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The Mark of the Mental

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In the Standard Model of the Mind currently employed in cognitive science we have corresponding to thought and sense two distinct kinds of properties: intentional and qualitative. On the one hand we have qualitative states, which are generally agreed to be those states which there is 'something that it is like' for the subject that has them; I will say that these states have a quality. On the other hand we have intentional states, which have the property of being about something, called intentionality, and which lack a quality. There is nothing that it is like to have intentional states. According to the Standard Model all mental phenomena have one or another, or both, of these properties. There are some mental phenomena that are purely qualitative (perhaps sensations and their sensory qualities) and some that are purely intentional (thoughts) and still others that are a mix of both (perceptions and emotions). Of course, there are those who resist the Standard Model, drawn as they are to the siren song of a single mark of the mental.

Which of these two is it to be then? At this time in the history of philosophy the favorite appears to be intentionality. There are several well articulated accounts of conscious experience that make intentionality the mark of the mental; these include (versions of) higher order accounts of consciousness, same order accounts, as well as the newer mid-level approaches. But there are reasons to resist making intentionality the mark of the mental. One such reason is the fact that there are intentional systems that do not count as minds. To show this one might point out that the states of a simple thermometer are about the temperature in the room and so seem to count as intentional, but surely it is positively absurd to think that thermometers have mental states! This is at least a *prima facie* reason to think that intentionality is not the essential trait of the mind. In any case, just as the steam engine definitively showed that originating motion is not unique to the mental (contra Aristotle and the Ancients) so too the invention of the computer shows that intentionality is not unique to the mental; or at least it seems that way to me. There are some who think that saying this just shows that I have chosen to use terminology in a certain way (Strawson *Forthcoming*). So be it. I think the point is deeper than that, but let it rest

for now, and let's see how far we get exploring the *qualitative* as the mark of the mental.

If having a quality (that is, there being something that it is like for the organism) is the mark of the mental then there must be a quality associated with thought. The idea that there is something that it is like to have a thought is gaining acceptance in the philosophical community and has been argued for recently by Alvin Goldman (Goldman 1993), Galen Strawson (Strawson 1994), Charles Siewert (Siewert 1998), and David Pitt (Pitt 2004) just to name a few. Now, within this camp there is a debate about which component of the, say, belief is qualitative. All propositional attitudes have two components. On the one hand there is the content, what the attitude is held toward, and on the other there is the mental attitude taken towards this content. Thus we distinguish the belief that George will show up on time and the hope that George will show up on time from the fear that he will show up on time as differing attitudes held towards the same content (Fodor 1991).¹ Is the qualitative component of the belief part of the content, or part of the mental attitude that we take towards the content?

Pitt, Siewert, and Strawson all argue that the qualitative character of the thought is had by the content of the thought (albeit not the propositional content). On the other side, Goldman argues that the qualitative component belongs to the attitude type itself². In this paper I will examine the two answers and argue that the quality of thought is best understood as taking a qualitative mental attitude towards some representational (a.k.a. intentional) content. Each propositional attitude (belief, desire, fear, regret etc) is distinguished by a unique quality and it is having that quality (read: feeling that way) with respect to the content that makes it a belief, fear (etc.) that *P*. This allows us to endorse the common sense platitude that experience (in the sense of 'conscious experience'³) is the mark of the mental and keep the insights of the Representational Theory of Mind.

There is a simple reason for thinking that the qualitative component would be had by the mental attitude itself, as the difference between the belief that *P* and the fear that *P* is precisely that they are differing *attitudes* about *P*. So why think that the qualitative component is had by the content? No reason is ever explicitly given but we can piece one together. Pitt, Siewert, and Strawson all offer as their evidence (in one form or another) the phenomena of coming to understand a sentence that you previously *did* not understand. They argue that there is something that it is like to hear a sentence and not understand what it means that differs from what the same sentence heard 'comprehendingly' is like, or to hear an ambiguous utterance one way and then to hear it in the other sense. Pitt has a nice example.

Consider the sentence

(4) The rodomontade of ululating funambulists is never idoneous

Pitt goes on to say of this sentence

If one does not know what at least one of 'rodomontade', 'ululating', 'funambulist, or 'idoneous' means, one does not understand (4)...yet...if one learns that 'rodomontade' means *rant*, that 'ululate' means *howl*, that 'funambulists' are tightrope walkers, and that 'idoneous' means *appropriate*, one should experience the sentence differently. It will be read as meaning that the rant of howling tightrope walkers is never appropriate. (ibid)

The underlying argument here may be that since, as the contents of thought changes the qualitative component of the thought changes, the quality for the thought must be a part of the content. Or it may be that they have some kind of analogy with sensations in mind.⁴ I have to admit that reflecting on cases like these⁵ convinced me that there is a distinct difference in quality between hearing it one way versus the other but my account can handle this discovery. There is, therefore, no reason to think that this kind of evidence supports the claim that the qualitative aspect of the thought belongs to the content of the thought.

