

## Translucent experiences

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**Abstract** This paper considers the claim that perceptual experience is “transparent”, in the sense that nothing other than the apparent public objects of perception are available to introspection by the subject of such experience. I revive and strengthen the objection that blurred vision constitutes an insuperable objection to the claim, and counter recent responses to the general objection. Finally the bearing of this issue on representationalist accounts of the mind is considered.

**Keywords** Perception · Blurred vision · Transparency · Representationalism

It is common these days for writers on perception to stress the ‘transparency’ (sometimes ‘diaphanousness’) of perceptual experience. The suggestion is that all that perceptual experience even seems to present you with are worldly objects and their perceptible characteristics. You are never, so the claim goes, aware of features of your own experience, even when you introspect. It is this claim that I shall argue against here. Sometimes perceptual experience is merely translucent. When you have such experience, you are, to be sure, apparently aware of worldly objects, but you are also aware of features of your own experience.

The supposed transparency of perceptual experience is most commonly employed by its advocates as a criticism of accounts of perception that appeal to sense-data or qualia. The suggestion seems to be that if there really are such things, we should be able to be aware of them; but that the transparency of experience precludes this. This line of criticism is entirely without merit. If there are such things as sense-data, there is no reason why one should not be aware of them while failing to be aware of them *as* sense-data. According to certain sense-datum theorists—such as Hume and Prichard—we are aware of sense-data all the time we

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are perceptually aware of anything, but we mistake these sense-data for physical objects. Moreover, there is no reason why such a mistake should not be inevitable for anyone who is not at home with the sense-datum theory. There is, in other words, no reason to suppose that sense-data, if they exist, should be discoverable to untutored consciousness. After all, sense-data are typically introduced into a theory as a result of argument—as a result, for instance, of reflecting on such phenomena as illusion, hallucination, perspectival variation, and so forth—and not as a result of sheer self-awareness. Although some may have supposed otherwise, phenomenology is in fact the last place to look for support for sense-data.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, there is no reason why the concept of a sense-datum cannot, for someone who is at home with the theory, take on a reporting role in such a way that sense-data are recognised as sense-data. Similar remarks apply to qualia. The most that an appeal to transparency can achieve is to place the burden of proof on believers in sense-data or qualia to show how it is that experience has the phenomenologically transparent character that it does if experience is in fact populated by sense-data or qualia. Since at least the time of Berkeley, with his notion of ‘suggestion’, such accounts have been repeatedly offered. Whether they are plausible or not is another matter.

Be this as it may, it is not sense-data or qualia that I shall be claiming as possible objects of awareness, but certain features that everyone recognises in experience without the need of sophisticated theoretical concepts.

## 1 I

I begin by distinguishing two claims that are commonly run together by proponents of transparency. The target of the present paper—the ‘Transparency Thesis’, as I shall call it—is expressed in this often cited passage from Gilbert Harman: “Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree” (1990, 39). A more recent statement of the thesis, one that employs the current language of transparency, is provided by Michael Tye: “When you introspect your visual experience, the only particulars of which you are aware are the external ones making up the scene before your eyes... Your awareness is of the external surfaces and how *they* appear. The qualities you experience are the ones the surfaces apparently have. Your experience is thus transparent to you. When you try to focus upon it, you ‘see’ right through it, as it were, to the things apparently outside and their apparent qualities” (2002, 139). Both Harman and Tye subscribe to ‘intentionalism’ or ‘representationalism’ about perceptual experience: the view that such experience is just a form of representing things in the world as being a certain way. The Transparency Thesis is not peculiar to such a view, however. In the same year that saw the appearance of Harman’s influential article, Paul Snowdon presented an account of his disjunctivist theory of perception—a theory that is incompatible with representationalism by virtue of regarding perceived objects as *constituents* of perceptual experiences—in which he states

<sup>1</sup> What phenomenology does, rather, is to inform the arguments in question, and to place a constraint on admissible responses to such arguments.

that his position “is in line with a thought traditionally expressed in the words ‘experience is invisible or translucent’ [he clearly means transparent]. That is, we, as it were, look straight through the experience to the object; there is nothing to the experience, from our point of view, other than the aspects of the object is acquaints us with” (1990, 136). Others in this tradition have similarly committed themselves. M. G. F. Martin, for example, claims that “for both perception and hallucination, we can characterise what the mental state is like purely in terms of the putative objects of perception and the qualities they seem to have”.<sup>2</sup> Since, however, it is only intentionalists who have considered the sort of challenge to the Transparency Thesis that I shall be mounting in this paper, I shall explicitly discuss only their way of attempting to uphold the thesis.<sup>3</sup>

To be distinguished from the above Transparency Thesis is the claim that perceptual experience seems, even to reflective consciousness, to present you with worldly objects: that there is no possible reflective awareness of perceptual experience without an (apparent) awareness of, indeed attention to, such objects. This is a weaker claim. It amounts to no more than a recognition of the intentionality—the (apparent) world-directedness—of perceptual experience, together with an insistence that reflective consciousness of such experience cannot fail to register such intentionality. Martin expresses this weaker claim as follows: “The only sense that we can make of what one attends to in attending to one’s experience is that one does so through attending to things not taken to be merely properties of experience....[G]iven that one’s state of mind has a certain subject-matter, one can attend to the state of mind only by attending to that subject matter” (1998, 172). The idea that you cannot become aware of, say, how a certain cat precisely looks to you without paying attention to the cat is fairly uncontroversial, and certainly will not be contested here.<sup>4</sup> This does not, however, by itself provide any support for the

