
This book is a follow-up to Tye’s influential earlier work *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (Tye, 1995), which offered a physicalist account of phenomenal (or qualitative) consciousness, arguing that it can be fully and satisfactorily explained in terms of mental representations. Tye’s particular version of this theory (representationalism) holds that our conscious experiences consist in those mental representations that are Poised (to influence our beliefs and desires), and have Abstract, Nonconceptual, Intentional Content (from which Tye coins the acronym PANIC). The eight loosely connected essays in Consciousness, Color, and Content (some new, and some previously published) elaborate and amend aspects of the theory of the earlier book, and defend it from various objections that have been or might be made, either to representationalism or to reductive theories of consciousness in general.

I should confess at the outset that I am very sympathetic to certain aspects of Tye’s view, but find other aspects utterly wrong-headed. In particular, I believe that Tye’s “tracking” theory of intentional content (seemingly a form of “causal” or “correlational” theory (Cummins, 1989), wherein functional states are held to have content inasmuch as their occurrence is correlated, under appropriate conditions, with the occurrence of whatever they represent) is both unworkable (Cummins, 1989), and an unsuitable foundation for his representationalist account of consciousness. However, given a radically different theory of representation, much of what Tye says about phenomenal consciousness might well turn out to be true. But the book does not dwell upon the theory of intentional representation, so it would not be appropriate to enter into a detailed critique of Tye’s view of it here, still less to set it against my own theories of representation and phenomenal consciousness (Thomas, 1999). However, the fact that I see Tye sometimes as a powerful ally and sometimes as a dangerous opponent inevitably colors my attitudes toward different parts of this book.

Certain chapters, however, merely rehash certain “classic” thought-experiment arguments of recent philosophy of mind, attempting to show that, despite initial appearances, they pose no threat to physicalism in general, or representationalism in particular: chapter 1 on the knowledge argument (Mary the incarcerated color expert); chapter 5 on the inverted spectrum (which goes back to Locke, although
Tye is particularly concerned with Sydney Shoemaker’s take on it); and chapter 6 on swampman and inverted Earth. I have no great quarrel with the general direction of Tye’s thinking in these chapters, but I deprecate the genre. The original thought experiments, and perhaps the first two or three rounds of objections, objections to objections, and so on, may have offered valuable insights, but that stage is long past. They have become fodder for the publish-or-perish academic philosophy industry, and the resulting scholasticism can achieve little beyond persuading other cognitive scientists that listening to the philosophers is a waste of time. No consensus is discernable, and every finely honed argument soon meets its equally clever rebuttal. Although Tye handles this sort of material better than most, and one cannot help but admire his skill in juggling what has become extremely complex material, reading these chapters did not leave me feeling I understood the underlying substantive issues any better.

Admittedly, the problem introduced at the beginning of chapter 6 is a relatively novel compound of some old elements: An obvious riposte to Block’s (1990) inverted Earth argument against representationalism (itself a product of miscegenation between the inverted spectrum and Putnam’s Twin Earth) entails the very counterintuitive conclusion that a spontaneously created physical duplicate of me (swampman) would not have phenomenal consciousness. Furthermore, Tye’s ultimate solution to this problem, at the end of the chapter, seems fairly convincing. The trouble is with the dozen or so pages in between, wherein Tye defends a different response to the inverted Earth argument in tedious detail, before pointing out a fairly obvious flaw in the scenario and moving on to the relatively quick exposition of his actual solution. This chapter would have been much better at about half the length.

Chapters 3, 4, 7 and 8 are more constructive in intent, and, I found, much more readable and enlightening. Chapter 4 is still concerned with rebutting various objections that have been or might be made to representationalism, mostly to do with various optical effects, afterimages, illusions and the like. However, these objections are still relatively fresh, so the substantive issues have not yet been obscured in a fog of philosophical nit picking. I found Tye’s rebuttals, generally, clear and prima facie convincing.

Chapter 8 applies the PANIC perspective to the question of how far down the phylogenetic scale consciousness occurs. I would not say Tye’s answers are entirely compelling (he tentatively concludes that caterpillars are not conscious, but bees are, although, lacking metarepresentation, they do not suffer from any pains they may feel), but the chapter is an interesting exploration of the uses to which a theory of the nature of consciousness can be put. Without such a theory we have nothing but vague and conflicting intuitions to tell us which of our fellow creatures might be fellow conscious beings.

For a full understanding of the PANIC criteria, that supposedly set conscious mental representations apart from the non-conscious herd, you will need to turn to Tye’s earlier (1995) account. They are briefly explained in chapter 3, but the main