

Is *Narrow Content*'s "Narrow Content" Narrow Content?

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Internalism about mental content is, roughly, the view that there is a kind of mental content—narrow content—that is determined by a subject's internal state. Over the past few decades, philosophers have developed a variety of arguments for and against internalism, including arguments from intuitions about possible cases, causal efficacy, privileged access, and the psychological roles of contentful states.

Juhani Yli-Vakkuri and John Hawthorne's *Narrow Content* offers an exceptionally rigorous treatment of this topic. It advances the bold thesis that all versions of internalism are either false or "pointless"—that is, roughly, of no interest. This overarching conclusion is pursued by exploring various possible regimentations of the internalist thesis. In the process, Y&H rule out many variations on the internalist view, which constitutes solid progress on multiple fronts.

A drawback of Y&H’s approach, however, is that in working with regimented versions of intuitive claims, they risk missing their target, the core internalist thesis that there is a kind of mental content determined by a subject’s internal state. In this paper, we argue that *Narrow Content* in fact misconstrues the internalist position, which has the consequence that its main lines of argument leave the core internalist thesis largely untouched. We also raise some internal concerns with some arguments.

In Section 1, we overview Y&H’s proposed regimentations and argue that they leave out something that is hard to regiment: the idea that a thought’s narrow content is supposed to be *represented*. Section 2 overviews Y&H’s arguments against the regimentations they consider, showing that a more charitable construal of internalism avoids the key arguments and raising some internal concerns with some arguments.

1 Y&H’s construal of internalism

Y&H’s stated target is internalism, the view that thoughts have narrow contents, contents that are “fully determined by what goes on inside the agent” (p. 3).¹ While internalism is usually understood (and initially described by Y&H)

¹Y&H define *thoughts* as intentional states that are “aptly described by ‘that’-clauses.” (p. 1) The suggestion seems to be that thoughts are intentional states that are “aptly described” by propositional attitude ascriptions of the form “A believes/desires/etc that P”. It is not entirely clear how “aptly described” should be understood here: must the state be “aptly described” entirely or in part? Must it be described entirely accurately or merely sufficiently accurately for some purpose? Demanding interpretations of this phrase narrow the scope of *Narrow Content* in ways that don’t seem entirely charitable. In particular, Y&H recognize that many internalists don’t think narrow contents are (always or typically) the contents ascribed by “that”-clauses, so they presumably don’t mean “described entirely and accurately” (if they did, the views in question would be out of scope). Given the kinds of

as just stated, Y&H find this definition insufficiently precise. They propose to regiment this definition in terms of a set of technical notions, which we will now introduce.

Y&H define a *content assignment* as a relation between thoughts and contents such that, necessarily, the relation relates any thought to just one content (they also describe content assignments as “functions in intension”). Y&H are neutral regarding the nature of contents, but they take them to in some sense determine *intensions*, which are functions from indices to truth values, where indices are possible worlds, perhaps together with other alethic parameters, such as agents, times, and locations. They count all entities that determine intensions as contents.²

Y&H define a *narrow content assignment* as a content assignment whose assignments (strongly, locally) supervene on the *qualitative agential profiles* (*QAPs*) of thoughts, where a thought’s QAP is the “maximal way in which the thought relates to the way the agent of the thought is in intrinsic, qualitative respects” (p. 30). A thought’s QAP effectively captures all the intrinsic qualitative properties of the thought and its agent. *Qualitative*, here, roughly means *generic*, i.e., not involving any particulars. For example, the property of being square is qualitative, but that of being square #67 and that of being Yasmine’s neural firing #347 (a particular event) are not.

states Y&H focus on, it seems that they use “thought” to mean any intentional state of a propositional form, i.e., any state that “says” that something is the case.

²The condition that contents must determine intensions is stated on p. 24. We couldn’t find an explicit statement that this is sufficient for being a content, but this appears to be how Y&H use the term “content” since when considering various content assignments they never worry that the intensions or intension-determining entities assigned by a relation might not in fact be contents.

As Y&H note, we cannot equate the position of internalists with the claim that there exists a narrow content assignment, since the latter is clearly trivial and uninteresting: we can trivially construct narrow content assignments assigning arbitrary contents to thoughts in a way that supervenes on their QAPs. For example, the function assigning to every thought the intension of “ $2+2=4$ ” is a narrow content assignment. So, Y&H take internalism to be the less obviously trivial thesis that there is a narrow content assignment *that satisfies some further constraints of interest* (p. 39) . We will discuss the constraints momentarily.

