

Comments on Mark Johnston's "Why Experience Is not Predicative"

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1. INTENTIONALISM IS JUST ABOUT PHENOMENOLOGY

Mark appears to take intentionalism (= **consensus view**) to be committed to a traditional conjunctive analysis of (attentive) *seeing* (p.11,15) and to certain (implausible) theses about the *individuation* of *courses of experiential events* (26-32).

Against this intentionalists primarily interested giving an account of *phenomenology*. (Indeed, Byrne&Tye more or less eliminativist re experiential events!) Supervenience. Grounding (Fine, Schaffer, Rosen). On another formulation: enjoying a bit of phenomenology *just is* (real definition) "**experientially-entertaining**" a certain proposition. (Mark's *own* initial formulation (p.2) *doesn't mention* seeing or individuation.)

Now a theme running through my comments: since intentionalism merely a view about *phenomenology*, **intentionalists could in principle agree with what Mark says on other issues**. For example, intentionalists could *agree* Mark's view that it is impossible to come up with a counterexample-free analysis of seeing (*conceptual analysis* of philosophically interesting concepts impossible), and with his views on the individuation of experiences. Experience might yet be "predicative" (propositional).

(Btw, I fully agree with Mark that standard arguments *for* intentionalism fall short. But there is another: inference to the best explanation of illusion/hallucination, indeterminacy, etc. Does *not* require the "bipolarity thesis" Mark criticizes: that, if a token-experience is non-veridical, *that very token experience* might have been veridical.)

2. ARGUMENT FROM FAILURE OF CONJUNCTIVISM

- 1 Intentionalism is "**committed to** a very strong thesis, namely that [the seeing relation] **can be reduced** to [experientially entertaining a content plus a happy mix of causation and matching]", in accordance with traditional **conjunctivist** (factorization) approach seeing (p. 15).
- 2 [The seeing relation] is "**not in fact reducible** to [experientially entertaining a content] plus a happy mix of causation and description" (p. 16; ingenious cases and arguments at 33-55). "Cumulative case against the Exing that P view."
- 3 So intentionalism is wrong.

Mark's claim **very strong**: not only no conceptual analysis, the seeing relation *not even a posteriori identical with* a complex relation involving exp. entertaining and causation (40). His own view: **primitive**, although 'constituted by' or supervenient on complex causal process from world to brain. (Requires brute supervenience, *modal danglers*.)

In Worst Case Intentionalist Could Just Accept Mark's Anti-Conjunctivism

As noted, intentionalism is a common factor account of **phenomenology**, **not account of seeing**. Contrary to Mark's first premise, **not committed to conjunctive analysis** of seeing in terms of the common factor and other ingredients.

To see this, consider (extreme) **Williamson's view about knowing**: the *belief* relation a common factor, but knowing can't be identified (by conceptual analysis or otherwise (?)) with the belief relation plus other ingredients. Similarly, the intentionalist could say *experientially entertaining* is a common factor btw seeing and not seeing, but *seeing* not reducible to *experientially entertaining* plus a causal relation to the world. (This possible non-reductive intentionalist view of seeing very similar to Mark's own view - just with a different supervenience-base, one involving exp. entertaining.) If this 'non-reductive' view of seeing is ok for Mark, why not the intentionalist?

Alternatively: Intentionalist Might Defend Conjunctivism Despite Mark's Argument

Version 1: Conjunctivism true in the following weak sense: in actual world, what an individual sees a **priori deducible** from a complete description of his phenomenology (on intentionalism, what contents he exp entertains) plus macro-level facts about his causal relations to the world, contextual factors (McLaughlin), etc. (In fact, our capacity to reach verdicts on Mark's cases (Ames room case, his hologram case) is evidence of this.) This **does not mean** it's possible to give an **explicit conceptual analysis** of seeing in conjunctive terms; the history of failure suggests it's not. (Cf. Chalmers and Jackson point: **knowledge-facts apriori deducible** from non-knowledge facts **without explicit analysis**. Btw, this version doesn't require causation *apriori* necessary condition on seeing - maybe in Eden it's not. And this version *consistent with* the next.)

Version 2: Seeing relation is a **posteriori** identical with some super-complicated relation involving experientially entertaining contents *and* causal relations to the world.

Of course, if intentionalist accepts conjunctivism, must answer Mark's arguments.

(1) The Argument from Counterexamples: *Counterexamples undermine conjunctivism*

Reply 1: As we just saw, some versions of conjunctivism give up goal of providing explicit conceptual analysis, so **immune**.

