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IS EXPERIENCE TRANSPARENT?

1

Consciousness, some say, is “transparent” to first-person acts of attention; experience is “diaphanous.” You might take this to suggest that when you try to focus attention on consciousness or experience itself, you find you cannot: attention “passes through” straight to the object you are conscious of – the object you experience. But the metaphor has been variously elaborated. Here are two recent invocations of transparency by philosophers who think it bears significantly on the nature of experience. Gilbert Harman (1990) writes:

Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to the intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree.

And here’s one way Michael Tye (1995) puts the point:

Try to focus your attention on some intrinsic feature of the experience that distinguishes it from other experience, something other than what it is an experience of. The task seems impossible: one’s awareness seems always to slip through the experience to blueness and squareness, as instanced together in an external object. In turning one’s mind inward to attend to the experience, one seems to end up concentrating on what is outside again, on external features or properties.

Whatever the truth or import of transparency claims, they are generally offered on the basis of first-person reflection, or introspection, broadly construed. What I mean here is this. We can make first-person judgments attributing various sorts of experience to ourselves. And the warrant we have for making such judgments differs significantly in kind from that which other people ordinarily have or would need for the corresponding second or third person judgments about us. When Harman and Tye invite us to try to attend to our own experience, they are pretty clearly inviting us to confirm



their claims about what we will find – and what we won't find – on the basis of that distinctive kind of warrant (whatever it is) enjoyed by first-person judgments about experience.

Now this introspective “transparency” finding has been put at the service of two far-reaching philosophical views. First, it is said to support what Tye has called “strong representationalism” (2002, p. 45). Roughly, the thesis is that the phenomenal character of experience is to be explained by identifying it as a species of mental representation. We can explain why it looks or feels to us as it does, why its looking or feeling to us is phenomenally conscious, by maintaining, in Tye's words, that “phenomenal character is one and the same as representational content that meets certain further conditions” (Tye, 2000, p. 45). We might, borrowing David Chalmers' (2004) terms, describe this as a *reductive representationalist* account of phenomenal consciousness – “RR,” for short. (Alternatively, we might classify it as a reductive form of *intentionalism* regarding phenomenal character – as I will sometimes do.)

Second, our introspective discovery of the transparency of experience allegedly tells us something about the nature of the introspective knowledge we have of it – namely, that this knowledge is generated by attending, not to the experience, but to things in our surroundings. In Tye's words, “We attend to . . . the external surfaces and qualities – and . . . *thereby* we are aware of something else, the ‘feel’ of our experience” (2000, pp. 51–52). This, the “displaced perception” view of introspective knowledge (“DP” for short), is shared by Fred Dretske (1995) – who also draws on a version of the transparency claim in support of it.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes this DP thesis and associated transparency claims are expressed not just in terms of what one can and cannot *attend* to, but through a contrast between awareness *of* and awareness *that*. So one says: you are aware of objects and qualities of things you perceive, but you are not aware *of* your own experience, or its features.<sup>2</sup> You are only aware *that* you have experiences – that it looks, feels, tastes to you a certain way, and you have this awareness-that, somehow by means of awareness of “external” objects and qualities. Proponents of this idea differ over just how to describe this “by means of” relation linking awareness of objects and awareness that one has experience, though there seems to be general agreement that the

link is *not* to be construed as *inferential* (Dretske, 1995, pp. 60–61; Tye, 2000, pp. 52–53). And we are offered analogies: introspecting your visual experience by being aware of what is before you is said to be rather like being aware of the contents of your gas tank by reading the fuel gauge, for example (Dretske p. 41ff; Tye, p. 52). Just *how* these are supposedly alike, and just what is supposed to distinguish awareness-of and awareness-that is not always so clear. However, a core view is discernable: we are not *aware of* or do not *attend to* the phenomenal character of our experience. Thus, such awareness or attention is not a part of how we introspectively know that we have the sort of experience we do. Rather, we know that our experience has the character it does, only indirectly, by being aware of or attending to external objects and qualities.

So, according to some, first-person reflection or introspection supports a reductive representationalist view of phenomenal consciousness and displaced perception theories of self-knowledge. And it does this by supporting transparency claims such as are illustrated by the remarks from Harman and Tye. But does it really? Just what, if anything, does “transparency” reveal about the nature of consciousness and self-knowledge? The matter is complicated not just because it is difficult to assess arguments closely tied to metaphor, but also because an effort to give the idea more literal expression exposes obscurities. It is not clear there is some single, unambiguous, literal thesis that encapsulates what authors generally have in mind when they speak of the transparency of experience or consciousness. Nonetheless, I will try to examine a bit more closely what literal truths and falsehoods might be lurking around this alluring metaphor. And I will argue, on the basis of what I find, that introspection does not, in fact, strengthen support for the two doctrines I have mentioned, regarding consciousness and self-knowledge; on the contrary, it makes them harder to defend.

## 2

Maybe we will fasten most quickly on the basic issues, if we can find the key moves in some argument that goes from transparency to Reductive Representationalism and Displaced Perception views. For this I will focus on Tye’s exposition, since it seems one of the

more explicit and sustained discussions – and I believe relevantly similar assumptions are at work in others’ arguments. In Tye’s view, what clinches the argument from transparency to RR seems to be this. We are invited to recognize that the *representational content* of experience is not rightly regarded as a *feature of* experience. And we note that, according to RR, the phenomenal character of an experience just is a certain kind of representational content it has. Therefore, RR tells us that phenomenal character of experience is not a feature of experience. But then, it follows that phenomenal character of experience is not a feature of experience to which we have direct access (Tye, 2000, pp. 48–49). Now this latter point is *also* just what we discover when we try, in introspection, to attend to the features of our experience. According to the passage cited earlier, we find we cannot: we can attend only to external features or properties or qualities. Or, as Tye has more recently put the matter, “If you are attending to how things look to you . . . the only objects of which you are aware are the external ones making up the scene before your eyes” (Tye, 2000, pp. 46–47). And: “The qualities of which you are directly aware in focusing on the scene before your eyes and how things look are not qualities of your visual experience” (Tye, 2000, p. 46). The upshot is this. Introspection provides us with a certain finding regarding what we *cannot* attend to or be directly aware of (qualities of experience) and what we *can* (external objects and qualities). This finding can be explained, provided that one adopts RR. For the finding in question is a consequence of that theory’s account of phenomenal character. And so, this provides us with an important reason to accept that account.

