

Is Phenomenal Character Out There in the World?

JEFF SPEAKS

University of Notre Dame

Representationalist views of consciousness are now probably widely enough held that they deserve to be called the orthodoxy in the philosophy of mind. This situation is largely due to the groundbreaking work of Michael Tye, who has done more than anyone to defend the view that the phenomenal character of an experience is (or supervenes on) a representational property of the experience. It is therefore surprising to find this view rejected—apparently quite dramatically—in Tye’s *Consciousness Revisited*. There Tye argues that phenomenal characters aren’t representational properties of experiences at all, but rather are identical to the properties experiences represent:

“The . . . phenomenal character of a perceptual experience consists in, and is no more than, the complex of qualities the experience represents. Thus, the phenomenal character of the experience of red just is red. In being aware of red, I am aware of what it is like to experience red, since what it is like to experience red is simply red. . . . The phenomenal character of an experience, then, is out there in the world . . .” (119)

On the face of it, the gap between the now-standard representationalist view of phenomenal character and Tye’s new position could hardly be greater: redness, of course, is not a representational property, and the redness of a thing does not supervene on its representational properties; so the claim that red is a phenomenal character is on that score alone inconsistent with representationalist views of phenomenal character.

This paper has two main aims. One is to argue for the somewhat surprising conclusion that Tye’s apparently radical new view is not a change in view at all, but a notational variant of a standard representationalist theory. My more general aim, though, is to lay out a bit more clearly than is usually done the basic metaphysics of representationalist views of

consciousness. In the end, what I will argue is that unclarity on this score is what has permitted the choice between standard representationalist theories and Tye's new position to appear to be something more than a verbal question. I'll conclude by discussing the bearing of this on the question of whether we can be aware of phenomenal character in introspection, and the relative importance of properties of subjects and properties of experiences in the theory of consciousness.

1. Standard Representationalism

What are the basic claims of representational theories of consciousness? My aim in this section is to answer this question in a way which is, as much as possible, neutral between different versions of representationalism.

1.1. Phenomenal Properties

One way into the basic claims of representational theories of consciousness is to begin by saying what these theories are supposed to be theories of. One way to do this begins with the idea that there is a certain property—being conscious—which people and many animals can have, but which many other things—like tables, chairs, plants, and present day computers—lack. Once we get this far, it is hard to deny that being conscious is a determinable property, and that corresponding to it are many determinates—different ways of being conscious. Let's call these determinate properties *phenomenal properties*. One of the central tasks of a theory of consciousness is to give an account of phenomenal properties.

It should be uncontroversial that phenomenal properties, as introduced above, are properties of conscious subjects. (Hence phenomenal properties, as defined above, pertain to what is sometimes called 'creature consciousness' as opposed to 'state consciousness.') The phenomenal property that I instantiate at a time is what it is like to be me at that time.¹

Just as subjects instantiate phenomenal properties, subjects also instantiate certain representational properties. Subjects can, for example, believe that grass is green, or imagine that grass is red. These representational properties of subjects are relational properties: they are a matter of a subject coming to stand in some propositional attitude relation to a proposition. Let's call these *PA-properties* (for 'propositional attitude') and the relations which these properties involve *PA-relations*. Examples of PA-relations are:

¹ This use of 'phenomenal property' is stipulative rather than an attempt to interpret the various ways in which this term is used in the literature. Chalmers (2006) and Fish (2009), for example, use it to mean, roughly, 'aspects or parts of the phenomenal character of an experience.' By contrast, I'm using this term to sharply distinguish between the phenomenal properties of subjects and the phenomenal characters of experiences.

belief, imagining, supposing. Every PA-property is, for some PA-relation R and some proposition p, identical to the property of standing in R to p.

Representationalist theories of consciousness hold that when a subject instantiates a phenomenal property, she also is instantiating a PA-property. But representationalists also hold more than this: they hold that which phenomenal property a subject instantiates is fixed by the PA-properties she instantiates. There are views of various strength about what this ‘is fixed by’ relation amounts to. Some representationalists might specify it in terms of a supervenience relation; others in terms of identity.² Since this is orthogonal to the issues I want to discuss, I’ll stay neutral on the correct formulation here, though I will occasionally for simplicity focus on the identity-theoretic version:³

[R1] For every phenomenal property, there is some PA-relation and proposition such that the phenomenal property is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of standing in that relation to that proposition.

