



Propositional Intentionalism and the Argument from Appearance

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Abstract

The argument from appearance for the content view or intentionalism attracts a lot of attention recently. In my paper, I follow Charles Travis to argue against the key premise that representational content can be ‘read off’ from a certain way that a thing looks to a subject. My arguments are built upon Travis’s original objection and a reinterpretation of Rodrick Chisholm’s comparative and noncomparative uses of appearance words. Byrne, Schellenberg and others interpret Travis’ ‘visual looks’ as Chisholm’s comparative use, and appeal to the noncomparative use as an alternative to avoid Travis’s objection. I demonstrate that they misunderstand both Chisholm and Travis. Both the comparative use and the noncomparative use are semantic notions, while ‘visual looks’ is a metaphysical one. Although Chisholm’s appearance objectivism — that appearance expressions attribute appearances to ordinary objects — is close to ‘visual looks’, appearance objectivism is not exceptional to the noncomparative use as Byrne interprets. In the end, I also show that Byranean’s conception of distinctive visual gestalt cannot exclude contrary representational contents, because a distinctive visual gestalt can be shared by different kinds of things. Besides, Byrne and others do not explain why a distinctive visual gestalt should be presented as ‘being instantiated’. Therefore, I conclude that representational content cannot be read off from a certain way that a thing looks to a subject; the argument from appearance thus fails.

Keywords Intentionalism · representational content · the noncomparative use · visual looks · appearance objectivism

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1 Introduction

Intentionalism or representationalism about perceptual experience is the mainstreaming view in the debate on the philosophy of perception. It comes in many varieties, but all share the commitment that perceptual experience has intentional or representational content. So, the view is also called *the content view*.¹ Among various arguments for intentionalism such as the argument from illusion/hallucination, the argument from transparency (Tye, 2002), etc., in the recent literature, Byrne (2001); Siegel (2010a; Schellenberg, (2011)) try to argue for the content view through perceptual experience's phenomenal characters or looks. For example, Byrne (2001) suggests that “the content of a perceptual experience specifies the way the world appears or seems to the subject”, and then argues that differences in phenomenal character imply differences in the way things appear to the subject. Because the way the world appears to the subject is understood as a content, differences in phenomenal character thus imply differences in content. That is, from the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience, a specific content can be derived.

Compared with Byrne's arguments, Susanna Siegel's argument, which she calls *the argument from appearing*, incorporates the accuracy conditions (2010a, p. 345). Roughly, if the perceived thing is the way it seems to be, then the experience is accurate; otherwise, it is inaccurate. On another occasion, Siegel writes “the content of an experience is given by the conditions under which it is accurate” (2006, p. 361). So, we should note, unlike merely appealing to phenomenal characters or looks, Siegel's content view also relies on the accuracy conditions, while the accuracy conditions depend on the way that perceptual experience presents. In Siegel's argument, she does not explicitly use appearance words such as “appears”, “seems”, “looks”, etc. as Byrne does, she rather uses the phrase “experience presents clusters of properties as being instantiated”. But she admits that “the properties presented are meant to be properties that the object *looks* to the perceiver to have” (2010, p. 355, italics added). In other words, to proceed to the content view, Siegel's starting point is also *phenomenal characters or looks*, and the accuracy conditions play the bridging role.

Susanna Schellenberg's Master Argument shares the similar thoughts with Byrne and Siegel. The crucial premise clearly expresses the look-content link: “If the world seems a certain way to her, then she has an experience with content C, where C corresponds to the way the world seems to her” (Schellenberg, 2011, p. 719). For the convenience of discussion, I call these arguments for the content view or intentionalism *the argument from appearance*. Its skeleton is as follows,

P1: When a subject has a visual experience of a thing, the thing looks a certain way to the subject.

P2: If a thing looks a certain way to the subject, she has an experience with a content, which corresponds to the way the thing looks to her.

C: Therefore, visual experience has content.

¹ Intentionalists include Searle (1983); Harman (1990); Dretske (1995); Tye (1995); Byrne (2001, (2009); Siegel, (2010a, b; Schellenberg, (2011); Brogaard (2015, (2017), etc. In this paper, I do not make a distinction among intentionalism, representationalism, and the content view.

The argument is sketchy. I omit many details and sophisticated restrictions discussed in Byrne's, Siegel's, and Schellenberg' articles. But my focus will be on P2, which is the shared key premise. So, I hope the potential unfairness of representing their arguments will not undermine the force of my own arguments.

