Hi Professor Clark,

I was rereading Chapter 6 in light of your very helpful handouts regarding how to understand 'primary intension' and 'verifies' and I came across something I was hoping you could comment on.

I was considering a world in which P and not-Q was verified, so I was considering a world in which someone was informed about the structural description of that world but were in an epistemic state such that it was rational to endorse not-Q. But then I thought that there would be no real significant difference between that situation and our own situation. It is certainly epistemically possible that everyone in the actual world (except for the one performing the thought experiment) is a zombie, and the information which one would be able to obtain in the world which verifies not-Q is the same information we all have in the actual world. But Chalmers certainly agrees with the fact that our world is one in which people have consciousness. It seems that whatever considerations are used to justify that inference in our world can be used as well in whatever world P is verified and not-Q is verified. And that world could just be the actual world, for it is primarily positively conceivable that everyone else is a phenomenal zombie, taking our world as the actual one, and giving a physical description of our world in a semantically neutral vocabulary. In fact, because we do not have a complete description of our world at hand, one might even say that there is less justification for us to assume that other people are not phenomenal zombies. Because we only have P - X where X is a set of microphysical truths we have yet to discover, there is even less data to inform us about how the the brain does what it does (assuming, of course, that more microphysical truths would help rather than hinder the case for materialism [an assumption that Chalmers seems to make considering he offers as much physical information as possible, P, rather than less]).

So it seems as though moving considerations of phenomenal zombies to another epistemically possible world does nothing to help bolster Chalmers' point, which simply ends up stating a puzzle that we are all seemingly already aware of - that we cannot be sure that everyone else in the actual world is not a phenomenal zombie because all we have is third-person and not first-person data to begin with. And whatever way we justify making the jump from our empirical data to other minds should be enough to justify the same jump considering a different epistemic possibility. If this is correct, then either Chalmers has given us real motivation to believe everyone else is a phenomenal zombie, or his conclusions can be as motivating as the thought the everyone else is a phenomenal zombie, i.e., not at all. Chalmers responds to the objection that zombies could use the same argument to come to the (false) conclusion that materialism is false in their world by adding Q (that someone is conscious). But that does not affect this point, because whoever is considering this situation (presumably) will know that s/he is conscious, thus making Q true, but verifying not-Q otherwise.

If you could show me what I am missing or if Chalmers' addresses this point somewhere in his book (I think I remember him addressing it, but I can't seem to find it), that would be very helpful. Or if you would rather have me stop by your office to discuss it rather than have to respond via email I will do so when you have time.

Thanks in advance.

Best,
-Noah
What-It’s-Likeness and Representations (Nate Sheff)

Chalmers asks (346), “Are phenomenal properties identical to pure representational properties?” and “Are phenomenal properties identical to impure representational properties?” To the first, he answers no; to the second, he says it’s an open possibility. I want to defend an affirmative answer to the first question, but first, I have to lay out some of his idiosyncratic terminology.

What it takes for properties to be identical is for there to be a two-way entailment. Property A entails property B when property A is always accompanied by the presence of property B; property A is identical to property B when A and B always appear together, or not at all. That is, A and B are identical when A entails B, and B entails A. Phenomenal properties for Chalmers are properties of a subject; they are the what-it’s-like to be a certain subject, like a bat. Pure representational properties are the intentional content of a representation; impure representational properties are the modes of presenting that intentional content. Suppose I represent Venus as being bright; the intentional content of my representation is Venus and brightness. The pure representational content is just the same as the intentional content. But Venus might be presented to me as the morning star, which would be the impure content of my representation. So, to recap: phenomenal properties are of subjects; pure representational properties are of intentional content; impure representational properties are of the mode of presentation.

The questions now become, first, “Do properties of a subject always appear (or not appear) together with intentional content?” and second, “Do properties of a subject always appear (or not appear) together with the mode of content’s presentation?” To the second question, it’s easy to see why it’s an open possibility that these properties always either go together or not at all. And according to Chalmers, the answer to the first is no. One reason why is that intentional content could be represented unconsciously, though there is nothing it is like that attends that unconscious representation. I don’t think this is a good reason, and not because the notion of unconscious representation is incoherent. Rather, I believe that there is a property of subjects, who have unconscious representations. There certainly can be functional difference.

