

**Comments on John Kulvicki's "What is What It's Like?" (2003 Eastern Div. APA)**  
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I'll summarize Kulvicki's paper and then present a couple of objections.

Kulvicki's goal is to give a representationalist account of what it's like to see a property that is "fully externalist about perceptual representation" (p. 1) and yet accommodates a certain "internalist intuition" (p. 4), which he describes as follows: "something about what it is like to see a property is internally determined, dependent only on the way one is built from the skin in" (p. 3). He illustrates this intuition with an inverted spectrum case and the manifest-image problem. On his view, there's an apparent conflict between the intuition and representationalism. That's because, on representationalism, "what it is like to see a shade of color can be exhaustively explained in terms of what is perceptually represented" (p. 1) and, he claims, "all representational facts are externally determined" (p. 4). In short, if what it's like is partly internally determined, then how can it be fully explained in terms of externally determined representational facts?

Kulvicki resolves the apparent conflict by appealing to modes of presentation. In perception, one represents properties under perceptual modes of presentation (MOPs). What are these? He writes, "The perceptual MOP of a property is just what one can come to know [about] it on the basis of perceptually representing it" (p. 5). What one can come to know (extract, deduce) on this basis includes only information about properties that constitute the represented property and depends partly on the perceiver's internal structure.

For example, based on our perceptual representation of squareness, humans can deduce that squares are 4-sided. According to Kulvicki, other creatures may perceive squareness without being able to deduce this information. To acquire it, they'd have to do some science. Kulvicki has us imagine that the reverse holds for color perception: unlike us, these creatures can extract information about reflectance properties just from perceptually representing greenness. We and they represent the same properties (squareness and greenness), but under different Kulvickian MOPs.

Notice that the extractable information concerns only constituents of represented properties, which are externally determined. So, Kulvicki's MOPs introduce only externally determined information and his account is consistent with the externalism requirement. But *which* items of information about constituent properties are extractable depends partly on one's internal structure. And, "Since structural features are internal to the perceiver, what it is like is in part internally determined" (p. 5). His account thus seems to accommodate the internalist intuition without violating the externalism requirement.

He adds that, "even though the structure of the perceptual representation determines the perceptual MOP, one needn't ever be aware of perceptual representations or their structure" (p. 8); and, "we need only ever be aware of what we perceptually represent to be the case" (p. 6). I'm not sure what role these claims play in his project. Perhaps the idea is that his account doesn't conflict with a transparency (diaphanousness) principle that representationalists endorse.<sup>1</sup> I'll leave this point aside, for the most part.

My first objection is that Kulvicki's account of what it's like is implausible. Philosophers use 'what it's like' to refer to phenomenal consciousness.<sup>2</sup> For example:

there's nothing it's like to be a zombie, and there's nothing it's like for the blindsighted to visually perceive. Yet it seems that zombies and the blindsighted could extract information about the constituents of greenness or squareness on the basis of perceptually representing those properties. This seems hard to deny, especially if, as Kulvicki writes, "one needn't ever be aware of perceptual representations or their structure" (p. 8). If zombies or the blindsighted could do these things, then Kulvicki's account is too liberal: it attributes what-it's-like properties where they don't exist. Indeed, if the account ascribes (visual) what-it's-like properties to zombies and the blindsighted, then it severs what it's like from phenomenal consciousness, thus ignoring the explanandum.

The account also seems too stingy, failing to attribute what-it's-like properties where they exist. Suppose Twin-Alter spends his life in a black-and-white environment, which lacks colors and their constituents: no messy sets of reflectance properties, etc. Yet, due to his different ocular/neural system, the world seems to him as if there are green things in it. With respect to what it's like, he and I are identical. Consider also a phenomenal duplicate of me who spends his life in a curvy environment, which lacks square objects and their constituents: no straight lines, no right angles, etc. Kulvicki's view seems to imply that what it's like is constructed entirely from resources external to the perceiver: one's internal structure merely *limits* what information can be extracted from one's perception of external properties. But in the environments of my phenomenal duplicates, the relevant properties don't exist. These cases seem plainly coherent, but it's unclear how Kulvicki could explain them.

