

Does the Rich Content View of Experience Matter? Comments on Matthew Frise (Pacific APA, 2013)

Adam Pautz
University of Texas at Austin

In his provocative discussion, Matthew argues that the rich content view doesn't matter to other debates in philosophy. I am sympathetic with much of what he said. But I do have three points to add.

1. The Rich Content View Not Needed to Answer Skepticism: A Quicker Argument?

To begin with, I agree with Matthew's claim that it is not obviously the case that "the rich content view plays a critical role in our avoiding skepticism about the external world", as he puts it. His argument is that there are accounts of perceptual justification that do not require the rich content view, and one of those accounts **might be right**.

The first point I'd like to make is that Matthew might have said something even stronger. One of these accounts **must be right**: there **must be** a true account of perceptual justification that does not require that rich content view.

To see this, notice that, even if the rich content view is true in the actual world, there are possible worlds in which it is false. For the sake of argument, suppose that, in the actual world, the content of your experience of tomatoes is rich. Now consider another possible world, *W*, in which, owing to some neural differences, your experiences of tomatoes fail represent **one** specific high-level property that they represent in the actual world – say, the natural kind property of being of being a tomato, the affordance property of being edible, or some causal property. However, suppose that in *W* everything is otherwise as similar to the actual world as possible: your experiences of tomatoes and their lower-level contents and your learning-history and so on are as similar as possible to how they are in the actual world.

Now, intuitively, in such a world *W*, as well as in the actual world, when you see a tomato in a normal case, you wouldn't only have a justification for believing the low-level content that a red and round thing is present; you would have a justification for believing, in fact you would know, various high-level contents: that a tomato is there, that is edible, that it is causally independent of you, and so on. Here as elsewhere, radical skepticism is implausible.

Because *W* is a possible world, we know that there **must be** some or other true general account of justification according to which you have justifica-

tion for believing these high-level contents even if the rich content view of experience is false. We may not know what that account is - maybe it is a reliability-based account, or Millar's recognitional-capacity account, or a permissive dogmatist account, or an inferentialist account based on implicit background beliefs. But, because W is a possible world, we know that there must be some such true account. (In Pautz 2013a I use a similar argumentative strategy, involving "absent cognitive qualia worlds", to argue against claims about the epistemic significance of cognitive qualia.)

2. Could the Rich Content View Help in Selecting A Theory of Sensory Representation?

So much, then, for the first of my three points. The second point I'd like to make is this. I agree with Matthew that the significance of the rich content view has been overplayed. But I think that if certain versions of it are true – I don't myself think they are true, but if they are true – then this might help naturalists about representation select between different naturalistic theories of sensory representation – a possibility Matthew didn't consider.

To see this, pretend that some strong version of the rich content view is true: your visual experience of a tomato represents, not only that it is red and round, but also that it is a tomato, that it is edible, and that it is causally independent of you. Let N be the neural realizer of your experience.

Arguably, such a rich view would rule out a general causal-covariation theory of sensory representation of the kind defended by Tye, Stalnaker, and Neander. For, intuitively, the tokening of the neural state N in the visual system (as the result of light) on particular occasions is never *causally explained* by a tomato's having the very high-level properties of being a real tomato, or being edible, or being causally independent of you. For instance, the visual system is just not causally sensitive to the edibility of a tomato, or even its being a tomato. A fake tomato with the same low-level properties would have led to the receptor activity and downstream processing.¹

By contrast, at least in some cases, the rich content view might go well with, and thereby lend some support for, a more teleological, output-based theory, such as Millikan's success-based theory. For instance, the *edibility* of a fruit might best explain why, in the past, it was advantageous that a certain sensory typically caused eating behavior, leading to the proliferation of this

¹ Siegel 2010, p. 84ff argues that the causal-covariation theories don't deliver clear verdicts on these matters. I disagree with her arguments, but I cannot discuss this here.

system in the population.² So, in some cases, Millikan's theory might support the assignment of the high-level content *that stuff is edible*. (But, I think no existing naturalistic theory of *sensory* representation – including a Millikan-style theory - supports the assignment of high-level *causal-counterfactual* contents, such as *that object is causally-counterfactually independent of me*.)

3. Could the Rich Content View Help Save Intentionalism from Counterexamples?

My third and final comment is this.

Roughly, intentionalism about phenomenal consciousness is the view that having an experience with a certain phenomenal character just is a matter sensorily representing a certain content. So, on this view, all phenomenal differences require content differences. I agree with Matthew that the rich content view is not needed to defend intentionalism in the face of cases of unilateral neglect (see also Masrour 2011).

But some have argued that the rich content view is needed to save intentionalism from certain other alleged counterexamples (the cases below are from Pautz 2010).

For instance, consider intentionalism about pain phenomenology. Imagine a case in which two creatures, from different species, track the same type of bodily damage, say a lesion in the arm. But suppose that, for whatever reason (e. g. susceptibility to infection), this same lesion is more dangerous to one of the creatures than to the other, so the two creatures respond to it with radically different neural processing and behaviors. On some elaborations of this case, given what we know from empirical research about the neural basis of pain, it is reasonable to think that the two creatures have phenomenally different pains. But given that their experiences track the same external, physical properties, it is somewhat hard to see what the difference in representational content might be. This kind of case is especially difficult for externalist-realist intentionalists about pain like Tye and Hill.