What could explain this? A pure representation that is unconscious has some intentional content; perhaps (for the sake of argument) in cases of attentional blindness, subjects do have unconscious, though pure, representations. So there is something it is like to be a subject in that representational state: namely, being attentive to one thing rather than another. Now the question is whether the entailment holds in the other direction: wherever one finds this particular phenomenal property, will there also be the unconscious pure representational properties? There doesn’t seem to be a prima facie reason why not. If we grant that there are such things as phenomenal properties, there doesn’t seem to be a reason to dismiss a plurality of distinct ways to be a subject representing something unconsciously.

I don’t see why one would think there’s any presentation of the subject (at all) in the content of the representation. I see the furniture in the room; I don’t also see the “I” that is seeing all that furniture, nor is it indexically presented.
Weekly ‘Question(s) of Interest’ – 20 Feb 12

Here are my questions for this week:

First, I agree with Chalmers when he says on page 348 that “...the most plausible cases of phenomenally distinct visual experiences with the same representational content involve differences in attention.” I thought of one example that he did not discuss: talking on a cell phone while doing something else (like walking or driving). When I’m engrossed in a phone call, I still “see” what is in front of me, but there is a difference in how I see it. There isn’t necessarily a difference in representational content, instead it seems as if I’m seeing something differently. Perhaps another example is in cases of extreme exhaustion. The effect is similar to cell phone calls; I still see what is in front of me but I am not seeing it in the same way although the representational content seems to be the same.

Second, Chalmers speaks of a Fregean content of perceptual experience as content “...that is true if an object appropriately related to the perceiver has the property that normally causes the relevant sort of experience” (379). What is the nature of this causal relationship? (How does a visual stimuli cause the relevant sort of perceptual experience?) I don’t think Chalmers would be much bothered by this question though, and would simply say we don’t yet know. And can a causal claim be part of a phenomenal mode of presentation?

Lastly, I’m having a hard time understanding Chalmers’ notion of perfect color. He says that in Eden, subjects could have a sort of direct acquaintance with perfect colors (411). Perfect colors are (probably) not instantiated in our world, but are possible a priori (413). “And “it is most natural to conceive of perfect redness as a sort of simple, irreducible quality, one that might be instantiated on the surface of objects in some possible world...In particular, it is natural to hold that perfect colors are not reducible to physical properties” (415). I’m having trouble even conceiving what Chalmers is referring to here. What would it be like to directly experience a perfect color? How can we determine when we are in a world in which we directly experience perfect colors? When I conceive of redness, I conceive of red objects. Certainly some can be more red than others. But the best idealization for redness that I can accomplish is a sort of paradigmatic conception of red, like in the rainbow or from a laser pointer. I’m confused about the concept in general here.

We’ll talk more about direct acquaintance in week 7; it’s clearer to treat that as something distinct from the simplicity + intrinsic character (=perfection) of the color itself.
Week 6 Questions

Chalmers goes wrong right at the start of Chapter 11. He says, “Consciousness involves the instantiation of phenomenal properties.” and “For many purposes it does not make much of a difference whether one focuses on the phenomenal properties of subjects or of mental states (it is easy to translate between the two ways of talking), and in what follows I move back and forth between the two.”

But this latter claim is implausible. Subjects, qua subject, are objects. They are physical things that occupy space and interact with other physical things like tables, chairs, and trees. Mental states, qua mental state, are states. They are not (qua mental state) physical (even if it were to turn out that they are in some way ontologically dependent on the physical), nor do they interact with tables, chairs, and trees. Objects and states have very different kinds of properties.

Chalmers here seems to subscribe to what Rosenthal calls “the relocation story,” or the idea that because a mathematical account of physical objects seems to leave out the qualitative properties that commonsense wants to attribute to them, we need to relocate those qualitative properties to the sensory states which give rise to them. Dretske and Tye seem to be making the same mistake when they claim that phenomenal properties are identical to represented properties, like physical redness. Chalmers agrees with such accounts “as long as one holds that one is directly aware of the represented property rather than the representational property.”