Now, how is transparency supposed to support the DP view of self-knowledge? Again, the introspective transparency finding is that we are not directly aware of the phenomenal character of our experience; in fact, we find we are not aware *of* it at all. What we are aware *of* are just external objects and their qualities. But these are also just the basic assumptions of the DP view of self-knowledge. Thus introspection supports DP by confirming its starting point. From here the theory then goes on to propose that your knowledge that you have experience with a certain character is, in a certain way, indirect: somehow, by means of your awareness of external objects

and their qualities, you are aware that you have the experience you do.

So, whatever might be associated with talk of the transparency of experience, these two negative claims seem crucial to Tye's use of transparency to support RR and DP:

- T1: The phenomenal character of one's experience is not a feature of experience to which one can attend.
- T2: One cannot be aware *of* the phenomenal character of one's experience.

T1 and T2 allegedly constitute introspective data best explained by a certain representationalist theory of phenomenal character.<sup>3</sup> And they allegedly cast out inner perception views of self-knowledge, leaving a theoretical need best fulfilled by a displaced perception account. I am going to argue that, depending on how you interpret T1 and T2, they are either false, or true in a way that can (and should) be explained without adoption of RR and DP. Either first-person reflection does not provide the transparency finding to which proponents of RR and DP would appeal, or it provides a finding better explained without them.

I will start with something I think nearly everyone will accept. You can, in some sense, attend to how it appears to you – for example, how it looks, sounds, smells, tastes, feels to you. Now, I would also say, it looks, sounds, etc., to you in these ways just in case you have phenomenally conscious experience: visual experience, aural experience, and so on. Further, at least some differences in ways of looking, sounding, etc. to you, in this sense constitute *phenomenal* differences. For example, at the very least, differences in the way colors or shapes look to you are phenomenal differences. And, where there are phenomenal differences in how it appears to you, you have experience that differs in *phenomenal character*. I think that those who find use for the phrases 'phenomenal consciousness' and 'phenomenal character' would grant this much at least.

Now, I want to go a little farther. If, in the sense just invoked, it looks or otherwise appears some way to me, its so appearing to me is a feature I have: a "phenomenal feature," in my terminology. Furthermore, when, for example, I attend to how it looks to me, I attend to what phenomenal feature I have. That is, I do not somehow

attend to the *way* it looks to me, while leaving its *looking* that way to me out of it. When something looks blue or square to me – to take Tye’s example – and I attend to how it looks to me, I do not somehow attend just to blueness or squareness, without attending to its *looking* blue or square to me. I might put this point by saying that when, for example, there is some figure that looks blue and square to me, and I attend to how it looks to me, its *looking* to me that way “falls within the scope of my attention,” just as much as, and together with, the figure itself and its blueness and squareness. The figure, its properties, and its appearing to me, all come together as a package, as far as this act of attention is concerned. I may only *look at* the blue square – I certainly don’t look at my visual experience of it. However, I can, while looking at the blue square, attend to its looking to me as it does.

I haven’t yet explained how this claim bears on transparency, as interpreted in T1 and T2. But I want to pause at this point to secure my point about the scope of attention. For what I have just said seems to commit me to holding that I can attend, not just to “external objects and qualities,” but to my *experience of them* as well. And maybe that will already cause certain devotees of transparency to object.

So: suppose you look at a pair of circles A and B. You attend to how they look to you. In doing this, you attend to the circles, of course, but that is not all. You may attend to their possession of certain qualities: their circularity for example. And presumably you can attend to *the size* they appear to have relative to one another. Can we interpret this attention in a way that excludes their *looking* to you as they do from what you attend to? We might say, for example, that you attend to *A’s being larger than B*, provided that A not only *looks* to you, but actually *is* larger than B. However, this way of construing what you attend to will not work in a case of illusion. Suppose A looks bigger to you than B, but really isn’t – as for example, in the famous Titchner illusion. In that case, what you attend to is not: A’s being bigger than B. For *that* fact is simply not there to be attended to. Are you then somehow barred from attending to the size A and B appear to you to have, relative to one another, whenever A inaccurately looks bigger to you than B? Surely not. So how should we conceive of what you attend to in this circumstance? This way seems

readily available: A looks bigger to you than B. *That* is what you're attending to. Or, to nominalize: you attend to *A's looking bigger to you than B*. Or, if you like, you attend to *the fact or state of affairs* that A looks bigger to you than B. To grant any of these ways of putting the matter is to grant my claim about the scope of attention.

If one thinks this violates some insight into the transparency of experience, what alternative might one propose? Tye often speaks in ways that suggest that certain *qualities* themselves are to be construed as objects of attention. Someone might, in line with this, say that what you attend to here is: the circle A, the circle B, and the relational quality: "being a larger circle than." But if this is what allegiance to the transparency claim demands we say, at this point the claim hardly seems introspectively evident. It is not even clear just what could be meant by attending to a quality "being a larger circle than" all on its own, as a separate item. Perhaps: we might comply with a request to attend to this quality much as we would the request of someone beginning a speech with the phrase: "Consider the diplomatic alliance between France and Germany . . .". By complying, we can, in a sense, *attend* to this diplomatic alliance, by *taking it into consideration*, as we might say. And similarly, I can attend to a relational quality ("Consider the relation, being larger than . . ."). However, surely I can, in *that* sense at least, also attend to its looking or feeling to me some way. So, I don't see here a viable way to conceive of what I attend to, when I attend to the way it looks to me, and the way it looks to me is illusory, that excludes its looking to me as it does from the scope of my attention.