[$\forall F$: F is a phenomenal property][$\exists R$: R is a PA-relation][$\exists p$: p is a proposition] F = the property of standing in R to p

I take [R1] to be the core claim of representationalist views of consciousness.

1.2. ‘Experience’ and ‘Phenomenal Character’

Our discussion so far has notably made no use of two terms which figure prominently in most representationalist theories: ‘experience’ and ‘phenomenal character.’ How do these get into the story?

Experiences are events which a subject of experience undergoes; and the idea is that the phenomenal properties of the subject of that experience are fixed by the properties of those events. ‘Phenomenal character’ is then introduced as a term for that property of an experience which determines the phenomenal properties of the subject of that experience—which determines, that is, what it’s like for the subject of the experience.⁴ (As above, we can imagine various views of what this determination relation amounts to; as above, since

² The relevant supervenience relation here would presumably be ‘strong supervenience.’ A property class F would strongly supervene on a property class G iff for any worlds w, w* and individuals o, o*, if o in w and o* in w are alike with respect to their G-properties, they are also alike with respect to their F-properties in those worlds.

³ There are difficult questions about whether, to make some thesis like [R1] true, we need to recognize different PA-relations as in the supervenience base for the facts about phenomenal properties. This is orthogonal to the main topic of this paper, so I ignore this complication in the next. I discuss these issues at some length in *Speaks* (forthcoming-b).

⁴ See, e.g., Byrne (2002).

this is orthogonal to what I want to discuss, I will stay neutral on this point.) On this view, we might express the relationship between phenomenal properties, experiences, and phenomenal characters as follows:

[R2] For every phenomenal property, there is some phenomenal character such that that phenomenal property is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of having an experience with that phenomenal character.

$[\forall F: F \text{ is a phenomenal property}][\exists G: G \text{ is a phenomenal character}] F = \text{the property of having some experience } e \text{ such that } G(e)$

[R2] is a bit oversimplified in at least two respects. First, it assumes that all phenomenal properties are traceable to experiences, and hence ignores bodily sensations, moods, and the possibility of ‘cognitive phenomenology.’ Second, it assumes that a subject’s phenomenal properties at a time are always traceable to a single experience rather than a number of distinct but co-occurring experiences. We could interpret ‘experience’ in [R2] broadly enough to encompass bodily sensations, moods, and occurrent thoughts, and we could revise [R2] in the obvious way to leave open the possibility that phenomenal properties are sometimes identical to properties of having multiple experiences with multiple phenomenal characters. But these issues are for present purposes distractions, and I will ignore them in what follows.

Now, just as the representationalist takes phenomenal properties to be identical to representational properties, she will also typically take phenomenal characters to be identical to representational properties. But of course we can’t identify phenomenal characters with PA-properties; if [R2] is true, then phenomenal characters are properties of experiences, and we know that PA-properties are properties of subjects. Whatever else may be true of experiences, they don’t stand in propositional attitude relations to propositions; experiences don’t believe or desire anything.

Hence, if we are going to give a representationalist treatment of phenomenal character, we need to recognize a new category of representational properties, which will be properties of experiences rather than (as with PA-properties) properties of subjects. Let’s call these *experiential representational properties*, or *ER-properties*. Like PA-properties, ER-properties will be relational properties; they will be a matter of an experience standing in some relation to a proposition. And, as with PA-properties, it will be useful to introduce a name for these relations, which we can call *ER-relations*. Every ER-property is, for some ER-relation R and some proposition p, identical to the property of standing in R to p.

The idea that experiences stand in relations to propositions may seem a bit more surprising than the familiar idea that subjects stand in PA-relations to propositions. But this idea is implicit in the pervasive use of phrases like

‘the experience has the content that such-and-such.’ There are only two readings of phrases like this: that the content is a monadic property that the experience instantiates, and that ‘having’ expresses some relation between experiences and contents. Since most people don’t think of propositions as properties—at least not as properties of experiences—the second interpretation seems the more reasonable one. But if this interpretation is right, then the way that most philosophers talk about experiences and content presupposes the existence of ER-properties and the ER-relations of which they are partly constituted.

Given our characterization of ER-properties as representational properties of experiences, we can now state the claim of representationalist theories of phenomenal character as follows:

[R3] For every phenomenal character, there is some ER-relation and proposition such that the phenomenal character is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of standing in that relation to that proposition.