This direct awareness is troubling. And that trouble seems to come from the way that Chalmers has framed the discussion in terms of phenomenal properties. This choice of starting point has stacked the deck in Chalmers’ favor, because phenomenal properties are those properties of mental states of which one is already conscious. Chalmers says that these properties “characterize aspects of what it’s like to be a subject... or be in a mental state.” This will become crucial in his discussion of identifying phenomenal properties with representational properties. He first dismisses the idea that phenomenal properties could be identical to pure representational properties. “If any given representational content can be represented unconsciously, then pure representational properties cannot be identical to phenomenal properties.” He then considers whether phenomenal properties could be identical with impure representational properties. These are properties “of representing a certain intentional content in a certain manner.”

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3 Chalmers, 342
4 Ibid, 343
5 Ibid, 341
6 Ibid, 346
7 Ibid, 342
Chalmers says, “If we stipulate the right manner of representation, the possibility of unconscious representation might be ruled out…” And his obvious suggestion is to require that those impure representational properties which represent the given intentional content as phenomenal.

Now we can see how the books have been cooked. Phenomenal properties, as Chalmers has defined them, are intrinsically conscious. This is what differentiates them from the more neutral qualitative properties, which can be conscious or non-conscious. In this discussion of impure representational properties, Chalmers is suggesting that we limit our concern to only those representational properties which are also intrinsically conscious. But appealing to such properties begs the question against theories of consciousness which hold consciousness to be a necessarily extrinsic property, like higher-order or global workspace theories.

Chalmers, of course, thinks that there are other reasons to be wary of these theories: the well-worn cases of zombies and the explanatory gap. But appeals to “it’s possible that it doesn’t work that way” and “we don’t intuitively understand why it would work that way” are not likely to be found particularly convincing by committed functionalists.

A better strategy is to divorce qualitative properties from consciousness. Experiments with metacontrast, for example, show that we can represent colors without being conscious of them. Doing so allows us to address two important but distinct questions: (1) What is the relationship between the physical properties of objects and the representational properties of mental states independently of questions of phenomenal properties? and (2) In virtue of what is a mental state conscious? Running these two questions together is going to severely limit the answers that we are able to arrive at, and this may in turn limit veridicality of those answers.

It is interesting to pursue the question you raised in class: whether or not it is legitimate to think a property of a mental state could characterize what it’s like to have that mental state (with all its properties). C does indeed treat the two as interchangeable.

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8 Ibid, 346.
9 One answer which avoids the relocation story is that the families of physical properties are homomorphic to the families of sensory properties. Cf. Sellars 1963, Clark 1993, and Rosenthal 2005.
Benjamin Nelson
Question of Interest #4

There’s a chance (and I think a good chance) I’m just confused about Chalmers’ discussion of veridical color experiences, but what he says to reject primitivism in “Back to Primitivism” (397) seems too quick. Chalmers has us consider two communities who, when presented with an apple, have differing color experiences, viz., community R experiences the apple as red and community G experiences the apple as green. The question is which, if either, community has a veridical experience? The problem for the primitivist is supposed to be the attribution of “perfect” color properties such as “perfect redness” or “perfect greenness” (400). So if we say both experiences are veridical it looks like any object instantiates every perfect color property, while if we say that only one community has a veridical experience this seems to be arbitrary and raises the worry that we might be members of a non-veridical community (401). This seems to force us into saying that neither experience is veridical such that color experiences are all illusory. But Chalmers claims that, “This is a counterintuitive conclusion and runs counter to our usual judgments about veridicality of experience” (401).

I’m wondering if reframing the primitive property would offer an additional way to cope with this seeming problem. It seems like we should say that color experiences are illusory in the sense that there is no experience that some color property ought to give rise to. That is, we should be able to say that for some community, property C normally gives rise to red experiences, while for some other community C gives rise to green experiences, but that there is no fact of the matter about which experience C should give rise to.