Some philosophers have criticized this general approach to the content view even from the intentionalist's camp. For example, Pautz (2009), as an intentionalist, argues that the argument from appearance trivializes the content view. He proposes that 'x has an experience with content y' should be treated as a theoretical term rather than a theory-neutral one, and that having an experience with an experiential property E is identical with bearing a relation (e.g., entertaining) to some content. Travis (2004, 2013) shows that representational content cannot be read off from the way a thing looks to the subject because looks either do not decide any particular representational content, or they do not make the content available to the subject. Raleigh (2013a, b) shares a lot of sympathy with Travis, showing that a theory-neutral understanding of 'looks' is not committed to any particular metaphysical account of phenomenology.

My own criticism is built upon the debate between Travis and Byrne (also Schellenberg, Siegel). Briefly, Travis's argument is supposed to be based on two notions of 'looks': one is 'visual looks' and the other is 'thinkable looks'. Byrne and others appeal to the Roderick Chisholm's (1957) noncomparative use as an alternative notion of looks to avoid Travis's objection. I will explicate both Travis's and Chisholm's notions of looks and demonstrate that Byrne and others misunderstand both of them. Based on the new interpretation, I show that their responses to Travis's objection is unsuccessful. In the end, I further demonstrate that Byrne's conception of distinctive visual gestalt cannot rule out contrary representational contents, because a distinctive visual gestalt can be shared by different kinds of things. Moreover, a distinctive visual gestalt can still be not presented 'as being instantiated'. Therefore, representational content cannot be read off from a certain way that a thing looks to a subject.

The paper proceeds as follows. In § 2, I lay out Travis's objection to the argument from appearance (2013, pp. 23–58). In § 3, I present how Byrne (2009) and Schellenberg (2011) exploit Chisholm' noncomparative use of appearance words to avoid Travis's objection. § 4 is devoted to expounding Chisholm's comparative and noncomparative uses of appearance words (1957) and his appearance objectivism. In § 5, I demonstrate how Byrne and others misunderstand both Chisholm and Travis, which leads their strategy to a wrong direction. § 6 puts aside Byrne's misinterpretations and focuses on his visual gestalt view. I show that a distinctive visual gestalt neither helps to explain why representational content should be read off from looks, nor helps to avoid indeterminacy and incompatibility in contents if contents could be read off from looks.

2 Travis's 'Visual Looks' and 'Thinkable Looks'

In this section, I will try to present Travis's main objection to the argument from appearance. His work on it is extremely rich but perplexing. If my interpretation goes wrong, I hope that the misinterpretation can still serve the general purpose of under-

standing looks and contents. P2 in my reconstructed argument expresses Travis's targeted claim, namely that "it is looks-indexing that makes such facts available to us: the representational content of an experience can be read off of the way, in it, things looked" (Travis, 2013, p.34). But Travis further argues that there are two notions of looks, 'visual looks' "make representational content recognizable. But they do not decide any particular representational content for any given experience to have" (*ibid.*); 'thinkable looks' "are not what might make content available to us...they are a matter...of what is indicated" (*ibid.*). Let me address these two notions one by one and see what Travis means.

Travis labels the first notion 'visual looks' because the look which something has is determined merely by its visual effects, which are in turn determined by the environmental conditions, perspective, suitable visual equipment, etc. 'Visual looks' are specified by the expression "something looks thus-and-so, or like such-and-such" (Travis, 2013, p. 35). For example, Pia looks like her sister (Travis' example); the tomato looks red and bulgy; the wax statue exhibited in the museum looks to be made of wood. Travis emphasizes that to have visual looks is to have it *full stop* — the look does not bear on whether a certain way is represented.²

Why can intentionalists not read off content from 'visual looks' if they do make content recognizable as Travis agrees? Travis says, "If such content is looks-indexed, then things looking as they do on a given occasion must fix *what* representational content experience then has" (2013, p.36). That is, the content must not be indeterminate if there is any. However, Travis further demonstrates that the way a thing looks is sensitive to occasions and tend to depend on how comparisons are made. For example, as he explains, in the Müller-Lyer case, the length of two segments looks unequal or not liable to depend on how you view them. Or in Joseph Jastrow/Ludwig Wittgenstein's rabbit-duck image, how it looks to you also tends to depend on the way that you view it. In his favorite Pia's case, Travis points out "on some understanding or other, [Pia] looks (just) like any of indefinitely many different things" (*ibid.*). In short, Travis's initial point is that because the way a thing looks depends on the comparison that the subject makes on a given occasion, there are various ways a thing can look to the subject. Hence, no particular content could be read off from visual looks. This indeterminacy poses a substantial problem for intentionalism because it becomes unclear which look matters to the content if any, and there seems no reason for preferring one to another. Let us call this objection *the indeterminacy objection*.