<sup>2</sup> Martin (2002, 417). Elsewhere we find Martin distancing himself from the sort of transparency claimed by classical sense-datum theorists as follows: “Price commits himself to something much stronger in insisting on the diaphanous nature of experience: namely, that sameness and difference of phenomenal properties just are sameness and difference in presented elements. It is doubtful if this claim is true: why cannot the ways in which things are presented in experience make a difference to what the experience is like, in addition to what is presented?” (1998, 174–5). It take, however, if only to render this claim consistent with the one cited in the text, that these ‘ways’ are just those that determine what features, both intrinsic and relational, a perceived object appears to have. A ‘presented element’, such as a circular table-top, gives rise to different experiences depending on how it is oriented in relation to the viewer, for example. Appealing to such ways of appearing can avoid having to say, with sense-datum theorists, that we are aware of something elliptical, or as elliptical, when something circular is seen at an angle.

<sup>3</sup> It may be, however, that the response of such non-representationalists will have to coincide with that of the representationalists. At one point Martin specifies his own form of disjunctivism, which he terms ‘naïve realism’, as follows: “The Naïve Realist... claims that our sense experience of the world is, at least in part, non-representational. Some of the objects of perception—the concrete individuals, their properties, the events they partake in—are constituents of the experience” (2004, 39). Given that blur is hardly to be accounted for simply by some object in the world being a constituent of an experience, perhaps Martin’s statement that perceptual experience is ‘at least in part’ non-representational indicates that he is going to attempt to account for blur in some representationalist way.

<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes claimed, especially by representationalists, that it is a necessary truth that every conscious state is intentional (in the sense of being apparently world-directed). I have argued against that claim elsewhere (2002, 129–30). We need not consider this issue here however, but can concern ourselves just with perceptual experiences that are indeed ostensibly world-directed.

Transparency Thesis. The latter is not merely the claim that when we introspect our perceptual experience, we inevitably attend to the (ostensible) objects of the experience; it is the claim that there is nothing other than such objects and their (apparent) features and relations that we could possibly attend to. The observation that perceptual experience, together with reflection upon it, always seems to present us with worldly objects—that we are never aware of *less* than such ostensible worldly objects and their apparent features—is clearly compatible with our being aware of *more* than this. That there are times when we are indeed aware of this ‘more’ is the burthen of this paper. We can have an awareness of features of our own experience, not instead of an intentional directedness to worldly objects, but in addition to it.

## 2 II

You do not have to be a keen introspectionist to find counter-examples to the Transparency Thesis. Some aspects of some perceptual experiences are manifestly features of the experiences themselves. There are, for instance, certain figures that, as it is sometimes put, the human visual system ‘does not like’. When we are presented with such figures our visual system cannot cope adequately, and a strange, anomalous experience results. One of the most impressive instances of this is a ray diagram devised by Donald MacKay.<sup>5</sup> The distortions in visual experience that this figure produces do not look like features of the object itself. In seeing such a figure it is as if we are, in part, experiencing our own visual system overloading.

We do not, however, have to turn to such *recherche* cases to find a counter-example to transparency. The everyday phenomenon of blurred vision serves perfectly well, and it on this that I shall concentrate.<sup>6</sup> When an object looks blurred, we typically have no problem detecting this blurriness. Such blurriness is not, however, and is not taken to be, even by totally naïve subjects, a feature or apparent feature of the object seen. There is a feature that objects themselves can appear to have that bears some similarity to blurriness: what I shall call ‘fuzziness’.<sup>7</sup> A cloud, or an Impressionistic water-colour figure, or a patch of light projected on to a screen, can have an indistinct boundary and can hence look fuzzy. This, however, is quite different from blur. Fuzziness, unlike blur, is and is taken to be a feature of the object seen. Moreover, and because of this, when an object appears fuzzy, the

<sup>5</sup> MacKay (1957). A more effective reproduction of the diagram can be found in Gregory (1972, 134).

<sup>6</sup> This objection seems first to have surfaced in print in Boghossian and Velleman (1989). Blurred vision—and I have principally in mind that which characterizes short- and long-sightedness—is not the only common perceptual phenomenon that can ground the case against the Transparency Thesis. The related, but distinct, phenomenon involved when one shifts focus from a near to a far object, or conversely, can also serve. So, too, can the figure-ground switches that we can experience when viewing two-dimensional Gestalt pictures. I shall discuss yet another recalcitrant phenomenon later in the paper.

<sup>7</sup> I shall pretend that fuzziness is the best objective feature to compare with blur, though there are disanalogies. Blurred objects, for example, have ‘haloes’ around their edges that one can see through. My remarks about fuzzy objects can, however, easily be adapted to any more complex features that may be proposed. Moreover, I shall later give a general argument against the postulation of *any* objective feature as being that which blurred vision represents objects as having.

subject does not take this to be a case of blurred vision. We can see a fuzzy object clearly, and take ourselves to do so. Such an experience is phenomenally different from any blurred experience.<sup>8</sup> Any blurred experience can in principle become clear. Conversely, when one sees something in a blurred way, one does not take oneself to be seeing something fuzzy: one cannot see the thing clearly enough for it to look that way! Suppose a myopic person were suddenly to start seeing more and more clearly until he ended up with 20/20 vision. This change in experience would not be taken by this person to be a change in the features of the objects seen. It would immediately be taken for what it is: a change in the character of the visual experience itself. Blurriness is not a way that things in the world themselves *seem to be*. It is, however, a feature of experience of which we are usually aware when it is there. The Transparency Thesis is therefore false.