Now there *are* other ways one might try of doing this. A proponent of sense-data might say that, in addition to the publically visible circles on paper, equal in size, A and B, there are *private mental* circles in my visual field A\* and B\*, one of which not only looks but *is* larger than the other. So what I attend to is A\*'s being larger than B\*. Followers of Meinong or Brentano might construct yet other accounts, having me attend to *nonexistent* or *mentally inexistent* circular objects. But I will set aside these views here. If one preserves some version of transparency only by introducing sense-data, or nonexistent, or mentally inexistent objects as the objects of attention, then that will not give us a type of transparency

we can use to argue for RR and DP. And my primary concern here is with the use of transparency claims to that end.

The point here is readily generalized to other cases of illusory experience, and it could also be made in connection with hallucination. Now suppose that, in light of all this, you agree with my “scope of attention” claim. You agree that you can, after all, attend to its looking to you as it does. Granting me my terminology, this means: you can attend to your having a certain phenomenal feature. Since your visual experience just is your having that feature, you can attend to your visual experience. And if that violates some claim that experience is transparent, then so much the worse for that claim. But where does this leave the two transparency theses earlier isolated, T1 and T2, alleged to support RR and DP? That is not yet clear.

First, consider T1: the phenomenal character of my experience is not a feature of my experience to which I can attend. Under what interpretation would I regard it as false, given what I’ve said? One might take T1 to entail both: (a) I cannot attend to the phenomenal character of my experience, and (b) the phenomenal character of my experience is not a feature that belongs to it. But now (a) at least seems false. For just what is meant by “the phenomenal character of experience”? I would say that my having an experience with a certain phenomenal character is none other than my having a given phenomenal feature. Whether one speaks of the phenomenal *features* a *person* has, or of the phenomenal *character* her *experience* has, marks a merely verbal difference. And, if my remarks on the scope of attention are correct, then you can attend to what phenomenal features you have. But then, it follows by a trivial verbal transformation that you can attend to the phenomenal character of your experience. And so, on one interpretation, T1 is false.

Are there other interpretations? One might instead hear T1 to entail (b) only, not (a). So: while I may well be able to attend to the phenomenal character of my experience, that phenomenal character simply is not *a feature of* my experience. Is *that* right? Well, it depends on how much you read into the idea that phenomenal character is a feature of experience. Suppose again something looks blue and square to me. That is a phenomenal feature I have, and my having it is a visual experience with a certain phenomenal character. Is there a way to re-state this, which involves predicating a feature

of this experience? I suppose I could say: “My experience is a conscious visual experience of a blue square.” And I guess that too would count as a statement of the phenomenal character of my experience. In that sense, I might allow that the phenomenal character is a feature of experience. One can say what the phenomenal character of one’s experience is, by employing a grammatical form that involves applying a predicate to an experience. But again, the point here seems to me merely verbal.

However, perhaps there is some other way to understand what it means to say that the phenomenal character of an experience is a feature of the experience that you can attend to, which does not take this to be equivalent to saying you have a phenomenal feature, and you can attend to that. One might try to take the phenomenal character of an experience to be a feature it could have, without any *person* having features, the having of which constitute the experience. On this view, experience would be, so to speak, a self-standing subject of predication, that could be examined and attended to on its own. Now this *does* seem to me mistaken. The idea that I can attend to an experience, and its features, but without attending to *my having it*, seems to me as wrong as the suggestion that I can, when at a play, attend to features of a performance, but without attending to the actors performing as they do. One reason it strikes me as wrong: if I *could* attend to the experience and its features separately, then it seems I would be able, for example, to attend to a feeling of pain, and to something’s looking blue, all the while wondering *who* feels pain and *to whom* it looks blue. But I don’t see how I could intelligibly wonder that while attending to these experiences.

This raises some notoriously tricky issues about self-consciousness that I won’t pretend to resolve. Right now I just want to make a more modest point, about the transparency claim T1. On one interpretation it says we cannot attend to the phenomenal character of our experience at all. But, granting my scope of attention thesis, and my view that phenomenal character talk and phenomenal feature talk are interchangeable, on that reading T1 is false. On another interpretation, T1 tells us that the phenomenal character of experience is not, properly speaking, a feature of experience – and so, not a feature one can attend to. But again, the claim will be false, given the scope of attention thesis, and certain terminological conventions. So it

seems T1 will be true only if one supposes that, for the phenomenal character of experience to be a feature of the experience, the experience must have its phenomenal character independently of persons having features, their possession of which is experience. Maybe *then* experience doesn't have features to attend to, because it isn't in the nature of experience to be "free-floating" like that – experience necessarily has a point of view "built into it," ways of seeming are necessarily ways of seeming *to someone*. But if this is all that finally remains of T1, it favors no commitment to RR or DP. It would be granted by anyone who has trouble making sense of the notion of experiences that are no one's.

So much then, for T1; let's turn now to T2. This tells us that we cannot be *aware of* the phenomenal character of our experiences. Under what interpretation would I regard T2 as false? It's already clear in what sense I believe you can attend to the phenomenal character of your experience. The question now becomes: is this also to say that you are *aware of* it? Well, if I am *attending to* something, and I am *thinking of* it or *about* it, then, in some sense surely, I can also rightly be said to be *aware of* it. And in that sense, yes indeed, I am sometimes aware of the phenomenal character of my experience. If T2 is taken as denying this, then it is false.

