

# Fodor's Representationalism

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**Conference in Honor of  
Jerry Fodor**



- The representationalism of my title is a view about consciousness. That will surprise some; Fodor was known to be impatient with the topic of consciousness.
- But in his last 6-8 years he developed the outline of an account of consciousness, inspired in part by that very impatience with most standard views.
- Fodor did not to my knowledge write this up in any way he was pleased with. So I'll rely here on my recollection of a fair number of conversations, some reasonably detailed.  
My goal will be to do justice to the thoughts he pressed, and also to objections I raised and his replies.

# I. Fodor's View

- Fodor's main motive in developing a view about consciousness was to have a theoretical treatment of conscious perception that avoids the quandaries that seem to arise in connection with qualia.
- His main concern with the standard literature stemmed from claims about an explanatory gap, a hard problem, and related challenges to any satisfactory theoretical treatment.

His goal was an approach to consciousness that avoids those apparent difficulties.

- Perceptual consciousness occurs when we consciously perceive things. So Fodor's first—and main—move was to treat such consciousness as just a matter of one's being conscious of the things we perceive.
- And that suggests a way to deal with the qualitative aspect of conscious perception. There just are no qualities except for the properties of things we perceive. There is no qualitative character of the perceptual states themselves.
- This sidesteps any explanatory gap or hard problem:  
There is no special difficulty in explaining the perceptible properties of the things we perceive, such as color and the like.

- When one sees a red tomato, the redness that figures in one's experience is not a mental quality; it is just the color of the tomato itself. And physics provides us with an account of that physical property—roughly in terms of surface reflectances.
- The perception's being conscious, then, is simply one's being conscious of the tomato and of its perceptible physical properties.
- Perceiving can also occur without being conscious, as in various subliminal cases. And subliminal perceiving fits comfortably with this account. In subliminally seeing a tomato, one sees it, just not consciously. So then one isn't conscious of the tomato—or of its color or any other properties.

- It's easy to tell if a case is subliminal. We ask, "Did you see a tomato?" If the subject says no but we find priming or above-chance forced-choice guessing, then visual information got in psychologically, and that's unconscious perceiving.
- Subjects' reports show whether they are conscious of what they perceive. And those reports also, by wide consensus, show whether subjects' perceptual states are conscious. If somebody does perceive something but reports not doing so, the perceiving is not conscious.
- It's natural to conclude that consciousness consists simply in being conscious of what one perceives.

- This view so far looks like a version of representationalism, on which the only way anything qualitative figures in conscious perceiving is that the perceptual states represent qualities of perceived objects.
- But things are a bit more complicated. Fodor also holds that representation occurs without being conceptualized. And those preconceptual contents are often iconic.
- Iconic representations have no canonical decomposition; so any part of an iconic representation is an iconic representation. Iconic representations are in that way semantically and syntactically homogeneous and so cannot individuate—i.e., divide their reference (LOT 2, ch. 6; “Revenge,” 2007a).

- Are such iconic representations qualitative? And if so, why aren't perceptual states qualitative—so that Fodor's view would not be representationalist after all?
  - Fodor's iconic representations are never, however, conscious. They are not only prior to conceptualization but also prior to consciousness. And qualitative states give rise to the quandaries representationalism seeks to avoid only if they're conscious.
  - Since the view denies that there are any mental qualities as those are typically construed, it can reasonably count as a version of representationalism.
- And the overall view is representationalist in another way I'll mention shortly.

- But isn't there something it's like to see a red tomato? And isn't what it's like what leads to the quandaries? Doesn't what it's like imply that the seeing itself—the perceptual state—has a qualitative aspect?
- No. There being something it's like to see a red tomato is just one's consciously seeing it. It is being conscious of the tomato and its redness—conscious of it by seeing it. Similarly with the conscious redness that figures in such a perception. That consists simply in one's being conscious of physical redness—again, by seeing it.
- But isn't there phenomenal consciousness when one consciously sees a red tomato? And won't that give rise to the quandaries?

- Phenomenal consciousness is a theoretical construct that posits mental qualitative character as having consciousness built in.
- And it is far from clear that common sense characterizes qualitative character that way—as welded to consciousness, so that the two cannot occur independently or be given distinct theoretical accounts.

On our commonsense view, we readily distinguish consciousness from qualitative character, as distinct mental properties.

- Construing qualities and consciousness as welded together also impedes any informative account of the nature of either. Indeed, proponents of the phenomenal-consciousness picture say as much.

