

# Representational theories of consciousness

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1	Phenomenal character and representation . . . . .	1
2	PANIC . . . . .	2
3	Explaining representation . . . . .	2
4	Objections . . . . .	3

## 1 Phenomenal character and representation

Tye uses the expression ‘phenomenal character’ to pick out what it is like for a subject on a given occasion. So if we have two subjects, one of whom seems to see blue and the other of which seems to see red, they will differ in what it is like for them — and hence, in Tye’s terms, their experiences differ in their phenomenal character.

We have already encountered functionalist theories of phenomenal character. Tye’s theory is a version of this kind of theory. But it has a new element. Tye’s view is that to have a state with a certain phenomenal character just is to represent the world in a certain way.

Why might one think this? Tye is motivated by the *transparency of experience*: the fact that, when we introspect a conscious experience, we end up focusing on features our experience represents as in the environment.

But this leads to an immediate problem. Lots of mental states represent the world as being a certain way. For example, when I believe that grass is green, I represent grass as green. But beliefs have no associated phenomenal character; there is nothing that it is like to believe that grass is green. So how could we explain phenomenal character in terms of representation?

The answer is that phenomenal character has to be a certain special kind of representation. Tye defends a theory of this sort.

## 2 PANIC

Tye's theory is that phenomenal character is Poised, Abstract, Nonconceptual, Intentional Content (PANIC for short).

Here we will focus on the first and third of these conditions.

For representation to be poised is for it to be readily available as input to the creature's belief/desire system. What this rules out: the case of super blindsighters.

For representation to be nonconceptual is for it to be such that subjects need not have concepts which enable them to have thoughts about all of the features represented in the experience. What this rules out: belief.

## 3 Explaining representation

At this stage, you may have the following objection. Suppose that Tye is correct, and that phenomenal character is PANIC. We still have no explanation of how conscious states could be physical states, because we have no account of how a given state could have a certain representational content.

Tye responds to this kind of objection by giving a theory of content. Roughly, it is as follows:

A state of a creature represents  $p$  if and only if, were the creature in optimal conditions, the creature would be in that state only because  $p$

So a state represents a red surface if and only if, in optimal conditions, the creature would be in that state because of the presence of a red surface in the environment. For short, we will say that such a state *indicates* the presence of a red surface.

What are optimal conditions? Tye's answer is, again roughly: the conditions that the organism's perceptual system evolved to handle.

So what we get is a kind of functionalist theory, but a different kind than the ones we have discussed so far. Consider a red-seeming experience. On Tye's view (roughly) the property of having such an experience is identical to the property of being in some state which has the following functional role:

it indicates redness  
it is poised (stands in the right connections to the subject's beliefs and desires)  
it is nonconceptual

This sort of functionalist theory is sometimes called a *representationalist* theory of consciousness, because it explains consciousness in terms of representation.

## 4 Objections

Let's consider a few objections to Tye's theory:

- What about pains and other bodily sensations? Answer: these are experiences of one's body, which represent the states of the body which they indicate.
- What about emotions, like anger or fear? Answer: they are compounds of beliefs and certain bodily sensations.
- What about moods? Ditto.
- What about non-evolved creatures? The example of Swampman. Tye's answer: for non-evolved creatures optimal conditions are the conditions in which they find themselves.
- What about inverted earth? Answer: no change in nonconceptual representation.
- What about Mary, and zombies? Answer: phenomenal concepts.
- Block's objection: swampman goes to inverted earth.