Is there an interpretation on which T2 might be regarded as correct? We might assume that for me to be aware *of* the phenomenal character of my experience, as distinct from aware *that* I have experience with some character, my awareness of it would need to be just like the awareness I have of things I perceive, by looking at them, smelling them, feeling them, tasting them, hearing them. Clearly I am not aware of the character my experience in any of those ways *exactly*. I do not *look at* my visual experience, for example. If advocates of the transparency of experience tell us no more than this, then they are undoubtedly right. But surely they mean something more. Perhaps the additional claim is that we have no form of awareness of our own experience even interestingly *analogous* to these forms of perceptual awareness. There is no "inner sensing" of experience or phenomenal character that bears analogy to the commonly recognized senses of sight, touch and so on.<sup>4</sup> I would grant this point as well. I think such an analogy would have us vainly seek an inner appearance of phenomenal character, which is distinct both from

the phenomenal character itself and from reflective thought about it. But there are no such inner appearances to be found. However, one can recognize this without endorsing either RR or DP.

But now, even if T2 comes to nothing more than a rejection of inner sense, doesn't its the truth help out DP even a little bit? For then at least we will have cleared the way for DP by eliminating a major rival approach. The trouble is that we have also, along the way, collected a reason for rejecting the DP theory. Consider again the case of the Titchner illusion. DP tells me that I am (indirectly) aware that A looks bigger to me than B, by being aware of external objects and qualities. But just what objects and qualities are these? Just what is this awareness-of, by means of which I am to attain the requisite awareness-that? It won't be sufficient to give me the crucial "means whereby," if am aware only of the circles and their circularity. For *that* won't distinguish the means whereby I am aware that A looks bigger to me than B from the means whereby I am aware that A looks to me the same size as B. I cannot fill this gap in the "means whereby" awareness-of yields awareness-that by adding in my awareness of A's actually being bigger than B. For again, setting aside sense-data, non-existent objects and so on, A *isn't* actually bigger than B. It appears that DP lacks the resources to characterize the "means whereby" we are aware that it looks to us a certain way, when the way it looks to us is illusory. What we seem to need to fill this gap is just: its looking to us a certain way. But if we avail ourselves of *this*, then the DP proposal becomes: it looks to me a certain way, and thereby I am aware that it looks this way to me. Suitably elaborated, that may very well be true. However, this proposal hardly seems any longer to count as a displaced perception theory. For now nothing seems to remain of the analogy with fuel gauges and the like. And it is completely unclear why we should say, on this view, that introspective awareness is "indirect." For the idea now is that, by having an experience, one knows that one has it. And that seems to make knowledge of experience anything but *indirect*. Rather, there would seem to be a direct relationship between one's experience and the awareness that one has it.

My remarks so far seem to me enough to show that introspection supports neither RR about consciousness nor DP regarding self-knowledge, via support for the idea that experience is transparent,

as proposed by Tye. For the key transparency claims are: (T1) that the phenomenal character of experience is not feature of experience you can attend to, and (T2) phenomenal character is not something you can be aware of. But once we grant that things appearing to us as they do can fall within the scope of our attention, then, given certain terminological conventions, we can see that these transparency claims are either false, or true only on an interpretation that renders them useless to RR and DP. Though my focus has been on Tye's argument, I believe my response supplies material with which to critique others' use of transparency to similar ends.

## 3

Suppose you agree with me so far. Still, you may find this provides only a limited worry about RR: transparency does not support it. Also, you might wonder whether my scope of attention point depends specifically on cases of *misperception*. I now want to argue that this point can be made more generally, and raises a more general concern about the relation between RR and first-person reflection. For I think that RR requires a conception of representational content that severely limits the extent to which such a theory can appeal to first-person reflection for support.

To appreciate the case for this, we need to try to be a bit clearer about what is required for the success of RR. To do this, it will help to distinguish explicitly between *reductive* and *non-reductive* intentionalist views of phenomenal character.<sup>5</sup> Here's one way to articulate the latter. Start with the idea that its visually seeming or appearing to one a certain way is a phenomenal feature one has. And, to have a phenomenal feature is to have an experience, whose phenomenal character is the way it visually seems to one, in having that experience. One could then hold that its visually seeming to one a certain way – that phenomenal feature – is in a certain sense, also an intentional feature. It is an intentional feature in the sense in which it is sufficient for being an intentional feature that a feature is one in virtue of which its possessor can be assessed for accuracy or correctness – as happens when one says things such as: “The way it looks to her is accurate (or correct)” or “The way it looks to you is illusory.” And if the phenomenal feature is intentional, then the

phenomenal character of the experience had, in having that feature, is inherently intentional.<sup>6</sup>

One could hold a view of this sort, and refrain from the reductive intentionalism of RR. For it doesn't follow from this view that such phenomenal features can be *explained by identifying them with* a species of representation. Recall Tye's formulation of strong representationalism: "phenomenal character is one and the same as representational content that meets certain further conditions." Now this will, as Tye intends, *explain* phenomenal character by telling us what it *is*, only if that representational content, and those further conditions, are specified in way that does not involve a kind of trivializing circularity that would undermine the aim of explanation. Crucially: the representational content of the experience, and the further conditions mentioned in the account, must both be specified in terms other than merely as *ways of seeming* (looking, sounding, smelling). To explain phenomenal features in terms of representational content we need some way of conceiving of the special sort of content involved that does not make appeal to phenomenal modes of appearance of the kind targeted for explanation.

Let me try to make this a little clearer. Suppose I am asked to say what special form of representational content, and what further conditions explain why my visual experience has the phenomenal character it does. What makes this experience the experience of its looking a certain way to me? I might propose: "Well, it looks that way to me, because its looking that way is a state with a special sort of representational content – it represents a certain surface to have a certain shape and color." Then the question will be: "But *what* shape, and *what* color?" (This needs an answer, since representational states *without* the phenomenal character in question can surely be representations of shape and color.) At this point it would RR's ambition to explain phenomenal character to say: the state represents the surface to have the *color that looks this way*, or the *shape that looks this way*. For then we would be appealing to the essentially *phenomenal look* of something to specify the *representational content*, when the representational content was supposed to explain that very phenomenal look, by telling us what it is.