- Thus Block, who holds that view, suggests we can say nothing about what qualitative character is other than Louis Armstrong's quip about jazz: "If you gotta ask, you ain't never gonna get to know" (1978, p. 281). And proponents of Jackson's Mary (1986) are equally elusive about what Mary learns on first consciously seeing something red.
- If we can give no informative account of qualitative consciousness, a hard problem and explanatory gap are unavoidable. We can't expect to explain what we can't informatively describe.
- But if qualities are just perceived properties and consciousness is being conscious of them, an informative account is possible.

- Still, there are issues. What it's like to see a red tomato is being conscious of the red tomato—conscious of it by seeing it.
- But one can also see a tomato subliminally, without being thus conscious of it. So we need to explain how the two cases differ. What exactly is it that's added when one is conscious of the tomato?

We ask, "Did you see a tomato?" If yes, the seeing is conscious; otherwise not. But just what are we testing for with that?

- Perceptual information—color, shape, type of object—gets in when one subliminally sees something and it affects psychological processing. What more is there to one's also being conscious of those properties?

- One might seek to answer by appeal to how far the processing stream goes. It starts with transducers and eventually goes onto demonstrative reference, conceptualization, and so forth.
  - Might consciousness kick in just in case the processing gets far enough? Far enough to reach consciousness?
  - That's trivially so, but by itself not helpful. No stage all the way to conceptualization must occur consciously. So no stage that far along can explain why things become conscious at that point.
- We need a way to fix the stage at which things become conscious other than simply saying it's where things become conscious.

- Some theories of consciousness consider only conscious cases, tacitly denying that unconscious cases occur.

So the conscious states will just be those that exhibit some other mental property—as on the phenomenal-consciousness picture, on which being qualitative suffices for being conscious.

- But if states that occur consciously can also occur without being conscious, as perceptual states plainly can, we don't fully understand what the conscious cases are unless we explain how they differ from the unconscious cases.
- I'll return to this issue at the end—but first, how might we address that difference?

## II. An Alternative

- The two main types of theory that address the contrast between conscious and not are Global-workspace (GW) theories and higher-order (HO) theories.
- On GW theories, a content is conscious if it's globally available for processing. But it isn't clear why global availability should matter. And there are counterexamples: peripheral perceptual states that are conscious but not globally available, and widely available beliefs and desires that aren't conscious. So let's set GW theories aside.

- On HO theories a state is conscious if one is aware of being in that state—aware in a way that is subjectively unmediated. I've argued elsewhere that this awareness is due to one's having a HO thought that one is in the state, but that won't matter here. Any HO awareness (HOA) will do.
- This gives a nice answer to the difference between conscious and unconscious: A state is conscious if there is a HOA, and otherwise not. And it fits with the tradition, which spoke not of states' being conscious, but only of our being conscious of states.
- This differs from representationalism, on which a perception is conscious if one is conscious of the perceived object.

- On HO theories, one is conscious or not of perceptions; on representationalism one is conscious or not of perceived objects.
- On a representationalist theory the only qualitative aspects are properties of perceived objects.

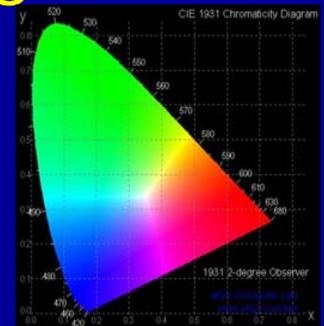
But what about qualitative character on a HO theory, on which a perception is conscious if one is aware of the perceptual state itself? Is qualitative character then a property of the perceptual state—a mental property that a HOA makes one aware of?

- And if it is, are those properties mental qualities—like phenomenal consciousness—which then give rise to a hard problem and an explanatory gap?

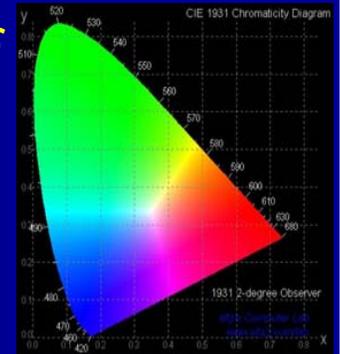
- Mental qualities are problematic if, but only if, they are intrinsically conscious, as on the phenomenal-consciousness picture. One might think there's no way around that: If mental qualities are fixed by consciousness, they aren't anything if they aren't intrinsically conscious.
- But fixing mental qualities by consciousness is wholly optional. It is not a given, and not even a matter of common sense.
- Indeed, common sense points toward an alternative—somewhat in the spirit of representationalism itself. We can instead fix mental qualities by their role in perceiving—in particular, by appeal to perceptual discriminative ability.