Earlier, we glossed internalism as the view that some mental contents are determined by internal states of subjects. The internal states of subjects include facts about particulars, such as having neural firing #347. Y&H’s internalism, in contrast, requires that narrow contents supervene on QAPs, which do not include any facts about particulars. The restriction of the supervenience base to QAPs is key to many of Y&H’s objections, but Y&H also consider a form of internalism that does not limit the supervenience base to QAPs. They define a *quasi-narrow content assignment* as a content assignment whose assigned contents supervene on the *agential profiles* (*APs*) of thoughts. Unlike QAPs, APs capture non-qualitative internal features, such as neuron #347 firing. Thus, all narrow content assignments are quasi-narrow, but not all quasi-narrow content assignments are narrow. Like the claim that there is a narrow content assignment, the claim that there is a quasi-narrow content assignment is trivial. The more interesting view, which Y&H call *quasi-internalism*, is the view that there is a quasi-narrow content assignment that satisfies certain further

interesting constraints.

The “quasi” terminology seems intended to convey that quasi-internalism is not really a version of internalism. This terminology is suboptimal. It is probably true that many internalists have understood narrow content as determined by purely qualitative features of thoughts and their subjects, but the real point of contention between internalists and externalists concerns whether there is a kind of content determined solely by internal, non-environmental factors, not whether there’s a kind of content determined by internal *qualitative* factors alone. As Chalmers (2018) points out in a review of *Narrow Content*, the question of qualitiveness seems orthogonal to the question of internality: some of Y&H’s arguments against non-quasi-internalism generalize to *qualitativism*, the view that mental content is determined by purely qualitative facts, internal or external. Moreover, well-known arguments for internalism (such as arguments from privileged access and from explanations of cognition and behavior) don’t specifically motivate the narrow internalist thesis that content is determined by a subject’s *qualitative* intrinsic state as opposed to the weaker thesis that content is determined by a subject’s intrinsic state (qualitative or not)—they are not arguments for qualitativism.³ For these reasons and for ease of exposition, we will not follow Y&H’s adoption of the “quasi” qualification

³Farkas (2008), who appears to be one of Y&H’s main targets, argues at length that the right way to understand internalism and narrow content is in terms of subjective indistinguishability: the internal is the subjective point of view that is common to twins, where the subjective point of view is roughly a subject’s consciousness. This seems to imply a commitment to narrow content being determined by QAPs, but there is a nearby, weaker view that is very much in the spirit of Farkas’ view and arguments. This nearby view takes narrow content to be determined not just by the phenomenal *types* of experiences, but by experiences (particular instances of phenomenal types). As we suggest below, experiences are the main particulars that seem relevant to determining narrow content.

for referring to internalist views on which internal particulars form part of the relevant supervenience base.

We will call a content assignment whose assignments supervene on thoughts' QAPs *qualifiedly narrow* (the narrowness is qualified to require a qualitative supervenience base). We will call content assignments whose assignments supervene on thoughts' APs *unqualifiedly narrow*. Correspondingly, we define qualified and unqualified internalism as the following theory schemas (to be filled out by specifying the relevant constraint C):

Qualified internalism There exists a qualifiedly narrow content assignment satisfying constraint C.

Unqualified internalism There exists an unqualifiedly narrow content assignment satisfying constraint C.

In what follows, all unqualified uses of “internalism” should be taken to refer to unqualified internalism (unless otherwise indicated). The same holds for unqualified uses of “narrow content assignment”, “narrow content”, etc.

As we already noted, all the substance of qualified and unqualified internalism lies in the constraint C. Y&H consider two kinds of candidate constraints: structural and theoretical.

The main structural constraint is that a content assignment be *truth-conditional*, that is, that, necessarily, it assigns to each thought a content that gives the correct truth value at the thought's index (the world, time, etc. where the thought is found, which is assumed to be unique). For example, suppose Li's thought that it is sunny is true. A truth-conditional assignment

must assign it a content whose intension returns “true” at the index of that thought. Other structural constraints discussed by Y&H have to do with the compositional structure of complex thoughts. We won’t go into the details of these constraints because they tend to be satisfied when truth-conditionality is satisfied, assuming thoughts are compositional.

Y&H initially lay out a diverse collection of theoretical constraints, but they end up mainly focusing on two. The first, which we will refer to as the *linguistic constraint*, is that the contents ascribed by a content assignment are *ur-contents*, which are what the “that”-clauses of propositional attitude ascriptions “express”. The term “express” can be understood in different ways. Judging from what Y&H end up counting as ur-content in chapter 3, the idea seems to be that a full analysis of the logical form of propositional attitude ascriptions will reveal that they ascribe relations to contents. On a simple analysis of belief ascriptions, the relation is simply the believing relation, a relation between individuals and propositions or similar entities, but more complex analyses are possible. The contents that figure in the logical forms of such ascriptions seem to be what Y&H call “ur-contents”. For a content assignment to satisfy the linguistic constraint, the contents it ascribes must be these ur-contents.

As Y&H recognize, the claim that propositional attitude ascriptions accurately characterize the narrow contents of mental states is widely rejected by internalists. Y&H cite Lewis’ (1979) statement that “beliefs are ill-characterized by the meanings of the sentences that express them”. They acknowledge that few internalists take the contents expressed by “that”-clauses to be narrow,

which is a view they call “sectarian internalism” (p 97).⁴ This makes the linguistic constraint a poor contender for a constraint characterizing the internalist position.