Reply 2: I thought some counterexamples (*moths, billards*) **could be avoided** (but I reject full analysis).

(2) The Naturalness Argument (and *Argument from Below?*): *The seeing relation is very natural (Lewis), more than a "conjunctive relation" defined in terms of experientially entertaining a content plus causation, which means seeing relation is not conjunctive relation.*

Reply 1: intuitions re naturalness **defeasible** (also degrees of naturalness unclear).

Reply 2: More concessive: consciousness some sense more "natural" than its complex supervenience-base; Mark's right, we should be *anti-reductionists*. But maybe Mark is **misidentifying** the target of his naturalness intuition. Not seeing. Maybe it is the "**common factor**" of *having an experience of a red thing* (experientially entertaining that a red thing's there) that is very natural (because involving exp entertaining relation not reducible to indication, functional role, etc.). And maybe *seeing* is just what conjunctivist suggests: an unnatural hybrid of common factor & other (causal) ingredients.

(3) **The Explanatory Gap Argument:** As Mark puts it (35), unclear how the common factor & causation “make the lights go on”, that is “make for conscious awareness of an item”.

Reply But not sure there is an explanatory gap. Given facts about a person’s experience described in experiential terms, and facts about his causal relations to world, **can’t we a priori deduce** whether he sees, and what he sees, in accordance with conjunctivism? Also, of course, even if there is an explanatory gap, many will **respond in the usual** way, by saying it doesn’t prove the reductive project fails (ambitious B-type physicalists who reduce seeing to experience and causation, and reduce experience to the physical).

3. ARGUMENTS CONCERNING INDIVIDUATION

For example, Mark argues against *general* (non-object-involving) intentionalism as follows (p.27): “E = Seamless transition from hallucinating lights on in the ceiling to visually attending to the lights on in the ceiling. E’ = Continuous [phenomenally identical] hallucination of lights on in the ceiling.”

- 1 “If [as on general intentionalism] experiencing is perceptually entertaining that p, and the admissible contents are [general] ... then E = E’” (of course Mark must mean type identical). **Why??**
- 2 “But [by Marks favored way of individuating] this is not so, E and E’ involve different sensory episodes. In E you come to be visually aware of the lights on in the ceiling, while in E’ you do not.”
- 3 So general intentionalism is false.

Reply. I didn’t see why general intentionalist should accept premise 1, which says he committed to saying E = E’. As thesis about phenomenology, intentionalism is *neutral on* individuation particular experiences, just as it is neutral on the analysis of seeing, as we saw above. In fact, **intentionalism is quite compatible with Mark’s claim** that E and E’ are in some sense not (type) identical.

Consider an analogy. Kicking a ball and kicking the air (halluci-kicking) are both kickings. Yet they are different types of episodes thanks to their different objects (the ball; nothing). Likewise, the general intentionalist says that E and E’ involve sensory episodes (like attentively seeing the light). And he says that these episodes are entertainings of general contents (or he might say the sensory episodes \neq the entertainings because he individuates events finely). But can’t he say with Mark that those sensory episodes have different objects (real lights vs. nothing or clusters of uninstantiated properties)? So couldn’t he say with Mark that, thanks to this, E and E’ are different (types of) courses of experience?

(Mark seems to appreciate this point (p.33). But says that, if the intentionalist wishes to individuate experiences in the same way he does in terms of sensory episodes and their objects, then he needs to accept conjunctivism about such episodes, which Mark believes is mistaken. This brings us back to the argument from the failure of conjunctivism against intentionalism, which I’ve talked about.)

4. TRUTH-MAKING ARGUMENTS

Let E be hallucinating brain grey.

- 1 On intentionalism, E is (or involves) the event of experientially entertaining the content *that brain grey exists*. (Incidentally, an implausible view: maybe better: *feature-placing* content like (very roughly) *brain grey is everywhere*.)
- 2 But the “problem is stark though somewhat subtle”: what makes this content true is the target of E, that is, brain grey (a quality or property). By contrast, on intentionalism, we get the absurd result that **what makes the content true is the entertaining of that very content** (or maybe the **content itself**). (p. 28; similar point p. 32)
- 3 So intentionalism is mistaken.

But I think the intentionalist could reject 2. He **could agree with Mark** that the “target” of E (what one is aware of in having E?) is brain grey. (He needn’t say that it is the proposition! He could say that property/quality P is a target of E iff P enters into the content of E.) And he could agree that the content *that brain grey exists is made true by this target, that is, brain grey*.

