

Reply to Philip Woodward’s Review of *The
Phenomenal Basis of Intentionality*

Angela Mendelovici

Draft of February 23, 2019

Philip Woodward’s probing and thoughtful review of *The Phenomenal Basis of Intentionality* (*PBI*) is in agreement with the book’s overall project, focusing its critical discussion on some of the details. Here, I consider the most pressing of Woodward’s objections.

(1) Identity PIT and representationalism

According to the *phenomenal intentionality theory* (*PIT*), all original intentionality is *phenomenal intentionality*, intentionality that arises from phenomenal consciousness. According to *identity PIT*, roughly, the way phenomenal states give rise to intentional states is by being identical to them. *PBI* defends these claims, as well as the further claim that every phenomenal state gives rise to some intentional state. This combination of views entails representationalism, the view that phenomenal states are nothing over and above intentional states (perhaps of a certain kind).

Woodward objects to this commitment to representationalism. Many of the issues raised have been discussed at length elsewhere, so I will be brief.

One worry concerns what we might call “perspectival” and “constant” color

experiences. When we view a white wall, we experience various shades of white and grey corresponding to changes in illumination (*perspectival* colors) as well as a uniform whiteness (a *constant* color). The representationalist takes all this to be a matter of represented content, whereas Woodward claims that perspectival color experiences are a matter of *instantiating* non-intentional phenomenal properties while constant color experiences are a matter of *representing* such properties.¹ Rather than rehearse the various representationalist accounts of perspectival and constant color experiences,² I want to propose a general reason for preferring a representationalist treatment over non-representationalist alternatives: both perspectival and constant color qualities appear to qualify represented objects—represented walls, cups, etc. They behave like contents, so we should take them to be contents.³

Woodward also worries that it is unclear how representationalism can explain the phenomenal difference between perceptual experience and imagination. One representationalist approach here is to say that perceptual experiences have a richer and perhaps more determinate phenomenal content than imaginative states (see Bourget 2017), though the two states might be alike in their derived contents (see *PBI*, Appendix C, pp. 107–8).

Woodward also objects to my preferred representationalist treatment of moods, on which they represent *sui generis* affective properties that happen to be uninstantiated, suggesting that it too revisionary. Whether or not the treatment is revisionary (it does purport to capture the phenomenology of mood experiences, after all), there are arguments in its favor—see Mendelovici 2013.

¹See Woodward 2016.

²Most representationalist accounts posit two layers of color contents. My favored view is also a two-layer view, with one layer capturing a represented object’s “face value” color and another layer capturing its “real” color as illuminated a certain way.

³Bourget 2015 provides a different argument for the same conclusion.

(2) Derived mental representation

PBI argues for *strong PIT*—the view that all intentionality is phenomenal intentionality—though it allows that there is such a thing as non-phenomenal derived mental *representation*, which is not a kind of intentionality.

Woodward suggests that the disagreement between my version of strong PIT and a version PIT that accepts derived intentionality is merely notational. I somewhat agree. Whether derived mental representation counts as a kind of intentionality depends on how we initially define “intentionality” (*PBI*, §7.4). However, part of the reason I insist on driving a wedge between derived mental representation and intentionality proper is that derived mental representation doesn’t have the same kind of psychological reality as intentionality. It needn’t be determinate whether we derivatively represent a particular content (*PBI*, §7.31, p. 144), and derived mental representation needn’t play any interesting psychological roles (*PBI*, §7.2.3, p. 135). (So, then, what does it do? It allows us to target contents that are beyond our immediate awareness, including rich descriptive contents, object-involving contents, and broad contents, which form a core part of our understanding of ourselves and others as representing subjects.)

My specific view of derived mental representation, *self-ascriptivism*, states (very roughly) that we derivatively represent the contents we self-ascribe upon sufficient reflection. Woodward objects that the view does not allow for a sufficiently reflective subject to misattribute a content to herself. This, he claims, is problematic because “there exists a tier of psychological reality to which self-ascriptions of non-conscious contents are answerable.” (xx) Nonconscious processes like those involved in understanding speech and getting jokes involve nonconscious inferences, which “seem to have the same *sorts* of contents as the beliefs that enter into . . . *conscious* inferences.” (xx, emphasis in original)