On my account the experiential quality associated with understanding a sentence is not to be attributed to the content of the sentence that you come understand but rather to the fact that, once understood, you are able to take an attitude towards the content. If it is just nonsense you can't believe, doubt, question, entertain, or affirm it. Once you understand it you automatically take one of these attitudes towards it. As for hearing an ambiguous utterance one way and then another, we can account for the qualitative difference by appeal to either the great variety of attitudes available or to the degrees of strength, and corresponding degree of quality, of these attitudes. For, as Goldman points out,

Subjects' classificational abilities are not confined to broad categories such as belief, desire, and intention; they also include intensities thereof. Words like 'certain', 'confident', and 'doubtful' pick out strengths on an attitude intensity scale, in this case belief intensities just like 'delighted', 'pleased', and 'satisfied' pick out "positions on a liking scale," (Goldman 1993, p 365).⁶

So, to use an analogy with color, belief is like the color red, desire like green. The category red includes all of the shades of red, while the cat-

egory of belief includes all of the intensities of belief. Thus, just because two mental states are both beliefs it does not follow that they must have identical qualitative character. They will have *similar* qualities. You may firmly believe one while only just barely believe the other. So, within each category of propositional attitude we will find intensity continuums. It is easy to see how each thought can have a distinct qualitative character; that is, for what it is like to think a thought to change when we think a different thought, and yet for it still to be true, in a sense, that the qualitative character of thought types is uniform.

But just what can this qualitative character be? What is it that distinguishes beliefs from desires? I suggest we start from the commonsense observation that to believe something is to be convinced (to some degree or other) of the truth of a certain proposition. Taking this into consideration I suggest we call the quality associated with belief *conviction*. The quality of conviction is the subjective feeling of certainty that one feels about the content of a represented proposition and encompasses a range of qualitative states. Well now, what does it feel like to be convinced? At this point all I can do is to try and draw your attention to the type of experience that I have in mind. This qualitative character is so common to our everyday experience that it is often quite hard to see it so the best place to start is by looking at cases on the extreme of the continuum. For instance, I once argued that Coney Island was not part of Brooklyn with a native New Yorker. This person KNEW that Coney Island was part of Brooklyn and couldn't understand why I didn't believe them.⁷ They felt certain that I was wrong, and probably feeble-minded. Why would they get so angry at this? I suggest that it is because they *felt so strongly* about the truth of 'Coney Island is part of Brooklyn'. True, we usually have beliefs very calmly and coolly but I think these feelings of certainty are had at some point by everyone.⁸

Or think of trying to remind someone of something that the two of you did last week. You say 'remember when we had that coffee last week?' or whatever, and they say 'Coffee? Last week? No, we didn't have coffee last week, did we?' You then try to bring up all the little details of the event in the hopes that it will jog their memory; it was at this place and at that time, there was a man in a green sweater, etc. Usually they will remember at this point. But what if they persisted? Denying that it was them saying 'it wasn't me', 'what guy in the sweater?' etc. You make one last attempt 'we took the F train, it broke down and the announcer said something that we couldn't understand' etc. But if this doesn't work and the person still denies something that you very clearly remember doing it can be very frustrating. Why? Again, I suggest that this is because you *feel so strongly* about

remembering correctly. You have an intense belief and the other person's refusal to acknowledge something that you KNOW⁹ they were part of brings the qualitative aspect of the belief to the forefront.

Still another way to isolate what it is like to feel convinced (in the opposite direction down the continuum) is to try and pretend that you believe something that you in fact don't believe. Try to convince yourself that $2+2=5$. I mean really try and believe it. It is almost impossible to actually come to believe it. You can imagine what it would be like to believe it but you can't get yourself to *really* believe. What is it that is missing in your pretense? It is the qualitative mental attitude. This is exactly analogous to trying to become angry at some one when you are not. You can mimic the behavior but if you don't really feel that way, you aren't really angry. Similarly you can think about what it would be like to believe that $2+2=5$ and fake the behavior that goes along with it, but if you in no way feel convinced then you simply do not believe it.