The second theoretical constraint Y&H seriously consider is the *rationality constraint*, which requires that certain epistemic properties of thoughts (chiefly, their status as a priori or a posteriori) supervene on the contents assigned to them. We agree that a connection between narrow content and epistemic properties is central to some internalist views (especially those of Chalmers (2002, 2003), though we are not sure that supervenience is the right way to articulate the alleged connection (it is not how Chalmers construes it).

Y&H briefly consider two constraints that pertain to the relationship between narrow content and phenomenal consciousness. There are two broad ways that consciousness and narrow content might be related: a subject’s narrow contents could play a role in determining their phenomenal states (as some representationalists about consciousness claim), or a subject’s phenomenal states could play a role in determining their narrow contents (as many

⁴Using the term “psychological content” for narrow content, Loar writes: “that-clauses on their oblique readings are sensitive, either directly or indirectly via translation, to how beliefs would linguistically be expressed, and that is [...] only loosely related to psychological content”. (p. 164) Chalmers (2011b) readily concedes that the rules of propositional attitude ascriptions are complex and in no way guarantee that a correctly used “that”-clause simply denotes the ascriber’s narrow content (it requires at most that the expressed proposition be “coordinate” with the narrow content). Jackson (2003) suggests that “the respect in which the semantics of natural kind terms deliver broad conditions is precisely the respect in which they get contents intuitively wrong”, and that this is true of the semantics of names as well (see also Jackson 2004). Y&H ascribe the view that ur-contents are narrow to Farkas (2008, ch. 4) and Segal (2000). We could not find clear evidence of this view in Farkas’ ch. 4. In correspondence, Farkas rejected the idea that she is interested in a notion of narrow content tied to the semantics of attitude ascriptions. Segal (2000) does subscribe to the view that, when used strictly correctly, the “that”-clauses of attitude ascriptions pick out narrow contents.

proponents of phenomenal intentionality claim). Y&H mention the representationalist view but set it aside as implausible. Regarding phenomenal intentionality approaches, Y&H do not consider the view that narrow content is determined by phenomenal consciousness (which is the view that proponents of phenomenal intentionality such as Horgan and Tienson (2009), Loar (2003), and ourselves (2018, 2020) hold). Instead, they consider the distinct claim that *ur-content* (the content that is expressed by “that”-clauses) is determined by phenomenal consciousness, which is much less plausible given the widely accepted view that “that”-clauses come closer to capturing broad content than narrow content. While we find Y&H’s characterizations of these views and reasons for setting them aside unsatisfactory, we agree that these are not interesting constraints to consider for the purposes of characterizing internalism, since the the core internalist position is neutral on the relationship between content and phenomenal consciousness.

Two other theoretical constraints that Y&H consider and quickly reject are the *privileged access* constraint, which requires of a narrow content assignment that it assign introspectively accessible contents, and the *explanation of action* constraint, which requires of a narrow content assignment that it assign the contents explaining action. As with the other theoretical constraints, these constraints go beyond any reasonable construal of internalism, even though some internalists accept that narrow contents in fact play the specified roles.

Y&H aim their arguments at specific versions of qualified and unqualified internalism incorporating some of the above-mentioned constraints. Our central worry with *Narrow Content* is that none of the views considered is equivalent

to the internalist thesis initially advertised as their target (the view that there is “a kind of content that is internally determined” (p. 16)). Having laid out the framework of content assignments and noted that it is trivial that there is a narrow content assignment, Y&H disapprovingly remark that internalists are not very clear regarding what else they believe beyond the trivial point that there is a narrow content assignment.⁵ Internalists must surely believe something more, so Y&H set about to explore further substantive claims that can be made about content assignments. But internalism does not need these further claims to be made substantive. The initial characterization of internalism—its characterization as the view that we have contents determined by our internal states—is substantive without the additional commitments. The problem is that the substance of this claim was left out of the formalism of content assignments.

In the framework of constraints and content assignments, the core internalist thesis can be approximately stated as the claim that there is a narrow content assignment that meets the following constraint: it assigns to every thought a content that it in fact has, i.e., that it represents.⁶ We can call this constraint the *representation constraint*. Our concern, then, stated within Y&H’s framework, is this: the representation constraint is the only constraint that

⁵“Theories of narrow content get their interest not by simply claiming that there is a narrow content assignment but by claiming that there is a narrow content assignment that satisfies some further, non-trivial conditions that render them theoretically interesting. [...] One flaw of the literature is that the nature of these further conditions is often left unclear. Nevertheless, conditions from one or both of two families [structural and theoretical constraints] are typically in play implicitly or explicitly.” (p.39)

⁶This is an approximate statement because it (indirectly, via the definition of a narrow content assignment) employs the notion of supervenience, and it is not mandatory (though it *is* common) to cash out the relevant notion of determination in terms of supervenience. More on this below.

really matters in characterizing internalism, but it cannot be expressed using Y&H's constraints. This is problematic because the views at which Y&H aim their central arguments are views that are stated in terms of their favored constraints. As we will see in the next section, this results in Y&H's arguments leaving the core internalist thesis untouched. In the remainder of this section, we will elaborate on the core internalist thesis and argue that none of Y&H's proposed regimentations of internalism adequately capture it.