The central issue here concerns what is the best way for PIT to handle the

allegedly intentional nonconscious states posited by cognitive science. Woodward maintains that such states are best explained in terms of derived content. If this is the job of derived content, then, clearly, self-ascriptivism does not deliver. But accommodating such states is not the job of derived content (*PBI*, Chapter 8). The relevant states need not be connected to consciousness in the specific ways required for them to derivatively represent (on anyone's story of derived content) in order for them to play their psychological roles. In most cases, the alleged nonconscious contents are just TR-represented, where *TR-representation* is merely a matter of tracking relations and functional roles, requiring no connection to consciousness. (Why not say that TR-representation is a kind of intentionality? Because, as argued in *PBI's* Chapters 3 and 4, tracking relations and functional roles are not metaphysically sufficient for intentionality.) In some cases, though, we might want to say that the relevant contents are phenomenal contents we are not aware of. On the resulting view, conscious and nonconscious states can indeed have contents of the same type—in most cases, they TR-represent related contents, and, in some cases, they might even have related phenomenal contents.

So, it is no objection to self-ascriptivism that it does not allow a sufficiently reflective subject to misattribute contents to herself. Self-ascriptivism does not aim to define a notion of derived content that can do the psychological heavy-lifting that Woodward would like derived content to do—such a notion is unnecessary.

(3) Structured content

PBI argues for the *aspect view*, on which, roughly, intentionality is not a relation to distinctly existing contents but rather an integral feature of mental states. *PBI* argues that both the *aspect view* and the alternative *relation view* face challenges in accounting for *internally structured contents*, contents that include

other contents as parts. However, partly thanks to Woodward’s discussion, I now think that *PBI* assumed an overly demanding requirement on internally structured contents.

PBI assumed that in order for a content to be internally structured, it must be nothing over and above its constituent contents combined in a certain way—call this *reductionism* about internally structured contents. Consider a case of a propositional content that includes an objectual content and a proprietal content as parts (e.g., <Vera is happy>). If reductionism is true, then an account of this content must isolate a way that its parts are related such that this mode of combination yields the relevant propositional content. The problem is that it is mysterious how any mode of combination, even one involving primitive elements posited specifically for this task, can do this work. If the mode of combination is not itself a content, then it is not clear how it can make an intentional difference, turning distinct contents into a unified whole that is itself grasped, entertained, or otherwise represented. If the mode of combination *is* itself a content, then it too would have to be combined with the other parts to yield a unified whole, leading to a regress. The solution is to reject reductionism: an internally structured content can be internally complex, including other contents as parts, without being reducible without remainder to its constituent contents and their inter-relations.^{4,5}

Rejecting reductionism paves a way forward for an aspect theoretic account of internally structured contents that takes them to be basic. We can say that the relations between contents required for mental structure are merely part-whole

⁴The problem is similar to Hurley’s (1998) “just more content” objection to subjectivist views of phenomenal unity. The solution is analogous to Bayne’s (2012) subsumption view.

⁵Woodward objects that one of *PBI*’s tentative suggestions for accounting for internally structured contents does not provide an intelligible explanation. This is true. I used to think that since it is non-negotiable that we have internally structured contents, such a failure of intelligibility was due to our own ignorance and hence an acceptable consequence (*PBI*, p. 220, n. 39). However, I now think this is mistaken and that we should instead reject reductionism.

relations: internally structured wholes have their constituent contents as parts. The aspect view can accommodate these relations, since properties can arguably be parts of other properties (e.g., the property of being red and round includes as a part the property of being red).⁶

An account of internally structured contents must accommodate contents belonging to different kinds. For instance, a predicatively structured content might be a propositional content containing an objectual content and a proprietal content as parts. One might worry that since the aspect view takes all contents to be properties, it cannot accommodate propositional or objectual contents. But this worry presupposes that objectual contents are objects and propositional contents are propositions, an assumption that the aspect view can and should reject (see Mendelovici 2018b). Just as the aspect view needn't say that the content <red> involves the actual property of redness, it needn't say that objectual contents belong to the ontological category *object*. What makes an objectual content objectual is having an objectual *superficial character*—where a content's *superficial character* is the set of properties that characterize it as the particular content that it is (see *PBI*, §2.2.1)—not an objectual *deep nature*. So, then, what the aspect view needs to say to accommodate an internally structured propositional content involving a proprietal and an objectual content is that there there is an aspect with a propositional superficial character that contains as parts an aspect with an objectual superficial character and an aspect with a proprietal superficial character. There seems to be no in-principle difficulty with saying this and similar things about other kinds of internally structured contents.

