

Phombie and the Transparency Thesis

Draft: 2009-04-14

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I

Transparency is one of the central arguments for externalist representationalism (henceforth, “ex-representationalism”). Ex-representationalism is the thesis that phenomenal properties are supervenient upon or identified with ex-representational contents. The supervenience thesis is called “non-reductive representationalism” and it claims that phenomenal properties are supervenient upon representational properties, that is, no phenomenal difference is possible without a representational difference, and the identity thesis is called “reductive representationalism” (hereafter “RR”), and it claims that phenomenal properties are identical with representational properties (mutual entailment between the two types of properties might be sufficient for the identity claim). Representational contents in the externalist version of representationalism are the represented properties in the world such as objective redness, that is, ex-representationalism identifies the phenomenal property of redness with the objective redness. In other words, it claims that redness is not a quality of our experience. Rather it is a quality of red objects in the world. And this is allegedly inferred from transparency considerations. In transparency argument, we are invited to focus our attention on the phenomenal properties of the scene before us, and it is predicted that we won’t find but the objective properties of the objects in the scene. It indicates, it is claimed, that the phenomenal properties which seemed to be qualities of our experience are, indeed, qualities of objects in the environment. An immediate objection to this argument is the case of non-veridical perceptions such as illusions and hallucinations. On the one hand, we know that we have an experience of, say, a red tomato when we hallucinate one, but on the other, we’re sure that no tomato is out there in our environment. Since the property of redness does not exist in the world but we have a phenomenal experience of it, it follows that the quality of redness is a quality of our experience, so qualia do exist. Put more simply, the argument is thus: in the case of hallucinations, qualia do exist, but they don’t exist in the world, so they exist in our experiences. How can ex-representationalists deal with this problem? Should they concede that at least *some* qualities belong to experiences? Let me first elaborate the transparency argument in detail and then consider the way they deal with the problem of hallucination.

Tye (2002) sets ten steps¹ to move from transparency thesis (henceforth, TT) to RR. In step (1), he gives a phenomenological instruction and makes a prediction.

¹ Amy Kind (“What’s so transparent about transparency?”) summarizes Tye’s argument in 5 steps as follows:

The instruction is as follows: focus your attention on the scene before you and on the visual phenomenal properties of your experience of seeing the scene. The prediction is that what you find are the external properties of the seen objects, not of your experience. Intuitively, the rich range of qualities that you see, such as blueness and roundness, are not qualities of your experience; rather they're qualities of objects in the world. Thus Tye's first step is a statement of TT.

In step (2), he raises an argument for TT by saying that if we take it that these qualities are those of experiences, we should convict these experiences of massive error. He does not mention an argument to show *why* this should be implausible; he just says "this is just not credible". For it is skepticism to say that though our phenomenology makes it seem to us that the qualities we experience are those of objects in the world, those qualities are in fact those of phenomenology itself. In this case, our phenomenology would misrepresent a fact about itself, and it is implausible inasmuch as it is skeptical.

In step (3), Tye states Displaced Perception thesis (DP). The thesis is that when you introspect your phenomenal experiences, you are directly aware of qualities of external objects *and thereby* you are aware of the phenomenal character of your experience. Awareness of external qualities brings about awareness of phenomenal character of your experience, but this is not an *inferential* relation. The phenomenal character itself is not a quality of your experience to which you have direct access.

In step (4), Tye warns us that the above points do not require that our experiences be veridical, rather they could apply to the case of *complete hallucination*, that is, the relevant objects and surfaces could be completely unreal, but it does not imply that the qualities you experience are qualities of your

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1. In introspecting a visual experience of object *O*, one is not directly aware of any qualities of the experience itself but only of a range of qualities experienced as being qualities of the surfaces of *O* (let us call these 'surface qualities'). It is only by being aware of these surface qualities that one is aware that one's visual experience has the phenomenal character that it does.
 2. When the surface qualities that are experienced change, so too does the phenomenal character of one's experience.
 3. These two premises are best explained by the representationalist hypothesis, i.e., that the phenomenal character of visual experience is wholly constituted by the representational content of the experience.
 4. Premises (1) and (2) generalize to hallucinations and other perceptual modalities, as well as bodily sensations and moods.
 5. Thus, the representationalist hypothesis too should be generalized: the phenomenal character of experience is wholly constituted by the representational content of the experience.