The notion of representation invoked by the representation constraint is part of our intuitive understanding of the subject matter of a theory of content. Following Brentano (1874), the notion is often introduced by pointing out that some mental states exhibit a kind of “directedness” or “reference to a content”—they “say” or “represent” something. A belief might “say” that grass is green, and a perceptual experience might present or be directed towards a purple octopus. The notion of content is then introduced to mean *that which a mental state represents*. On this understanding of the notion of content, to say that a mental state *has* a content is to say that it *represents* that content.

The following passage from the article “Narrow Mental Content” of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is representative of how the relevant notions are typically understood:

A state with content is a state that *represents* some part or aspect of the world; its content is the way it represents the world as being. For example, consider my belief that water is a liquid at room temperature. The content of this belief is what it says about the world [...] (Brown 2008, section 1)

The notion of representation can be communicated in various ways. Lewis (1979) talks about “objects of belief” (while recognizing, as discussed by Y&H) that these aren’t literally ascribed by “that”-clauses. We can talk more colloquially about contents being “what we think”, “what our thoughts are about”, or “what we entertain”. We believe most philosophers recognize that there are intelligible, closely related notions of representation, intentionality, and content that can be communicated in these ways.⁷

Note that the representation constraint is not implicit in the notion of a content assignment. Given the way Y&H understand the notion of a content assignment, a content assignment might assign to a thought a content that it does not represent. That is because any arbitrary function from thoughts to intension-determining entities counts as a content assignment (this is why, absent supplementation by some further constraint, qualified and unqualified internalism are trivial).

The representation constraint is not equivalent to any of the constraints

⁷Various ways of sharpening up this notion have been suggested. One way is the linguistic approach of Chisholm (1957, ch. 11), which equates the intentionality of mental states with certain linguistic features of propositional attitude ascriptions. This approach had its heyday, but it has now become clear that it leaves out too much of the original notion, especially if we are trying to capture narrow content (for reasons already discussed).

Another way of sharpening the notion of content is by focusing on representations’ important metaphysical attributes. A peculiar fact about mental representation is that we seem to be able to represent situations that are not actual. Based on this, one of us (DB) has suggested a sharpening of the notion of an intentional state (and, by extension, content): intentional states are those mental states that consist in standing in a non-factive relation to one or more proposition-like entities (of course, this is not to say that any state (mental or not) of standing in a non-factive relation to a proposition is an intentional state). This definition of intentional states is far removed from the intuitive starting point, but it is helpful in capturing what is at stake in certain debates, such as those surrounding the intentionality of consciousness. See Bourget 2019.

A less committal definition of intentionality simply takes the most salient, uncontested examples of intentional states and defines intentionality and content ostensibly. See Kriegel 2011 and Mendelovici 2018.

that Y&H consider. Some of Y&H's constraints are too weak in that a narrow content assignment might meet them but fail to meet the representation constraint. Some are too strong in that a narrow content assignment might meet the representation constraint without meeting them. Some are too weak in one respect while being too strong in another.

Consider first the structural constraints. The main structural constraint is the truth-conditionality constraint, which requires that, necessarily, for any thought T, the truth value of the content assigned to T at the index of T is the truth value of T at that index. A narrow content assignment's satisfying this constraint is not sufficient for it satisfying the representation constraint. Suppose that the truth-conditionality constraint is satisfied by some assignment A. The truth-conditionality constraint requires that A assigns contents that yield the right truth values at worlds that contain thoughts, but there are many contents that are like the A-assigned ones with respect to these worlds while having different truth values at other worlds. So, we can trivially construct alternative content assignments that satisfy the truth-conditionality constraint and don't assign the same contents as A. But, presumably, many of the contents assigned by these assignments are not represented. Not only is meeting the truth-conditionality constraint not *sufficient* for meeting the representation constraint, but it is also not *necessary*. The truth conditionality constraint presupposes that there is such a thing as the unique truth value of a thought at its index. We don't see why this should be assumed by an internalist. It could turn out that there is a kind of narrow content whose truth values do not always coincide with those of broad contents. In this case,

the presupposition of uniqueness would fail, but there might still be narrow contents we represent.

Satisfying the theoretical constraints more plausibly requires the satisfaction of the representation constraint. One might think that if some contents are ur-contents, determine apriority, are introspectible, explain behavior, or are tied to phenomenology, they must be represented by their subjects. Given the specific ways Y&H construe the relevant theoretical constraints, we largely disagree, but we won't argue this relatively subtle point here.⁸ The more obvious point is that contents could conceivably satisfy the representation constraint without satisfying the theoretical constraints. As we saw already, the theoretical constraints all say more than internalists need be committed to qua internalists.