This addresses Woodward's worry that the relation view might be in a better position to account for internally structured contents because it has more latitude

⁶See Gow (MS) for an aspect view appealing to part-whole relations.

in how to understand contents than the aspect view, which must say that they are properties. Even if the aspect view is more constrained in its resources, it arguably has all it needs.

(4) Truth and reference

PBI suggests a criterion of truth and reference and a theory of truth and reference explaining why the criterion obtains. According to the *matching criterion*, roughly, intentional states are true or refer when they match things in the world, i.e., when their contents' superficial characters are instantiated by things in the world. According to the *internal theory* of truth and reference, an intentional state's conditions of truth and reference are those that we at least implicitly endorse. In short, intentional states are true or refer when they match the world and this is so because we take it to be so.

As Woodward notes, on the matching theory, in order for an intentional state to be true or refer, it must have properties in common with its worldly truth-maker or referent. He recognizes that this does not mean that, e.g., an intentional state referring to triangularity must itself be triangular—only the superficial character of the content must be found in its referent, not its entire deep nature. But he worries that the aspect view now owes us a story of how superficial characters are grounded in the relevant aspects. The story, though, is fairly straightforward: Contents are aspects. Superficial characters are properties of contents. So, superficial characters are properties of aspects. (Of course, one might object to these claims, but that would be a different objection.)

Woodward proposes an alternative aspect view, similar to Bonjour's (1998) and reminiscent of medieval views, on which contents are components but not properties of intentional states. On this view, for example, representing the content <triangle> might involve having the worldly property of triangularity

itself as a component of one's intentional state. This picture allows for an identity theory of at least some kinds of reference: at least some contents are identical to their referents (e.g., <triangle> is identical to the worldly property of triangularity). How does the property get to be in our minds without making our minds triangular? For BonJour, at least, what prevents our minds from becoming triangular when we represent <triangle> is the fact that representing <triangle> is a matter of instantiating a complex property of which the property of triangularity is only one part (BonJour 1998, p. 184).⁷

This view requires more careful consideration than I can provide here, but there are a couple of reasons why I do not prefer it. First, it is mysterious just what it is for contents to be components of intentional states. For instance, it is unclear how, on BonJour's view, triangularity is supposed to combine with other properties to yield a complex property that we can instantiate without instantiating triangularity itself. Second, the view imposes overly demanding requirements on intentionality, e.g., requiring that the property of triangularity—a property that non-mental objects can have—somehow be in the mind in order for us to represent the content <triangle>. I don't think it's likely that such conditions are met.

As the above discussion shows, many choice points remain open even once PIT is adopted. I have described the combination of views I find most promising, a combination that I think escapes Woodward's criticisms. Still, I am in complete agreement with Woodward's sentiment that much work remains to be done.⁸

⁷*PBI* counts this view as a version of the aspect view, but Woodward worries that the relevant components do not count as aspects. Although at least BonJour's components arguably satisfy the intuitive characterization of aspects as "integral features of intentional states" (*PBI*, p. 198) they do not satisfy the official definition of aspects as intentional states, properties, or properties of intentional states or properties (*PBI*, p. 198). The solution is to amend the official definition so that parts of the aforementioned kinds of aspects also count as aspects.

⁸Many thanks to David Bourget, Philip Woodward, and Daniel Burnston for helpful comments and discussion.

References

- Bayne, T. (2012). *The Unity of Consciousness*. Oxford University Press Uk.
- BonJour, L. (1998). *In Defense of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourget, D. (2015). Representationalism, perceptual distortion and the limits of phenomenal concepts. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 45(1):16–36.
- Bourget, D. (2017). Why are some phenomenal experiences ‘vivid’ and others ‘faint’? representationalism, imagery, and cognitive phenomenology. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 95(4):673–687.
- Gow, L. (MS). Perceptual experience: Non-relationalism without adverbialism.
- Hurley, S. L. (1998). *Consciousness in Action*. Harvard University Press.
- Mendelovici, A. (2013). Intentionalism about moods. *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy*, 2(1):126–136.
- Mendelovici, A. (2018a). *The Phenomenal Basis of Intentionality*. Oxford University Press.
- Mendelovici, A. (2018b). Propositionalism without propositions, objectualism without objects. In Grzankowski, A. and Montague, M., editors, *Non-propositional intentionality*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Woodward, P. (2016). Conscious intentionality in perception, imagination, and cognition. *Phenomenology and Mind*, (10):140–155.