Generally then, the reductive intentionalist needs some way of conceiving of the special sort of representational content that is

supposed to explain phenomenal character without appeal to the phenomenal modes of appearance – looking, tasting, smelling, etc. – to be explained. I will call this non-circularity condition on a successful RR account of consciousness the “No Phenomenal Appeal” condition. Notice, by contrast, that *non*-reductive intention-ism does not require that this condition be satisfied. For while it says that phenomenal character is, in a way, inseparable from intentionality, it does not purport to explain phenomenal character by identifying it with a special sort of representational content. The question I now want to pose is whether first-person reflection affords us the conception of representational content needed to fulfill the “No Phenomenal Appeal” condition to which RR is committed. My contention will be that it does not. My argument for this returns to the scope of attention thesis I used earlier to criticize the transparency argument for RR. There are additional reasons for accepting this thesis that not only bolster my earlier criticism, but widen and deepen the case that first-person reflection is no friend to RR. I will describe three such reasons.

First, consider how noises sound and how odors smell. It seems that, when I think of precisely *what* kind of odor it is that I am smelling, I am sometimes quite unable to think specifically of just *that* odor, relying on introspective resources, in any other way than simply as: *the odor of what smells this way to me*. I may of course classify it in some more informative way – as the smell of a wet dog, the smell of frying butter, the smell of lemon, and so on. But I can’t always or even commonly use such characterizations to distinguish all the ways of smelling to me that I can distinguish in thought. In any case, the effort to give such a characterization is guided by some sort of attention that precedes it, which focuses the question, “What is *that* odor?” on something’s smelling this way to me – so as to permit me to recognize the aptness of the characterization offered in answer. So, to think of an odor in this manner, I attend to its smelling to me a certain way. Similarly, when I think of just what sound I hear, it seems I can sometimes think of just what sound it appears to me to be, only as: *that which sounds this way to me*. I may of course go onto classify the sound as a hiss, a squeal, a screech, a roar, or what have you. But again, such classifications as I am prepared to offer may not capture the precise sound quality of which I am then

thinking, in all its specificity. And, in any event, I have some way of thinking of what sound it is, prior to imposing such classifications, and on the basis of which I can determine their aptness. One might wonder why it is not sufficient to express the relevant conception of an odor or sound here just to appeal to some demonstrative formulation, e.g., ‘*that* odor,’ ‘*that* sound,’ – and leave the matter there. And if one does, one might say: no phenomenal manner of appearing enters into one’s conception of the quality. But it seems to me that one can have concepts of sounds and odors expressible in that demonstrative manner, distinct from those I would express by phrases like ‘what smells this way to me’ or ‘what sounds this way to me.’ A musical composer absorbed in creative effort might think thoughts properly expressible as ‘*That* sound wouldn’t go with *this* one,’ even though he thinks of neither as: what sounds some particular way to him. For he can compose in thought, when there is nothing he demonstratively indicates that sounds any way at all to him. (He is composing without playing, and maybe he is deaf.) Perhaps we will suppose he must be at least *imagining* the sounds? Even so, ‘what sounds this way to me’ and ‘what I imagine sounding this way to me’ express different concepts – a difference that is unspecified by invoking demonstrative expressions like ‘that sound.’ And so, to express the specific concept one is employing, it seems one cannot exclude the manner of appearance. (Similar remarks could be made in the case of odors or scents. Imagine a creator of perfumes “composing” a new fragrance.)

My point is that when we form, on a first-person basis, conceptions of the specific or fine-grained differences in what appears to us something is, we make appeal to phenomenal modes of appearance: what *smells* this way to me, what *sounds* this way to me, and so on. And it appears that we often have, on the basis of first-person reflection, no available alternative. Similar observations seem to apply to other sensory modalities and “sensible qualities” (color and shape). If this is right, there are often cases in which we have, introspectively, no way to conceive of just what it appears to us something is, but by attending to its appearing to us as it does. Thus in first-person reflection, we conceive of what some would call the specific “external qualities” of things that appear to us, only relative to their appearing to us this way or that.

This provides an additional reason to accept the scope of attention thesis urged against some versions of transparency: we can, in some sense, attend to its appearing to us as it does – we can attend to our experience. But further, it gives us reason to doubt one can use introspective knowledge of experience to justify the claim that experience has content that can be characterized without appeal to phenomenal modes of appearance of the sort that must not – on pain of circularity – appear in the reductive explanation of these in terms of representational content. In other words, if there is a way of conceiving of the representational content of experience that will get RR off the ground, it is not one for which we find introspective support. First-person reflection does not equip us to meet the “No Phenomenal Appeal” condition on RR.

Here is the second kind of example I want to offer to bolster my scope of attention thesis, and illustrate the introspective unavailability of the conception of representational content on which RR is based. It concerns phenomena of visual perspective long familiar in philosophical discussions of perception – though the use to which I want to put it is somewhat novel. Someone holds up before your eyes a round plate, at an oblique angle. Then she holds up a piece of paper, face-on, and on that paper is drawn an ellipse. Then she asks you, ‘Does *this*’ (referring to the figure on the paper) ‘look to you like *this*?’ (referring to the plate). To answer in the affirmative, on the basis of first-person reflection, as well you truthfully might, you must attend to how the plate and the figure look to you.

Now when you do this, and think of how it looks to you so as to answer the question, can you employ a conception of the way it looks to you that is free of appeal to phenomenal modes of appearance? Can you think of how the figure looks to you like the plate, by thinking of *what* they both look to you to be (or in Tye’s terms, what “qualities look to you to qualify something”) – but *without* appeal to their looking to you as they do? Only then could you claim to conceive of the “representational content” of your experience in a manner that meets the “No Phenomenal Appeal” condition on the reductive representationalist strategy for explaining its phenomenal character.

It is not easy to see how this condition can be satisfied. If you agree that the *plate* at least does not look elliptical, it clearly will

not do to say that the quality that looks to qualify both plate and figure is: *elliptical*. Maybe one will try something like this.