5. FINALLY: MARK’S EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT

Mark’s cumulative case (p.16) “Taking [experientially entertaining] that P as a starting point leaves us with an inadequate account of the special **epistemic status [or virtue]** of immediate perceptual judgment. [Sensory episodes like the event of seeing the roundness of the tomato] do much better here, at least when we understand their targets as the truthmakers for what we go on to immediately judge.” Mark later (57-8) says this special epistemic status is not: being blameless, being reliably formed, constituting knowledge, or cohering.

- 1 Our perceptual beliefs sometimes have a **special epistemic status or virtue**, because (in the sense that?) they’re formed on the basis of *seeing* their truthmakers, like *the roundness of this tomato*.
- 2 But intentionalism is **incompatible** with this “special status” claim.
- 3 So intentionalism is false.

The Main Problem: the Intentionalist Could Accept “Special Status” Claim

After all, just like Mark, the intentionalist recognizes success states or episodes like **seeing the roundness of the tomato**, which we have in the good case. (*He can even say they have rich, world-involving essences*.) In that sense, like Mark, he holds we occasionally “see” the truth-makers for our perceptual beliefs. He could take these success states as primitive, or analyze them in conjunctive terms. So, the intentionalist could *agree* with Mark that perceptual beliefs sometimes have a *special epistemic status or virtue*, in the sense of being based on “seeing their truth-makers”. Why should this be an idea only the anti-intentionalist can accept? (Like Mark, he could accept a view of the basing relation on which in the good and bad cases our beliefs are *based on* different sorts of states.)

Analogy: Williamson (E = K) holds we're epistemically better off in the good case because in the good case we're in a special state not present in the bad case, seeing that the tomato is round; but **this does not mean he must reject intentionalism** about experience!

(Maybe Mark would say that, on intentionalism, our belief that the tomato is round not based on seeing the roundness of the tomato, for the simple reason that, on intentionalism, **we do not see the roundness of the tomato** at all – it is not *present to us, ever so inclusively speaking* (Brewer, Alston). *I agree, and offer this argument.* Concept seeing is very simple and not causal. You (perfectly) see just the roundness of the tomato (a concrete trope) iff you have an experience with a certain visual phenomenology simply by virtue of being presented with the roundness of the tomato (iff the roundness of the tomato directly shapes the phenomenal contours of your visual experience). On intentionalism, this never happens: one has an experience with the relevant phenomenology by virtue of being related to an *abstractum*. Indeed, on *conjunctivism* about seeing, seeing *clearly* cannot shape phenomenology, because it is *posterior to* phenomenology, being analyzed conjunctively in terms of phenomenology plus causation. But I still think that on intentionalism *we see the roundness*. Phenomenology plus causation satisfies many of our beliefs about seeing: it grounds knowledge of, and reference to, objects, etc. *Enough to count as seeing.*)

Exactly What is the Special Status?

I think for Mark it is just: **being based on awareness of truth-maker**. Again, intentionalist can accept this. On another interpretation, the idea is that (all else equal) seeing the roundness of something grounds a *higher degree of justification* than hallucinating the roundness of something (= degrees of belief you ought to have)? But then *some* possible cases like this: *You seamlessly transition from hallucinating a tomato to seeing one. By chance, at the transition point, you happen to increase the degree to which you believe round thing, in each case basing your belief on your experience. On this version of Mark's view, that's epistemically ok.* But, intuitively, not.

Deviant Causal Chain Case: A Potential Worry for Mark's View and Its Motivation

In the future, disease devastates our eyeballs. But we put little computers on our heads that collect ambient spectral information and send it to a big computer in Washington DC. This computer then computes the information, and sends information back to the computers on our head, which then directly stimulate our visual cortexes. So we have experiences that are just like our previous experiences, and that produce beliefs that are just as reliable. (Indeed, we forget.)

Recall that Mark holds seeing is a *primitive relation* (e. g. it cannot be analyzed in conjunctively in terms of experience and causal relations). He also holds that "*the constitutional basis for seeing is (as it turns out) the state of the visual system plus appropriate [standard] causal influence by external things*" (somewhat as the constitutional basis of water turns out to be H₂O) (*Obscure Object*, 139). Now, in the Deviant Causal Chain case, the **appropriate or standard causal influence is absent**. So, *apparently*, on Mark's view, in this case, we don't bear the primitive seeing relation to any external states. This is a case of **fool's seeing: reliably veridical hallucination**. (If one says that Mark's appropriate causal influence is present after all, *consider a case in which it is clearly absent: e. g. where angels replace computers*. There must be some **brute limits** to the conditions under which Mark's primitive seeing relation gets instantiated.)

