

Can Intentionalism Explain the Laws of Appearance?

Comment's on Paul Raymont, Eastern APA 2006

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1. Introduction

In his very interesting talk, Paul argued that Intentionalism about experience is false on the grounds that it cannot account for perceptual incompatibilities. I will first explain what I take to be his argument. Then I will raise two objections to it. Then I will raise some question about whether Paul's own theory of experience provides a satisfactory solution to the problem.

2. The Argument

First, the argument. Paul points out that one cannot experience the same stick as bent and stick. Let us express this by saying that it is not possible to have a bent-straight experience. Likewise it is not possible to experience a surface as pure green and pure red. Following Colin McGinn, let us call these *Laws of Appearance*.

As Mark Johnston points out in the online version of Chapter 7 of his work in progress *The Manifest*, the Laws of Appearance are many and various and go far beyond any simple constraint to the effect that one cannot experience the same thing as having incompatible properties. For instance, it is not possible to experience to have an experience as of the back and the front of a thing at the same time, and it is not possible to have an experience as of an opaque object and a second object wholly behind the first. There are many ways the world might be which we cannot experience the world as being.

It may be worth pointing out that a simple Law of Appearance to the effect that we cannot have an experience as of one thing having incompatible properties may be false. For instance, in the waterfall aftereffect, we have an experience as of the same thing both moving and not moving. But I agree with Paul that that there are Laws of Appearance, and that a theory of experience must accommodate them. For instance, I agree that it is a necessary truth that no one should have a bent-straight experience.

Now we may represent Paul's argument as having two premises:

1. If Intentionalism is true, then the Laws of Appearances are false. Call this *Incompatibilism*.
2. The Laws of Appearance are true.
3. So, Intentionalism is false.

Obviously, the main premise here is Incompatibilism. What is the case for it? On Intentionalism, to have a visual experience with a certain qualitative character is to visually entertain a proposition, where visually entertaining is a sui generis propositional attitude relation. Now it is a general feature of propositional attitude relations that one can bear them to incompatible contents. For instance, one might stand in the belief relation to incompatible contents. So, by analogy, one would expect that one can stand in visual entertaining relation to incompatible contents. For example, one would expect that one visually entertain the proposition that a single object is both bent and straight. But, on Intentionalism, that is to say that it is possible to have a bent-straight experience. Thus Intentionalism would seem to violate the Law of Appearance that one cannot have a bent-straight experience.

Of course, the point is a general one. There are no constraints on what propositions one might believe (or almost none – see the discussion of Lewis below). So one might expect that there are no constraints on what propositions we might visually entertain. But, on Intentionalism, that is to say that there are no constraints on how one might experience the world as being. In other words, the Laws of Appearance are false. But, of course, there are constraints on how one might experience the world as being. There are Laws of Appearance.

3. Two Possible Intentionalist replies to the Argument

3.1 Two Kinds of Intentionalism

So much for the argument. To see how the Intentionalist might respond, we must distinguish between Reductive Intentionalism and Non-Reductive Intentionalism. Reductive Intentionalism combines Intentionalism with some reductive theory of sensory intentionalism. Non-Reductive Intentionalism combines Intentionalism with the claim that there is no interesting reduction of sensory intentionality. I think that Reductive and Non-Reductive Intentionalists should try to respond to the argument in different ways.

3.2 How the Reductive Intentionalist might respond to the Argument

Let us begin with Reductive Intentionalism. I believe that the Reductive Intentionalist should respond to the argument by trying to derive the Laws of Appearance from his favorite theory of content.

For instance, consider the Optimal Cause Theory. On the Optimal Cause Theory, one might say that to visually entertain the proposition that something is bent and straight is to be in an inner state that is caused under normal conditions by an object that is both bent and straight. Since it is not possible that an object should be both bent and straight, one might think that it follows from this theory that it is not possible to visually entertain the proposition that an object is bent and straight. On Intentionalism, that is to say that one cannot have a bent-straight experience. Thus one might think that at least one kind of Law of Appearance can be derived from the Optimal Cause Theory.¹

Now my view is that Optimal Cause theory might have trouble with another kind of Law of Appearance. Berkeley thought that one cannot perceive primary qualities like shape except via perceiving secondary qualities like color. I believe that the Optimal Cause Intentionalist cannot accommodate this law of appearance, for presumably it is possible that a visual system should track shapes without tracking colors or any other secondary qualities. But then, on this theory, it should be possible to experience shapes without perceiving colors or any other secondary qualities, contrary to Berkeley's Law of Appearance.

Another kind of theory of content that the Reductive Intentionalist might appeal to the Interpretation Theory of the kind defended by David Lewis. On this theory, what a person experiences, believes and desires is given by the best total interpretation of that person and the rest of his community, where very roughly the best interpretation is the one that does the best job of rationalizing their total behavioral dispositions, given certain constitutive principles of content-attribution.