We have argued that the regimentations of internalism that Y&H consider do not express the core internalist thesis. Either they say too much in that they bundle along with this thesis extra theoretical commitments that form no definitional part of it, or they say too little in that they allow internalism

⁸We disagree that the linguistic and rationality constraint clearly imply the representation constraint. Regarding the first, it seems perfectly possible, given the complex rules of propositional attitude ascriptions, that the contents that we literally (and perhaps correctly) ascribe in such ascriptions turn out not to be represented by the ascribees. Of course, this will seem hard to imagine if we define mental content as ur-content (as Y&H seem inclined to do). But if we think of mental content as that which is represented, on the Brentanian notion of representation described earlier, it is conceivable that mental content has little to do with the logical forms of linguistic descriptions of mental states. Regarding rationality, we just don't think internalists need to be committed to claims about apriority *unless* those claims are truisms that fall out of a definition of apriority along the lines of "having a necessary narrow content", which of course means that narrow content needs to be defined independently of apriority (we can't define narrow content as that on which apriority supervenes and apriority as having a necessary narrow content). Short of this kind of definitional link that takes narrow content to be conceptually prior, it is unclear why narrow content and apriority should be tied together, so we don't think internalism should be understood in terms of apriority.

to be true without requiring that a thought's assigned narrow contents are in fact represented by that thought.

In the following section, we will see that Y&H's key arguments succeed against their targets only because they neglect the representation constraint. In a nutshell, Y&H's strategy is to argue that all versions of internalism are either false or "theoretically pointless" (roughly, trivial). Internalism seems false when the representation constraint is bundled with further constraints that are implausibly satisfied (in many cases, the bundle involves the linguistic constraint), and it seems trivial or pointless when the representation constraint is left out. Nothing in *Narrow Content* shows that the core internalist view itself is either false or theoretically pointless. We will now consider Y&H's arguments in more detail to bring out these points.

2 Y&H's case against internalism

Y&H's overall argument against internalism (qualified or unqualified) is that every combination of additional constraints yields a view that is either false or theoretically pointless. While this is the overall argument, qualified and unqualified internalism are treated differently. The main thrust of the argument against qualified internalism is that it is implausible when combined with Y&H's candidate constraints (though Y&H also raise triviality concerns for some variants of qualified internalism), while the main thrust of the argument against unqualified internalism is that it is theoretically pointless even when combined with the constraints; qualified internalism is too strong while un-

qualified internalism is too weak. We will now consider the two horns of this alleged dilemma in more detail.

2.1 The argument against qualified internalism

Chapter 2 argues against versions of qualified internalism that are supplemented with the truth-conditionality or other structural constraints. In a nutshell, the problem with such a view, Y&H claim, is that it requires indices to contain an unpalatable number of parameters.

A variant of the well-known Twin Earth case (Putnam 1975) purportedly shows that it is possible for qualitatively identical subjects in the same world to have thoughts with different truth values. If this is right, then either content is not determined by QAPs (and, hence, qualified internalism is false) or content does not by itself determine truth value. Qualified internalists are forced to adopt the latter position. They can nonetheless maintain that a thought's truth value is determined by its narrow content *together with certain further factors*, such as the thought's subject, time of occurrence, and location. These further factors form part of the alethic parameters of indices. This view is often characterized as a species of *relativism* because it has the consequence that a thought only has a truth value relative to the relevant set of parameters.

Y&H's Mirror Man example pushes the Putnamesque line of argument further to show that the usual alethic parameters (subject, time, and location) are not enough. The example involves a subject who is perfectly symmetrical, which enables him to have two thoughts that are qualitatively identical but,

in virtue of being perceptually connected to two different objects (one to Kit Fine, the other to a wax statue of Kit Fine), end up having different truth values. Since the same subject, time, and location are involved, it seems that the relativist needs yet another parameter, which could be something demonstrated or attended to, or perhaps the thought itself. Y&H refer to the view that thoughts are their own alethic parameters as *thought relativism*.

Y&H concede that thought relativism can avoid the Mirror Man objection. However, they suggest that the view is quite radical and involves an ad hoc proliferation of alethic parameters. They also point out that it makes qualified internalism with mere structural constraints trivial, since thought relativism makes it trivial to construct arbitrary qualifiedly narrow content assignments that satisfy the structural constraints (p. 81). They use the example of an assignment that assigns to every thought the following function from thoughts (T) and worlds (W): return true if T is true at W, and false otherwise. It is not clear whether Y&H take this charge of triviality to be an objection to thought relativism, but it certainly seems to be a problem that arbitrary assignments satisfy the view.

As we indicated earlier, this triviality concern can be addressed by supplementing internalism with the representation constraint. Clearly, the trivially-constructed assignment specified above does not assign contents that are in fact represented by the thoughts to which they are assigned. The claim that there is a qualifiedly narrow content assignment whose parameters include thoughts and whose assigned contents we represent is a substantive claim.