$[\forall F: F \text{ is a phenomenal character}][\exists R: R \text{ is an ER-relation}][\exists p: p \text{ is a proposition}] F = \text{the property of standing in } R \text{ to } p$

Most representationalists, I take it, endorse [R1-3].⁵

1.3. *Sensible Properties*

What does the standard representationalist say about the relationship between the various properties defined above—phenomenal properties, phenomenal characters, PA-properties, and ER-properties—and properties, like redness, which our experiences represent objects as having?

Let’s use *sensible properties* as a name for the properties our experiences represent objects as having. Then we can adopt the following principle:

[PROP] Every proposition to which an experience can stand in an ER-relation is, for one or more sensible properties, the proposition that those properties are instantiated in the environment.

Of course, the view that the propositions which are the contents of experiences are existential propositions rather than, for example, singular propositions, is controversial. (In fact, my own view is that the latter position is correct.) But as this is orthogonal to the points under discussion, we can for simplicity adopt [PROP] without loss. Given [PROP] and [R3], we can derive

⁵ But not all: one could endorse [R1] but be skeptical that there are events involving subjects—experiences—which have the sorts of properties which [R2] and [R3] require. This, I take it, is the view of Byrne (2009). More on this below.

[R4] Every phenomenal character is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of bearing an ER-relation to the proposition that one or more sensible properties are instantiated in the environment.

And from [R2] and [R4] we can derive

[R5] Every phenomenal property is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of having an experience which bears an ER-relation to the proposition that one or more sensible properties are instantiated in the environment.

Setting aside the above qualifications about bodily sensations vs. experiences, and supervenience theses vs. identity claims—which, as noted above, are for present purposes beside the point—I think that [R1-5] are a pretty fair summary of the basic outlines of standard representationalist theories of consciousness. To be sure, the terminology here—which emphasizes the distinction between properties of experiences and properties of subjects—is a bit nonstandard. But it's just hard to see what representational theories of consciousness could be, if not theories which affirm [R1-5].

2. Tye's Identification of Phenomenal Character and Sensible Qualities

With this characterization of the standard representationalist view on the table, let's turn to Tye's alternative, and ask whether phenomenal character really is, as Tye says, 'out there in the world', and whether the phenomenal character of an experience of red could really be redness itself.

Why does Tye adopt this view? Because, he thinks, the standard representationalist view just outlined conflicts with the transparency of experience:

"... consider again what the thesis of transparency tells us. It tells us that in the case of perceptual experiences, the only qualities of which we are introspectively aware are qualities of external things if they are qualities of anything at all. But intuitively, we are aware of phenomenal character when we introspect. The conclusion to draw is that the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience consists in, and is no more than, the complex of qualities the experience represents. Thus, the phenomenal character of the experience of red just is red. In being aware of red, I am aware of what it is like to experience red, since what it is like to experience red is simply red."⁶

Here Tye seems to argue as follows:

1. When we introspect, we are only aware of properties our experience represents external things as having. (Transparency)

⁶ Tye (2009), 119. For a similar argument on which Tye's argument is modeled, see Nida-Rümelin (2007).

2. When we introspect, we are aware of phenomenal character.
3. Phenomenal characters are properties our experience represents external things as having. (1, 2)

The argument is valid, and both premises seem pretty plausible; and it delivers as its conclusion Tye's thesis that the phenomenal character of an experience of red just is redness—and, more generally, that the phenomenal character of an experience is identical to the sensible qualities that experience represents.

It is then easy to extend the argument to entail the falsity of the standard representationalist picture outlined in the last section:

4. Our experiences do not represent external things as standing in ER-relations to propositions.
5. Phenomenal characters are not properties of standing in ER-relations to propositions. (3, 4)

(5) is just the denial of [R3], the basic representationalist claim about phenomenal character.⁷

The argument also tells us how to replace [R3]. The properties our experiences represent external objects as having are sensible properties; hence, if (3) is true, phenomenal characters must be sensible properties:

[T1] For every phenomenal character, there is some sensible property with which it is identical.⁸

$[\forall F: F \text{ is a phenomenal character}][\exists G: G \text{ is a sensible property}] F = G$

[T1] is plainly inconsistent with [R3], since together they entail that sensible properties like redness are identical to experiential representational properties. But that is of course crazy; my pen is red, but does not on that account bear some representational relation to a proposition. Just in virtue of being red, a thing does not represent anything as red. Parallel remarks show that

⁷ Oddly, Tye (2009) still endorsed a supervenience version of [R3]. This is odd, since it's not easy to see how the relevant supervenience claim can even be formulated, given that experiences are not colored, and hence on this view don't instantiate phenomenal characters. Tye now rejects the supervenience version of [R3]; see the concluding pages of Tye (forthcoming-a).