My second objection concerns Kulvicki's formulation of the conflict between the internalist intuition and the externalism requirement. First of all, the internalist intuition

that Dretske, Lycan, et al., discuss isn't merely that "what it is like is *in part* internally determined" (p. 5). It's rather that features of the subject's external environment don't constitutively determine what it's like *at all*. (Environmental features play roles in *causally* determining phenomenal properties, but that's irrelevant.) Kulvicki's account doesn't accommodate this intuition: on his account, environmental features partly (constitutively) determine what it's like.<sup>3</sup>

There's another problem with Kulvicki's formulation. He contends that there's a conflict between the internalist intuition and *representationalism*. That's because he thinks that representationalism entails that "all representational facts are externally determined" (p. 4). But as David Chalmers and others have argued, externalism is optional for representationalists.<sup>4</sup> To explain this point, it will help to fix some terminology.

*Representational* properties are properties that represent things as being a certain way—properties that are assessable for accuracy. *Phenomenal* properties are what-it's-like properties. *Representationalism* is the view that phenomenal properties are (just) representational properties.

Where does the externalism come in? Let me fix more terminology. *Wide/external* properties depend constitutively on environmental factors. In other words, it's possible for intrinsic duplicates to differ with respect to wide/external properties. *Narrow/internal* properties are those that are not wide/external: narrow/internal properties don't depend constitutively on environmental factors. In other words, such properties are necessarily shared by intrinsic duplicates.

Representationalism is often combined with the view that all representational properties are wide. But it needn't be. On narrow representationalism, phenomenal properties are narrow representational properties. This view is perfectly coherent. Indeed, it has prominent advocates, including Terry Horgan & John Tienson and probably Chalmers.<sup>5</sup> So, Kulvicki is wrong to suggest that the internalist intuition conflicts with representationalism *per se*.

Rather, the intuition conflicts with externalism about the relevant properties, which representationalists can but need not accept.<sup>6</sup> This conflict is quite real, and Kulvicki's account does nothing to solve the problem it creates for externalist representationalism. As Chalmers observes, the following three claims form an inconsistent triad: (i) *representationalism*: all phenomenal properties are representational properties; (ii) *the externalism requirement*: all representational properties are wide; and (iii) *the internalist intuition*: all phenomenal properties are narrow.<sup>7</sup> (i)–(iii) can't all be true. In particular, if you're an externalist representationalist, then you *must* give up the internalist intuition.<sup>8</sup> You can't "accommodate" it. At best, you can explain it away, as Bill Lycan and other externalist representationalists try to do.

At the end of his paper, Kulvicki mentions that the Paul/Molly inverted-spectrum case may be impossible. Showing this would relieve some of the pressure against externalist representationalism, but the ideas Kulvicki develops in "What is What It's Like?" do not. Further, the problem the internalist intuition creates for externalist representationalism goes well beyond the Paul/Molly case. Chalmers' description of one of the theory's many odd consequences makes this point forcefully:

...a change in environment can often yield a gradual change from one wide representational content to another quite different content (e.g. from representing red to representing green), with a period of indeterminate representation of both contents (or divided reference) in the middle. But it is hard to know what an indeterminate phenomenal state involving both phenomenal red and phenomenal green could be like (striped? superimposed?), and it is hard to believe that a subject going through this change in environment would pass through such a state. (Chalmers, p. 11)

In my view, representationalists should respond by rejecting the externalism requirement: by admitting that some representational properties, including those concerning what it's like, are narrow. But that's another story.

I've presented two objections. First, Kulvicki's account of what it's like is implausible. It attributes phenomenal properties where they plainly don't belong, implying that there's something it's like to be a zombie and to perceive with blindsight; and it fails to attribute phenomenal properties where they do belong, as the cases of phenomenal duplicates in impoverished environments demonstrate. At least, I don't see how to avoid these highly implausible implications. Second, he formulates the problem for representationalism incorrectly: he mischaracterizes the internalist intuition as the weak claim that what it's like is *partly* internally determined; and he misleadingly builds externalism into representationalism. The internalist intuition creates a difficulty for externalist representationalism that his account doesn't address, let alone resolve.

My objections may be based on a failed attempt to understand Kulvicki's paper. If they are, I hope they may nonetheless help him to further clarify his views on what is to me a fascinating topic: the relationship between consciousness and intentionality.<sup>9</sup>

Handout:

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*The problem.* The internalist intuition seems to conflict with representationalism, since "all representational facts are externally determined" (p. 4).