We are also not convinced that there is no way to systematize the prolifera-

tion of parameters or that there is no good independent motivation for taking thoughts to be parameters, but we won't pursue such lines of response here because we are independently attracted to the unqualified internalism that Mirror Man is used to push us toward.

Y&H also argue that versions of internalism that are supplemented with the linguistic and rationality constraints are false (Chapters 3 and 4). We needed no persuasion as far as the linguistic constraint goes. We won't discuss the rationality constraint because it is not central to internalism as we conceive of it.⁹

2.2 The argument against unqualified internalism

Unlike qualified internalism, unqualified internalism has no trouble handling the Mirror Man case. This is because an unqualifiedly narrow content assignment can assign distinct contents to Mirror Man's two thoughts. For instance, the two thoughts might pick out their objects as *the person that caused this experience*, each mentally demonstrating a distinct perceptual experience. Because the experiences demonstrated are part of the APs of the thoughts, the thoughts can have distinct contents. The view that token experiences serve to anchor reference to other particulars is suggested by Searle (1983, ch. 8)

⁹While we do think narrow contents play a rational role, we think the notion of narrow content is prior to that of apriority and related notions, and we think it would be a mistake to try to settle questions about their relationships without having a good grip on narrow content independently of any epistemic notions.

and Russell (1910, p. 115). It is also deployed by Chalmers (2018, 2011a) in response to this type of case. It is a particularly natural view to adopt if one thinks that we have a special kind of acquaintance with our conscious states, a view that is arguably congenial to the internalist spirit.

Y&H agree that unqualified internalism can handle the Mirror Man case. The main problem they see with this view is that it is “theoretically pointless” when combined with any of the constraints they consider (p. 180). They also suggest in passing that unqualified internalism combined with the linguistic or rationality constraint is false (in addition to being pointless), but we will focus on the threat of pointlessness because we don’t endorse the linguistic and rationality constraints. Y&H raise two objections under the heading of theoretical pointlessness, which we will consider in turn.

What we might call the *basic charge of pointlessness* starts with the observation that (unqualified) internalism is trivial even when we include the structural constraints (truth-conditionality and associated constraints; p. 161). It is trivial because, assuming a fine-grained conception of contents as structured propositions, we can follow a simple procedure to construct arbitrary content assignments that satisfy these constraints. Since internalism combined with structural constraints is trivial, it is of no interest.¹⁰

Y&H further argue that even if internalism supplemented with the rationality constraint were true, it collapses into the claim that apriority and other relevant rational properties are narrow, saying nothing substantive about con-

¹⁰Y&H assume a coarse-grained conception of contents for most of the book, but at this point, they assume a fine-grained conception. We will go along with this for the sake of argument, since we agree that it would be a problem if quasi-internalism were pointless on a fine-grained conception of contents.

tent per se. Since supervenience is transitive, it is obvious that if apriority supervenes on the values of a narrow content assignment, it is narrow (it supervenes on APs). To establish the converse, we construct a narrow content assignment whose values “encode” all the features of APs. If apriority is narrow, it must supervene on the values of that assignment. So, we can trivially construct a narrow assignment on which apriority supervenes if and only if it is narrow. For this reason, Y&H conclude that “saying that a priori entailment supervenes on a narrow content assignment turns out to be no more than a roundabout way of saying that a priori entailment is narrow”. (p.159) In general, X supervenes on a narrow content assignment if and only if X is narrow.

Again, though, if we accept the representation constraint as a core commitment of internalism, the charge of pointlessness evaporates. Internalism supplemented with the representation constraint is not pointless because it is non-trivial that there is a narrow content assignment assigning contents that we in fact represent: the assignments that we can construct arbitrarily are not guaranteed to assign contents that are in fact represented. Since we think the representation constraint is the only constraint needed to characterize internalism, this suffices to rescue internalism from the basic charge of pointlessness.

The representation constraint also rescues the rationality constraint from the claim that it says nothing about content per se. As we just said, the content assignment that encodes APs in its values plausibly fails to satisfy the representation constraint. So, saying that X supervenes on a narrow content

assignment of *represented* contents is not a roundabout way of saying that X is narrow. If we supplement internalism with the rationality constraint in addition to the representation constraint, we obtain a view that commits us to a non-trivial relationship between apriority and represented contents. The representation constraint effectively singles out one or a few select content assignments. Absent reason to think there is a relationship between apriority and representation, we wouldn't have any reason to think apriority supervenes on one of those content assignments *even if we thought it was narrow*.

Let us turn now to the second argument for the claim that internalism is pointless. The second argument rests on substantive metaphysical claims that are supposed to show that APs are *world-bound* in that each exists at only one possible world. Y&H consider two metaphysical claims that would, if correct, supply the world-boundedness premise. The first is that events are world-bound. APs have internal events as essential parts, so APs are world-bound as well. The second is a plenitude claim to the effect that, just as arbitrary sets of things or spacetime slices of things within a world can constitute an object, arbitrary sets of modal slices of spacetime slices of things across worlds can constitute an object as well. Among these objects are the actual-world slices of physical objects (e.g. neuron-x-at-world-@) making up subjects' brains. Such objects are essential parts of APs, so this makes APs world-bound. If APs are world-bound, all content assignments vacuously supervene on AP: since no two possible thoughts have the same APs, it is impossible for a content assignment to assign different contents to possible thoughts with the same AP. If this is right, even the internalist view that incorporates the representation constraint

is trivial.