⁸ Tye calls this 'strong property representationalism.' (2013, 16–17) But this is a bit confusing, since this is an identity claim involving no representational properties.

[T1] is inconsistent with [R4]. (By contrast, [R1] and [R5] can remain; more on the significance of this below.)

And once we have [T1] on the table, we must reject [R2] as well. For the conjunction of [R2] with [T1] entails that every phenomenal property is identical to the property of having an experience which instantiates some sensible property. But just consider the phenomenal property I instantiate when I look at a red expanse. It simply is not true that for me to instantiate that property is for me to have an experience which is itself red.

But we can't simply delete [R2], and put nothing in its place. For without something like [R2], we lack any connection between phenomenal properties and phenomenal character. And, as stressed above, one central task of a theory of consciousness is to give an account of phenomenal properties. If Tye can't explain how phenomenal characters are related to phenomenal properties—to what it's like for the subject—he'll have sidestepped rather than answered the central question about consciousness.

3. The Relationship between Phenomenal Properties and Phenomenal Character

As a way of pressing this general worry about the relationship between phenomenal properties and phenomenal character, Speaks (forthcoming-a) offered the following *reductio* of [T1], using 'RED' as a term for the phenomenal character of the experience of red:

1. RED = red. (T1)
 2. $\forall x (\text{red}(x) \rightarrow (\text{RED}(x)))$ (1)
 3. My pen is red.
 4. My pen is RED. (2, 3)
 5. $\forall x (\text{RED}(x) \rightarrow \text{there's something that it is like to be } x)$
- C. There's something that it is like to be my pen. (4, 5)

Tye (forthcoming-b) finds two flaws in this argument. (He actually discusses two versions of this sort of argument, and raises objections to each; since both apply to the present argument, I discuss them each with respect to it.) His first objection is that the argument relies

“on the assumption that what it is for something to have a phenomenal character is for it to instantiate a certain property just as what it is for my

pen to have the color red is for it to instantiate the property of being red. The property instantiation model is not the only model, however, and I reject it.

An alternative model is the semantic value model. . . . The semantic value of a predicate is not usually a property the predicate instantiates. Rather it is a property the predicate represents. Furthermore, not every entity that represents a property has that property as its semantic value . . . The entity must itself be the right kind of entity. . . .

Correspondingly, what it is for an experience to have a phenomenal character is for that experience to have a certain property complex as its phenomenal character. This complex is represented by the experience, not instantiated by it.”⁹

Tye is surely correct that, given [T1], experiences must represent rather than instantiate phenomenal characters. (After all, the phenomenal character of the experience of red is, given [T1], redness itself, and the experience represents rather than instantiates redness.) He is also surely correct that things can represent properties without instantiating them. What is less obvious is how this makes contact with the above *reductio*.

On one interpretation, Tye is denying that my pen really does instantiate a phenomenal character, and hence denying that premise (4), the claim that my pen instantiates the phenomenal character of the experience of red, follows from [T1] plus the assumption that my pen is red. But if the inference from (1) and (3) to (4) is invalid, then either (2) must fail to follow from (1), or (4) must fail to follow from (2) and (3). But both inferences are trivial. The inference from (1) to (2) can fail only if a thing can have a property while failing to have that very property. The inference from (2) and (3) to (4) is validated by universal instantiation and modus ponens.

A more promising interpretation is that Tye is granting that (4) is true, but distinguishing between instantiating a phenomenal character and having a phenomenal character, where the latter is a matter of representing that phenomenal character (perhaps, as on Tye’s view, representing it in the right way). This is relevant to the argument, because it might give us a reason to reject premise (5). On this interpretation, (5) should be replaced with

(5*) $\forall x ((x \text{ represents RED}) \rightarrow \text{there's something that it is like to be } x)$

But then, since instantiating a phenomenal character is not sufficient to represent it, the inference from (4) and (5*) to the conclusion will be invalid, and the argument fails.

Tye’s second objection is complementary to this one, and is, in effect, that even (5*) is false, on the grounds that “there is nothing it is like to be

⁹ Tye (forthcoming-b).

an experience of red, though there is something it is like to undergo an experience of red.”¹⁰ This is quite plausible, and suggests that the true premise in the vicinity of (5) is not (5*), but rather

(5**) $\forall x ((x \text{ represents RED}) \rightarrow \text{there's something that it is like to undergo } x)$

where ‘undergoes’ in this context expresses some relation between subjects and experiences. If the inference from (4), (5*) to the conclusion is invalid, it is even more obvious that the inference from (4), (5**) to the conclusion is invalid, and hence that the argument obtained by substituting (5**) for (5) fails.