When I say, yes, the figure does look to me like the plate, I do give this answer by attending to what shape the plate and the figure look to me to have – but *that* shape is not elliptical. The shape is, well, something like: *elliptical from here*. And being ‘elliptical from here’ is not the same as being elliptical, period.

But what does being “elliptical from here” mean, if it does not entail being elliptical? Tye suggests it means something like: having a shape such that “it would be occluded by an ellipse placed in a plane perpendicular to the line of sight” (2000, p. 79).

But this can’t be quite right. For the plate could look to me quite *different* than the way it actually looks, and *not* like the figure, and yet still look to me to have a shape such that it would be occluded by an ellipse placed in a plane perpendicular to the line of sight. For all sorts of very different looking things could qualify as looking *that* way, provided that we alter the size of the ellipse and shape of the plate, and the placement of the occluding ellipse in the right ways.

What happens when I try to be more exact here? Maybe I should say: something looks to me to have a shape such that an ellipse of *a certain size* placed in a plane perpendicular to my line of sight, at *a certain distance* from me, would *exactly occlude it*. But now: what size and distance am I thinking of here, and what do I understand by ‘exactly occlude it’? All I can understand by ‘exactly occlude’ here is: occlude it in such a way that everything right around it still looks some way to me, while it does not itself look any way to me at all. And I don’t know how to identify the relevant specific size and distance here, but by reference to my experience: ‘*This* size – I mean, the size that this now looks to me to have.’ But notice then that I am specifying what shape, size and distance the plate looks to me to be, by appeal to a phenomenal mode of appearing of the sort to be reductively explained (its looking some way to me). What I think this shows is that when I attend to how it looks to me so as to make first-person judgments of pictorial resemblance (‘*This* looks to me like *that*’) I have no conception of what things look to me to be, adequate to allow me to make such judgments, *without appeal to phenomenal modes of appearing* (its looking to me a certain way). But this goes to show first, again, that when I attend to how it looks to me, its looking to me as it

does falls within the scope of my attention. This further justifies what was said earlier about transparency. Second, first-person reflection affords me no conception of the representational content of my visual experience that meets the “No Phenomenal Appeal” condition on RR. Thus reductive representationalism cannot appeal to introspection to help warrant its identification of phenomenal character with representational content so conceived. Or more exactly: we have no introspective warrant for applying to our experience the conception of representational content with which RR, as distinct from non-reductive intentionalism, wants to identify its phenomenal character.

Let’s move now to a third sort of example – involving a gestalt switch. Attend to the way one of the famous reversible drawings looks to you, when this changes from looking *one way* to looking the *other*. So, for example: attend to how a Necker cube drawing looks to you, when first it looks one way, then the other. I assume that such differences in how it looks to you constitute differences in your phenomenal features, or equivalently, differences in the phenomenal character of your experience.

Now, if RR is correct, then we will explain these differences in phenomenal character, by identifying them with differences in the kind of representational content the experiences have, differences in what we represent something to be. And this requires we specify the content without appeal to phenomenal manners of appearance – without thinking of how something is represented as a way of *looking*. And how should we do this? We should not say that something looks to me first to be *a cube with certain edges nearer me* (or with face ABCD turned to me), and then it looks to me to be *a cube with other edges nearer* (or with a different face EFGH turned to me). For, when I look at these lines on the paper, it’s just not true that anything looks to me to be a *cube* there at all. It’s not that the lines appear to lift off the page – as in a children’s pop-up book.

Maybe what we should say then, is that something looks to me to be a *picture or image* of a cube with a certain orientation, and then it looks to me to be an image of a differently oriented cube. Will it suffice to say that when I attend to the difference in the way it looks to me in such a gestalt switch, I attend simply to the difference

between being a picture of a cube in a certain orientation, and being a picture of a cube in a different orientation?

This doesn't seem adequate. For consider: I can of course *judge* that what I see is an image of a cube with a certain orientation, without its *looking* that way to me. I might still *think of it* as also an image of a cube with face ABCD turned to me, even when it doesn't *look* to me *that* way. For I might do this, even while it looks to me like a picture of a cube with a *different* orientation, or even when it has "collapsed" and ceases to look to me like a cube-picture at all, looking instead like just a bunch of lines intersecting a various angles. So, I can attend to the difference between how it looks to me, when I *merely judge it* to be a certain cube-image, and how it looks to me, when I not only *judge* it to be such an image, but it also *looks* to me that way. But then I am not just attending to what I represent something to be: I am attending to its *looking* to me a certain way as well.

The problem is, how am I to conceive of this difference in the phenomenal character of experience purely in terms of what qualities I represent as instanced where, without appeal to phenomenal modes of appearance? I cannot do so purely in terms of what the figure looks to me to be, if this is just: an image a cube with side ABCD facing me. For that is equally what I *judged* it to be, before it began to *look* that way to me as well. So the *change* in phenomenal character is not to be accounted for by reference to *that* representational content – since that would remain constant. The point here is that, when I attend to how the figure looks to me, evidently, first-person reflection affords me no conception of a difference in *how* it looks to me, identifiable with a difference in *what* it looks to me to be, which would leave its looking to me some way out of the story. Introspection gives me no conception of the difference I attend to as purely a difference in representational content – it gives me no such conception purified of appeal to a phenomenal mode of appearing.

So again we have an example (in fact a whole class of examples) illustrating that, to judge on the basis of introspection: first, its looking to us as it does falls within the scope of our attention; and second, we have no conception of the representational content of visual experience that would account for the phenomenal character

of experience in a way that satisfied the “No Phenomenal Appeal” condition on RR.

