

CHRIS HILL'S CONSCIOUSNESS¹

One of the things I learned from Chris Hill's wonderful book is that I was too optimistic when I published my own account of conscious experience in Naturalizing the Mind (1995). Chris taught me that there are more problems lurking here than I realized. Until I read his book, I was in the midst of (if not a dogmatic slumber) at least a prolonged nap. Chris woke me up. I thank him for it.

Chris and I are both dedicated representationalists about the mind. For Chris (as for me) all awareness is representational (69, 257). Being aware of an item is being in a state that represents that item (25). Although Chris finds the primary justification for this view in the fact that it is presupposed by the explanatory success of cognitive science (70, 88), I think its philosophical merits are also quite impressive. What makes the mind so profoundly mysterious, so spooky, so unlike anything one typically thinks of as physical, is the representational aspect of that organ—the brain—causally responsible for our intelligent and purposeful behavior. When nothing you experience, nothing you think, nothing you fear, nothing you want, need exist in the physical world for your thinking, experiencing, fearing, and wanting it to explain—causally explain--why you act the way you do, thinking, experiencing, fearing, and wanting begin to look completely alien. Not part of a scientific picture of the world. A representational theory—assuming it can be successfully grounded—constitutes an elegant rescue from this dilemma. It, and it alone,

¹ A symposium (with Ned Block, Alex Byrne, myself, and Chris Hill) on Chris Hill's book Consciousness (Cambridge, 2009) at the Pacific Division Meetings, APA, San Diego, April 2011. All page references are to this book.

bridges this explanatory gap. It, and it alone, holds out some promise of solving the hard problems of consciousness.

Let me add a word to justify that last claim. It is important to do so because much of Chris's book is inspired by a conviction that among philosophical theories of the mind, only a representational account of consciousness exhibits enough promise to justify the difficult work needed to solve (and in the meantime the patience needed to tolerate) its outstanding problems. One of the great strengths of Chris's book is his absolute honesty in facing these problems, his resourcefulness in proposing solutions, and his modesty in acknowledging what remains to be done. If you are not antecedently convinced that a representational game is the only game in town, you will probably see Chris's glass as half empty rather than (as I do) half full.

So why do I say that representationalism of the sort Chris promotes in this book is the only game in town? Because (for a materialist) only it explains why the qualities you experience, the qualities you are aware of in having the experience—in short, the phenomenal character of the experience--needn't be qualities of anything. Nothing in the head (e.g., the experience itself) or outside the head (the objects being experienced) need have the properties you are aware of in having the experience. How is this possible? The same way it is possible to have people riding in pumpkins and wearing glass slippers when there are no pumpkin coaches or glass slippers in the real world. Cinderella, as we all know, is a story, and there are things in stories that don't exist in the real world. The story vehicles, the representations, the printed words, are perfectly respectable physical objects, of course. They exist in our familiar space-time world. They are located in

books in the same way mental representations, thoughts and experiences, are located in heads, but their meaning, their content, the story they tell, isn't there. It isn't anywhere.

In a nutshell that is the kind of account a representational theory tells about conscious experience. It provides a satisfying picture of why you cannot, by looking in a person's head, discover what kind of experiences are occurring there despite the fact that it is in there--in the head--where the experiences are occurring. If you don't know the language, you won't be able to read the story these neural symbols are telling the person in whose head they occur and whose behavior they govern.

But all these benefits require a convincing, and materialistically acceptable, account of representation. Quite aside from the task of providing a general theory of representation, a theory about how brains acquire—presumably through some biological means--their representational powers², there are a multitude of questions about whether representation is the right conceptual key to unlock the mysteries of mentality. Is this the right approach for bridging the explanatory gap? Even if propositional attitudes (thinking that P) can plausibly be interpreted in representational terms, can emotions, feelings and bodily sensations be understood that way? What does pure joy represent? A headache? Depression?

Chris has intriguing things to say about many of these topics. I will concentrate on experience—something Chris calls experiential awareness—the conceptually neutral but phenomenally rich form of awareness associated with sense perception: seeing, hearing, and smelling things. You don't need the concept SKUNK, don't need to know what a skunk is, to see or smell a skunk, but seeing and smelling a skunk (a species of

² Chris doesn't himself propose such a theory (257). His project is to show, by exhibiting its explanatory usefulness--indeed, its indispensability--why such a theory is needed.

experiential awareness) is, nonetheless, one of the most dramatic and puzzling forms of consciousness.