(5**) tells us how Tye is thinking about the relationship between phenomenal properties and phenomenal character. If something like (5**) is true, a subject’s phenomenal properties—what it is like to be that subject—is fixed by the experiences that subject undergoes, and the phenomenal characters which are represented by—i.e., are the semantic values of—those experiences. Using the terminology above, we might express this as follows:

[T2] Every phenomenal property is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of having an experience which stands in an ER-relation to the proposition that one or more phenomenal characters are instantiated.

On this view, as Tye emphasizes, phenomenal characters are not properties of experience which determine what it’s like to have the experience; they are properties represented by experiences, and what properties an experience represents determines what it’s like to have the experience. This is just the sort of replacement thesis for [R2] we were looking for, which tells us how, on Tye’s theory, phenomenal characters are related to phenomenal properties of subjects.

The *reductio* under discussion was offered as part of a dilemma for the proponent of [T1]. The idea is that once we explain how phenomenal characters are related to phenomenal properties, the proponent of [T1] will either (the first horn of the dilemma) be forced by the *reductio* into an implausible sort of panpsychism according to which there is something it is like to be my pen, or (the second horn of the dilemma) be exposed as defending a mere notational variant of the standard representationalist view.¹¹ Tye’s response to the *reductio* shows that he has the resources to would avoid the

¹⁰ Tye (forthcoming-b).

¹¹ This would be an especially implausible sort of panpsychism because it would hold, not just that there’s something that it’s like to be my pen, but also that what it’s like to be my pen is fixed by its color.

first horn of the dilemma; let's now ask how it fares with respect to the second.¹²

Tye's theory, understood as consisting of [T1-2], is a terminological variant on the standard representationalist theory consisting of [R1-5] unless there is at least one point of substantial disagreement between the two views.

The disagreement can't be found with any of the R-theses which Tye would accept. Note that [T1] and [T2] jointly entail [R5]—just substitute 'sensible properties' for 'phenomenal characters' in [T2]. And [R5] plausibly entails [R1], since 'having an experience which is ER-related to p' is a PA-relation.

This leaves the following theses as potential points of substantial disagreement between Tye and the standard representationalist view:

Standard Representationalism	Tye's New Theory
[R2] For every phenomenal property, there is some phenomenal character such that that phenomenal property is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of having an experience with that phenomenal character .	[T1] For every phenomenal character , there is some sensible property with which it is identical.
[R3] For every phenomenal character , there is some ER-relation and proposition such that the phenomenal character is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of standing in that relation to that proposition.	[T2] Every phenomenal property is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of having an experience which stands in an ER-relation to the proposition that one or more phenomenal characters are instantiated.
[R4] Every phenomenal character is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of bearing an ER-relation to the proposition that one or more sensible properties are instantiated in the environment.	

We should be a bit suspicious about the fact that the only points of disagreement between the standard representationalist and Tye concern sentences which use the disputed term 'phenomenal character.'¹³ This suggests that the disagreement may be a merely verbal one about the meaning we attach to 'phenomenal character.'

One way to substantiate this suspicion would be to show that, while Tye and the standard representationalist will disagree about which of the above sentences are true, there is no proposition about perception about which

¹² For an important precursor of the argument to follow, see the discussion of the relationship between Dretske's theory of consciousness and standard representationalist views of phenomenal character in Fish (2009), 10–13. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this passage to my attention.

¹³ The idea that verbal disputes can be identified as those which cannot be stated without use of a particular disputed term is a familiar one. See, for example, the discussion of the 'method of elimination' in Chalmers (2011).

they disagree.¹⁴ And one way to show this is to show that there are sentences which express the same propositions as [R2-4] out of the mouth of the standard representationalist but which Tye will accept, and sentences which express the same propositions as [T1-2] out of Tye's mouth but which the standard representationalist will accept.

Consider first sentences [R2-4], which Tye will deny. We can introduce a new term into our language, 'schmenomenal character,' which we define as follows:

F is a schmenomenal character of an experience iff for some phenomenal property G, G is identical to (or supervenes on) the property of having an experience which is F.