Let us think through what is involved in being related to world-bound particulars. Being world-bound isn't an ordinary property of particulars like being square or being located at a particular spatial location. It is a modal property similar to being necessarily square or possibly oval. Specifically, it involves necessarily being one maximally specific way, intrinsically and extrinsically—if a particular could have been different, it would be found in more than one world, so it would not be world-bound. Consider the variant of Tom Hanks' nose that is bound to the actual world (call this entity @nose). @nose is an entity that is “by definition” precisely as Tom Hanks' nose is at the actual world in both intrinsic and extrinsic respects (it is, of course, different in its modal properties): it was developed in the same womb, went through the same precise developmental process, came within the same precise distance of Haley's Comet, and so on. @nose's precise relationship to every particle of the universe is fixed. In order for Tom Hanks to have @nose on his face, he has to be in a world that is exactly like the actual world, including all its galaxies (in fact, he has to be in the actual world, but this implication is of secondary interest here). Thus, having @nose on his face is an extrinsic property of Tom Hanks. Generally speaking, having any world-bound particular as a part is not an intrinsic but rather an extrinsic property of subjects, contrary to what Y&H claim. All the definitions of intrinsicity considered by Y&H have this consequence.¹¹ Since

¹¹One common proposal (which Y&H discuss but do not ultimately endorse) is roughly that an intrinsic property is a property such that a thing's possession of it does not imply the existence of anything outside the thing. Properties making reference to world-bound entities are clearly extrinsic by this standard since they imply the existence of every actual thing. Properties making reference to world-bound entities remain extrinsic to subjects even if we say instead that the thing's possession of the property is modally independent

only relationships to entities that are intrinsic to the subject are included in APs, relationships to world-bound entities are not included. Thus, internalism is not trivial after all.¹² (Even if it turned out that Y&H are right that world-bound objects or events can be part of APs as they define them, internalists could simply refine the definition of APs to exclude such peculiar particulars.)

Even if APs are world-bound (impossibly, we think), the metaphysical threat of pointlessness can be deflected. Note first that many supervenience claims

of the existence of things outside the thing. Another proposal, which Y&H (ch. 5) consider superior but imperfect, is that the intrinsic properties are those that supervene on the natural properties of things and their parts. Tom Hanks' property of being partly constituted by @nose is not intrinsic by this standard since Twin Tom Hanks could have a face whose parts exhibit all the same natural properties as their counterparts in Tom Hanks, but it would not have the property of being constituted by @nose. Another proposal considered by Y&H is that an intrinsic property of *x* is one that is not "about" anything outside of *x*. Insofar as we understand this proposal, it seems to us that having-a-nose-developed-in-such-and-such-way-on-earth is a property that is "about" things outside of Tom Hanks.

¹²If all events are world-bound and hence excluded from APs, doesn't this remove too much from the internalist's supervenience base? We think not, since, presumably, there has to be a way of individuating events or event-like things other than by the totality of their intrinsic and extrinsic properties. Denying this would have bizarre consequences, like that on any accurate way of thinking about events, World War II would not have happened if you didn't read this footnote. Even if there is a technical sense of "event" on which events couldn't have been other than they intrinsically and extrinsically are, there is also another kind of thing (perhaps we should call it a "schmevent") that is not world-bound. We might characterize these things as instantiations of properties. These are the event-like entities that are supposed to form part of the internalist's supervenience base.

In any case, it may be worth noting that the arguments Y&H adduce in favor of the world-boundedness of events are not particularly well-developed or, arguably, compelling. They write, "One way to motivate this view is to begin with Jaegwon Kim's thought that the time of an event is essential to it, and combine this with the reasonably common impulse to treat the temporal and modal dimensions symmetrically." (p. 156) Y&H cite works arguing that time and modality can be formalized in similar ways. We are not sure how to understand this quick argument. The idea seems to be that, if time and modality are symmetrical and events have their times essentially, they must have their possible worlds essentially as well. But the fact that time and modality can be formalized in similar ways is an extremely tenuous basis for such an inference. The other quick argument Y&H offer for the world-boundedness of events is that "short of world-boundness, there is nothing approaching a test for when an event in one world is the very same event as an event in another." (p. 156) A footnote acknowledges that this is a weak argument, and we agree. It slips into thinking of possible worlds as places that we discover rather than a model for thinking about possibility and necessity (see Kripke 1980).