Before we meet the G community it is natural to think that what accounts for our red experiences is just some primitive property R. But once we meet the G community, who similarly suppose that some primitive property G accounts for their green experiences, it looks
like the most reasonable way to respond is to suppose that there is some property C that accounts for both communities’ color experiences and that both communities have veridical experiences in virtue of C. That is, if “veridical” experience is treated relatively, viz., experiences are veridical if they conform to the experiences of one’s community, then we can say that relative to their communities both R and G have veridical experiences. Then we could say that color experiences are illusory in an absolutist sense, since there is no necessary connection between a given color property C and the experience C ought to give rise to. In this way, there is still some primitive property C that gives rise to color experiences, but these color experiences are veridical or non-veridical only relative to a community of perceivers. If we treat veridicality relatively, then we can avoid the complications and complexities Chalmers’ two-stage approach requires.

* This view is called “relationalism” about color, defended by Jonathan Cohen in his book *The Red and the Real*. Depending on how fine-grained the relations are, it can become difficult to hold that there are any illusory color appearances.
Kathy Fazekas | Question(s) of Interest #4

This week's response is going to be less formal than usual because I found it very difficult to follow Chalmers' arguments in the last half of chapter 11. Basically, as soon as he started talking about Fregean content and Fregean Representationalism, I got lost, and remained lost whenever he discussed these. After much rereading, I think I grasp the meaning of Fregean content, but I still don't understand Fregean Representationalism.

At one point he says: “Fregean content involves a mode of presentation such as the property that normally causes experiences of phenomenal redness. On this view, the relevant representational content does not directly involve the property attributed by the experience.” So, Fregean content is a sense or a mode of presentation. More specifically, Fregean content is a condition that picks out an extension. He also says that “Fregean content of a concept is a mapping from scenarios to extensions and that the Fregean content of a thought is a mapping from scenarios to truth values, where scenarios are maximal epistemic possibilities, or centered possible worlds.” If I am interpreting Chalmers correctly, ‘Hesperus’, ‘Phosphorus’, ‘Venus’, ‘the object usually visible at a certain point in the evening sky’, and ‘the object usually visible at a certain point in the morning sky’ all have different Fregean content even though they have the same extension (because a priori each of these concepts could have a different extension). Fregean content is therefore analogous to primary intensions (whereas Russellian content is analogous to extensions). Although, he says in the afterword that “the Fregean content of an experience determines a primary intension rather than that it is a primary intension.”

I'm still not entirely clear on what a mode of presentation is. If “the relevant representational content does not directly involve the property attributed by the experience,” for example, red or green, then in virtue of what would the mode of presentation of red be different from the mode of presentation of green? Here, perhaps Chalmers is assuming that red and green are primitive phenomenal experiences—

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1 Page 364.
2 Page 362.
3 Page 374.
4 Page 364.
they are the ‘what it is like’ that is attached to the mode of presentation and they are not reducible to a physical causal process in the brain. Because Chalmers believes that inversion is possible when two subjects are physical duplicates having physically identical experiences, I suspect he thinks that ‘the property attributed by the experience’—red, for example—is something non-physical and non-reducible.

My difficulty following Chalmers’ arguments later in chapter 11 most likely stems in part from my disagreement with some of the assumptions he makes early in the chapter. For example, he claims “there is often something it is like to represent the external world...It is natural to think that a satisfactory account of consciousness must respect its intentional structure and a satisfactory account of intentionality must respect its phenomenological character.” It seems as though he is saying that the ‘what it’s like’ of experience is directed at the representing of intentional/representational content. This just seems completely counterintuitive. To me it seems as though the ‘what it’s like’ of experience is directed at the intentional/representational content. And the representing of the intentional/representational content is not a conscious or a phenomenal process. We are conscious of intentional and representational content (such as the brightness of the sun); our consciousness is of the intentional content that is represented. But we’re not conscious of the representing process itself. In contrast, he seems to be saying that the representing process itself has phenomenal content. If he makes an argument for this claim, it escaped me. He says on page 368 that we can become introspectively aware of modes of presentation. This does not seem intuitive to me, and, unless I’m missing something, he doesn’t provide argumentative support for this claim. He says that these modes/Fregean concepts may be nonconceptual contents. He may be onto something with this, but he doesn’t really attempt to elaborate on it. And, based on the small amount he does say about this, I’m not convinced that we can become introspectively aware of something that is nonconceptual. (Let me clarify that I do think it is possible that we can become introspectively aware of something that is nonconceptual. For example, I’ve sometimes become introspectively aware of emotions for which the English language seems to lack linguistic terms/concepts. However, I think Chalmers should defend his claim and not just ‘leave it hanging’, especially when it seems a non-trivial point.)