Can intentionalists swallow the indeterminacy bullet but claim that various contents can be read off? Travis rejects this approach, for "those various ways move in mutually exclusive directions" (Travis, 2013, p. 37). That is to say, if representational content could be read off from visual experience, due to the indeterminacy, exclusive contents could be read off. For example, the wax statue in the museum bathed in a warm light might at the same time look both wooden and waxy to the subject. Admittedly, it is not a problem that a wax statue *looks* both wooden and waxy. The problem lies in the feature of representational content: it is required to be accurate or inaccurate. The content of the experience of the statue thus would be both accurate (the statue is the way it seems to be) and inaccurate (the statue is not the way it seems

² A similar view is shared by Brewer (2006, p.174).

to be). Let us call this objection *the exclusive objection*. This objection is devastating for most intentionalists who hold that contents are propositional.³

Non-propositional intentionalism, such as Tim Crane's view (2009, 2013), may be immune to Travis's indeterminacy objection and exclusive objection, because Crane seems to allow the content to be indeterminate and to have indeterminate accuracy. Content in Crane's view is more like a realist painting. Keith Wilson interprets Crane's view as content pluralism, so Travis's argument can be applied to each individual content (2018, p. 204). I doubt that his interpretation does justice to Crane's view, because to have an indeterminate content does not amount to having plural contents or disjunctive contents. Crane himself rejects the reduction from a painting-like content to (disjunctive or conjunctive) propositions. As for Travis's indeterminacy objection and exclusive objection, I am incline to confine them only to propositional intentionalism, while addressing Cranian intentionalism separately.

But Travis objects to the content view in general. He believes that senses are silent. Following Austin, he dispels 'perceptual misleading' such as illusions as evidence for intentionalism. As Austin says, 'deceived by our senses' is only a metaphor. Our senses are dumb (Austin 1962, p. 11). "Our senses merely bring our surroundings into view; afford us some sort of awareness of them. It is then for us to make of what is in our view what we can, or do" (Travis, 2013, p. 30). So, in perception, things are presented to us, full stop. Dialectically, it is intentionalists' burden of proof to show why visual looks must be understood as "properties being presented *as being instantiated*". If visual looks are silent, then Cranian intentionalism must be rejected as well.

Travis's second notion of *looks* is labeled 'thinkable looks' and this look is specified by the expression "it looks as if something is such-and-such". "[thinkable look] really speaks of a form of thought, or judgment". 'Looks like' takes a sentential object or a proposition which describes a thought, or a judgment, based on visual evidence (visual looks). In some cases, 'thinkable looks' may only imply an uncertain thought, for example, it looks like that painting is a Vermeer (Travis's example). The subject who makes this statement may be an amateur painter; he finds the color, light, and technique of painting alike to Vermeer, but he is still not certain about it. In other cases, the expression taking 'thinkable looks' makes affirmative thought with a simile, for example, it looks as if the clouds are horses, in which the subject is certain about her judgment. In short, the central point is that the expression taking 'thinkable looks' does not express a visual, or perceptual awareness but a form of thought, or judgment. So, Travis thinks that 'thinkable looks' "are not what might make content available to us." Note that here 'available' means 'perceptually available'; Travis allows downstream state of perception to have representational content.⁴ Since the following debate is centered around 'visual looks', I shall not explore 'thinkable looks'.

To sum up Travis's objection to the argument from appearance:

³ Most intentionalists are propositional intentionalists, such as Searle (1983), Dretske (1995), Tye (1995), Byrne (2001), etc.

⁴ For the detailed and more lucid discussion about the notion of availability, see Wilson (2018).