Tye will accept each of [R2-4] with 'schmenomenal character' substituted for 'phenomenal character.'¹⁵ These theses will, after all, be entailed by [T1-2] along with the definition of 'schmenomenal character.' Moreover, both Tye and the standard representationalists will identify schmenomenal characters with properties of standing in ER-relations to contents.

But that means that Tye accepts the existence of properties which play exactly the roles that the standard representationalist assigns to phenomenal characters: they are (i) properties of experience which (ii) fix the phenomenal properties of the subject of the experience and (iii) are identical to or supervene on properties of standing in an ER-relation to a proposition.

Do the schmenomenal versions of [R2-4] express the same propositions as [R2-4] do, out of the mouth of the standard representationalist? It seems to me plausible that they do. So it seems that Tye, and indeed any proponent of [T1-2], must accept all of the claims of the standard representationalist, even if he chooses not to express them using the language employed by most representationalists.

Now let's consider the converse question of whether the standard representationalist should accept the claims expressed by [T1-2]. Here we don't even need to go through the trouble of introducing a new term; we can

¹⁴ This is a slight oversimplification, since on some very coarse-grained views of propositions—like those which identify all necessary propositions—this will not be a sufficient condition for a dispute to be merely verbal, especially when the subject matter is a series of claims all of which are necessary if true. This won't matter for what follows; the argument that the dispute between Tye and the representationalist is merely verbal doesn't depend on any theses about the identity conditions of propositions.

¹⁵ As above, I'm setting aside the (for present purposes) irrelevant point that one might be having multiple experiences at a time, and hence that one's phenomenal properties might be fixed jointly by the phenomenal characters of those experiences rather than by the phenomenal character of any one experience. Tye himself would be unlikely to go this route; see Tye (2003).

simply translate Tye's theory into the language of the standard representationalist by replacing each instance of 'phenomenal character' with 'sensible property.' So translated, [T1-2] will of course both be true by the lights of the standard representational theorist. The question, of course, is whether this translation affects the content of [T1-2]. Is anything lost by replacing 'phenomenal character' everywhere it appears in Tye's theory with 'sensible property'?

If Tye is not just using 'phenomenal character' in the way that standard representationalists use 'sensible property', then we should expect there to be a pair of sentences with the following qualities:

- (i) They differ only with respect to substitution of the terms 'phenomenal character' and 'sensible quality';¹⁶
- (ii) Tye will accept the 'phenomenal character' sentence;
- (iii) the standard representationalist will not accept the 'sensible quality' sentence.

If we can find no such pair of sentences, then appears as though we have a case in which Tye is using 'phenomenal character' as we used to use 'sensible property', rather than proposing a substantive identity between the occupants of distinct theoretical roles.

But it is not easy see what such a sentence could be. Consider, for example:

Experiences don't instantiate __, but instead represent __ as instantiated.

What it is like to be a subject of experience is determined by which __ that subject's experiences represent.

Colors, sounds, and shapes are all __.

Introspection on one's experience only ever reveals __ represented as in the environment.

The standard representationalist will accept all of these with 'sensible property' filled in the blank; Tye will, I think, accept all of these with 'phenomenal character' filled in (and presumably with 'sensible property' filled in as well).

Consider, by contrast, a plausible example of a substantive identity thesis, like the identification of pain with C-fiber firing. We might wonder

¹⁶ The requirement is that *every* occurrence of one term in one sentence be replaced with the other term in the other sentence. If selective replacement were permitted, it would be trivial to show, of any given dispute, that it is not verbal.

whether the disagreement between the identity theorist and the dualist (or functionalist) over ‘Pain = C-fiber firing’ is merely verbal, on the grounds that the identity theorist is simply using ‘pain’ in the way that the dualist uses ‘C-fiber firing’. But in that case there will be plenty of sentences of the sort required by the above test, for example

— is a mental property.

The identity theorist will accept this with ‘pain’ substituted in, whereas the dualist (or functionalist) will deny this sentence with ‘C-fiber firing’ substituted in. Precisely for this reason, I suggest, we don’t take the debate between the identity theorist and the dualist or functionalist to be merely verbal. They are disagreeing over whether the bearers of distinct conceptual roles are identical. The same case, I think, cannot be made for Tye’s disagreement with the standard representationalist.

