Paul Raymont, Oct. 15, 2005 (paulraymont@trentu.ca, paulraymont@hotmail.com)

Some Experienced Qualities Belong to the Experience

Abstract

In this paper, a criticism of representationalist views of consciousness is developed. These views are often supported by an appeal to a transparency thesis about conscious states, according to which an experience does not itself possess the qualities of which it makes one conscious. The experience makes one conscious of these qualities by representing them, not by instantiating them. Against this, it is argued that some of the properties of which one is conscious are had by the conscious state itself. Only by adopting this view can we account for certain perceptual incompatibilities, such as the fact that one cannot see a stick as being both bent and not bent. This sort of experience is impossible because it would require that an experience have, and not just represent, incompatible features.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is a transparency thesis about conscious states. According to this thesis, the qualities of which one becomes directly conscious in the course of having a mental state are merely represented by that state and are not possessed by it. Proponents of this view include Gilbert Harman (1990, 1995), Fred Dretske (1995, 2000), and Michael Tye (1995, 2003). Despite the recent popularity of the transparency thesis, a closer reflection on the nature of some perceptual experiences shows it to be false.

Before presenting an objection to the transparency thesis, let us first clarify it by means of an example involving a visual experience. While seeing a red tomato one becomes *directly* conscious of certain features, qualities that define what it is like to have

that experience. For instance, one is aware of the redness of the tomato. On the basis of this awareness one may become *indirectly* conscious, on the basis of inference, of certain other properties (e.g., of the age or ripeness of the tomato). The transparency thesis concerns the qualities of which one becomes directly conscious by having the experience. According to this thesis, these qualities are just represented, and are not had, by the experience. The experience is a state by means of which one becomes aware of these qualities, but it does not itself instantiate them. By having the experience, one does of course get some information about the experience itself – for example, that it represents so-and-so qualities – but this, allegedly, makes one only indirectly conscious of the experience's properties. On the transparency thesis, the subject of the perceptual state does not thereby become directly conscious of that state's intrinsic features, the features of the experience that is doing the representing.

Some of its proponents (e.g., Tye 2003) use the transparency thesis to support a general claim about all conscious states (including, e.g., moods and bodily sensations such as pain), according to which any such state is a representation that makes its subject directly conscious not of its own qualities but, rather, of properties that it represents other things as having. A conscious state is thus supposed to be a state by means of which one becomes conscious only of *other* things and not of the representing, conscious state itself; it is a state *by which*, but not *of which*, one is conscious.

While the transparency thesis is used to support a claim about all conscious states, the focus of the following critique will remain on perceptual states. It is of these conscious states that the transparency thesis is most plausible. In spite of this, it can be shown that some of the qualities of which one is made directly conscious by a perceptual

experience are had by the conscious state, or experience, itself, and that only on the basis of this claim can there be an acceptable account of certain perceptual incompatibilities.

2. An Explanation of Perceptual Incompatibilities

Perceptual incompatibilities are cases in which perceptual states exclude each other, so that no experience can involve both of them. For instance, one cannot see a stick as being both bent and not bent at the same position, *p*, at the same time, *t*.

One might be tempted to account for this fact by adverting to an inconsistency in the represented content, equating the incapacity to see a stick as bent and straight with an incapacity perceptually to represent mutually exclusive properties. Thus, the stick's being both bent and not bent is inconsistent, and so cannot be depicted in an experience simply because one cannot perceptually represent inconsistent contents.

This approach will not work, for some perceptual experiences do represent impossible circumstances. Tim Bayne provides the example of inverting spectacles, which render one's visual contents inconsistent with one's tactile contents (Bayne 2004: 227). In fact, inconsistencies can even be represented within the same perceptual modality. Thus, Tye (2003: 38-39) notes that some pictures depict impossible circumstances. He also notes the waterfall effect, in which, after staring at a waterfall for some time, if one looks at the adjacent rock face, a portion of the rock surface will appear to be moving, but will also appear not to be moving (relative to the area around it) (cf. Crane 1988).

To revert to the original example involving the stick, it is not difficult to see how one *can* perceive it as being both bent and not bent. For, while one cannot *see* the stick as being bent and not bent at *p* at *t*, one *can* represent this contradiction in polymodal

experience. Consider the bent-stick illusion, in which one sees a stick that is immersed in water as being bent.[1] Suppose that while seeing it as being bent at *p* at *t*, one also tactually experiences the stick as being not bent at *p* at *t*. (These indices will henceforth be omitted.) The stick is thus experienced as having mutually exclusive properties. Of course, the subject is typically not taken in by the illusion; she does not *believe* that the stick has both these features. Still, its having them is part of the content of her perceptual experience.

In view of this we cannot account for the inability to see a stick as bent and straight simply by noting that this experience would have an inconsistent content, for we can (and do) have experiences that represent inconsistent contents.