- a. The argument from appearance implies that representational content can be read off from a thing's looks.
- b. 'Visual looks' can make contents perceptually available to the subject but cannot fix a particular representational content.
- c. 'Thinkable looks' can fix a particular representational content but cannot make the content perceptually available to us because they are not perceptual.
- d. There are only two notions of looks.
- e. Therefore, representational content cannot be read off from a thing's looks. That is, the argument from appearance is false.⁵

Note that premise (b) only partially expresses Travis' view on 'visual looks'. As explained above, if content can be read off from visual looks and the latter cannot fix the former, then mutually exclusive contents might be read off. In such cases, experience would be both accurate and inaccurate at the same time. This exclusive objection is a further objection to those intentionalists who appeals to accuracy conditions to argue for the content view. For example, Siegel's argument from appearing incorporates accuracy conditions (2010a, 2010b).

3 Is there an Alternative Notion of "Looks"

One natural response to Travis's objection is to find a third notion of looks other than 'visual looks' and 'thinkable looks'. Byrne (2009, p.439–440), Schellenberg (2011, p.721), and Brogaard (2017) identify Travis' 'visual looks' with Chisholm's comparative use of appearance words and 'thinkable looks' with Chisholm's epistemic use. They (not Brogaard) then invoke Chisholm's noncomparative use to block Travis's objection. As 'thinkable looks' does not concern the latter discussion, so I also put epistemic use aside.⁶ In this section, I shall first discuss Byrne's view on Jackson's 'phenomenal use'. Secondly, I shall present how he and Schellenberg appeal to Chisholm's 'noncomparative use' to respond to Travis's objection.

Byrne in *Experience and Content* consider two alternative notions of looks: Jackson's *phenomenal use* and Chisholm's *noncomparative use*. Frank Jackson's phenomenal use of appearance words is usually supposed to be akin to Chisholm's noncomparative use. As Frank Jackson writes:

The phenomenal use is characterized by being explicitly tied to terms for color, shape, and/or distance: 'It looks blue to me', 'It looks triangular', 'The tree looks closer than the house', 'The top line looks longer than the bottom line', 'There looks to be a red square in the middle of the white wall', and so on. That is, instead of terms like 'cow', 'house', 'happy', we have, in the phenomenal

⁵ Similar summaries of Travis's argument can be seen in Byrne (2009), Schellenberg (2011), Brogaard (2017), Wilson (2018).

⁶ For the discussion about epistemic use, see Jackson (1977), Martin (2010), Brogaard (2015), Glüer (2017).

use, terms like ‘red’, ‘square’, and ‘longer than’...It is the analysis of this use which leads to sense-data. (Jackson 1977, p. 33)

According to Jackson, the phenomenal use is only tied to low-level predicates such as ‘blue’, ‘triangular’, ‘longer than’, and so on; appearance statements in the phenomenal sense ascribe sensible qualities (what the complements of appearance verbs refer to) to sense-data. But the claim that the phenomenal use leads to sense-data does not imply the claim that sense-data are mental entities. Jackson instead establishes the thesis that sense-data are mental entities through an independent argument.⁷

Byrne agrees with Jackson that the phenomenal use cannot reduce to the comparative use.⁸ But he does not accept the phenomenal use as the genuine alternative use, mainly because Jackson’s phenomenal use is too narrowed to apply to higher-level predicates. Byrne refers to Thau’s (2002, p. 230) example—“It looks red and very old”—to vindicate this point. The statement seems to require a univocal interpretation of looks, while if the phenomenal use is in place, the univocal interpretation becomes impossible. This is because the predicate ‘old’ is not a low-level one. So, to have a univocal interpretation, one way for defenders is to argue that ‘looks’ in the statement must be used epistemically or comparatively. Otherwise, the univocal interpretation must go. Thau’s conclusion is rather that there is no phenomenal use.

Byrne agrees with Thau’s conclusion but is unsatisfied with his argument. He follows Chisholm and argues for the noncomparative use. In Chisholm’s example, ‘That animal looks centaurian’ may not make an epistemic or comparative claim but a noncomparative one. As Byrne interprets, “there is a distinctive centaurian ‘visual gestalt’: centaurs have a certain kind of body hair, torso, coloring, gait, and so forth” (Byrne, 2009, p. 443). On Byrne’s account, the noncomparative use tends to be associated with an object’s distinctive visual features: the centaurian look is associated with a certain kind of body hair, colouring, gait, etc.; and a Scandinavian women’s look is associated with straight blond hair, a small nose, pale skin, etc (Byrne’s example). Hence, besides ‘visual looks’ (the comparative use) and ‘thinkable looks’ (the epistemic use), there is a genuine third notion of looks, namely the noncomparative notion. Unlike Jackson’s phenomenal use, which only applies to low-level predicates, Chisholm’s noncomparative use has a wider application. So, ‘looks’ in “it looks red and old” can have a univocal use without taking the comparative or epistemic use.

