



Comments on Ismael's "Doublemindedness: A model for a dual content cognitive architecture"

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Abstract: Two general worries are raised for the dual content approach to consciousness as presented by Ismael in "Doublemindedness". First, it is argued that something much like Ismael's proposed explanations of subjectivity and the explanatory gap can be given in terms of phenomenal concepts rather than in terms of dual content. Furthermore, self-representation alone does not explain the "determinacy" and substantiveness of phenomenal concepts (or presentational content). The notion of "presentational content" and its use in explaining the subjectivity of experience seems at least as mysterious as subjectivity itself, and may in fact presuppose it.

1. Introduction

In her "Doublemindedness", Ismael sketches an approach to consciousness that promises to resolve or explain away two vexing problems for physicalism. One is the apparent epistemic gap between the physical and the phenomenal. The second is the subjectivity of conscious experiences. Ismael proposes that conscious states are states that have dual content. In addition to their ordinary first-order representational contents, conscious states are "self-representational". Features of this self-representational content give rise both to epistemic gaps and to subjectivity, but in ways that are compatible (it is suggested) with a thoroughgoing physicalism about consciousness.

In my comments, I will focus on two questions for Ismael's dual content approach to consciousness. In Section 2, I compare Ismael's self-representational approach to similar views concerning phenomenal concepts. Much of what Ismael says about self-representational content can be preserved as a theory of phenomenal concepts, without adopting her dual content model. Why then should we adopt a dual content view? In Section 3, I raise concerns about whether or not Ismael's proposed explanation of the subjectivity of conscious states is any less mysterious or troublesome for physicalism than subjectivity itself.

2. Self-representational Content or Phenomenal Concepts?

It is uncontroversial that we can self-represent. I can introspect, for instance, and form a thought about my present visual experience. The concepts employed in such introspective thoughts about conscious experiences are often called "phenomenal concepts", and these concepts have seemed to many to have important features that distinguish them from physical or functional concepts. Physical concepts are said to be relational, or causal, or descriptive, whereas phenomenal concepts are demonstrative (Papineau 1993, Perry 2001), or recognitional (Loar 1990), and refer directly to phenomenal properties. Many physicalists have adopted what Stoljar (2005) calls the "phenomenal concept strategy" (Loar 1990, Lycan 1996, Papineau 1993, Sturgeon 1994, Tye 1995). On this view, physical and phenomenal concepts both refer to the very same (physical) properties. The problem of an explanatory gap between the physical and the phenomenal is not due to an ontological gap, but instead to the "conceptual independence" of phenomenal and physical concepts.

This distinction between phenomenal and physical concepts also makes possible a type of explanation for the subjectivity of conscious states. Others may be able to refer to a feature of my conscious experience (in terms of, for example, its causal relations). But because of the indexical (Lycan 1996) or perspectival (Loar 1990, Tye 1999) nature of phenomenal concepts, only I can form phenomenal concepts of my own experiences.

These two (brief) physicalist explanations of subjectivity and the epistemic gap are couched entirely at the level of phenomenal concepts—our concepts *about* conscious experiences. They do not require any view about the content of the experiences themselves, and in particular, they do not require any notion of dual content or self-representational content for those experiences. But they are otherwise quite similar to Ismael's proposed solution to those two problems. So what benefit is there for the dual content model?

This is an important question, I think, because Ismael herself at times switches into discussion of phenomenal concepts rather than presentational content. In explaining the presence of cognitive gaps, she says that "physical and phenomenal concepts are concepts drawn from separate media and only metalinguistic knowledge will remove them." And at one point she mentions the "subjectivity of phenomenal concepts". It may be that she has a view about the relationship between presentational content and phenomenal concepts, but she does not offer one here. Perhaps phenomenal concepts, on her view, just are phenomenal states for which their presentational contents (and not their first-order intentional contents) are made salient.

But even though the notion of presentational content might give rise to a view about phenomenal concepts, it seems that one can have a similar view about phenomenal concepts *without* adopting Ismael's theory of presentational content. The crucial difference, even in comparison to theories of phenomenal concepts on which the phenomenal property is a constituent of the phenomenal concept (Papineau 2002, Block forthcoming), is that presumably on a dual content model a phenomenal state always has its self-representational content, even when a subject is not employing a phenomenal concept. And it is in these cases that there is no clear motivation for the view that phenomenal states represent themselves, in addition to having their ordinary first-order intentional contents.

3. Subjectivity and Presentational Content

One of the mysteries of consciousness is that our own conscious states are available to us for representation in a way that seems different in kind from the availability of external objects and properties. Arguably this is at the root of the idea of the subjectivity of consciousness. But I want to suggest that this is not explained by Ismael's notion of presentational content; it is presupposed.

Ismael cites approvingly Levine's (2001) notions of "substantiveness" and "determinacy", applying it to presentational content (rather than to phenomenal concepts, as Levine does). And she writes of "properties exemplified inside presentational domains", which serve as "points of reference" for us in understanding the descriptive vocabulary of public language. All of this suggests that presentational content is no ordinary representational content. This seems to be a kind of content for which there is a greater sort of immediacy between the representing and the represented.