To understand the argument I am making here it is important to recognize that I am not arguing, as have some,<sup>7</sup> that RR is wrong because there are differences in phenomenal character without representational or intentional differences. I am not maintaining that the differences in phenomenal character which I have used for illustration are “non-intentional” or “purely sensational” and I hold no brief for non-intentional qualia – or (if this comes to the same thing) “intrinsic qualities” of experience. Perhaps in some sense the phenomenal differences I’ve been talking about are all intentional, or representational (whatever that comes to). The question here is whether, introspectively, I have any way of conceiving of these differences as differences in what I represent something to be, independently of any appeal to a phenomenal mode of appearing, such as looking, sounding, or smelling. I contend that no such way is available to me in the cases I have discussed. On the basis of first-person reflection I have no way of conceiving of these differences as differences in the representational content of my experience, without appeal to a phenomenal manner of appearing, of the sort the reductive representationalist sets out to explain.

Now this might not immediately seem so troubling to reductive representationalists. They will, of course, want to appeal to non-introspective sources of warrant for their claim to reduce phenomenal character to a species of representational content. The question then is whether – supposing I am correct here – this represents a significant limitation on the extent to which they can appeal to introspection in support of their theory. I think it does. Typically, when it has been urged that RR will have difficulty in accounting for some introspectible difference in phenomenal character, philosophers have assumed that the challenge will be met, as long as the problem cases provide no clear examples of a phenomenal difference without a representational difference. But part of what I am arguing here is that this misconstrues the nature of the challenge to reductive representationalists. Non-reductive intentionalists will accept that there are no phenomenal differences without intentional ones. And so, if the additional commitments taken on by RR regarding the nature of the relevant intentional differences get no

support from introspection, then other things being equal, introspection favors non-reductive intentionalism only, not RR. To put this another way, to the extent that first-person reflection tells against non-intentional qualia, pure sensational features and the like, it gives us reason only to adopt non-reductive intentionalism, not RR. The challenge for RR then is to argue, on some grounds or other, that the experience whose phenomenal character is introspectively accessible to us also has in fact a sort of representational content whose conception is *not* introspectively available to us, and, moreover, that this phenomenal character is one and the same as that representational content. It seems to me insufficiently appreciated how far short of this goal reductive representationalism remains, even if introspection provides no incontestable examples of non-intentional differences in phenomenal character.

## 4

In all this it may appear I still have not done justice to some genuine insight that inspires talk of the transparency of experience. Isn't there *some* sense in which it is correct to say experience is transparent or consciousness is diaphanous? I think there is. Note the role played by the notion of "turning your attention" in the quotations I gave at the outset from Harman and Tye. The idea in Harman seems to be that you can't turn your attention *to* your experience, and *away from* the tree. And in Tye: you cannot turn your attention *inward* to experience, away from the *external* things experienced. I agree that there is something to this. It seems to me that I cannot attend to what distinguishes one experience from others, while *taking attention away* from what the experience is *of*. Thus I would endorse this general formulation of transparency:

T3: You cannot attend to how it appears to you, by turning your attention *away from* something that appears to you, and *towards* your experience.

Now this seems to be part of what moves people to speak of the transparency of experience. Since one cannot turn attention to experience by turning it away from the objects experienced, it sounds right to say that the experience does not (and cannot) "block" attention to the object. And since the experience does not block the

object, but in fact reveals it, experience, we might say “transmits” attention, somewhat as transparent things transmit light. Now this metaphor has the potential to mislead, I suppose. But if T3 is what accounts for its appeal, then it is not completely misplaced. For T3, it seems to me, is correct.

We should recognize that directing attention to experience is not like directing attention *from* one sensorily apparent thing *to* some other. You can turn your attention *away* from one visually apparent thing, and *to* another, so as to *ignore* the first, in *favor* of the second. Directing attention to the second thing excludes attending to the first. But if you turn your attention to how some object looks to you on some occasion, you don’t (and can’t) do so, by turning your attention away from it or diminishing how much attention you devote to it, while increasing your attention to its looking to you as it does. Thus an injunction to turn your attention “inward” on experience seems especially misleading. For if there is some thing in public space your experience is of – as there will be if you’re not hallucinating – attending to your experience equally will be attending to this thing.

Notice that this is entirely consistent with my “scope of attention” thesis. Clearly T3 does not contradict my claim that we can attend to its looking, feeling, sounding, etc., to us certain ways. Attending to the phenomenal character of your experience is nothing more than attending to what phenomenal features you have. And there is simply no need to take this to mean that one can attend to one’s experience to the *exclusion* of attending to things in one’s surroundings and one’s own body. We can recognize our ability to attend to its appearing to us in various ways, without conceiving of this as some kind of mental withdrawal from an “outer” to an “inner” realm. If we relinquish sense-data, we would do better, I think, simply to dispense with this inner/outer talk altogether, which perhaps is partly to blame for errors, both among those who might counsel us to turn our attention inward on experience, and those who insist that we can attend only to “external” objects and qualities. For this habitual metaphorical opposition of inner and outer may obscure from us the possibility that we can attend to the sorts of things that attract the “outer” label – things at least with spatial location and unperceived aspects – while also (and indivisibly) attending to their

*appearing* to us – that is, to what is traditionally taken to fall on the “inner” side of the divide. The mistake is not to suppose that one can attend to or be aware of one’s experience. The mistake is to suppose that to do this, one must withdraw attention from objects on the “outside” to objects on the “inside.”

But now the question resurfaces: does transparency, in *this* guise at least, if not the others, support RR and DP? It is hard to see how it would. The difficulty for DP encountered earlier in connection with illusory appearances would remain, as would the concern that first-person reflection does not afford us the conception of representational content needed for RR.

One might, however, plausibly argue that a broadly intentionalist view of phenomenal character would help account for why experience is transparent in the sense of T3. Since the phenomenal character of sense experience is inherently intentional, and sensory phenomenal features are intentional features, there is no way for us to identify that character and those features, but relative to what would make one’s experience accurate or inaccurate, correct or illusory. And if we identify them in *that* way, and our experience is accurate, we will inevitably attend to what, if anything, appears to us. For what makes your experience correct, what makes the way it appears to you accurate and not illusory, will be the same as what appears to you. Thus, the fact that sensory phenomenal features are intentional renders them such that you cannot attend to your possession of them, while withdrawing attention from what appears to you.