### 3 III

How might a defender of the Transparency Thesis respond? Although he does not explicitly discuss the Transparency Thesis, Fred Dretske has recently dealt with the challenge that blur may be thought to pose to representationalist accounts of experience as such in a way that could be used to defend the thesis. According to Dretske, to suppose that blurriness is a feature of visual experiences themselves is simply to confuse a feature that is represented with a feature of a representation. “Blurry is the way experience represents objects”, he writes, “and you don’t need a blurry representation to represent things as blurry. You can do it, for example, with sharply printed words”.<sup>9</sup> It is significant that Dretske chooses to employ the term ‘blurry’ rather than ‘blurred’. The former is, as we shall see, ambiguous. It is, however, perfectly clear how Dretske himself interprets it. It denotes what I am using the term ‘fuzzy’ to denote: the property of having indistinct boundaries and surface details. Dretske himself is, indeed, happy to use the latter term. To be blurry, he writes, is a matter of having ‘fuzzy edges’. This is an objective feature that objects can possess in and of themselves, without a reference to how they are perceived. To be fuzzy is to lack a sharp boundary: something that may be true of a swirl of mist, for instance, whether it is perceived or not.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, as Dretske himself suggests, sharply printed words are not fuzzy—even, we may add, when

<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting that we could never mistake the one for the other. Incorrigibility is no part of the present argument. What is part of the argument is the claim that there is an intrinsic difference between these two sorts of experience that is there to be noticed.

<sup>9</sup> Dretske (2003). This and the following quotation from Dretske are both from p. 77. Dretske is responding to a blur-based objection to his representationalism that was raised by Kent Bach (1997).

<sup>10</sup> I take what holds of objects ‘in and of themselves’ to include relational facts. It even includes such a relational fact as that X partly occludes Y, even though a point of view is implicated in this fact. (X partly occludes Y when seen from here, but not when seen from there.) One can learn that X is occluding Y by attending to the objects themselves (as perceived from some Z), because this fact holds independently of whether there is actually a perceiver at location Z. Such relational facts, even those that conditionally implicate a point of view, harbour no difficulties for the Transparency Thesis. (Relatedly, see note 2 above.) By contrast, if no one is actually seeing anything, nothing is blurred. Facts that concern objects ‘in and of themselves’ therefore contrast with facts that concern actual perceptions.

they are seen blurrily. No injustice will be done, therefore, if we substitute the term ‘fuzzy’, so understood, for Dretske’s ‘blurry’ in considering his view. Dretske’s central claim, thus rephrased, is that blurred vision is a matter of representing a fuzzy object; and the view that he is attributing to his opponent, and rejecting, is that in order to represent an object as fuzzy, a visual experience must itself be fuzzy. The manifest silliness of this last idea should, however, suggest doubt as to whether Dretske has properly understood the objector’s claim about blurred vision.

Dretske takes the issue of blur to be simply another instance of something that is generally found in discussions of qualia. When an object looks red to me, it does so, the advocate of qualia suggests, in virtue of my visual experience instantiating a certain quale or sensory quality. Is this quality itself redness? If it is, we shall have the bizarre consequence that certain experiences are themselves literally red. Because of this, advocates of qualia commonly suppose that the quality that characterizes my visual experience when something looks red to me is one that is merely analogous to redness: ‘redness prime’, as Christopher Peacocke has called it.<sup>11</sup> Dretske’s suggestion seems to be that, when it comes to blurred vision, ‘qualia freaks’ overcome such scruples and claim that, when an object looks fuzzy to one, one’s visual experience is literally fuzzy. Indeed, he even offers a diagnosis of why such a mistake is made. The reason for it, he suggests, is that specifically pictorial representations of indistinct objects are themselves indistinct: “Confusing an intentional property of a representation—how the experience represents things to be—with a property of the representation itself . . . is easy to do with blurry pictorial representations since pictorial images of a sharp object actually have the property (fuzzy edges) they represent the sharp object to have”.

This diagnosis is not plausible, since it also applies to colour: pictorial images that depict red things are themselves typically red. So why the scruples that lead to ‘primed’ qualities? In fact, the issue raised by blur is quite distinct from this general issue raised by qualia. One indication of this is the fact that whereas we have no words for the peculiarly subjective sensory qualities postulated by the advocates of qualia, the everyday term ‘blurred’ does apply quite literally to experiences. Equally, this term does not apply to objects in and of themselves. Unless we are dealing with something that is itself, like a photograph, a pictorial representation, it makes no sense to ask of an object whether it is itself blurred or not. When we ask someone whether a certain object is blurred, what we are asking is whether the object *looks* blurred to this person. Moreover, its looking blurred cannot be a matter of its looking *to be* blurred, or looking as if it *is* blurred; for that would be to suppose that blurredness is an objective feature that objects can simply possess, whereas it is not. The reason why we employ the term ‘blurred’ in this way—the only plausible reason—is that while we are acquainted with blur, it does not—apart from the special case of pictorial representations—appear to be a quality of objects themselves. If it did, why would we not apply the term to such objects themselves? The transparency of visual experience with respect to colours nicely explains why we apply colour terms to the objects that we perceive, and not to visual experiences.