The puzzle is this: in some cases incompatible features *can* be represented by a subject, but in other cases they cannot be – for example, one cannot see a stick as bent and not bent; this latter sort of case stands in need of an explanation. Given that inconsistencies can sometimes be represented, why are there these other cases in which they cannot be?

In order to answer this question, note that while incompatible features can be represented, they cannot be *had* by something. Even though one can see a rock face as both moving and not moving, it cannot really *be* moving and not moving, and while one can see and feel the stick as being bent and not bent, it cannot really *be* bent and not bent. This observation, that nothing can *possess* incompatible properties at the same time, can be exploited to explain why one cannot see the stick as bent and not bent. To wit, doing so would require that one's visual experience not only represented but also *had* incompatible features.

The idea is that the inability to see a stick as bent and not bent arises from a limitation on the properties that can be possessed by an experience, as distinguished from a limitation merely on the features that the experience can represent. No single experience can have the qualities that it would need to have in order visually to represent both the presence and absence of a bend in the stick, for the qualities in question are mutually incompatible; and, while something can *represent* the joint instantiation of mutually incompatible features, nothing can *have* mutually incompatible features (at the same time). Just as the stick cannot really be both bent and not bent, so, too, can no mental state encode in the same portion of the visual field both that the stick is bent and that it is not bent.

Note that the claim is that one cannot represent *in the same portion of the visual field* the stick as being bent and straight. This reference to the visual field is needed, for while the claim initially was that one cannot possibly see a stick as bent and not bent, there are in fact ways of visually representing a stick as having these incompatible features. For example, one might see the stick as being straight while seeing its reflection in a distorting mirror that makes it look bent. Here, the subject sees the same stick as both having and lacking a bend, but she does so only by means of different portions of her visual field. The reference to the visual field is therefore required in order to set aside such cases and more narrowly specify the kind of visual representation that cannot be had. One cannot see, in the same portion of the visual field, a stick as being bent and not bent, and this is because one's experience cannot possess the qualities that it would need in order to depict the presence and absence of a bend in the same part of the visual field.

3. Against the Transparency Thesis

It has here been proposed that the reason why one cannot see a stick as bent and not bent (in the same part of the visual field) is that doing so would require one's experience not only to represent but also to *possess* incompatible features. If so, then it is plausible that when either one of these mutually excluding features is instantiated in isolation from the other in connection with an experience, it is possessed (and not just represented) by that experience. Let us now consider whether these incompatible features are, when thus severally instanced by different experiences, features of which the subjects of the respective experiences are directly conscious. If they are, then the transparency thesis is false, since some of the qualities of which one is directly conscious in perceptual experience are had by the experience itself.

A proponent of the transparency thesis may deny that the mutually exclusive qualities are (when separately instanced) features of which the subject is directly conscious. She might agree that the perceptual incompatibility involving the stick arises from the fact that the relevant states in the perceiver cannot possess incompatible features, but deny that the subject is directly conscious of these features (when they are separately instanced). Perhaps, for example, the reason why one cannot see the stick as bent and not bent is simply that doing so would require the possession of incompatible properties by the underlying neural mechanisms that give rise to one's visual experience, where these underlying features are not ones of which one is directly conscious.

This objection fails because we know a priori that one cannot see a stick as both bent and not bent (in the same portion of the visual field – this qualification will generally be omitted in what follows). However, if this incompatibility really were rooted in a pair

of mutually excluding features of underlying neural mechanisms, features of which we are largely ignorant, then it would be hard to see how our knowledge of the incompatibility could be a priori; for if the incompatible features were thus hidden, we would not know of their mutual incompatibility until we discovered them. Even if we do come to know the relevant facts about the underlying neural mechanisms, this discovery will yield merely empirical knowledge, and so will not account for how it is that we knew a priori, in advance of any such discovery, that it is impossible for anyone ever to see a stick as bent and not bent. In short, if this discovery were all that grounded our knowledge of the incompatibility, then before attaining it we would have been in the position of having to wait and see what the empirical research turned up. But we do not, in fact, need to wait and see whether anyone can see the stick as bent and not bent. We already know that nobody can possibly do so.

It is important to be clear about the grade of modality that accrues to this claim. When it is said that one *cannot possibly* see a stick as bent and not bent, this is meant to express knowledge of a necessary truth, one that holds in all possible worlds. It is not just that we human creatures *happen* to be incapable of seeing a stick as bent and not bent, just as we are incapable of hearing certain high-frequency sounds, but rather that no possible subject can have this sort of experience. However, if the transparency theorist's above objection were well-founded, then the statement that one cannot see a stick as bent and straight would lack the requisite degree of modal strength. To see why, suppose, in accordance with the objection, that each of the incompatible features finds its home in the underlying neural mechanisms, and that these features are not, when separately instanced, properties of which one is directly conscious. Suppose, then, that when one sees a stick as

bent, this experience arises from the instantiation of some feature, F, in the underlying neural mechanisms, and that when one sees a stick as being straight, that experience arises from the presence of some other property, G, in the neural mechanisms; and suppose that the reason why one cannot see the stick as bent and straight is that F and G are mutually incompatible.