are trivialized on the assumption that events and other particulars are world-bound. For example, the view that the moral facts supervene on non-moral facts is also rendered vacuously true (the supervenience base includes singular facts about world-bound entities). Similarly, the view that the mental supervenes on the physical is rendered nearly vacuously true: it turns out that it is consistent with the existence of souls and ghosts (it merely rules out non-physical worlds with distinct mental features). The metaphysical threat is a problem for supervenience views of metaphysical dependency, not a problem specifically for internalism. It would be worrisome if internalism was first and foremost a supervenience thesis, but it is not. It is usually defined, at least as a first pass, as a determination thesis. Y&H, as well as many internalists, go on to precisify the determination thesis as a supervenience thesis, but this is not compulsory. If supervenience turns out to be a largely useless notion because of some surprising metaphysical truths revealed by Y&H, internalists can stick with a determination formulation, understanding determination as more demanding than supervenience. Indeed, characterizations of internalism in terms of supervenience leave out an important part of many internalist views, which is the idea that subject's internal states *make it the case* that they represent particular contents.

There are different ways of cashing out talk of “making the case”. Internalists might say that internal states ground, constitute, realize, or even are identical to the representation of contents. Even if APs are world-bound and internalism as stated by Y&H is trivial, the view that there are contents grounded in, realized by, or constituted by internal features of subjects remains non-trivial.

The metaphysical threat of pointlessness does not even purport to apply to such views. To be fair, Y&H quickly consider an argument against one specific grounding characterization of internalism, but their objection is of very narrow scope: it leaves intact other grounding formulations and other “making the case” formulations.¹³

In this section, we discussed Y&H’s two central arguments for the claim that the unqualified version of internalism is theoretically pointless. We suggested that the basic threat of pointlessness evaporates if we accept the representation constraint, while the argument from world-boundedness rests on the false assumption that properties of having world-bound parts are intrinsic. Further, internalists who accept Y&H’s metaphysical assumptions can deflect

¹³Y&H consider something close to a grounding characterization of internalism. They reject the grounding picture for roughly the following reason. Contents are abstract entities existing distinctly from a subject’s internal state and to which subjects or thoughts are related. A relationship is grounded in facts about *all* its relata, not merely some of its relata. So, facts about an internal state cannot by themselves ground a relationship to a content: facts about the content itself must play a role. So, grounding internalism is false. We think this is an interesting argument, but it neglects two possible lines of response. First, not all internalists endorse the kind of relational view presupposed here. On some views, contents are parts of subject’s internal states, either because they are adverbial modifications of subjects, components or aspects of intentional states, or intentional states themselves (Kriegel 2011, Pitt 2009, (Mendelovici 2018)). Second, an internalist who does embrace relationalism (as one of us does, see Bourget forthcoming) could simply tweak their grounding formulation of internalism. One option is to say that there are represented contents whose representation is not grounded in contingent facts outside the subject. This kind of grounding internalism is unaffected by Y&H’s observation that relationships to abstracta are partly grounded in necessary facts about the abstracta.

the second argument by not construing their thesis in terms of supervenience.

3 Conclusion

The main claim of *Narrow Content* is that all versions of internalism are either false or pointless. Y&H construe internalism's starting point as the (trivial) claim that intrinsic features of subjects and thoughts (QAPs in the case of qualified internalism, APs in the case of unqualified internalism) can be assigned contents through arbitrary relations. They then consider various constraints that could be added to produce more substantive or interesting views. Their strategy is to show that all the constraints fail to generate an interesting and plausible view.

Restricting the inputs of content assignments to purely qualitative features (QAPs) makes many constraints difficult to satisfy. In particular, it makes the structural constraints difficult to satisfy because of Mirror Man cases. In order to satisfy them, we plausibly have to take thoughts to be their own alethic parameters, i.e., to endorse thought relativism. This threatens to make internalism trivial. The representation constraint we have suggested avoids the threat of triviality, but we think the more attractive internalist view is unqualified internalism anyway, so we didn't expend more effort trying to save the qualified view.

Y&H argue that unqualified internalism faces two charges of pointlessness: a basic charge and one that is motivated by the alleged world-boundedness of APs. The latter is defused by the observation that relationships to world-

bound particulars are extrinsic and so not part of APs. It can also be avoided by not formulating internalism in terms of supervenience, which yields something weaker than what many internalists mean when they talk about content *determined* by internal features of subjects. Even setting the argument from world-boundedness aside, the worry that internalism cannot be made interesting with structural constraints remains. This is the basic and perhaps most serious threat of pointlessness, since it does not rest on questionable metaphysical assumptions. Our response is that it arises because Y&H's definitions neglect the representation constraint: they count as narrow contents all sorts of contents that aren't represented by our mental states.

In short, *Narrow Content* shows that various possible regimentations of the internalist position fail for one of two reasons: some are implausible, others are trivial or pointless. We largely agree with Y&H's claims about the regimented views they consider (though we reject the argument from world-boundedness). Even so, we pointed out that all their arguments leave untouched the core internalist thesis, the view that mental states have contents whose representation is determined by their subjects' internal features.

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