To see how this theory might explain the Laws of Appearance, let us first reconsider the case of belief. Now, contrary to what I said

¹ There is however a problem here. To accommodate the waterfall illusion, the optimal cause theorist must go compositional: in this case, he must say, one represents *moving and standing* still by virtue of the concatenation in one's visual system of a representation of moving and another of standing still. But if he accepts this, then he must say that one can visually represent that the same object is both bent and straight, by virtue of the concatenation in one's visual system of a representation of being bent and another of being straight. However, while the waterfall illusion seems to be possible – indeed it seems to be actual – the bent-straight experience seems impossible. One would like an explanation of why one can have one experience of an impossible scene (moving and standing still) but not others.

above, there are constraints what one might believe. There is a limit on how irrational one might be. Likewise there is a limit on what one might desire. As David Lewis says, one couldn't have a basic desire for a saucer of mud. The Interpretation Theory explains these constraints on belief and desire as following from the constitutive principles of interpretation.

Likewise, perhaps the combination of Intentionalism and the Interpretation Theory of content can explain the constraints on how one might experience the world as being, that is, Laws of Appearance. For instance, perhaps one cannot have an experience as of a bent and straight object because there is no possible course of behavior which would be rationalized by this content-attribution.

So there are ways the Reductive Intentionalism might respond to the argument. Now as it happens I think that Reductive Intentionalism is false. I think that both the Optimal Cause Theory of sensory intentionality and the Interpretational Theory fail. So I believe that Intentionalist cannot answer the Argument from the Laws of Appearance by deriving the Laws of Appearance from some reductive theory of sensory intentionality.

3.3 How the Non-Reductive Intentionalist might respond to the Argument

Let us turn, then, to the question of how the Non-Reductive Intentionalist might respond to the Argument from the Laws of Appearance.

First, a preliminary. Let us call a necessity of the form *necessarily p* a basic necessity just in case it cannot be derived from any more basic necessities. For instance, the modal claim that necessarily for every object there is a property of the object.

Now I can say how I think the Non-Reductive Intentionalist should answer the argument. The Non-Reductive Intentionalist can accommodate the Laws of Appearance by taking them as basic necessities. We all must admit some basic necessities. On this view, there is no deep explanation of why the Laws of Appearance are true of experience, just as there is no explanation of why certain modal truths hold of object and properties, and objects and properties in other ontological categories. It is just a basic modal fact that one cannot visually entertain incompatible propositions, and hence have incompatible experiences. This position is not unoccupied: it is taken by McGinn in the *Subjective View*.

Paul argues that the Intentionalist cannot account for the Laws of Appearance. On this response, in a sense, he is right: the Intentionalist

cannot derive them from any theory, or from any more basic modal truths. But this does not mean that he cannot account for them in the sense that he must reject them.

4. A Problem with Paul's Solution: It requires the sense datum theory

Finally I turn to Paul's own solution to the problem posed by the Laws of Appearance. On the one hand Paul speaks of a visual field. He says that, on his theory of experience,

[1] having a bent-straight experience

is identical with

[2] having an experience that represents being bent and being straight via the same region of the visual field

And he says that it is impossible to have a bent-straight experience because it is impossible because it is impossible to have an experience that represents being bent and being straight via the same region of the visual field. But it is not clear what it means to say that one has an experience that represents a property via a region of the visual field, or why it should be impossible to have to have an experience that represents being bent and being straight via the same region of the visual field.

Paul speaks of the visual field. This suggests that he might accept the Sense Datum Theory or Peacocke's Sensationalism, a full-blown act-object theory. Perhaps if we accept this theory then we can explain the impossibility of a bent-straight experience in terms of the incompatibility of the properties of being bent and being straight. On such a theory, to have a bent-straight experience would be to sense a bent and straight sense datum, or in Peacocke's terminology to sense a bent' and straight' prime region of the visual field. Since nothing can be bent and straight, or bent' and straight', we would have, if we accepted this theory, an explanation of the impossibility of a bent-straight experience. So, the Sense Datum Theory might explain the Law of Appearance. But then, of course, we would also be stuck with all the problems of the Sense Datum Theory.

Now Paul also says "we [should] take the claim about the visual field as a statement about the features of the experience itself". This suggests that he accepts something like Adverbialism, together with the

claim that adverbs are to be analysed along the lines of the Davidson's event analysis in terms of properties of events – in this case, particular experiences. But it is not clear how Adverbialism or such a Qualia Theory explains the impossibility of bent-straight experiences. The Adverbialist (/event modifier-ist) or Qualia-Theory will say that to have a bent-straight experience would be to have an experience with the property P and Q. Now such a theorist could not say that the properties P and Q are the properties of being bent and straight, and then explain the impossibility of a bent-straight experience by pointing out that these properties are incompatible. For as Paul points out experiences are neither bent nor straight. Such a theorist would have to (i) give some kind of comprehensible, jargon-free explanation of what these properties are (ii) show that they are incompatible and (iii) show that we can know that they are incompatible on the basis of experience and reflection, before looking at neurophysiology.

5. Sum Up

To sum up, the main points are these. First, the Intentionalist might accommodate the Laws of Appearance by deriving them from a theory of sensory intentionality. Second, might accommodate them by taking them as basic truths. Third, it is not clear what Paul's own solution is: he equivocates between the Sense Datum theory and the Adverbialism. The sense datum theory explains some Laws of Appearance, but does not accommodate the waterfall illusion, and faces all the problems of the sense datum theory. The Adverbialist cannot explain the Laws of Appearance, and faces all the problems with Adverbialism. So even if the worse case scenario for the Intentionalist obtains, and he cannot offer any kind of explanation of the Laws of Appearance, it still may be that the reasonable choice, between these options, is to accept Intentionalism.