So, on Mark's view, in this Deviant Causal Chain case, our perceptual beliefs are not based on attentively **seeing** their truth-makers, for the simple reason that on his view we **don't see** their truth-makers in this sort of case. On his view, this means that our perceptual beliefs in this case are **lacking** a "special epistemic virtue" possessed by our actual perceptual beliefs. The problem with this verdict is that, intuitively, our perceptual beliefs

in this case are no less epistemically virtuous than our actual perceptual beliefs. (Even if in this case we don't bear Mark's primitive relation to the truth-makers for our perceptual beliefs, we at least see* them in some experience-plus-causation sense.)

I think this sort of Deviant Causal Chain Case also **casts additional doubt** on Mark's epistemic argument against the "consensus view". If the intentionalist accepts conjunctivism, he holds that seeing is just a matter of experience (experientially entertaining contents) and causal relations to the world. Mark seems to think that's not enough to explain perceptual entitlement. And with John Campbell he thinks it's not enough to explain our capacity for singular thought (16). To explain these things, he seems to think we must hold seeing is a primitive relation that cannot be analyzed in conjunctive terms (as Campbell does too). (Otherwise I am not sure how he has an epistemic argument against the combination of intentionalism and conjunctivism.)

But, given what Mark says about the supervenience-base of seeing, his **primitive seeing** relation is apparently **absent** in the Deviant Causal Chain Case. All we have in that case is experience and causal relations to the world – the sort of thing the conjunctivist identifies seeing with. *Yet in this case we still manage to have singular beliefs about external objects. And our perceptual beliefs appear to be just as epistemically virtuous as our actual perceptual beliefs.* So Mark's primitive seeing relation appears to be explanatorily idle. Experience and causation – the sort of thing the conjunctivist identifies seeing with – seems explanatorily sufficient.

(I think Deviant Causal Chain cases also create a **non-epistemic problem** for Mark's view. Surely in some such cases we *see* things, as Lewis said against Grice. Or maybe it's indeterminate whether we see – where that might be understood as good-old semantic indecision. **Conjunctivism** gets you those verdicts. But Mark's primitivism-with-supervenience view of seeing is apparently incompatible with them.)

Residual Questions: Isn't a natural way of developing Mark's view similar to (general) intentionalism? Let R be the salient visual experience property you have on viewing a tomato and in any phenomenally identical scenario. Mark accepts common factor (9): being aware of $\lambda x(x \text{ is red and } x \text{ is round})$. This suggests R = being aware of $\lambda x(x \text{ is red and } x \text{ is round})$. In some cases the sensible profile instantiated, in other cases not. This is very similar to (general) intentionalism: R = visually entertaining $(\exists x)(x \text{ is red and } x \text{ is round})$. In some cases the content is true, in other cases not. Or to use the "by virtue of" idiom: if in the hallucinatory case one has R just by virtue of being aware of $\lambda x(x \text{ is red and } x \text{ is round})$ (rather than by virtue of being aware of its instantiation), why not say the same about the veridical case? Of course, this is compatible with saying that in the veridical case one's also aware of the instantiation of the sensible profile: the idea is that this doesn't enter into the constitution of phenomenology (e. g. maybe it gets a conjunctive analysis).

What are qualities, as distinct from properties? Mark says the objects of hallucination are color expanses (65). Elsewhere ('Objective Mind') he says that they are qualities. And he says these qualities (or expanses) differ from properties in being **more concrete** than properties. Two issues. (i) In what sense more concrete? Located in hallucinatory case? Where? Spatially extended? (ii) If redness is not a property, what does it mean to say we're aware of the redness of the tomato in good case? Are qualities, like properties, the kind of items that can be instantiated by things like tomatoes, so we can see their instantiation? (Then wherein do they differ from properties?) Or are they things that aren't instantiated, but pervade space (e. g. the surface of a tomato)? Similar questions for pains, tastes, smells.

The role of the brain a problem? Suppose Yuck and Yum belong to different species. Some berries poisonous to Yuck but important foodsource for Yum. Totally different neural processing and behavior. Presumably (?), on Mark's view, there a quality, say sweetness, "in" the food, perhaps supervening on chemical property C. Suppose Yuck and Yum's taste systems under "appropriate causal influence" of it. Then Mark's view delivers implausible verdict Yuck and Yum both perceive the instantiation of *sweetness* by the food. Against this, Yuck tastes it as bad!