Appealing to the distinctive “visual gestalt”, a particular representational content can be read off from the way a thing looks to the subject because the object in question is *always* presenting its distinctive feature to the subject. In Byrne’s words, if \circ looks_{nc} (the subscript expresses the noncomparative use) F to S then S exes, of \circ , that it is F*, where F* is either identical to F or related to F (‘exes’ stands for the perceptual attitude) (Byrne, 2009, p. 443). Introducing F* allows intentionalists to claim that the read-off content possibly does not include Fness. For example, from

⁷ Briefly, Jackson argues that material things do not have color properties because color properties do not serve any scientific causal explanation of the interactions between objects, while sense-data as the immediate perceptual objects have color properties. Hence, sense-data are not material but mental. See Jackson (1977, pp. 120–28).

⁸ Jackson’s detailed argument for the independence of the phenomenal use can be seen in (1977, pp. 34–6). For the objection, see Martin (2010, p. 180-1).

the appearance statement “Joe looks Scandinavian” the read-off content can be formulated without the predicate “Scandinavian” but only with lower-level predicates such as “straight blond hair”, “a small nose”, etc.

Byrne supposes that Chisholm’s noncomparative use is a genuine alternative notion, which is overlooked by Travis. Hence, Travis’s objection is at least incomplete, leaving a possibility for intentionalists to claim that representational content can be read off from looks where the appearance word is used noncomparatively. Particularly, the noncomparative use can convey a distinctive visual gestalt of the object in question, and the visual gestalt can fix a representational content. Therefore, the indeterminacy objection and the exclusive objection can be both blocked.

Schellenberg’s (2011, p. 722) view is very similar to Byrne’s: she thinks that appearance words, used noncomparatively, pick out or refer to particulars, such as objects or property-instances, and no comparison to other particulars is made. She even believes that the comparative use and epistemic use depends on noncomparative use, because the picked out ‘way’ grounds for which comparisons are made, and further for which ways look to the subject in the epistemic sense. In effect, the way a thing looks in the noncomparative sense fixes the content of experience.

To sum up, Byrne’s and Schellenberg’s general strategy has two steps: first, they interpret Travis’s ‘visual looks’ and ‘thinkable looks’ as corresponding to Chisholm’s comparative and epistemic use of appearance words, respectively; secondly, they pinpoint a genuine third notion of looks, namely Chisholm’s noncomparative use, to argue that a visual gestalt can be picked out, from which a determinate representational content can be read off.

In the next sections, I will expound Chisholm’s comparative/noncomparative use and explain why Chisholm’s definition of the noncomparative use is problematic. I will also introduce Chisholm’s appearance objectivism.

4 Chisholm’s Noncomparative Use of Appearance Words

Chisholm defines the comparative use as follows,

When we use appear words comparatively, the locution

x appears to S to be...

and its variants may be interpreted as comparing x with those things which have the characteristic that x is said to appear to have. A more explicit rendering of such locutions, therefore, would be something like this:

x appears to S in the way in which things that are...appear under conditions which are...(1957, p. 45)

The essential point is that if “appears” is used comparatively, the complex expression “ x appears F ” means that x appears like F -things appear under certain conditions. Take Chisholm’s own example, “The mountainside looks red”: this might mean that the mountainside looks the way red things look in daylight or that the mountainside looks the way red things are expected to look under present conditions, etc. The conditions can be variously described depending on the context. The point of the

comparative use is to translate appearance statements — taking the form “x appears so-and-so” — into sentences referring to things which *are* so-and-so.

The noncomparative use of the appearance expression “appears F”, by contrast, is understood independently of F-things’ appearing under certain conditions. Given the noncomparative use, appearance statements cannot be translated into sentences referring to things which are so-and-so. As a result, the statement, “The mountainside looks red”, does not entail the statement, say, “The mountainside looks the way red things look in daylight”.