<sup>11</sup> Peacocke (1983, 20). Wilfrid Sellars, also, particularly emphasised this distinction (e.g., 1963, 48).

That precisely the opposite is true of blur suggests that transparency is absent in this case.

Dretske's favoured term 'blurry', unlike 'blurred', is ambiguous. It can, unlike the latter, be applied to objects in and of themselves—in which case it means, as Dretske himself says, 'fuzzy'.<sup>12</sup> But it can also mean what 'blurred' means: there is no impropriety at all in speaking of visual experiences themselves as being blurry. So Dretske's claim, "Blurry is the way experience represents objects", is itself ambiguous. When we substitute either 'blurred' or 'fuzzy' for the ambiguous 'blurry', we get a true proposition in each case, though a different one. Although blurred is indeed the way experience represents objects, it is not, as we have seen, a way it represents them *as being*: it is not a feature they are represented as having. Blurredness attaches to the visual representing, not to what is represented. When we see blurrily, we represent objects in a blurred manner. By contrast, fuzzy is a way of representing objects in the sense of representing them as being a certain way. To suppose that a certain manner of representing was itself fuzzy would be senseless. Dretske's position is not, however, undermined by this ambiguity in his central term, since it is an ambiguity that he can recognize and avoid. To avoid it, we simply drop the ambiguous term 'blurry', and state Dretske's central contention as being that blurred vision is a visual representation of a fuzzy object, and that the blurredness of a visual experience, if we want to talk about such a thing, is simply a matter of that experience representing a fuzzy object. Blurredness is not a 'quality' that an experience possesses; and when we introspect, we shall not discover any such quality, but only the fuzziness that some object is represented as possessing. This will allow Dretske himself to explain why we do not, special cases aside, suppose that objects in themselves are blurred—for then they would themselves be representations of a fuzzy object—and why visually representing a fuzzy object is not representing it as being blurred—for then we would be representing it as a representation of a fuzzy object.

When, however, we construe Dretske's claims in this way, we see that they hardly constitute a response to the challenge posed by blur at all, for they blatantly conflict with the phenomenological facts on which the challenge is based. The equation of blurred vision with the visual representation of a fuzzy object is, for reasons already given, a false one. An object can look fuzzy without any blur attaching to the visual perception at all. Conversely, when I am seeing blurrily, it need not seem to me that I am seeing something fuzzy. Indeed, to stress the point again, to the extent that I am experiencing blurred vision, it *cannot* seem to me that I am seeing a fuzzy object, since I cannot see the object well enough for any such feature to be apparent to me. Only to the extent that I see clearly do I visually represent, specifically, a fuzzy object.<sup>13</sup> Blur actually undermines one's ability visually to represent one's surroundings. It is analogous to the information theorist's notion of internal 'noise'. If I did visually represent a fuzzy object whenever I

<sup>12</sup> I do not insist that the term 'fuzzy' is wholly unambiguous, and that it cannot be used on occasion to mean 'blurred'. If it can, then I am commandeering the term for an unambiguous use.

<sup>13</sup> When discussing representationalist responses to the problem of blur, I shall assume, for the sake of argument, that experience is indeed representational in nature.

experienced blurred vision, I would in such cases, in the absence of overriding collateral information, believe that a fuzzy object was before me. But I do no such thing. Precisely because, when I see blurrily, I cannot see too well, I am unsure what is before me. This is not itself a matter of my theoretical judgement overriding the deliverances of my senses. It is not as though I realize that I am suffering from blurred vision, and so fail to be convinced by what I seem to see: the presence of a fuzzy object. The absolutely basic, animal response to blurred vision is uncertainty about the nature of one's surrounding. It is not, as Dretske's account implies, perceptual certainty that fuzzy objects are before me.

Dretske's failure properly to respond to the objection from blur is ultimately based on a misconstrual of the objection itself. For even if we set aside Dretske's attribution to the objector of the silly view that some visual experiences are themselves fuzzy, it remains the case that he takes the objector to be suggesting that whenever an object is visually represented as fuzzy—i.e., whenever something looks fuzzy—the visual experience itself instantiates the quality of blur. In fact, however, the real objection is that, to the extent that objects look fuzzy, blur is absent from the visual experience, and that, to the extent that such blurriness is present, an object is not being represented as fuzzy—or, indeed, as anything else. Blur is a wholly non-representational feature of experience: one that does not even contribute to objects' being represented as being a certain way.

Not only does Dretske fail adequately to answer the challenge presented by blur, the pictorial representations that he himself alludes to as part of his diagnosis of why one might mistakenly think of experiences as being 'blurry', themselves undermine his own position. Dretske's own suggestion was that, since pictorial representations of fuzzy objects are themselves fuzzy in some respect, someone who thought that visual experiences were picture-like would think that they too would be fuzzy when they were of fuzzy objects. Although visual experiences are so manifestly not like pictures in so many respects that the diagnosis is unpersuasive, there is one thing that visual experiences and pictures do have in common. Of all of the things in the world, they alone can be literally blurred. What is it about blur that explains this fact? Let us consider a pictorial representation, such as a photograph, and determine what it is that makes it blurred.<sup>14</sup> A blurred photograph will, as Dretske notes, carry an image that is more or less fuzzy. This, however, is not sufficient for the photograph to be blurred. The image may, after all, be a perfectly clear reproduction of a fuzzy object, or of a sharp object surrounded by mist; or the image may have been produced by random light getting into the camera. One and the same type of fuzzy photographic image will be blurred or not depending on how it was produced. In order for a photograph to be blurred, it is necessary that the photographic image contain less detail than the scene that was shot—or, strictly, less detail than was carried by the light that entered the camera lens when the picture was taken. Such a comparison with something external to the image itself—with some 'input' to the representational process—is internal to the concept of blur as applied in such a case, because blur is essentially a matter of *representational inadequacy*. This is why the