*Kulvicki's MOPs.* "The perceptual MOP of a property is just what one can come to know [about] it on the basis of perceptually representing it" (p. 5). What one can come to know on this basis (i) includes only information about properties that constitute the represented property (e.g., sets of reflectance properties) and (ii) depends partly on the perceiver's internal structure.

*The solution.* The conflict is merely apparent. Kulvicki's MOPs introduce only externally determined information. But *which* items of such information one can extract depends partly on one's internal structure.

*First objection.* Kulvicki's account of what it's like is implausible. It seems to attribute what-it's-like properties where they don't belong, e.g., to zombies and the blindsighted. Also, it seems not to attribute such properties where they do belong: how can he explain phenomenal duplicates in impoverished environments?

*Second objection.* Kulvicki mischaracterizes the problem. The internalist intuition that concerns Dretske, Lycan, et al., isn't merely that "what it is like is in part internally determined" (p. 5), but rather that features of the subject's external environment don't constitutively determine what it's

like *at all*. Also, Kulvicki wrongly assumes that representationalism entails externalism. Finally, the conflict between the internalist intuition and externalist representationalism is real.

The inconsistent triad (Chalmers)

- (i) *Representationalism*: all phenomenal properties are representational properties
- (ii) *The externalism requirement*: all representational properties are wide
- (iii) *The internalist intuition*: all phenomenal properties are narrow.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of transparency and its relationship to representationalism, see Amy Kind, ‘What’s So Transparent About Transparency?’, *Philosophical Studies* 115, 2003, pp. 225-244, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See the entry ‘consciousness, phenomenal’ in the *Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind* at <http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/main.html>. For a detailed discussion, see my “Qualia,” in L. Nadel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2003), article #204. Philosophers of mind have consistently used ‘what it’s like’ to refer to phenomenal consciousness at least since Nagel’s seminal “What is it Like to be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83, 1974, pp. 435–50.

<sup>3</sup> Kulvicki cites Michael Thau’s book several times and quotes from pages 46–47. But on those pages Thau discusses the intuition that *perceptual experience* (not: what it’s like) is partly internally determined. For example, he writes, “there is something about perceptual experience that is internally determined” (Thau, p. 47). Presumably, the aspect of perceptual experience to which he thinks the internalist intuition applies is phenomenal character, i.e., what it’s like.

<sup>4</sup> David Chalmers, “The Representational Character of Experience,” forthcoming in B. Leiter (ed.) *The Future for Philosophy* (New York: Oxford, 2004) and available at <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~chalmers/papers/representation.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Terrance Horgan and John Tienson, “The intentionality of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Intentionality,” in D. Chalmers (ed.) *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (New York: Oxford, 2002), pp. 52–53. Chalmers, “The Representational Character of Experience.”

<sup>6</sup> Two further terminological points should be noted. First, Kulvicki seems to suggest that representationalism entails that there’s no more to what it’s like than representational content (e.g., p. 1). But many representationalists, including Kulvicki, accept that there are different ways in (or modes under) which a given representational content can be represented. These ways or modes need not be construed as content properties, and there are good reasons for not so construing them. See Chalmers, “The Representational Character of Experience.” Second, Kulvicki’s use of ‘external’ is puzzling. I’ve been assuming that he uses it to mean ‘not internal’, i.e., in his words, not “dependent only on the way one is built from the skin in” (p. 3). But I sometimes get the impression that he has in mind a stronger notion: dependent only on external factors, and not at all on the way one is built from the skin in. This may explain why he characterizes perceptual MOPs in terms of the “constituents” of properties of external objects, such as (for certain possible perceivers) messy sets of reflectance properties. In the literature on representationalism, philosophers generally use ‘external’ in the weaker sense. (The same is true of the literature on internalism and externalism about cognitive content: Putnam, Burge, etc.). Dretske, et al., are certainly not committed to the view that what it’s like is external in the stronger sense.

<sup>7</sup> See Chalmers, “The Representational Character of Experience.”

<sup>8</sup> I.e., if you hold (i) and (ii), then you must give up (iii), on pain of inconsistency—I trust no one will invoke paraconsistency here!

<sup>9</sup> I thank Mark Scala for helpful suggestions.