I conclude that the disagreement between Tye and the standard representationalist is a merely verbal one, in the sense that it is a disagreement about which sentences are true but not a disagreement about whether the propositions expressed by those sentences (or indeed any other propositions in the vicinity) are true. Tye’s new theory of consciousness is therefore old wine in new bottles. Fortunately, it is still good wine.¹⁷

4. Is Phenomenal Character Introspectable?

Recall now Tye’s argument for the claim that the phenomenal character of the experience of red just is redness. That argument started off with the two plausible theses which appeared to be in conflict: (a) that we can only be introspectively aware of properties represented by our experiences, and (b) that we can be introspectively aware of phenomenal character. The worry is that the

¹⁷ One might grant the conclusion that Tye and the standard representationalist agree on which propositions are true, but deny that this shows that their dispute is entirely verbal. For consider two astronomers who disagree about the truth of ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus.’ On Millian views, they will both accept the truth of the proposition expressed by this sentence, since each believes that Hesperus is Hesperus. But still their disagreement might not be an entirely verbal one.

This is all fair enough. But in this sort of case, it is easy to find other relevant propositions about which they will disagree—for example, they will disagree about the proposition expressed by ‘Hesperus, the brightest object in the evening sky, is Phosphorus, the brightest object in the morning sky.’ The argument above indicates that there is no analogous proposition about which Tye and the standard representationalist disagree.

All this being said, there is an uninteresting sense in which the argument in the text is oversimplified, for Tye and the standard representationalist will genuinely disagree over the truth of meta-linguistic propositions like that expressed by “‘Phenomenal character’ refers to a property represented by an experience.” But if the only propositions disagreed about are meta-linguistic ones, that substantiates rather than undercuts the conclusion that the dispute in question is merely verbal.

foregoing line of reasoning shows that Tye's reconciliation of (a) and (b) is also merely verbal, and papers over rather than resolves the core conflict.

For consider why (b) seems plausible. The core intuition, as Tye says, is that it really seems as though "I am aware of what it is like to experience red." But if Tye's aim was to validate this claim, I don't think that he succeeds.

As emphasized above, when we talk about 'what it's like', we are talking about a property of subjects. Were this not true, then 'what it's like to have that experience' and 'what it's like for the subject to have that experience' would not be equivalent phrases—but they clearly are. And indeed this conclusion follows anyway from Tye's response to the *reductio* argument above. He rejected premise (5) of that argument, and instead endorsed the more indirect connection between phenomenal character and 'what it's like' expressed by

(5**) $\forall x ((x \text{ represents RED}) \rightarrow \text{there's something that it is like to undergo } x)$

This claim suggests—correctly—that the things that there's something it is like to be are things that undergo experiences—namely, subjects of experience—rather than experiences themselves. What it's like to have an experience is a matter of what I have been calling the subject of the experience's phenomenal properties.

But what are these phenomenal properties, on Tye's view? As noted above, [T1] and [T2] will entail [R5], which says that phenomenal properties are identical to (or supervene on) the property of having an experience which represents certain sensible properties as instantiated. But of course on Tye's view we are not aware of these properties when we introspect; nor are we aware of any properties which supervene on properties of this sort. Given transparency, that would require that, in experience, we represent objects as having experiences which represent exactly those sensible properties as instantiated as our experience does (or as having a property which supervenes on the having of such an experience). But of course we do nothing of the sort.

The fact that we are, on Tye's usage, 'aware of phenomenal character' does not entail that we are 'aware of what it is like to experience red.' For as he emphasizes in response to the above *reductio*, the phenomenal character of an experience of red is not identical to what it is like to experience red. For, if it were, redness would also be identical to what it is like to experience red; and then there would be something it is like to be my pen.

(Much the same point can be made in a slightly different way by pointing out that the standard representationalist's denial of the claim that we are aware of phenomenal characters in introspection can be expressed by the sentence, 'We are not aware of schmenomenal characters in introspection.' And of course Tye will agree to this.)

So, while I agree with Tye that it would be very nice indeed to be able to reconcile the sort of transparency theses he wants to defend with the intuition that we can be aware in introspection of what it's like to experience red, the prospects for reconciliation here seem—absent a wildly implausible theory of the contents of experience—dim.

5. Subjects and Experiences

I think that there is a general moral to be drawn here. When it comes to theorizing about experience, there are a few things on which we have some sort of independent grip. Among these, I think, are the phenomenal properties instantiated by the subject of the experience (i.e., what it's like to have the experience); the properties represented by the experience; and the veridicality conditions of the experience.