The explanation just sketched perhaps requires elaboration. But notice that if it is plausible, it does nothing to aid the cause of RR. For the view just enlisted to explain transparency requires no more than a non-reductive intentionalism. The additional commitments of the reductive view contribute nothing that is needed.

What do I wish to conclude about the much vaunted transparency of consciousness? If the thesis of transparency states that we cannot attend to, or are not aware *of* our own experience or its phenomenal character, then – going by what first-person reflection has to tell us

– the thesis is false. However, there may be other claims, perhaps obscurely bundled together with talk of transparency, better supported by introspection. For, I think first-person reflection can be used against an inner sense model of self-knowledge, and against the notion that you can focus your attention on experience in a manner that somehow excludes from consideration *your having it* – as if the experience were an independently existing object. Further – and this seems more directly involved in the transparency idea – it seems true that you cannot direct attention to how it appears to you, by turning attention *away* from *what* appears to you.

If I am right, we should not regard the transparency of experience as some clear unambiguous datum, whose explanation may or may not support theories of consciousness and self-knowledge. On closer examination, we find a tangle of ideas, difficult to extricate from metaphor, whose import may appear quite different once we get the relevant literal, disambiguated claims in view. Transparency claims, it turns out, do not promote the cause of either RR or DP. Either the crucial claims are false, or they provide no evidence for those theories of consciousness and self-knowledge. We can first see that certain transparency claims are unacceptable, when we consider our capacity to attend to how it appears to us, when the way it appears to us is illusory or hallucinatory. The critical point is that, when we attend to how it appears to us, in situations where the way it appears to us is incorrect, we attend to its appearing to us as it does. Appreciation of this point also furnishes reason to think DP leaves us no way to describe the “means whereby” (according to it) we are aware that we have the experience we do.

Now this idea, that when we attend to how it appears to us, the scope of our attention includes its appearing to us as it does, also finds warrant in cases where no illusion or hallucination is involved. In particular, it finds support in considering: first, our conception of finely distinguished qualities of things apparent via our senses; second, our capacity to attend to visual perspective so as to make judgments of pictorial resemblance; and third, our awareness of Gestalt shifts in ambiguous figures. Once my “scope of attention” thesis is supported in these ways, it reveals something else: that we lack an introspectively warranted conception of experiential content of the sort needed to explain phenomenal character as a species of

representation, without circular appeal to the phenomenal modes of appearing to be explained.

Part of my aim here has been to encourage a reconfiguring of current debates about consciousness, intentionality, and self-knowledge. Much as DP theorists see their main rivals as advocates of inner sense, reductive representationalists are likely to see their main challenge coming from those who argue for non-intentional qualia or non-representational phenomenal differences. But, if I'm right, attention to experience shows that DP is in trouble even if inner sense is rejected. And even if first-person reflection allows us to isolate no pure sensational qualities, it also yields no conception of pure representational contents.

Thus we should be wary of declarations that consciousness is transparent or diaphanous, and the theoretical morals drawn from them. Transparency is more slippery than it might at first seem. And while maybe consciousness is, in some sense, transparent because it is inseparable from intentionality, this does nothing to subordinate consciousness to representation.<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dretske writes: "If one is asked to introspect one's current gustatory experience . . . one finds oneself attending, not to one's experience of the wine, but to the wine itself (or perhaps the tongue or palate). There seems to be no other relevant place to direct one's attention" (1995, p. 62). Dretske takes this to show that "introspection has no phenomenology" or that "if there is an inner sense . . . it has a completely transparent phenomenology" (which Dretske takes to suggest that, really, there *is* no inner sense). Dretske believes the absence of introspective phenomenology – and the "transparency" (i.e., non-existence) of the phenomenology of inner sense – is explained by the displaced perception view. ("This account of introspective knowledge . . . explains why introspection has no phenomenology . . ." (p. 62).)

<sup>2</sup> Tye (2002) explicitly endorses this way of putting things, but some of Dretske's (1995) formulations also invite this characterization.

<sup>3</sup> For my interpretation of 'phenomenal character,' see Siewert (1998, Chapter 3).

<sup>4</sup> Dretske (1995) and Tye (2002) both seem to connect the denial that we are aware *of* our own experiences with a rejection of an inner sense view of self-knowledge. Relatedly, Shoemaker (1996) criticizes in some detail the notion of inner sense by arguing against an "object perception" model of self-knowledge. I also am very critical of the notion of inner sense (Siewert, 1998, pp. 208–214;

Siewert, 2001), but it would be very involved to sort out my exact agreements and disagreements with these authors on these points. For current purposes it is important to emphasize that I think one can reject the notion of inner sense while affirming my scope of attention thesis.

<sup>5</sup> I prefer the term ‘intentionalist’ to describe the non-reductive position, since I subscribe to that position, and I have doubts about whether the intentionality of experience is always best thought of as its having *representational* content, properly speaking. For example, I think there may be differences in how it looks to us that are not specifiable by attributing either linguistically or imagistically expressible content to visual experience, but which are not, for all that, rightly regarded as non-intentional, merely qualitative differences. So I want to leave open the possibility that the notion of intentionality extends more widely than that of representation.

<sup>6</sup> I work out this version of non-reductive intentionalism in more detail in Siewert (1998, Chs. 6–8). For other views I would classify as non-reductive intentionalism, see Crane (2002) and Horgan and Tienson (2002). For a detailed discussion of different “intentionalisms” about consciousness, reductive and non-reductive, see Chalmers (2004).

<sup>7</sup> See Block (1998) and Peacocke (1983).

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Amy Kind, whose July 2002 talk on transparency at the NEH Summer Institute on Consciousness and Intentionality (forthcoming; Kind, 2003) did much to stimulate my thoughts on this. I am also much indebted to questions and comments from (among others): Dave Chalmers, Terry Horgan, Kirk Ludwig, Alan Thomas, Amie Thomasson, Michael Tye, and Dan Zahavi.

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