<sup>14</sup> I focus on photographic images because paintings and drawings involve complex and irrelevant issues having to do with pictorial conventions and artists' intentions.

term ‘blurred’ applies only to representations. When the term is applied to visual experiences, such a notion of inadequacy is, therefore, involved. There is a big difference, however. We can refer to a visual experience as being blurred without reference to any input. A visual experience could be blurred without any actual object being represented at all, and without any light having entered the eye. A visual hallucination could be phenomenologically blurred. Blur is intrinsic to experience in a way that it is not to any mere image. This, of course, arises from the fact that visual experience, unlike any non-mental representation, is intrinsically and non-derivatively representational, or intentional. Since, nevertheless, representational inadequacy essentially attaches to blur, the consequence is that, in virtue of being blurred, a visual experience is intrinsically representationally inadequate. There is a visual representational inadequacy that is phenomenally registered as blur.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most striking thing about Dretske’s discussion of blur is the omission of any reference to representational inadequacy. Blurred vision represents fuzzy objects, and that is that. An experience may misrepresent an object as fuzzy when it is not, and in that sense be inadequate. This, however, would be a case of illusion, where blur need not—would not—be involved as such. In illusion the inadequacy would indeed be an extrinsic matter. In order for an experience to count as an illusion, the experience, or its representational content, must be compared with the actual nature of the object seen. Not only is it the case that the inadequacy that attaches to blurred vision is an intrinsic inadequacy in the representational state itself, such inadequacy cannot be consciously registered by an ostensible object appearing to the subject to be a certain way—fuzzy, for example; for then the visual state would have *adequately* represented such a quality. The whole idea that blurred vision is a way of representing a certain kind of object—a fuzzy one—is, when you think about it, quite bizarre. For, given that objects can actually be fuzzy, the consequence would be that seeing blurrily is a way of accurately seeing such objects, which is absurd. Indeed, if, as seems to be the case, Dretske is *equating* the visual representation of fuzziness with blurred vision, we should also have the consequence that there is a certain objective property of objects that can only be properly represented visually by seeing blurrily, which is even more absurd. The fact is, of course, that given any visible property of an object—including fuzziness—and a visual perception of that object, we can ask whether the latter is a blurred or clear perception of the object and the property. Blurriness is not tied to any one sort of visible property. But that is just to say that it is not representational.

#### 4 IV

Michael Tye has also recently risen to the challenge of accounting for blur from a representationalist perspective. Unlike Dretske, Tye recognises that a distinction between blurred vision and the perception of fuzzy objects is to be made. (However,

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<sup>15</sup> I am not suggesting that representational inadequacy in visual experience, even when it is distinguished from misrepresentation, always manifests itself as blur. As we shall see later, it does not.

he somewhat confusingly applies the term ‘blurry’ to both of them. In what follows I shall insert a parenthetical reference to fuzziness in quotations from Tye where this is what he means.) In particular, Tye recognises that a certain sort of representational inadequacy essentially attaches to blurred vision. When one sees an object, even a fuzzy one, in a blurred way, “One simply loses information”, he writes, in contrast to when one sees an object clearly. As a result, in blurrily seeing a fuzzily projected image of light “one’s experience is less definite about boundaries and surface details than the blurriness [fuzziness] in the image warrants”.<sup>16</sup> As we saw when considering Dretske’s views, however, we need, if only because of the possibility of hallucination, to be able to account for the blurredness of a visual experience independently of the actual nature of any object seen; so the notions of informational loss and of an experience’s representational content failing to do justice to the real nature of a perceived object are not entirely adequate. Moreover, the preceding characterisation of blur applies to a case where, without any blur, an object is illusorily misperceived as being fuzzy, or fuzzier than it actually is. Tye does, however, also characterise the inadequacy in question in terms of the “degree of representational indeterminacy in the experience”—an idea that he credits to Frank Jackson. Whether the representational content of an experience is indeterminate in a certain way or not is, as is required, something that is internal to the experience itself.

What, however, is the precise nature of the representational indeterminacy that is supposed to constitute blurred vision? At one point Tye suggests that “in seeing blurrily, one undergoes sensory representations that fail to specify just where the boundaries and contours [of the object] lie”. This, however, is true when an object looks fuzzy to me. In another passage, however, we find a more promising suggestion: “In the case of seeing sharp objects as blurred [fuzzy], one’s visual experience comments inaccurately on boundaries. It ‘says’ that the boundaries themselves are fuzzy when they are not. In the cases of seeing blurrily, one’s visual experience does not do this. It makes no comment on where exactly the boundaries lie”.<sup>17</sup> The important idea here is of a visual experience ‘making no comment’, as opposed to commenting on boundaries.<sup>18</sup> One might object that a clear perception of an object as fuzzy also fails to comment ‘on where exactly the boundaries lie’. What, however, I think Tye means is that in cases of blurred vision, and only in such cases, the visual experience makes no comment on where exactly boundaries lie *or where they do not lie*. It makes no ‘comment’ at all, positively or negatively. When,

<sup>16</sup> Tye (2003). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Tye are from pp. 18–20 of this article.