- Mental qualitative character has a strong tie to discriminative ability. One can consciously discriminate stimuli of two shades of red, e.g., only by being in conscious qualitative states that reflect the difference in the stimuli.
- Stimuli are just noticeably different (JND) if they would be indistinguishable (on most trials) were they physically any closer.
- So we can use JNDs for a range of stimuli to construct a quality space (QS) that captures all the stimuli in that range that an individual can discriminate.

For color stimuli, the QS might be like this (for just hue and saturation):  
(CIE—Commission Internationale d'Éclairage, 1931).



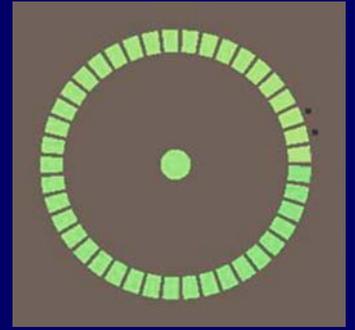
- Conscious perceptual discrimination plainly rests on differences in conscious qualities. We consciously distinguish stimuli by being in conscious qualitative states that differ in ways that reflect perceptible differences among stimulus properties.
- So in the conscious case the QS of discriminable stimuli will also map the conscious qualities that enable one to discriminate those stimuli:
- What, then, about the subliminal cases? Unconscious discrimination can be at least as fine-grained as conscious (Scott et al 2010). So the QS for consciously discriminated stimuli can also fix the properties that enable unconscious discrimination.



- Because the discriminating is unconscious, those properties won't be conscious. Are they mental properties at all? And if so, are they qualitative?
- There is compelling reason to think so. The only mental properties unconscious discrimination might rely on are mental qualities. So if not unconscious qualities, it relies on nonmental, neural properties. But then conscious discrimination could also rely on those nonmental properties, making conscious qualities causally idle—a high price to avoid unconscious qualities!
- And since mental qualities can be fixed by their discriminative role, there's no problem about their occurring nonconsciously.

- Also, consciously discriminable stimuli can be degraded to remain consciously detectable but not consciously discriminable—and forced-choice guessing still discriminates well above chance (Mealor et al 2012).
- This continuity between conscious and nonconscious cases again points to the same mental properties for discriminating in both. It's mental qualities in conscious cases; so also in the nonconscious cases.
- Indeed, in the degraded cases, the mental qualities are conscious—just not conscious in respect of discriminable differences.  
So there must be a nonconscious aspect to the conscious qualities that enables discrimination by forced-choice guessing.

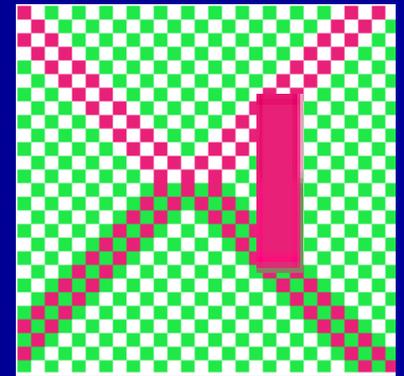
- Thus, in Raffman (2011) adjacent patches alternated different and same, but when different by less than conscious JNDs. Also, when different, wavelengths always increased.
- When subjects judged adjacent patches the same, a disk appeared with a hue randomly matching one of the patches, which subjects adjusted to match the two judged identical.
- Result: “[S]ubjects’ settings of the [central] disk progressed more or less systematically with the wavelengths of the patches, even though the members of the pairs in question had been judged ‘same’ ” (118).  
Matching was unconsciously more fine-grained than in conscious perceiving.



- Subjects consciously judge mental qualities for distinct adjacent patches to be the same, though a matching task reveals that they register perceptually as different.
- So there's a dissociation between how the relevant mental properties operate in visual discrimination and how they are for consciousness—their “mental appearance.” Qualitative states have a nonconscious aspect that figures in perceiving, but is not revealed by what it's like.
- So the property of being conscious cannot be built in. Mental qualities occur without being conscious. They are fixed by relative location in a QS, as the properties that enable discrimination, conscious or not.