Imagine yourself, then, a person of normal eyesight, seeing an object that looks³ red and round to you. Whatever you happen to believe about the object, and whatever its actual properties are, these are the qualities you experience, the qualities you are aware of. Since qualia (145) are the way things look or appear and, and since the object looks red and round, redness and roundness are the qualia of this experience, the properties that make the experience the kind of experience it is. If we knew things looked that way to a mongoose then, with respect to this solitary experience, we would know what it was like to be a mongoose.

Chris identifies these qualia, the way things look or appear, with the physical properties the brain represents perceptual objects to have. Thus, assuming a materialistic account of representation, one achieves a materialistic reduction of conscious experience. Conscious perceptual experience is a physical object (a physical event or condition in an animal's head) representing (maybe misrepresenting) the material world (this includes the animal's own body) as having assorted physical properties.⁴ Nothing spooky—certainly nothing irreducibly non-physical--going on here. All we have are material objects going

³ I use “look” (“appear” “seem”) in their phenomenal sense. Chris is careful to distinguish the phenomenal from the epistemic sense of “look” (31-32) and he has a good discussion of the limited role constancy mechanisms play in influencing the phenomenal appearance of things.

⁴ This tells us what gives the experience its particular phenomenal character, not what makes it conscious (not all physical representations are conscious). Chris's project is a limited one--to provide a theory of phenomenal consciousness, the qualitative nature of perceptual awareness. For what makes these experiences conscious see 12,18.

about their representational business--thereby, creating a subjective (because private) world of phenomenally rich experiences for the animals in whose heads they occur.

Experiential awareness is here being identified with property (as opposed to object or fact) representation (256). This is an important claim. It distinguishes sensory representation, a perceptual experience of an F, from conceptual representations, a belief that it is an F. In this respect, perceptual experiences are like the representational efforts of measuring instruments. Measuring instruments are property representers. We classify them according to what property or magnitude they represent. Thermometers represent temperature, pressure gauges pressure, speedometers speed, altimeters altitude, and so forth. What objects these instruments represent to have a temperature of 98°, a pressure of 20 psi, a speed of 45 mph, or an altitude of 300 ft depends, simply, on what object (if any) they happen to be (causally) related to in an appropriate way. Sometimes it is just a matter of what object they are in. If the thermometer is in my mouth, it represents my temperature as being 98°. If it is in your mouth, it represents your temperature as being 98°. The same is true of the brain--that part it devoted to perceptual experience. The brain says RED, ROUND, and MOVING TO THE LEFT, but it doesn't say what out there that has these properties. That is determined by what out there is causing the brain to register these particular values of color, shape, and movement.

But if visual experience is property-representation, what properties, exactly, does a perceptual experience represent? Does a visual experience represent the color, shape, size, orientation, and movement of physical objects? Or something else? Chris tells us it is something else. If a white ellipse seen at an oblique angle under funny light looks red and round, then if a representational theory of that perceptual experience is supposed to

capture its phenomenal character, the way things look, it should assign to experience not the job of representing the actual properties the object has (white and elliptical in this case), but the properties it appears to have (red and round). If the visual system had the job of representing the actual shape, color, and size of objects, it would, most of the time, be doing a terrible job. It would be constantly misrepresenting things because as you turn a white poker chip through 360°, move it away, or change the lighting, the visual system changes the way it represents the chip. Our experience of it changes, but the poker chip doesn't change its color, shape or size. If we don't want to say that the visual system is constantly misrepresenting the chip, we must say the visual system's job is representing not the objective shape, color, and size of the chip, but viewpoint relative and circumstance-dependent properties—what Chris calls A- (for appearance) properties: the way the chip (from this distance, in this light, and at this angle) looks.

There is a danger here and the word “appearance” signals the danger. We all know that the properties objects appear to have depends not only on such objective conditions as distance and lighting, but also conditions relating to the perceiver's eyes and nervous system (84). One can make things look different by squinting or taking drugs. Can the properties one is aware of in visual experience, the properties the brain represents, possibly be properties of external objects if they depend on conditions in the perceiver's nervous system? If they are physical properties, what are they properties of?

Chris is aware of this problem, of course, and he does a heroic job of trying to disarm it (143, Appendix II of Chapter 5, especially p. 168). Appearance properties, Chris tells us, are physical properties, but they are highly relational, observer-dependent, physical properties. Being between me and the back door--a property you now have, for

instance--is also a relational, a subject-dependent, property. It depends not only on where you are, but on where I am. It is, nonetheless, an ordinary physical property. Chris, tentatively, identifies appearance properties, the properties the brain represents things to have, with (what he calls) “Thouless” properties, something more akin to properties of the retinal image (see his discussion on 168 of “retinal projection properties”). As the lighting changes, or the object recedes from you, the brain represents—correctly represents—a continuously changing proximal condition. Qualia are physical properties, just not (as you may have thought) the ordinary physical properties we assign to tables, chairs, buildings, and people.