What explains these features of presentational content? It might be thought that the immediacy of presentational content falls out simply from the fact that the experience represents itself. This is precisely why there is no gap between the representing and the represented—the representation is representing itself. But this is not enough to account for subjectivity, or the substantiveness and determinacy of phenomenal concepts (or presentational content). As Searle has argued, any time you have a representation, you have something that he calls "aspectual shape" (1995). A representation represents something in some respect or other. We cannot assume that if an experience represents itself, it will represent every aspect of itself. If this were so, then this would explain the substantiveness and determinacy of presentational content. But why would self-representation entail this?

Besides, this would surely be too strong. If physicalism is true, then a conscious state is identical to some physical state. That physical state will have any number of features, both intrinsic and relational, that are not present to the mind or aspects of presentational content. Consider a C-fiber firing of mine after stubbing my toe. This event or state is spatially located in my brain. But this aspect of the pain experience is presumably not part of the presentational content of the experience. I assume that the same is true for many of its intrinsic physical properties. To use Ismael's terminology, many properties are "exemplified" by the conscious state, but not "exemplified in the presentational domain". But if presentational content only involves self-representation under some aspects and not others, what are these aspects and why?

One is tempted to answer by saying that the features of a state that enter into the presentational content are those features that are conscious or phenomenal. But of course this would eliminate the possibility of explaining consciousness or phenomenality in terms of self-representation.

Ismael also remarks that “there is nothing inherently mysterious about dual content.” The lack of mystery is illustrated by considering other cases of “dual content”, such as the coded messages in a letter written in English and a graph that both represents the stock market and the silhouette of the Tucson mountains. But it is worth noting that these are all cases of what Searle and others sometimes call “derived” intentional content. Their having the intentional content that they have depends on our interpreting them as having that content. The same is true of course for Ismael’s primary example of a filing cabinet. And thus it is no surprise that, in these examples, there can be multiple interpretations and thus dual (or more) content. Ismael does not propose to give a psychosemantics for her dual content, nor would it be fair to demand that she does so in a short piece. But it seems to me that there *is* something mysterious, at least initially, about the idea that a state could have the dual content structure that Ismael describes in a way that does not depend on interpretation in the manner of graphs or letters on paper.

As Ismael’s own illustrative examples show, the having of dual content architecture is neither sufficient for subjectivity nor particularly illuminating. The files of a filing cabinet can be given an interpretation under which they represent themselves, in addition to the usual interpretation of them as representing their contents. But there is no subjectivity associated with the filing cabinet. Ismael suggests that the mind “employs the same trick” for self-representation as does the hypothetical filing cabinet. But how is this supposed to actually work? There must be something importantly different between the way that a filing cabinet self-represents and the way in which we self-represent, if self-representation is supposed to explain the subjectivity of the mental.

One might reply that all we need to add is that mental representations have intrinsic or original intentionality, whereas the filing cabinet’s representational content is merely derived. The filing cabinet has content for us. None of the files have content for the filing cabinet—including the reflexive contents. By contrast, our representational states, including self-representational states, have intentional content for us. The problem is that this response is of no use to someone who wants to use the notion of dual content architecture in order to explain subjectivity. For it amounts to simply saying that mental content has subjectivity whereas filing cabinet content does not. That is, it appeals to subjectivity in its explanation of subjectivity.

This criticism may seem unfair. It may be argued that the problem of intentionality is a separate problem from that of explaining the subjectivity of conscious states. And though we have not reached a consensus view about how to naturalize intentionality, it seems to be a more tractable problem than that of subjectivity, and so it is promising to appeal to the former in order to explain the latter.

Such an attitude regarding intentionality is common in the philosophy of mind, although it has been called into question.¹ But even if the problem of intentionality in general is more tractable than that of explaining subjectivity, there are special worries for the notion of self-representation that Ismael invokes. How do phenomenal states self-

represent? It is not clear how any current naturalistic theory of intentional content can be appropriately applied to self-representation.² It is apparent that a causal covariation theory will not work. And every state carries perfect information about itself, but we do not want to say in general that everything represents itself.

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, Ismael's notion of dual content cognitive architecture may help illuminate the nature of subjectivity, but it does not explain how subjectivity is possible or reduce any mysteries. Yes, subjective states seem to be presentational. There is no appearance-reality gap, and this may indeed be because they have reflexive representational content in the manner that Ismael describes. But having dual content architecture in the minimal sense that Ismael describes does not reductively explain subjectivity, and the idea that conscious states have presentational contents is perhaps as mysterious as some of the other mysteries that presentational content is meant to explain.

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Notes

1. For example, see Horgan and Tienson (2002), although they are concerned with the relationship between intentionality and phenomenal character (and not explicitly with subjectivity).
2. Kriegel (2005) grapples with this problem at the end of his paper. But his solution seems to be to abandon self-representation in the strict sense.