I think at least an extension of this argument to non-veridical cases (step 4) is essential to the argument and must have been mentioned by Amy Kind.

experience and not of external objects. In veridical cases, our experience represents the existent external qualities, and in non-veridical cases, it represents non-existent *external* qualities.

In step (5), Tye begins his move from TT to RR. It is intuitive, he argues, that if any of the external qualities (which are the contents of your experience) change, the phenomenal character of your experience would *necessarily* change. The fact that a change in the external qualities brings about a change in the phenomenal character of our experiences needs an explanation. According to (4), the explanation would be that these external qualities at least partly *constitute* phenomenal character.

In step (6), he hypothesizes about the phenomenal character by identifying it with a certain sort of representational content into which certain external qualities enter. It explains fact (1), that is, the qualities we experience are not qualities of experience and are qualities of objects, since representational content is not a quality of the thing that has it. It also explains fact (5), that is, changes in the external qualities bring about changes in the phenomenal character. For the phenomenal character is nothing over and above the representational contents which change.

In step (7), he makes the consequence of the previous steps explicit: tradition is wrong about taking qualia as qualities of experiences. There are no such things as qualities of experiences, but there are qualities of which the subject of experience is directly aware via introspection; these are the qualities of objects in the world. These qualities can be called “phenomenal qualities” in a broad sense of the term. In steps (8), (9), and (10), Tye generalizes RR to the phenomenal character of other perceptual modalities (hearing, tasting, etc.), bodily sensations (such as pains and itches), and emotions (such as love and hatred).

As we’ve seen, in step (4) of his argument, Tye tries to accommodate the hallucinatory experiences in his account. Even in these cases, when we focus on our phenomenal properties, we find them to be properties of things in the world. But the difference between veridical and hallucinatory cases is that in the former, existent external properties are represented and in the latter, non-existent external properties are represented.

II

In this paper, I will delve into the possibility conditions of TT. I shall argue that TT is grounded in certain features of our phenomenology. Therefore, no metaphysical conclusion of identifying phenomenal properties with representational properties follows from TT. I will make my point by devising two different scenarios in one of which, those relevant features are missing, and

in the second one, those relevant features are available. In the first case, I will argue, TT does not work, and in the second one, it works but without there being a represented content in the environment. Thereby I will show that TT is itself grounded in some pure phenomenological features and by no means indicates that phenomenology is constituted by the representational character of experience.

*First scenario: dumbie.*² Imagine a subject whose phenomenology is completely occupied with a simple red color. Needless to say that dumbie is not immersed in something like blood to have this exotic kind of phenomenology. Indeed he has no environment to contact with. It's almost similar to our experience when we completely close our eyes in darkness and experience no afterimages: what we experience then is a simple dark color. Thus we can imagine a creature whose only experience is like this; let's call it "dumbie". Dumbie's phenomenology is stuffed with a *simple* shade of color without a phenomenal experience of a distance between him and the color. By simplicity I mean: without any salience, dimensionality, spatiality, temporality, motion, etc. Rather it is a uniform, homogeneous experience. Now we can give the phenomenological instruction to dumbie and ask him to focus his attention on the scene before him. Then is it correct to predict that he will find properties of external objects in the world and not of his own experience? Here the prediction is not confirmed as immediately as the one in the original argument by Michael Tye. It doesn't seem plausible in this case to say that his phenomenal property of redness seems to him to be transparent. In fact, if we imagine ourselves to be dumbies, our phenomenology would not seem to us to be transparent.

