the qualitative character of the experience differs. So in the cases of color representation, I grant that sameness of phenomenal character is compatible with difference in intentional content, and indeed difference in reference. But I doubt that sameness of intentional content—all the way down, at the finest intrasubjective level of individuating grain—is compatible with difference in phenomenal character. Only sameness of referent is compatible intrasubjectively with discernible difference of phenomenal character. The perceptual intentional content, the perceptual modes of presentation, will commonly be in some way, at some level, different, if phenomenal character is different.

The reason for this correlation is not that phenomenal character is reducible to representational content. There is nothing essentially representational about phenomenal character. At least, there is nothing essentially representational *as of* anything beyond the phenomenal character itself.

The reason that sameness of intentional representational content is not compatible, or at least is not obviously compatible, with difference in phenomenal character is that phenomenal character is commonly an individuating element in the individual's recognitional ability. So it is an element in individuating the intentional representational content of an individual's perceptions.⁵ A given phenomenal character could in principle have been associated with any of various intentional representational contents, inasmuch as it could be involved in any number of nonindexical recognitional representations and recognitional

abilities with different referents. For nonindexical conceptual and perceptual representations, difference in reference entails difference in concept and percept.

III

Block's suggestion that our phenomenal characters, in perception of a given color, vary widely, even among normal humans, is an interesting one. The empirical ground for his suggestion is at first blush striking. Suppose that his suggestion is correct. How might it affect individuation of the intentional aspects of perceptual representation?

I think that one simply must bear in mind that representational content is a kind one of whose roles is that of typing psychological and other cognitive abilities. We find out what kinds there are by investigating and reasoning about different sorts of cognitive transactions and abilities. There are a variety of such transactions and abilities. I think that there is likely to be a variety of overlapping kinds of phenomenal character that individuate overlapping kinds of perceptual intentional content, especially when intersubjective typings are at issue.

The finest differences of phenomenal character within an individual might be relevant to explaining different possible discriminations that the individual might make. Thus, at the most fine-grained level, there are as many perceptual contents as there are phenomenal discriminations—not necessarily pairwise discriminations—that the individual uses, or can use, in perception. But when it comes to normal perceptual tasks outside of discriminative tests in a matching exercise, some of these possible discriminations might be irrelevant. That is, different phenomenal “shades” might be grouped together and treated, in a given type of psychological activity by the individual, as the same phenomenal property for individuating a certain kind of psychological ability, hence intentional content. This happens in our perception of something as red, as opposed to a narrowly discriminated and quickly forgotten shade of red.

The same point applies to individuation of intentional content across individuals. The most dramatic case of this sort is our treating the blind person and ourselves as sharing a concept of red. It is obvious that at a certain level, the psychological abilities of the blind person and of the normally sighted person differ in the representation of the redness of a flower. They have different concepts of red, inasmuch as some of the sighted person's concepts are associated with recognitional abilities through perception. But there remains a sense in which the two can share a thought that the flower is red. In this case, there is a concept of red that does not depend on a visual phenomenal character at all, shareable by different individuals. The relevant shared psychological abilities are associated with a complex of shared background information about red things, and a shared network of

causal relations, through interlocution, back to red things. But the blind person lacks the sighted person's perceptual ability to recognize red things. So there remains an intentional content, or better an array of intentional contents, that they do not share.

I think that the same sort of point may well apply in cases of spectrum shift within a given community. Slight or even medium-level phenomenal differences among individuals might instantiate instances of the same phenomenal kind, where the kind is relevant to understanding shared perceptual-recognitional abilities, especially those that hinge in any way on communication or other shared activities. For example, suppose that qualia caused by seeing some standard sample of red differ between males and females. There will certainly remain a sense in which the sample looks red, even looks the same shade of red to the different individuals. Here 'looks red' is understood in terms of being in the same perceptual/representational state a normal human being is in when, in normal favorable circumstances, he or she is looking at a red object.⁶ Differences in the "shades" of qualia associated with the standard sample seem to be irrelevant for typing verbal and even discriminative similarities between the individuals. They are irrelevant to individuating this sense of 'looks red'. Here our understanding of 'looks red' cuts through the presumed qualitative differences between the individuals' qualia and counts them as instances of the same representative type.⁷ Whether they might count as instances of the same phenomenal type for purposes of intersubjective typing, in something like the way different shades count as falling within a given generic color, seems to me to be an open question. Groupings of phenomenal qualia seem to me to be open to psychological investigation. But I am sympathetic to the view that intersubjective typing might group together qualitatively different qualia as instances of single qualitative genera. It is, of course, not obvious that the groupings will, in every case, for every explanatory enterprise, closely parallel groupings of objective colors.

Such coarse-grained kinds would be compatible with the finer-grained kinds relevant to explaining the narrowest intrasubjective individual discriminations. Insofar as one considers the finest-grained discriminations of phenomenal character, it might well be that there are some spectrum shifts among members of a given species, in regard to reference to a given objective color property. Block's empirical evidence certainly suggests such shifts.

Insofar as different individuals have different phenomenal characters—different qualia individuated in the finest-grained way—in perceiving the same color, there is no question of who is right and who is wrong, assuming that there is comparable sensitivity and comparable functional efficiency among the individuals. Right and wrong hinge on the referent, the objective color. Different individuals can have different modes of perceptual presentation in perceiving the referent. Some of these modes might be standard for a given species. Others might be statistically somewhat deviant. And there may be a great variety

of modes within a given species. These are empirical matters. Block is certainly right that these matters cannot be reduced to questions about the meaning of words, or to questions about the representational functions of qualia.

Notes

1. It is assumed that reflexive self-representation by the sensation does not count.
2. See Shoemaker (1994a), pp. 291–314; and (1994b), pp. 21–38.
3. I assume throughout that we are considering representation as something more than the sort of information-carrying exhibited by tree rings. Even in cases where the noise is taken to be a sign of defects in the visual system, the qualia does not always have the representational content that indicates the defect. Sometimes the individual takes the qualia to be an object of reference from which he infers some defect in the system—as a natural sign of defectiveness rather than itself having intentional content that means the defect. These are delicate matters. The key point is that such qualitative noise does not always have intentional content, particularly when it is not used for any representational purpose.
4. Block notes this point and indicates that it has “more than a little force.” I believe that he can handle the objection to his overall strategy. I am sympathetic with his overall strategy, but want to discuss principles of individuation that are relevant to this particular example.
5. I leave open whether it is *part* of the intentional content. I am inclined not to regard it strictly as a part of *conceptual* content because of abstract uses of the content, removed from recognitional uses.
6. I agree with Block and others that there is also a sense of ‘looks’ according to which red will ‘look’ differently to males and females, given the above stated supposition. Whether we have a clearly established public use for ‘looks red’ that follows this usage is more doubtful, especially if Block is right that qualia differ widely among normal humans’ perception of red.
7. It is compatible with this point that differences in phenomenal quality determine differences in intentional content, at a certain fine-grained level of individuating intentional content for intrasubjective and even inter-subjective purposes. It is even compatible with this point that in cases of more coarse-grained individuation, phenomenal character (finely individuated) plays some looser role in the individuation of representational content.

References

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