By contrast, we have no independent grip on 'phenomenal character.' This is a theoretical term introduced for 'whatever property of experience it is which determines the phenomenal properties of the subject of the experience.' Tye's view simply divorces 'phenomenal character' from this theoretical role, and gives it a new theoretical role (one already possessed by terms like 'sensible property').

This would be revolutionary if it were accompanied by the claim that occupants of the new theoretical role (like red) could play the former theoretical role as well; but of course Tye does not think that they can, because he does not have the absurd view that experiences can be red. This would also be revolutionary if it were accompanied by the claim that nothing played the former theoretical role. But of course Tye does not think that either; his response to the *reductio* argument entails that experiences have schmenomenal characters, and these play exactly the theoretical role formerly assigned to 'phenomenal character.' We end up with a debate, not about what objects and properties exist, not about what instantiates which properties or relations, and not about the relations in which those various properties and relations stand to each other, but merely about which of these properties we should call 'phenomenal characters.'

The reason why this is possible, I think, is a frequent unclarity in the literature about exactly what metaphysical category we're theorizing about when we use terms like 'phenomenal character', 'phenomenal properties', 'what it's like', and (worst of all, I think) 'qualia.'¹⁸ Sometimes one has in mind properties of subjects, sometimes properties of experiences of subjects, and sometimes properties represented by experiences of subjects. One of the main points of the foregoing has been to show how this can lead us into

¹⁸ Though there are of course exceptions. For admirably clear discussions of these matters which are very much in the spirit of the approach recommended here, see Byrne (2002) and Ch. 1 of Fish (2009).

merely verbal disputes which have the potential to obscure the important philosophical issues about consciousness.

The way to avoid this confusion, I suggest, is to be sure that our discussions are always anchored in the phenomenal properties of subjects—in what it is like to be a conscious subject—or (equivalently) what determinates of the determinable being conscious a subject instantiates. The reason why this has the potential to avoid confusion is that these subject-level properties are the ones on which we have an independent grasp. If we begin theorizing about various properties of experience without a clear view of how those relate to the phenomenal properties of subjects, we risk not just confusion, but losing sight of the topic of theories of consciousness.

A more radical suggestion—one advocated, for independent reasons, by Alex Byrne—is that we should avoid theorizing about phenomenal properties of subjects in terms of their experiences, the phenomenal character of their experiences, and the representational properties of experiences, at all.¹⁹

Recall [R1], which says that phenomenal properties are identical to properties of standing in PA-relations to a proposition. It is a substantial claim that these PA-relations are best analyzed in terms of (i) experiences, (ii) relations of ‘undergoing’ in which subjects stand to those experiences, and (iii) ER-relations between those experiences and propositions. Here I have not argued that we shouldn’t analyze the relevant PA-relations in this way. But it’s worth at least considering the possibility that we have a better grip on these PA-relations than on experiences, our relations to those experiences, and their relations to propositions. If so, the right move is to try to directly explain the natures of the PA-relations and propositions which make [R1] true rather than to go in for [R2-4] and try to explain the other events, properties, and relations to which they make reference.²⁰

Bibliography

- Alex Byrne (2009). Experience and content. *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (236): 429–451.
- (2002). Don’t PANIC: Tye’s Intentionalist Theory of Consciousness. In *A Field Guide to the Philosophy of Mind* (winter 2002/3).
- David Chalmers (2011). Verbal disputes. *Philosophical Review* 120 (4): 515–566.
- (2006). Perception and the fall from Eden. In Tamar S. Gendler & John Hawthorne (eds.), *Perceptual Experience*. Oxford University Press. 49–125.

¹⁹ See Byrne (2009). Byrne’s reason for this conclusion is that there are no experiences—at least not in the relevant ‘special philosophical sense.’

²⁰ Thanks for helpful discussion to audiences at McGill University and Ohio State University.

- Jeff Speaks (forthcoming-a). What are debates about qualia really about? *Philosophical Studies*.
- (forthcoming-b). *The Phenomenal and the Representational*. Oxford University Press.
- Martine Nida-Rümelin (2007). Transparency of experience and the perceptual model of phenomenal awareness. *Philosophical Perspectives* 21 (1): 429–455.
- Michael Tye (forthcoming-a). Transparency, qualia realism and representationalism. *Philosophical Studies*.
- (forthcoming-b). Speaks on strong property representationalism. *Philosophical Studies*.
- (2009). *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism Without Phenomenal Concepts*. MIT Press.
- (2003). *Consciousness and Persons: Unity and Identity*. MIT Press.
- William Fish (2009). *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion*. Oxford University Press.