- Fixing mental qualities by discriminative role may seem unintuitive if one construes mental qualities in terms of what it's like. Aren't conscious qualities fixed one by one, independently of all the others?
- No. Conscious perceptual discrimination is a relational matter—distinguishing each perceptible property from others. And since conscious discrimination relies on conscious mental qualities, they too must be fixed comparatively.
- Close stimuli presented simultaneously are far easier to discriminate than if presented in succession. Fine-grained discrimination is facilitated by comparisons:

- Since the mental qualities there presumably track the stimuli, that effect is due to the way we're aware of those mental qualities.
- But mental qualities operate comparatively even apart from how we're aware of them. Simultaneous-contrast is an early visual effect, occurring prior to subjective awareness: So the comparative effects there are independent of subjectivity.



And as Fodor notes, perceptual constancies, which are also comparative, occur prior to subjective awareness (LOT 2, p. 192).

- Mental qualities are fixed by relative location in a QS—so we're also aware of them in respect of that relative location.

- Can HOAs explain why there is something it's like to be in a conscious qualitative state—why the state is “lighted up”?
- There's something it's like—and the quality is “lighted up”—when, but only when, one sees or hears or otherwise perceives something consciously. That's what it is for there to be something it's like.
- On a HO theory, consciously perceiving consists in one's being aware of perceiving something—in its seeming subjectively to one that one is perceiving that thing.  
And we can explain that as one's being in a qualitative state and one's being aware of oneself as being in that state. That is all there is to a quality's being “lighted up.”

- Some urge that the explanatory gap or hard problem shows that what it's like is more than just perceiving consciously.
- But the explanatory gap and hard problem both rest on a wholly optional picture of qualitative character—that we can grasp its nature only by consciousness. And perceptual role offers an alternative way to fix and understand the nature of qualitative character.
- So a proponent of those quandaries must show either that the tie with perceptual role does not work or that the quandaries arise even with that tie in place. Neither strategy is promising—and this challenge is indeed typically just ignored.

- The HOA-QS theory partly agrees with representationalism: Both hold that there being something it's like consists in one's consciously perceiving something.
- Representationalism holds that one is aware of no qualities except perceived stimulus properties. We wouldn't describe stimulus properties as "lighted up"—but on representationalism we don't describe anything that way.
- Still, the mental qualities of QS theory need not be conscious—indeed they are in themselves not conscious. So the two theories share the advantage of avoiding quandaries associated with intrinsically conscious mental qualities.

# III. Assessing the Views

- Fodor's view and QS theory both appeal to perceptual role to explain the qualitative aspect of perceiving—but they construe that qualitative aspect very differently.

On Fodor's representationalism, it consists in properties that objects are perceived to have; QS theory posits mental qualities that needn't be conscious.

- But since neither appeals to mental qualities that must be conscious, both avoid the quandaries about consciousness, such as a hard problem or explanatory gap.

- Fodor appeals to iconic representations, which cannot occur consciously but seem much like qualitative properties.  
And the mental qualities of QS theory are not in themselves conscious; their occurring consciously is due to accompanying HOAs.
- Is the difference, then, just verbal? The mental qualities Fodor's representationalism denies are intrinsically conscious, and QS theory posits no such mental qualities.
- Also, the mental qualities of QS theory explain our discriminative abilities, as Fodor's iconic representations presumably also do—  
and in both cases without the relevant properties' being in themselves conscious.

- And both agree on the general line that consciousness is a matter of perceiving consciously—and that there's nothing more to there being something it's like for one.
- But there is then the apparent divergence. Perceiving consciously on Fodor's view is being conscious of what one perceives, whereas on the combined HO-QS theory it's being conscious of the relevant qualitative states.
- So the HO-QS theory accommodates mental qualities' occurring consciously—just not intrinsically so. By contrast, the iconic representations Fodor posits are not the sorts of things that can occur consciously.

- Part of Fodor's motivation for insisting that iconic representations can't be conscious is his rejection of the epistemological given. An epistemological given, he urges, has to be conscious in order to play a role in justification, and must be independent of inference to be foundational. And iconic representations can't be conscious if they are independent of inference (LOT 2, p. 192).
- But the mental qualities of HO-QS theory don't change when they become conscious. Their being conscious is extrinsic to the qualitative properties themselves.
- So it's still not obvious that the two views differ even here in a way that's substantive, rather than verbal.

- QS theory posits mental qualities based on discriminative ability, and that's not why Fodor posits iconic representations. But the very same posited properties may result from different reasons for positing.
- So Fodor had little to object to in QS theory. Indeed, his main complaint about the combined HO-QS theory was not about the QS part. It was instead the standard representationalist objection to any type of HO theory (cf. Harman 1990; Dretske 1993).
- Are we, he challenged, ever actually aware of our perceptual states?

Isn't it rather that we're aware only of the objects we perceive and their perceptible properties?

