ABSTRACT. The representational theory of phenomenal experience is often stated in terms of a supervenience thesis: as Tye has recently put it, “necessarily, experiences that are alike in their representational contents are alike in their phenomenal character”. Consequently, much of the debate over whether representationalism is true centres on purported counter-examples – that is to say, purported failures of supervenience. The discussion here focuses on one important representationalist response to a striking class of these, namely, perceptual states in different sensory modalities that, despite differing phenomenally, share at least some content – for example, the visual and tactile sensations of motion. Some representationalists reply to these cases, in effect, by widening the supervenience base of phenomenal experience to clusters of perceptual contents. However, I argue that this reply radically undermines the representational theory of experience by, among other problems, ruling out its construal as an identity thesis, and leaving the supervenience claim apparently ungrounded.

The representational theory of phenomenal experience is often stated in terms of a supervenience thesis: Byrne recently characterises it as the thesis that “there can be no difference in phenomenal character without a difference in content”, while according to Tye, “[a]t a minimum, the thesis is one of supervenience: necessarily, experiences that are alike in their representational contents are alike in their phenomenal character”. Consequently, much of the debate over whether representationalism is true centres on purported counter-examples – that is to say, purported failures of supervenience. The refutation of putative counter-examples has been, it seems to me, by and large successful. But there is a certain class of these for which
the representationalist response has been something less than completely convincing. These are the cross-modality cases. I will explain what I mean, and then argue that the response in question is not only unconvincing but actually undermines the representationalist position.

Note, firstly, that the defence of this supervenience claim is independent of, though complements, the argument from transparency or diaphanousness with which it is sometimes confused. What we might call “the supervenience argument” has as its key premise that phenomenal character never varies independently of content, from which determination or identity are inferred. The issue in the transparency argument is our awareness of phenomenal character as distinct from perceptual content; the issue in the supervenience argument is the relative patterns of variation of character and content. Moreover, it is not just the actual pattern of variation that matters to the supervenience claim. Supervenience is always presented as a claim about what patterns of variation are possible with regard to its target phenomena. To Tye it is a claim about what experiences are necessarily like, while for Byrne it is a claim about the limitations on the difference there can be between any two experiences.

To establish the supervenience of the phenomenal on representational content, it is necessary to show that, of necessity, all groups of sensations with identical content are groups with identical phenomenal character, or conversely that all differences in phenomenal character are necessarily accompanied by some difference in content. Since it is certainly true that by and large in the actual world phenomenal character doesn’t vary independently of content, there is perhaps some presumption in favour of supervenience holding. For this reason anti-representationalists have shouldered the burden of proof and depend on purported actual–world counter-examples to carry the day (it would of course be sufficient to demonstrate the mere possibility of a counter-example, but modal claims in this arena are so contested as to be rhetorically useless).