<sup>17</sup> I should say that although Tye regards the representational content of perceptual states as nonconceptual, he himself reserves the ‘seeing/representing as’ locution for conceptual presentations. I take it, however, that his present remarks will apply to the purely visual, nonconceptual case of a sharp object illusorily looking fuzzy. (Incidentally, in what follows, I myself employ such ‘as’-locutions not to signify conceptual representation, but merely to express the way an object looks.)

<sup>18</sup> In the passage just quoted Tye characterises the first ‘comment’ as being inaccurate because his example specifically concerns the misperception of a sharp object as fuzzy. We can, however, abstract away from this issue of accuracy of representation, as we have seen we need to be able to do if we are to provide a wholly general account of blur: one, that is to say, that also applies to hallucination. The fundamental contrast that Tye introduces here, one that does apply to hallucinations, is between an experience’s commenting on boundaries and its not commenting at all.

by contrast, one clearly sees a fuzzy object, one's visual experience does comment negatively on the presence of a sharp boundary. At each point within the 'fuzz', such an experience specifies that there is *not* a sharp boundary there: that there is no discontinuity in the nature or intensity of a quality that would constitute such a boundary. The crucial distinction is, one might say, that between a representation of indeterminacy and indeterminacy of representation. We therefore seem to have a neat threefold distinction. Clear perception of a sharp object specifies a sharp boundary; clear perception of a fuzzy object specifies the absence of a sharp boundary; blurred perception specifies neither.<sup>19</sup> This account can also be applied to the other aspect of blurred vision mentioned by Tye: the perception of surface detail. The suggestion would be that blurred perception, to the extent that it is blurred, fails to comment, positively or negatively, on the details of an object's surface. Illusory perception of an object as having surface details that are fuzzier than they are would, by contrast, comment on every visible surface detail; it would simply characterise such details inaccurately.

## 5 V

The above is the most promising account of blur that representationalism has yet offered. It is not adequate, however, because a failure to comment either positively or negatively on relevant features of a visually presented object is not peculiar to blurred vision. Consider, for example, our perception of the surfaces of objects that are seen at some considerable distance. Here, too, as Tye says of blurred vision, 'one simply loses information' concerning the character of the surfaces. Distant objects do not have to look blurred in order for such indeterminacy to arise, however, since their outlines can still look sharp. Or consider seeing an object through fairly dense fog or mist, where little more than the object's shape need appear. Fog and mist do not induce blurred vision. Parafoveal vision also constitutes a counter-example to Tye's analysis as it applies to objects' boundaries. If you focus on some object straight in front of you, objects to either side of this central area will appear more or less indeterminately, the more indeterminate the further towards the periphery of your visual field they are. Such objects, however, if they are at the same distance away from you as the object you are focusing on, do not appear blurred. Nevertheless, Tye's condition for blur is met: parafoveal vision comments neither positively nor negatively on objects' boundaries.

The major weakness with any such representationalist account of blur, however, even with one that would escape such criticism, is that it simply does not address the challenge posed by blur to the Transparency Thesis. Such an account treats the problem of blur as if it were simply a challenge to the representationalist project of showing that the phenomenal character of an experience supervenes on, or is determined by, that experience's representational content, and as if defending such supervenience would in and of itself constitute a vindication of the Transparency

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<sup>19</sup> This three-fold distinction would apply, as it should, even to hallucination. Simply substitute 'visual experience' for 'perception', and 'as of' for 'of'.

Thesis. This, however, is not the case. For suppose that representational content does fix the phenomenal character of experience. It remains a possibility that there are, as against the Transparency Thesis, aspects of phenomenal character that are not captured by specifying the *apparent features* of the ostensible objects of experience. This possibility can be excluded only by showing that representational content determines phenomenal character *just by determining such features*. Let us refer to this last claim as the ‘Object-Determination Thesis’. All possible representationalist accounts of blur now face a dilemma in relation to the issue of transparency. Either such an account insists upon such object-determination, or it does not. If it does not, the account will clearly fail to support the Transparency Thesis. If it does, blur will, for reasons we are about to see, fail to be determined by representational content; in which case representationalism itself will be in deep trouble.

One should not be misled into thinking that the representationalist’s supervenience claim entails the Object-Determination Thesis, and hence the Transparency Thesis, in virtue of the presumably undeniable principle that, since representational content is just what represents things as being a certain way, every aspect of representational content must constitute something’s being represented in a certain way. Because of this principle, it is true that if blur is a matter of representational content, it cannot occur in experience apart from something being represented as being a certain way. This, however, gives us only part of the weaker of the two claims that were distinguished in the first section of this paper. It says nothing more than that blur can feature only in experiences that are intentionally directed to worldly objects. In particular, it does not say that blur features by way of characterising such objects, as the Object-Determination Thesis requires. Moreover, the undeniable principle entails nothing stronger than this. To think that it does is to be misled by the ambiguity, which we have noted before, in the phrase ‘represent in a certain way’. If this is interpreted as meaning ‘represent as being a certain way’, then the undeniable principle will indeed deliver the Object-Determination Thesis, and thereby the Transparency Thesis. If, however, the phrase is given its other reading, our principle will allow there to be an aspect of representational content that constitutes something’s being represented in a certain way—e.g., in a blurry way—rather than constituting something’s being represented *as being* a certain way. So construed, the principle will not entail the Object-Determination Thesis. No doubt, for any representational content, there must be elements in it that represent something in the stronger sense: that is, as being a certain way. If, however, there can be any aspect of representational content that represents in the weaker sense, the Object-Determination Thesis will be false, and the Transparency Thesis unsupported. To avoid the weaker construal, the undeniable principle will have to be reformulated so that it claims that every aspect of representational content constitutes something being represented *as being* a certain way. But then the undeniable principle is no longer undeniable, and we need a reason to accept this stronger reading. The supervenience claim itself provides no reason for doing so, since it is compatible with the weaker reading of the principle.