- But there is reason to hold that we are sometimes aware of our perceptual states.
- When we consciously perceive, we are aware of our perceiving; we are aware, e.g., that we see or hear something. When we consciously perceive, we can report that we perceive, which we could do only if we were aware of the perceiving. Indeed, that's how conscious perception differs from subliminal perception—in which we aren't at all aware of our perceptual states, and so cannot report them.
- It will help here to distinguish being aware of something from being consciously aware of it. This distinction fits comfortably with common sense, even for those new to it.

- Indeed, the distinction figures regularly in the popular press and other nonacademic writing. And it's needed if we want to distinguish subliminal from conscious perceiving in any informative way.
- Input from subliminally perceived stimuli affect psychological processing; so we must be aware in some way of the stimuli. It's just that we're just not consciously aware of them.  
By contrast, when perceiving is conscious, we're not just aware of what we perceive; we then are also consciously aware of it.
- But it's crucial to distinguish awareness of what we perceive from awareness of our perceptual states.

- In subliminal perception, we're not aware of our perceptual states, but are aware of what we perceive, though not consciously aware. In conscious perception, we are consciously aware of what we perceive—and also aware of our perceptual states.
- But we are rarely consciously aware of our perceptual states even when the perceiving is conscious.  
We're consciously aware of our perceptual state only when we introspect—when we deliberately attend to those states.
- The distinction between being aware from being consciously aware underwrites any informative account of the difference between perceiving consciously or not.

- So the advantage the QS-HO theory has over any version of representationalism, Fodor's included, is in giving an informative explanation of how the conscious and nonconscious cases differ—an explanation in terms of HOAs.
- It's the appeal to HOAs, themselves rarely conscious, that lets us draw the crucial distinction between being aware of perceptual states and being consciously aware of them—and that lets us distinguish conscious from subliminal perceiving.
- If we focus only on the conscious cases, we miss what consciousness adds. And a satisfactory theory of consciousness must address and explain that.

- One could avoid addressing that by just denying that the unconscious cases are really perceptual at all—or even mental.
- That's highly implausible—and not Fodor's view. He described unconscious perceptual processing as subpersonal—meaning just that it's unconscious. And he held that it is genuinely perceptual (e.g., LOT 2, pp. 191-193).
- Still, he remained unimpressed by a need to explain the difference between conscious and nonconscious cases—and equivalently by the distinction between awareness and conscious awareness.  
Why, then, did he reject the need to explain that difference—and reject distinguishing awareness from conscious awareness?

- Conscious and subliminal cases differ, he thought, simply because in conscious perceiving one is aware of what one perceives, but not in subliminal perceiving.
- And he in effect took that awareness to be primitive. And since that awareness is what makes perceptions conscious, awareness and conscious awareness are the same. So there's no need—and no possibility—of further explanation. There is just nothing more to say.
- Perhaps there's nothing more for common sense to say. But even if so, that's hardly the end. We can explore theoretical considerations that may explain what it is to perceive something consciously.

➤ An abrupt halt to explanation is not unique to Fodor. Advocates of a hard problem see stark explanatory limits due to intrinsically conscious qualities.

Fodor avoids that result by rejecting such qualities.

But like many representationalists, he takes our awareness of the things we consciously perceive to resist informative explanation.

➤ So both approaches take something very close to the phenomenon of consciousness as not susceptible to explanation.

➤ Before adopting a representationalist view (ca. 2010), Fodor had himself seen the hard problem as intractable.

- Thus he had written that “we can’t, as things stand now, so much as imagine the solution of the hard problem”—and that a solution would require “revisions of our concepts and theories ... [that are] very deep and very unsettling” (2007b, p. 10).
- His representationalism sets things up so that a hard problem simply doesn’t arise—and with no deep or unsettling revisions. But it also trades one unexplained thing for another: perceptual awareness in place of intrinsically conscious qualities.
- Earlier, when Fodor thought there was a hard problem, he also held consciousness might be a brute, unexplainable fact. So that idea might just have persisted.

- “[S]ome things are true about the world because that’s the kind of world it is; there’s nothing more to make of it” (2007b, p. 10).
- The two cases, however, are very different. If one thinks there’s a hard problem, it may be natural to see qualitative consciousness as basic in that way.

But perceptual awareness is unlikely to be basic. We can seek to explain it in terms of what it is for perceptual states to register information and what it is for the states to be conscious—as the HO-QS theory does.

- So we did not reach closure, and I shall leave it there—with gratitude to Jerry for the extended exchange we had about consciousness, and very much else.

**Thank you for  
your attention**

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