Besides the above negative and semantic characterization, Chisholm also provides a positive but *epistemological criterion* for the noncomparative use in the end of that chapter where he introduces different uses of appearance words:

More generally, when we take the locution ‘x appears so-and-so to S’ non-comparatively, we can say that the subject S, referred to in such a statement, can know whether the statement is true even if he knows nothing about things which are so-and-so. (Chisholm, 1957, p. 53)

According to this criterion, knowing how an F-thing appears under certain conditions is no longer a necessary condition for understanding a sentence involving “appears F”. Instead, the noncomparative use implies that the subject’s experience itself suffices for her to know the truth of “x appears so-and-so”.

Chisholm, in that chapter, also tries to persuade readers to charitably accept the noncomparative use on the basis of understanding traditional empiricism. He argues that this use is closely related to the empiricist tradition and it is even presupposed by empiricism, as he writes,

If there is a predicate ‘so-and-so’, which is commonly applied, both to ways of appearing and to the properties of things, as ‘red’ is applied both to apples and to the way such apples generally look, then the property use of ‘so-and-so’ may be defined in terms of ‘appears so-and-so’. (Chisholm, 1957, p. 50)

The quotation indicates that ‘appears so-and-so’ is taken to be conceptually prior to ‘so-and-so’ by empiricists. ‘Red’, for instance, should be defined by ‘appears red’ rather than the other way around. Apparently, the empiricist view on the relationship between ‘appears so-and-so’ and ‘so-and-so’ is inconsistent with the comparative use which regards ‘so-and-so’ to be conceptually prior. For the comparative use implies the thought that the meaning of ‘x appears F’ is defined in terms of how F-things appear under certain conditions.

Furthermore, Chisholm appeals to an analogy of two possible uses of the expression “speaks French” to illustrate the noncomparative use. We can either define “speaks French” as speaking the language spoken by the majority of people living in the geographic area that is France (i.e., Frenchmen), or we can define it in terms of particular vocabularies and grammars. If we define it in the former way, then the statement:

- (1) John speaks French

entails the statement

(2) John speaks the language spoken by most Frenchmen.(Chisholm, 1957, p. 52)

By contrast, if we define it in the latter way, then (1) does not entail (2). In addition, a speaker could know (1) without knowing (2)—she may not know anything about the majority of people living in France or their linguistic activities. But as long as she knows that the language which John speaks has certain vocabularies and grammars, she knows that John speaks French.

The analogy is meant to carry over to the appearance words. If “appears F” is used comparatively, then a subject cannot claim “O appears F to me” without knowing how F-things look under certain conditions. But just like “speak French” can be defined without referring to Frenchmen, Chisholm thinks that “appears F” can be defined or used without referring to F-things. Imagine that you have an experience of a thing which you know it is red in daylight. The object looks a certain way and you ostensively define that way of looking as looking red. Chisholm thinks that you can then use the expression “looks red” to pick out that appearance without prior knowing anything about how red things look. All you know is a certain appearance of the object.

It is worth noting that Chisholm attributes appearances that “appears F” picks out to the object in question. He claims that “The animal looks centaurian” does not attribute anything to the “look of the animal”. Instead, it attributes something to that animal (1957, pp. 115–6). That is to say, the complex expressions such as “looks red”, “looks centaurian” and the like pick out appearances of objects. In fact, according to Chisholm, no matter whether an appearance expression is used comparatively or noncomparatively, the expression always attributes something to objects. Let us call this view *appearance objectivism*. The following text presents this view:

Rather, the complex expressions consisting of the verb followed by its modifier—the expressions “looks centaurian” and “appear green”—attribute something to what the noun, or subject of the verb, refers to. These complex expressions, whether we take them comparatively or noncomparatively, might thus be replaced by single words—for example, by “lookscentaurian” and “appearsgreen.” (Chisholm, 1957, p. 116; italics added)

On this account, “looks red” in the statement “The mountainside looks red” picks out an appearance of the mountainside, even the mountainside may be yellow in daylight. I am sympathetic with appearance objectivism. Ordinarily, appearance statements say how a thing strikes the subject. “The mountainside looks red to me” says that the mountainside strikes me with redness. Such a striking is not only for me. Others with the similar well-functioning visual system would see the same redness if they look at the mountainside from my perspective. Moreover, explanatorily speaking, we always appeal to *objects' appearances* to explain how an object looks to us. Suppose I claim that Joe looks Scandinavian. I explain this to others by pointing to a Scandinavian and those specific characteristics she has, and saying that these characteristics capture my attention. I am using objectively visual characteristics to explain how Joe