If you still find yourself feeling skeptical try to imagine what it would be like to have a belief but not feel in any way sure about what you believed. Is such a thing even imaginable? I mean to have a belief and yet feel in no way committed to it? Or certain that it is true, or false? If it is imaginable it certainly is a very odd thing that we are imagining! To adapt something Russell said in the Lectures on Logical Atomism, no one with a 'vivid sense of reality' will have any success here. Interestingly this is actually how some schizophrenics, whose sense of reality is, at times, much less vivid than a normal person's, describe their experience (Sass 1993).¹⁰

What is it that these schizophrenics say? They describe their delusional beliefs as not *feeling* the way that their ordinary beliefs do. Even though they do say that they believe the strange things that they say, they also say that at the same time they know that they are different from their 'usual' beliefs. They don't have the usual quality of conviction that marks their non-delusional beliefs. This is not to say that every schizophrenic describes their experience this way. Some are actually convinced of the truth of their delusional beliefs. Nonetheless this is interesting because it suggests that there may be a sub-group of patients usually classified as schizophrenic who actually have a qualitative disorder. Qualitative disorders affect the way things look or seem to an individual. Included in this group would be disorders of facial recognition, neglect, Capgrass syndrome, Alien Hand Phenomena and a variety of others. In each of these the qualitative character of the victim's experience is radically altered. If I am right in suggesting that the cognitive attitudes are qualitative then we should expect to find people with deficits of this qualitative character. And we do. Some delusional be-

liefs of so-called schizophrenics can be explained in this way. The thought occurs but since they don't feel any way about it they think that the thought must not be theirs, that it must have been inserted or whatever else they come up with to explain their very strange experience.

When we turn our attention to desires it seems even clearer that qualitative character is involved. Wanting something 'so bad it hurts' is a common expression and implies that our folk psychological notion of desire includes a qualitative aspect. We feel desire in a way that is hard to ignore. It is true that the majority of our desires are not strong enough to cause a pang but again on a continuum this is what you would expect. I have been pretending that belief and desire were the two basic propositional attitudes but we must bear in mind that there are many, many attitudes that we can have and that within most of these attitude types we will find a continuum of intensities. The possibility for a rich qualitative experience associated with propositional attitudes is very real. How many attitudes there are and what qualities are associated with them is a task that I leave for another time.

It looks like we have truly found the mark of the mental. All and only mental states have qualities. All and only mental states are like something to have. The four basic kinds of mental states we began with are now reduced to two overarching types, *vis* attitudes and sensations. It is the qualitative character of the sensing of red that makes a sensation of red mental and it is the qualitative character of seeing *that* something is red that makes a perception a mental state. So too it is the qualitative character of being angry that makes being angry that Bush is in the White House a mental state and it is the qualitative character of belief that makes the belief that Kerry would have been a better President a mental state. These two overarching kinds of mental states are themselves distinguished by which component has the qualitative character. In the case of sensations it is the content that is qualitative. In the case of the attitudes it is the attitude itself that has the qualitative character.¹¹

Now we can see why the states of the computer do not count as mental: they do not have qualities. The computer does not *feel* anyway about the propositions that it represents, whereas we do. So while it is helpful and illuminating to use the computer as an analogy to explain representation, and hence intentionality, it is not a useful analogy for explaining mentality. The questions 'how are mental states about things in the world?' and 'what are mental states?' are not the same and we should not expect an answer to one to be an answer to the other. So, while the Representational Theory of Mind is valuable, it is not really a theory of mind but of the intentionality of thoughts, and therefore a theory of mental content. It explains how we

are able to think about the things that we do.

I believe that this truly allows for all the insights that philosophers have had about consciousness/mentality to peacefully coexist. On the one hand we respect the insight of the Cartesians, the Searles, and the Strawsons of the world that the purpose of mental states is to generate experience for the subject while on the other hand we respect the insight of the Empiricists and the modern Representational Theory of Mind that the mind is representational; it just turns out that representation is not uniquely mental. We respect our common sense intuition that there is something over and above mere symbol crunching computation going on in the mind while at the same time recognizing the role that computation and symbol crunching play.

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Notes

¹ I use the term 'thought' to be synonymous with 'propositional attitude'. This differs from the way, say Fodor uses the term. On his use the belief that Dan is late and the fear that he is late share the thought 'Dan is late'. On my use these are two thoughts that share a single content. On his view thinking is explained by the causal relations between thoughts on mine thinking is the having of various attitudes towards various contents.

² Though Goldman also thinks that there is a qualitative component that is part of the content of the attitude

³ if that if not redundantly redundant

⁴ Seeing red and seeing green differ in their content and it is virtue of this difference that the qualitative components of the sensations differ.

⁵ see Pitt's article for a nice gathering of these kinds of sentences

⁶ He also points out that this is another way in which functionalism about beliefs fails; box storage is not a matter of degree but having a belief is.

⁷ I argued that it was an island and so by definition was not connected to Brooklyn thus not part of it.

⁸ This echo's Hume's claim that moral judgments are really calm passions that we mistake for judgments

⁹ Of course I don't mean 'know' in the sense that you can't be wrong. I mean to point out that beliefs we feel very strongly about we often also feel like they couldn't be wrong.

¹⁰ It was actually reflecting on the kind of cases that Sass describes that originally led me to think that belief involved a qualitative component that was constitutive of it.

¹¹ In some cases both may be qualitative as, for instance, when I dislike my pain.