In response, Brian Cutter, Michael Tye (2011) and Chris Hill (2012. p. 137) have claimed that, while the two individuals' pain experiences repre-

² For the point that Millikan's consumerist theory, but not the causal-covariation theory, goes naturally with assignments high-level contents like *being edible frog food*, *being nutritious*, *being a dog*, see Neander 2012, sections 3.2 and 3.5; Lycan 1996, pp. 147-8; and Pautz 2010, 50-51. Cutter and Tye (2011) have recently argued that *in some cases* Tye's own causal covariation theory *does* in fact support assignments of fairly high-level contents like *being potentially dangerous* (more on this below), but Pautz 2013, footnote 14 argues against this.

sent the same type of lesion, they also represent that lesion as having different *subject-indexed valuational properties*, of the form *being harmful to one to a specific degree*. This explains the phenomenal difference, according to them. So the content of pain experience is richer than you might have thought.

Some proponents of the rich content view, for instance Nanay and Prosser, have argued that visual experiences represent tomatoes and other visible objects as having various different affordances, like being edible and throw-able. The idea defended by Tye and Hill that pain experiences represent valuational properties is somewhat analogous, since valuational properties, like affordances, concern an item's impact on a creature's goal-directed behavior.

Here is another case. Suppose two creatures' taste systems track the same chemical property of the some berries, but the berries are poisonous to one of the creatures but an important food-source for the other, so that they respond to it with relevantly different taste processing and behavior. There is an empirical argument (which I will not elaborate here) for supposing their experiences of the berries to be phenomenally different. But what's the difference in representational content? Again, this is especially a problem for realist-externalist versions of intentionalism.

The intentionalist might reply by invoking affordances: there is a phenomenal difference because one creature's taste experience represents the berries as *being edible* while the other's taste experience represent them as being *poisonous*. This is a rich content view about taste experience.

Prosser (2011) has even argued that, to handle certain structurally similar cases involving spatial perception, the intentionalist must claim that our spatial experiences represent complex affordances in addition to spatial properties, such as *being easily within reach* (although Prosser's case, and his account of what these properties are and his naturalistic theory of how the visual system represents them, are somewhat unclear to me).

Now, as it happens, I think that the aforementioned "rich content accounts" of these cases involving pain and taste face serious problems (Pautz 2010: 51-2; Pautz 2013: 57-60) and that there is a better alternative available to intentionalists: an internalist and projectivist version of intentionalism about pain and taste experience (Pautz 2010; Chalmers). (Another alternative is the appearance property theory of Shoemaker, Kriegel and others – but I think it is problematic (Pautz 2010: 52; 2013: 69-72).)³

³ In fact, I think that the rich content view is not well motivated and faces general problems (and if it is false, it of course doesn't matter to other debates). The natural kind thesis – that some experiences represent natural kinds - is especially poorly motivated, since we know that that account is not

My point is just that we may need to look at more cases, besides the single case of unilateral neglect that Matthew considers, before we can conclude that the rich content view does not matter to the defense of intentionalism, or to the defense of certain realist-externalist versions of intentionalism.

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needed to account for perceptual phenomenology in possible worlds in which what we call "tomatoes" and "pine-trees" and so on don't fall into any natural kinds at all – worlds in which they have no hidden-essence, or in fact fall into multiple kinds, or are unreal objects as in a brain-in-a-vat case. And there is a general problem with all version of the rich content view: if rich content view is true, and the sensory representation high level properties is an additional level of representation beyond the representation of low level properties, then the sensory representation of *any* high-level property [e. g. being happy] should be combinable with the sensory representation of *any* cluster of low-level properties – colors, shapes, orientations (in the same way that the representation of any color could go with the representation of any shape). For instance, you could represent a pile of mud as happy, an after-image as causally-*independent* of you, a lemon as a tomato, and so on. This seems absurd. If, on the other hand, the rich content theorist says that these are not possibilities, then she owes us an explanation of why they are impossible. (I should say, however, that all intentionalists face a problem in the vicinity, which I have elsewhere called "the problem of the laws of appearance"; my point here is that the rich content view would seriously exacerbate this problem.) The problem here for the rich content view is analogous to problem involving "separation cases" that I raise elsewhere (Pautz 2013) for the hypothesis that there is a rich set of cognitive qualia distinct from sensory-perceptual qualia.

A clarification: I only think the rich content view is false when it is explained by tying it to an intentionalist theory and using the Lewis-Ramsey technique along the lines of Pautz 2009 (for a similar approach to precisifying philosophical debates, see Dorr and Hawthorne forthcoming). If it is explained in some other, more standard ways, I believe that it is either trivially true, or else indeterminate (a claim also recently made by Logue 2013 on quite different grounds).

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