Note that I don't insist that in this case, the subject affirms that redness is a quality of his experience or is not definitely a quality of an external object. For my purposes it is sufficient that the subject suspends judgment about whether his red phenomenology is a quality of an external object or his experience. This way a difference between this scenario and the following scenario is guaranteed, this much of difference is enough for my purposes.

Second scenario: phombie. Imagine a possible world in which only a subject exists without any objects around; let us call the subject "phombie" (I call it so because it's the opposite of zombie: zombie is our functional and physical duplicate without phenomenology, but phombie is our phenomenological duplicate without functional or representational resemblance to us). Let's assume that

² Ned Block (1996) has introduced a similar case: "For example, close your eyes in daylight and you may find that it is easy to attend to aspects of your experience. If all experiences that have visual phenomenology were of the sort one gets with one's eyes closed while awake in daylight, I doubt that the thesis that one cannot attend to or be aware of one's experience would be so popular." I shall give a phenomenological account for this intuition in the following sections.

phombie is a disembodied mind so that he doesn't have a body to be counted as an object or an environment. Now imagine that phombie shares our phenomenology: he has a rich phenomenology of a scene rife with trees, leaves, grass, birds with all the richness of details, that is, he can focus on the specific properties of the tree's leaves, trunk, branches, etc. Phombie's phenomenology is not currently connected to an environment. Furthermore, it was not connected to an environment in the past in its personal history and it has no ancestors who had been connected to an environment. Therefore, phombie (1) has no current contact with an environment, (2) didn't have a contact with an environment in the past, and (3) doesn't have an evolutionary history of a contact with an environment. Therefore,

Phombie: our phenomenological duplicate without a current contact with an environment and without a personal or ancestral history of a contact with an environment³.

Thus, the difference between phombie and a case of complete hallucination becomes clear. In the case of hallucination, only (1), that is, current contact with an environment or (2), that is, a personal history of having contact, are missing, but at least an evolutionary history of having contact with an environment is available. But in the case of phombie, all three kinds of contact with an environment are missing; therefore the phenomenological contents of phombie can't be accounted for by ex-representationalism.

Now imagine that our Phombie is a philosopher who thinks about his own phenomenal states of mind. When he thinks about his phenomenology, he tends to identify it with representational contents. And his main motivation is the transparency of his phenomenal experiences. He brings about an argument for representationalism from transparency, though he has never read Tye (2002)! The moral is that it seems possible for a subject with the same phenomenological life as ours to entertain all these thoughts. Therefore, transparency is one of the features of phenomenology which can be there without there being any representational contents. Therefore, phombie -unlike dumbie- can follow TT's phenomenological instruction and the prediction comes true about him: he finds nothing except the properties of external objects in the environment, though he

³ Tye's (1995, pp. 153-55) application of a Davidsonian swampman to phenomenology is different from phombie, since phenomenal swampman is at least currently connected to an environment, though evolutionarily disconnected. And his Uncle Theodore (p. 152) is currently disconnected to an environment, though it has an evolutionary history. My phombie has no current environmental connection, no personal or evolutionary history of a connection. Such an imaginary scenario can be a more close-to-reality imagination when we consider cases of schizophrenia: patients whose unreal hallucinations are phenomenally indistinguishable from real perceptions and are experienced as objective.

had no history of a contact with an environment. This counter-example to TT shows a flaw in the transparency argument: phombie can apply the same argument in his own case, but his conclusion that the phenomenal properties of his phenomenology are in fact qualities of external objects in the environment is false.

By making a comparison between the two scenarios, dumbie and phombie, we would conclude that certain phenomenological features, that are missing in the former and are available in the latter, account for the transparency of our experiences. Therefore, for transparency to be there, non-representational phenomenological features are sufficient and representational⁴ contents are not necessary.

I will try to make an argument for two theses:

Phenomenological Sufficiency Thesis (PST): non-representational phenomenological features are sufficient for transparency.