Representationalist accounts of experience do, however, standardly embody the Object-Determination Thesis. This can be seen by recalling how the notion of

intentional or representational content is specified. This is invariably done by reference to something like a ‘correctness condition’ for visual experience (and mental states generally). Here is Tye himself on this issue: “Visual experiences have correctness conditions. For the subject of the experience, the world *seems* a certain way, the way represented by the experience. The experience is accurate if the world is that way, inaccurate otherwise. The way the world is represented is the content of the experience. Qualities entering into the content are qualities the world (or things within the world) seem to the subject of the experience to possess” (2002, 150). This clearly commits representationalism to object-determination: a quality enters into the representational content of a subject’s experience only if it seems to the subject that some object within the world possesses that quality. If, however, we take this specification of representational content, or something like it, as definitive of the notion, then blur does not ‘enter into’ the representational content of any experience. This is because there are no correctness conditions for a blurred vision of something (in so far as it is blurred). How on earth would an object have to *be* for a blurred experience to be correct? The point here is not that it is impossible for the world to be the way that a blurred experience represents it as being. This applies to certain other types of experience: ‘paradoxical’ or ‘impossible’ percepts, such as the waterfall illusion. Blur is quite different. It is not that blurred vision lays down a condition for the world to meet that the world cannot possibly meet: it just does not lay down such a condition at all. Blurred vision is not a sort of *illusion*. And this is because it is not the case that the world seems to be a certain way in virtue of blur. It is, rather, that within certain limits there isn’t a way the world seems to be at all.

Ironically, Tye’s own account of blur, in terms of a ‘failure to comment’ on the world, shows that he accepts the previous point, although this conflicts with his espousal of the Object-Determination Thesis. The contradiction emerges most clearly, as we might expect, when he compares blur with certain cases of illusion. When a sharp object is misperceived as having an indistinct boundary, we have a case of misrepresentation; as Tye puts it, the experience “comments inaccurately” on the object. When such an object is seen blurrily, however, there is, he says, “no inaccuracy”. This is both true and consistent with his own position: a failure to ‘comment’ can hardly constitute a false ‘statement’. If, however, blurred vision of an object does not, as such, involve inaccurately representing that object, then, given that, obviously, it does not involve accurately representing the object, it represents it neither accurately nor inaccurately. But that means that it does not represent it as being a certain way at all. According to Tye’s own formulation of the Object-Determination Thesis, therefore, blur cannot be a matter of the representational content of an experience. A quality enters into the representational content of an experience, it was said, only if an ostensible object is represented as having that quality: only if this quality is one that an object ‘seems to possess’. If blur did enter into the representational content of a perceptual experience, and, hence, the perception’s object seemed to possess this quality, either this object would really have that feature or it would not, and the question of correctness would indeed arise.

The fundamental reason why blurred vision has no correctness conditions already emerged in our investigation of Dretske’s views on this matter. Although, when we see blurrily, there is a way objects appear, these object do not, in virtue of blur,

appear to be a certain way, to possess a certain feature. Moreover, the idea that we could see something correctly in virtue of seeing it blurrily is surely absurd. And what, in any case, might this feature be? We have already seen that it is not blur, or blurredness, itself, since, the special case of photographic images and suchlike apart, this attaches not to objects themselves but only to representations of objects.<sup>20</sup> If blur were the feature in question, it would make sense to ask, of a blurrily perceived non-pictorial object, whether that object was *really* blurred; and it does not—except when what is being asked is whether one is really seeing blurrily. We have also seen that fuzziness is not the feature in question. The only remaining remotely plausible candidate is indeterminacy in certain respects. I have already argued that indeterminacy is not peculiar to blurred vision; but it is not true that blurred vision even involves the representation of an object as being indeterminate. If it did, then given that no worldly object is actually indeterminate in the relevant respects, every blurred perception would be inaccurate, and blur would be assimilated to illusion. The most general reason why this proposal will not work, however, is that indeterminacy, whether blur is involved or not, is not a feature that objects seem to possess. Indeterminacy itself constitutes a counter-example to the Transparency Thesis and, if it is an aspect of representational content, the Object-Determination Thesis. When, for example, I indeterminately perceive an object that is towards the periphery of my visual field, I do not take myself to be perceiving an indeterminate object. This is not because of some theoretical view I hold to the effect that indeterminate entities are impossible. The visual experience itself simply does not seem to present me with such an object. The inadequacy is, and is immediately taken to be, an inadequacy in my perception, not in the object perceived. If perceptual experience did repeatedly represent indeterminate objects—did, that is to say, apparently acquaint us with actually indeterminate objects—the theoretical view in question would have much less intuitive force than it has. Moreover, if an indeterminately perceived object seemed actually to be indeterminate, it would be inexplicable why our natural reaction in such a case, if we have an interest in the object, is to turn our gaze so that we can see it properly. Indeed, not only would this reaction be inexplicable, the procedure itself would be incoherent. An object that is in the centre of our visual field does not appear indeterminately in the way a peripherally perceived object does. If these two perceptions of the object represented it as being determinate and indeterminate respectively, then we would, in passing from the one to the other, be representing the object as changing its features, and there would be no question of seeing the same object properly. Similar remarks apply to blurred vision. When an object ceases to look blurred, it does not look as if the object itself has changed in any way at all, and we do take ourselves to be getting a better view of it. In general, some feature of experience is an apparent feature of an object of awareness only if: (1) if it ceases to be a feature of the