looks to me. Therefore, when I say “*o looks F to me*” I admit that *o* has an objective look *F*. Chisholm’s appearance objectivism has contemporary echoes. For example, Alva Noë holds that looks are perspectival properties, which are relational properties of *objects*, i.e., relations between objects and their environment, but not relations to experiences (cf. Noë, 2005, p. 83; also see Brewer 2008). Martin holds a more parsimonious objective view on looks. He writes: “we identify the looks of objects with their basic visible properties, including their colors and shapes” (Martin, 2010, p.161). For Martin, properties in environment are even redundant for looks, let alone any experiential state. The point is, besides Chisholm’s semantic distinction between the comparative and noncomparative uses, he also proposes a metaphysical view on looks, namely appearance objectivism. Nevertheless, as I know, he does not say whether looks are perspectival or not.

Let us go back to Chisholm’s argument for noncomparative use (in the semantic sense). I think that Chisholm’s defense is problematic. First, the analogy does not work. The French language is a complex concept and thus can be characterized in diverse ways such as the characterization without appealing to Frenchmen. By contrast, the concept of *F* conveyed by “*appears F*” is usually much simpler. We do need to appeal to *F*-things to understand “*appears F*”. Consider Chisholm’s own example “*looks centaurian*”. Centaurian is a complex concept; it can be characterized in terms of, for instance, having a half-man-half-horse appearance with wings. Now a question arises: Does this characterization appeals to the ordinary centaurian to characterize “*looks centaurian*”? One may say, it does not because the term “centaurian” does not appear in the above characterization; the characterization does not claim that “*looks centaurian*” means “having an ordinary centaurian look under certain conditions”. However, another may disagree and claim that having ‘a half-man-half-horse appearance with wings’ amounts to ‘having an ordinary centaurian look’. Hence, defining “*appears F*” needs to appeal to what an *F*-thing appears under certain conditions. Hence, it is not obvious that we can define or understand “*looks centaurian*” without appealing to the notion of ordinary centaurian.

Let us consider a simpler predicate to make case clearer. Let *F* stand for ‘red’. The analogy now does not apply at all. There seem to be two ways of defining ‘*looks red*’: Either defining it in comparative terms as Brewer does: *looks F* is understood in terms of paradigm exemplars of *F*-things against various points of view and various circumstances of perception (Brewer, 2011, p. 95); or defining it demonstratively. Obviously, for the sake of argument for the noncomparative use, only the demonstrative definition is available to Chisholm. However, it is obvious that defining “*speaks French*” in terms of vocabularies and grammars is not a demonstrative definition. That is to say, no matter whether we can define ‘*looks red*’ demonstratively, and thereby noncomparatively, the “*speaks French*” analogous argument does not serve its purpose.

A more general question is whether the involvement of the demonstrative definition of ‘*looks F*’ rules out the comparative sense. Chisholm thinks that when the appearance word is used noncomparatively the subject can know the truth of the appearance statement “*x appears F*” without knowing how an ordinary *F*-thing appears. This is the epistemological criterion that Chisholm used to characterize the noncomparative use. This line of thought seems to imply that the subject demonstra-

tively defines “appears F” in the appearance statement. Imagine a scenario where you demonstratively define “looks red” of an object. You then use the expression “looks red” to pick out that appearance without knowing anything about how red things look. All you know is that this thing has a certain look and you use the expression to refer to that way of looking. Now it becomes dubious whether in such a scenario the subject is defining ‘looks red’ or ‘red’ itself, since we also demonstratively define ‘red’ in this way. That is, the demonstrative definition of ‘looks F’ is indistinguishable from the demonstrative definition of ‘F’. It implies that the epistemological criterion for the noncomparative use fails, because knowing the truth of an appearance statement (involving demonstratively defining ‘looks F’) implies knowing F-thing.

Let us add something new to the previous scenario to illustrate why defining ‘looks red’ requires some sense of understanding of ‘red’. Suppose that Jackson’s poor Mary⁹ is just released and stands by you. When you point at the mountainside and assert “this looks red”, does she know from then on what ‘looks red’ means? Wait! She actually begins to know what ‘red’ means, because she already knew that red things normally look red and other colored things can look red under certain conditions. It means that to understand the meaning of ‘appears F’ one must have already understood the meaning of ‘F’.