For transparency, there needn't be anything but pure phenomenological features of our experience. I will show this by phombie scenario. Phombie's experience is a non-representational pure phenomenology and yet he finds that his experience is transparent to him. I will give an explanation for why phombie's phenomenology is transparent to him, though he has no kind of contact with any environment. I will do this by making a comparison with dumbie's case. The second thesis which is entailed by PST is the following:

Representational Non-Necessity Thesis (RNT): representational contents are not necessary for transparency.

This thesis is entailed by PST, since sufficiency of pure phenomenological features for transparency indicates that nothing else, including representational contents, are necessary for transparency. The transparency argument is to conclude that the transparency of experience is accounted for in terms of representational contents, but RNT shows that this conclusion is false. Thus, I will argue for PST, hence RNT, from my scenarios, and this will undermine the transparency argument.

In what follows, I will explain why phombie's phenomenology is transparent to him but dumbie's is not. I will identify some features of phenomenology which make our phenomenology look transparent to us. From this, it follows that a

⁴ Throughout the paper, when I talk about representational contents and the like, I mean externalist representational contents unless otherwise mentioned.

pure non-representational phenomenology can look transparent to its subject. For transparency is exhausted by pure phenomenological features of our experiences.

III

In order to present an explanation for how pure phenomenological features might account for the transparency of experience, I will introduce the the “transitive character” of phenomenology. By the transitive character I mean a feature of our phenomenology that makes it *look as though* it refers to objects and properties outside of it. My intention is not to pose skepticism about the external world. Rather my point is that whether or not there’s an external world, some objects and properties are *presented in our phenomenology* as worldly and objective, and some are presented as subjective. This feature of our phenomenology does not depend on there being a world out there. Even a phombie can experience some objects and properties as objective and, some other objects and properties as non-objective. In other words, objectivity/non-objectivity distinction is primarily a phenomenological distinction. Certain objects and properties are systematically presented in our phenomenology as objective, while others look to us to be non-objective. Certain features of our phenomenology account for this phenomenological objectivity, and this is what I call the “transitive character” of phenomenology. On the other side, the “intransitive character” of our experience makes objects look to us as non-objective.

As a less controversial example of an intransitive experience, consider the general mood or the background feelings that we always have. Now I’m sitting in front of my laptop, sub-consciously seeing other things such as the books on the desk, hearing some noises, feeling the keys with my fingertips, and having lots of other experiences. But at the same time, I have a general mood or background feeling inside me, which doesn’t seem to refer to anything in the world. My phenomenology makes this general mood look to me as a non-objective experience. But my visual experience of laptop and books, my auditory experience of noises, and my tactile experience of the keys are presented in my phenomenology as referring to external properties and objects, whether or not there are any such objects and properties out there in the world.

But in what features of phenomenology is its transitive character grounded? In the following discussion, I will focus on the visual phenomenology. The following explanation applies to other sense modalities as well, with few modifications though. After giving a phenomenological explanation of objectivity, I will return to the question of how the transitive character of our experience accounts for its transparency.

I think two central features of phenomenology contribute to its transitive character: spatiality and temporality. Both these features should be conceived as subjective and phenomenal. Different phenomena occupy their own space in our phenomenology, or in other words, particular phenomenological spaces are allocated to particular phenomena. For example, the phenomenon of desk occupies a certain phenomenological space in my visual experience, different from that of the phenomenon of books. Phenomenologically conceived, spatiality is tantamount to the occupation of certain phenomenological spaces. What about temporality? Again phenomenologically conceived, when a phenomenon falls in a sequence of events, it exhibits a temporal character, for instance, when it appears to us at one point but doesn't appear in another.

Falling in a regular spatial-temporal chain –in the phenomenological sense– constitutes the transitive character of our experience. Take general moods for example. As I said before, general moods appear to us as non-objective. According to my explanation, since they don't occur in regular spatial-temporal sequences, they are presented in our phenomenology as non-objective. After-images, which also lack phenomenological objectivity, are explainable in the same way. But the phenomenon of a red tomato in our visual experience is presented as objective, since it occupies a certain phenomenological space and falls in a certain sequence of events in a regular way. This explanation needs more analysis, but I hope this much is enough for the purposes of this paper.