<sup>20</sup> Even in the case of photographic images we do not attribute blurredness to the object because we see it blurrily. Moreover, the blur that characterises such objects is not a strictly perceptible quality that visual experience represents the object as having. All that such experience presents us with is a fuzzy object. To take such an object to be blurred, we have to take it to be a representation, such as a photograph, and we have to make reference beyond the fuzzy image to some supposed ‘input’ to the representational process. Here the ‘as’ is conceptual.

experience, but the object remains an object of awareness, the object apparently changes; and (2) if you take your experience at face value, you will believe that the object does have that feature. Neither of these holds of perceptual indeterminacy, whether blur is involved or not.

Indeed, it is not possible even to postulate a feature that blurred vision, as such, represents objects as having. For suppose we did. Let us call it the ‘B-feature’. Although there are no objects in existence that possess this feature, perhaps there could be. And perhaps a veridical, clear perception of them would be phenomenologically just like actual cases of blurred vision. The reason, it may be said, why we do not attribute blur to objects, is that we know that blur results from a malfunction of the visual system. The very term, it may be suggested, connotes some representational inadequacy. If that is so, then a veridical perception of the B-feature would not properly be regarded as a case of blurred vision. Nevertheless, if such a perception were phenomenologically identical to cases of blurred vision, the present suggestion would stand as an objection to the entire line of argument of the present paper. For then it would be the case that whenever we perceive in a blurred manner, our visual experience actually represents an object as possessing the B-feature. On this proposal, actual cases of blurred vision surprisingly emerge as cases of illusion: we simply misperceive an object that lacks the B-feature as possessing it. This is perhaps unsatisfactory enough; but our uneasiness with this idea can be backed up by the following argument. As many philosophers hold, and as I have argued at some length elsewhere (2001), if an object visually appears to be F to a subject, and the subject does not overlook this fact, but is attentive to the object as thus appearing, the subject will, naturally, immediately and necessarily, in the absence of overriding collateral information (or mental breakdown), believe that the object *is* F.<sup>21</sup> This, however, is just what we do not find, and could not find, with blurred vision, or any visual state that was phenomenologically identical to it. With the previous qualifications, the necessary immediate cognitive or doxastic upshot of such vision is uncertainty or hesitancy. This is not a learned response. It is wholly immediate and natural and indissociable from the phenomenology of the experience. Just think, to make the point vivid, of *very* blurred vision—the vision of someone who is colloquially referred to as being ‘as blind as a bat’. The hesitancy, here, is not at all like that which might well be induced by an untoward and unusual object. With blurred vision, it is not that the subject does not know what to make of an object. It is, rather, that the object does not appear clearly enough, and does not even *seem* to appear clearly enough, for the question of what to make of it properly to arise.<sup>22</sup> The definiteness that essentially characterizes perceptual clarity goes hand in hand with definiteness of belief.<sup>23</sup> On the present proposal, however, the

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<sup>21</sup> Those who think that belief is too sophisticated a mental state to attribute to all perceiving creatures may substitute some more humble form of response for belief.

<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the hesitancy is different from that which we find in a paradoxical percept, such as the waterfall illusion (which is, perhaps, more than merely an unusual phenomenon). In such cases, a phenomenon is, apparently, internally inconsistent. Whatever we may wish to say about blurred vision, it is not that.

<sup>23</sup> The clarity to which I refer here is a phenomenological feature, not merely an informational and relational one defined with respect to an actual object perceived.

sort of hesitancy that we find with blurred vision should not enter the picture, save as a learned response. For on this proposal, subjects of blurred vision simply seem to see objects with the B-feature—and people with very blurred vision simply seem to see objects as being very B! The most that could be elicited by such a vision is astonishment. This, of course, may involve hesitancy; but not of the sort we find in (phenomenologically) blurred vision, since it is differently motivated. In short, the present proposal erroneously substitutes mere misrepresentation for what holds in cases of (phenomenally) blurred vision: *inadequate* representation.

The only way, therefore, in which blur can enter into representational content at all is by its *not* representing an object as being a certain way. In other words, a representationalist account of blur will be possible at all only if the Object-Determination Thesis is dropped. If that is done, however, no representationalist account of experience will lend any support to the Transparency Thesis at all. Indeed, in dropping the Object-Determination Thesis, representationalists will be dropping the Transparency Thesis itself as well, since the only reason to drop the former is the recognition that there are features of experience—and hence, for an representationalist, aspects of representational content—that do not appear in consciousness as apparent features of the ostensible objects of experience. But this is just to deny the Transparency Thesis. If representationalism is to stand a chance of being an acceptable account of experience in general, it must dissociate itself from the Object-Determination Thesis. For the latter entails the Transparency Thesis, and the Transparency Thesis is patently, transparently false.

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