There is obviously a tension here. We can’t identify the properties the brain represents an object to have with the properties the object actually has. That would result in continuous and massive misrepresentation by the perceptual systems. Nor can we go to the other extreme and identify the properties things are represented as having with properties things seem to have. That would make a representational theory of conscious experience completely circular. We would be identifying qualia (the look of things) with properties the brain represents objects to have, and then completing a circle by equating the properties the brain represents objects to have with qualia—how things look. Zero progress.

Chris tries to tread a middle path here. It is a tough slog. He wants qualia to be physical properties of external objects (otherwise there is no materialistic reduction) and, yet, to be variable enough to reflect (without massive and continuous misrepresentation) the variability of perceptual experience. It is not easy to see how he can have it both ways.

There is, furthermore, a question about what object or objects are supposed to have the properties Chris calls appearance properties. The answer is important because Chris tells us (254) that the objects we are aware of in having an experience are the objects that have the appearance properties we are aware of. If chairs and tables don't have these appearance properties, if retinal images have these properties, it follows that we see are retinal images, not tables and chairs. Not (need I say) a welcome result! Chris recognizes this and argues (144) that, contrary to the way it might seem (and what he has earlier said) tables and chairs really do have appearance properties. His argument sounds to me like a philosopher executing modus ponens when the rest of the world will be executing modus tollens. Chris (143-144) argues that appearance properties must be properties of ordinary objects because introspection tells us we see ordinary objects and so, modus ponens, ordinary objects must have the appearance properties we are aware of. I expect everyone else to reason as follows: if Chris is right and we are aware only of appearance properties, and the objects we are aware of are the objects that have these appearance properties, then, modus tollens and too bad for Chris, we aren't aware of ordinary objects.

Let me close with two quick comments about Chris's treatment of property-awareness. It seems to me he gets himself--unnecessarily--into trouble by conflating awareness of properties with awareness of their instantiation. For Chris, awareness of the color green is awareness of some green thing. Given that all awareness is supposed to be representational, and the primary form of representation is property representation, this is a very surprising claim. It leads Chris to say strange things--that, for instance (96-97), when you hallucinate (what you would describe as) red spots you are literally not aware

of the color red. Why does he say this? Because there is nothing red to be aware of. The color red is not instantiated. Since one is not aware of any (instantiated) color, such illusory experiences have no color qualia. It just seems as if they do. Chris tries to sweeten this bitter (because implausible) pill by distinguishing qualia (qualities you experience) from phenomenal properties (the qualities it seems you experience). So two experiences might have the same phenomenal properties (they seem the same to you) while being experiences of much different properties.

This, I submit, is not a place one wants to be. It would be better--much better—to take seriously the earlier acknowledgement that representation is primarily representation of properties, not objects, and to insist that, sometimes, in hallucination and illusion, for instance, one is aware of uninstantiated properties. These properties may look as if they are instantiated, of course, but this only means that these qualities (information about which is apparently processed on independent causal pathways in the visual system) are “bound” together (psychologists tell us) and represented—in this case, misrepresented—as instantiated by a single object. One is thereby made aware of redness and roundness, and made aware of them as if they were instantiated by a single object (it looks like a red ball), without there being instantiations of either property.⁵ This move requires one to talk about perceptual awareness of uninstantiated properties, it is true, and this will make nominalists nervous, but I have never understood why it should make representationalists nervous? If a malfunctioning speedometer on a Klingon spaceship can (mis)represent the ship as going twice the speed of light--a cosmically uninstantiated

⁵This is, moreover, Chris’s extensional (not intensional) form of awareness (97). One can’t be aware of a property unless that property (not instances of it) exists.

speed--why can't the brain (mis)represent objects as having locally uninstantiated colors and shapes?

Finally, a word about Chris's claim (107ff.), and accompanying arguments, that there is an appearance/reality distinction for qualia, a difference in the way a property appears to us (the quale) and the way it is in itself (109). It seems to me that here, once again, Chris slides over the very relevant distinction between the property a thing has and the thing having that property. To use Chris's example, a photograph (a representation) of a mouse may fail to carry information about the mouse. It may misrepresent the mouse as, say, green rather than grey. It may thereby fail to reveal the real nature of the mouse. So there is a genuine distinction between appearance and reality when talking about the mouse, the object being represented. But properties are different. Mice aren't properties. If my experience represents the mouse as green, the property green is the property being represented, and it is difficult to see what information about this color the experience fails to reveal. Could a visual experience—any representation for that matter—misrepresent or fail to represent the color it is representing an object to have? Could a thermometer misrepresent or fail to represent the temperature it represents an object to have? How is this possible?