Thus far, it has been demonstrated that the spatial-temporal character of our phenomenology is a ground for its transitive character. Now I should say something about how the transitive character of phenomenology gives rise to its transparency.

IV

Dummett's phenomenology is not transparent, because it lacks a spatial-temporal character and is thus intransitive. This is how I will show the connection between the transitive character of phenomenology and its transparency.

As I mentioned before, Dummett's phenomenology lacks any spatial-temporal salience. In other words, it is a simple, pure shade of red that exhibits no temporality and spatiality. As an approximation, consider an analogy to a portrait. Imagine a portrait of a garden on a flat canvass. Some parts of the portrait seem more distant to you and some seem closer. For instance, the tree is closer to the observer but the mountain seems to be located in a farther distance from her. However, we are certain that all parts of the picture are in almost the same distance from us (as observers). The painter does this by making proper changes in the magnitudes of objects portrayed, that is, by allocating more or less space to objects on the canvass. She can, for instance, paint the tree much bigger

than the mountain, whereby the tree *appears* closer to us than the mountain. This is an approximate model of how dimensions are perceived in our phenomenology. Phenomenologically speaking, there's no difference between a flat piece of sheet on which some lines are drawn as a cube which seem like a cube to us (albeit not a cube in fact) and a real cube with real dimensions. Particular distances between edges of objects make them appear to us as dimensional, no matter if they have dimensions in the real world or not. For us to have a dimensional phenomenology, there needn't be a cube out there in the world. Rather, certain types of phenomenological relations are enough. In similar ways, objects seem close or far to us not by *actually* being close to or far from us. For objects to *seem* close or far, it is sufficient that they phenomenologically appear to us in certain ways (for instance, bigger or smaller, that is, by occupying a bigger or a smaller portion of our phenomenological space).

Now it becomes evident that dumbie's phenomenology is not transitive in character, since it exhibits no spatiality and temporality, and that's why his phenomenology is not transparent to him. His phenomenology does not have features that make it look to him that there are objects and properties out there; objects and properties which he is transparently experiencing them.

V

Let me reformulate my argument against the argument from transparency. As I said before, I conclude from my scenarios that pure, non-representational⁵ phenomenology is sufficient for transparency (PST), and from this, it follows that representational contents are not necessary for the transparency of our phenomenology (RNT). And this is an explicit rejection of the conclusion of the transparency argument. Since the very features of our phenomenology are sufficient for its transparency, we don't need to resort to representational contents to account for it. In this section, I will mention the premises of my argument against transparency.

P1: Phenomenological features are sufficient for the transparency of our experiences.

This premise was established by what I elaborately developed in the previous sections.

P2: If P1 is true, then phombie is possible.

⁵ It should be noted that by 'representational' here I have *externalist representational* in mind. My argument is that if transparency argument supports representationalism, it is at least neutral between internalist and externalist versions.

This premise is true, because phombie is our phenomenological duplicate without a surrounding environment, and since phenomenological features alone are enough for transparency, it is possible for phombie's phenomenology to be transparent.

P3: If phombie is possible, then it is possible for phenomenology to be transparent without any ex-representational contents.

The previous premises demonstrate that the transparency of our phenomenology doesn't depend on its representing the external properties of objects in the world. Rather it solely depends on its own experiential features, that is, its transitive character which depends in its own right on its spatial-temporal character. Therefore, transparency without representational contents is possible, QED.

P4: If it is possible for phenomenology to be transparent without any ex-representational contents, then ex-representationalism doesn't follow from transparency.

And this leads us to our final conclusion:

C: The argument from transparency for ex-representationalism is wrong.

Therefore, the transparency argument for ex-representationalism is undermined by the above argument. However, the grain of truth in transparency argument is that it shows a representational character of our phenomenology. Since our phenomenology is transparent to us, it has a transitive, representational character. Thus from transparency we can make an argument for internalist representationalism. This is what I shall do in the following chapters.