We must now inquire about the relation between these underlying mechanisms and the experiences to which they respectively give rise. Suppose the relation in question is causal. That is, suppose that the instantiation of F causes one to see the stick as bent, while the instantiation of G would cause one to see it as not bent. If so, and if the only basis of the inability to see the stick as bent and not bent were the incompatibility of F and G, then matters could have been such that one was able to see the stick as bent and not bent. This is because causal relations are contingent; they do not hold across all possible worlds. Hence, they could have been otherwise. For instance, the causal relations could have been such that F, together with other neural properties with which it is compatible, might cause one visually to experience the stick as bent but also as not bent. Here, seeing the stick as not bent is caused not by G but by some other neural feature, one that is compatible with F.[2] So, if the inability to see a stick as bent and straight resulted simply from the incompatibility of two underlying mechanisms that respectively cause one to see sticks as bent and to see them as not bent, then the impossibility of one's seeing the stick as bent and straight would be a merely 'empirical' or natural impossibility. We would thus have only the result that human subjects *happen* in fact to be so constituted that they cannot, given the natural limitations that arise from their design, see a stick as bent and straight. While there would be this natural limitation on

their powers, it would be possible for matters to have been otherwise. That is, it would be possible for human subjects to have had the ability to see at once, in the same portion of the visual field, the stick as being bent and not bent. But this is not possible. When it is said that one *cannot* see a stick as both bent and not bent, 'cannot' should be taken to indicate a higher grade of modal strength than just 'cannot, given the causal relations and our actual constitution'.

A critic might reply that instead of regarding the relation between F and seeing the stick as bent as a causal relation, we should think of the relation in terms of supervenience or realization. Thus, when a subject see the stick as bent, that experience supervenes upon, or is realized or implemented by, a neurological state that involves the instantiation of F. Similarly, if he at some other time sees the stick as straight, that experience supervenes on a state that involves G.

Unfortunately, while such supervenience or realization relations introduce a closer, more direct connection than causation, the connection is still too weak to make it inconceivable that anyone should ever see a stick as both bent and not bent. After all, while our experiences of seeing the stick as bent may well supervene upon instantiating F, it does not follow that all conceivable experiences of this sort must also be realized by F. There are, possibly, other ways of realizing or implementing that experience that do not involve F. Moreover, it is at least conceivable that some such alternative implementation involves no features that are incompatible with G. Hence, we would again have the unwanted result that while one cannot, in fact, see a stick as bent and straight, it is at least *conceivable* and thus possible that some subject should see, in the same portion of the visual field, a stick as being both bent and not bent.

4. Conclusion

In the end, there is no mystery about the identity of the mutually excluding features that prevent our seeing the stick as both bent and straight. In order to specify them, we need not conduct an investigation into the underlying mechanisms that subserve our conscious states. The incompatible features can be identified by reflecting on the nature of the relevant experiences, for the features are, when separately instanced, qualities of which one becomes directly conscious by having the experiences in question. These qualities involve colour qualia and their distribution in various shapes across one's visual field. These qualia simply cannot be distributed in such a way as to bend and simultaneously not bend at a given position. For them to do so would be for one's experience to possess (and not merely represent) mutually excluding features.

These qualities are, when separately instanced, had, and not merely represented, by experiences. Also, they are qualities of which the subject of such an experience becomes directly conscious. So, contrary to the transparency thesis about conscious states, some of the qualities of which one becomes directly conscious in having an experience are possessed by the experience itself.

Notes

[1] Bayne (2000) considers the case where one sees the stick as being bent while feeling it to be straight. So does Tye (2003: 38). Following Tye (2003: 179 n. 10), let us set aside the fact that that here touch corrects vision, making one see the stick as being straight. It seems possible for some other creature to have a perceptual system that allows it to see a stick as bent while feeling it to be straight, and since this is a convenient illustration of one's perceptual systems representing contradictory appearances, something that our systems do in the other cases that I have cited from Bayne and Tye.

[2] One might object that *any* feature that led one to see the stick as not bent would have to be incompatible with F, since any two properties are mutually incompatible if they cause incompatible effects. However, on the transparency view, there would be no incompatible effects in the given case. For on that view, seeing the stick as bent and not bent would be a matter of *representing* incompatible features, and the features of *representing* a bend and *representing* the absence of a bend are not mutually incompatible – after all, we can, and sometimes do (as noted in Section 2, above), represent both the presence and the absence of a property.

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