5 Page 340.
Furthermore, if Fregean concepts/modes of presentation are nonconceptual, then how can we put them in scenarios/centered worlds? Don’t we need to have a concept or linguistic term for something if we are to investigate its primary intension?

Additionally, there are two things Chalmers says on page 365 that I find very perplexing. One: “it seems plausible that any mental state that visually phenomenally attributes a property under this mode of presentation will itself be phenomenally red.” It sounds as if he is saying that the mental state itself is red. But it seems incorrect, unconventional or simply a category mistake to ascribe a color to a mental state, given that mental states are not themselves colored. Mental states represent parts/portions of visual experience as having colors (whether one is awake and perceiving the external world, awake and imagining visual things, or asleep and having dreams)... but that is different from saying the mental state is colored. Two: “it seems plausible that phenomenal redness is equivalent to the representational property of perceptually phenomenally representing the relevant Fregean content.” I am having trouble separating “the representational property of perceptually phenomenally representing”(1) from Fregean content(2). Based on how he defines Fregean content, it seems like 1 and 2 are the same thing. Either way, I find this sentence impenetrable.

Speaking of impenetrability—‘narrow representationalism’ seems almost like an oxymoron. Narrow content of mental states is one thing, but narrow representational content just doesn’t make sense. I thought the whole idea of mental representation (the existence of which I took to be disputed, but Chalmers just assumes it) was that mental states represent stuff from the external world. If there isn’t some non-mental property, object, or relation being represented as content in a mental state) then how can we even talk about representation in mental states?

I have plenty of questions from chapter 12 as well, but this is already way too long (sorry!).
In Chapter 12, Chalmers considers what the phenomenal content of an experience could be. If phenomenal content is Russellian content, phenomenal content is composed of objects and properties. For instance, Russellian phenomenal content of a color experience attributes a color property. Chalmers says that the color properties attributed could be physicalist, dispositionalist, projectivist, or primitivist, and each of these views has problems (p. 388). Chalmers summarizes the problems with a Russellian view with a four-premise argument. The conclusion, “There is no property that is attributed by all possibly phenomenally red experiences” (p. 389), is supposed to show that the Russellian view of phenomenal content is problematic. I do not think that premise 4 of Chalmers’ argument is true, and without premise 4, the conclusion does not follow.

“4. For any veridical phenomenally red experience of an ordinary object, it is possible that there is a falsidical phenomenally red experience of an object with the same nonrelational properties as the original object.” (p. 388-389)

In support of premise 4, Chalmers appeals to the possibility of a community of spectrum inverters. If a normal community and a community of inverters both perceive the same apple, the normal community sees the apple as red and the invert community sees the apple as green. Chalmers argues that one is a veridical phenomenally red experience of the apple and the other is a falsidical phenomenally red experience of the apple. However, I do not see how the community of inverters is having a phenomenally red experience of the apple. It seems, rather, that the inverters are having phenomenally green experiences. (These phenomenally green experiences may be veridical or falsidical, but that is beside the point.) If this is true, then the community of inverters is not having a “falsidical phenomenally red experience” of the apple as Chalmers suggests. This then leaves open the question of whether it is actually possible that for any veridical phenomenally red experience of an ordinary object, there is a falsidical phenomenally red experience of that object.

The idea has to be that “veridicality” is a relational affair, depending on correlations between signs and signified. So in the invert community, G experiences reliably signal ripe delicious apples; R signals something. If for some stray reason an apple causes an R experience, in that community it would be nonveridical.