Imagine a more extreme scenario: you and Mary look at the mountainside under a very strange light condition. You and Mary never saw this color before. You randomly pick up a three-letter word ‘sed’ and assert “this looks sed”. Your demonstrative definition is unfortunately *inappropriate*. For if the color is so peculiar the new concept — sed — presumably describes the color under such peculiar light conditions, namely this peculiar light is essentially connected to the concept sed. Therefore, your assertion — “this looks sed” — is inappropriate; what you should have asserted is that “this is sed”. Hence, when we demonstratively define ‘looks F’, we must have already know F in some sense. If we first encounter a visual quality and want to name it, we directly give it a name F without saying ‘looks F’. Hence, to say that an appearance statement involves a demonstrative definition or a demonstrative act, it does not mean that (implicit) comparisons are not made.

Now let us consider the epistemological criterion in another angle. Chisholm writes, “if the term ‘appears’ in the locution ‘x appears so-and-so to S’ is used non-comparatively, then S, referred to in such a statement, can know whether the statement is true even if he knows nothing about ordinarily so-and-so things in general” (Chisholm, 1957, p. 53). This definition is indeed problematic. I cannot know whether the statement “o looks F to me” is true or false, if I know nothing about the way an F ordinarily looks. This is because without knowing how an F ordinarily looks, I cannot form a proper concept of what an F is. And without grasping the concept, I cannot know whether a statement involving this concept is true or false. Suppose that I have never seen a Scandinavian woman and have also never come across any description of how they are typically portrayed in movies, books or elsewhere. As such, I would not know the stereotypical features of Scandinavian women. Suppose that Joe has a Scandinavian look: she has straight blond hair, a small nose, pale skin, etc. One day I meet her at the philosophy of perception class. Certainly, she looks Scandinavian.

⁹ See Jackson (1982).

But I do not know whether the statement “Joe looks Scandinavian” is true or false, precisely because I do not possess the concept of Scandinavian look. I cannot conceptually relate the term ‘Scandinavian’ to Joe’s look. Only after someone tells me (e.g. while pointing to Joe) “this is a Scandinavian look”, would I begin to know the truth-value of “Joe looks Scandinavian”. The argument equally applies to low-level predicates. Think about Jackson’s Mary. Mary does not know what it is like to see something red in the black-white house, because she does not know what an ordinary red thing looks like. She needs to see red things to grasp the concept of red so that she could know what it is like to see something red. Grasping certain concepts is necessary for acquiring knowledge involving the relevant concepts. And knowing what an F ordinarily looks like is necessary for grasping the concept of an F. Therefore, it seems impossible to know the truth-value of a statement involving ‘F’ without knowing how an F ordinarily looks. Thus, Chisholm’s definition of is problematic.

Again, the failure of this definition is independent of Chisholm’s appearance objectivism. Although I do not know the truth of the statement “Joe looks Scandinavian”, the statement itself is true, since looksScandinavian is Joe’s objective appearance.

A brief summary of Chisholm’s view on the comparative and noncomparative uses: most importantly, “appears F”, no matter whether it is used comparatively or noncomparatively, attributes something to the object referred to in the appearance statement. In this sense, I label Chisholm’s view *appearance objectivism*. Secondly, Chisholm tries to motivate the noncomparative use of appearance words by appealing to the epistemological criterion and the analogy of two ways of defining “speaks French”. As I argued, both arguments face difficulties.

5 The Misinterpretations in Byrne-Schellenberg’s Response

Let us return to Byrne-Schellenberg’s response to Travis’s objection again after the long exposition of Chisholm’s comparative and noncomparative uses. As we noticed in § 3, the key of their response is to find a genuine third notion of looks. They believe that Chisholm’s noncomparative use is that genuine third notion. For Byrne specifically, the noncomparative use attributes a distinctive visual gestalt to an object, which fixes the particular representational content. But as explained in the last section, Chisholm’s comparative use also attributes F-looks to objects, although semantically appearance statements is equivalent to a statement in comparative terms. So why can the comparative use of appearance words not refer to a distinctive visual gestalt as the noncomparative use does? Byrne does not answer this crucial question. He seems to assume that the difference between the comparative use and the non-comparative use lies in whether the appearance expression “appears F” picks out a distinctive visual feature. If so, he misunderstands Chisholm’s point. As I interpreted Chisholm’s view above, he holds *appearance objectivism* that appearances should be attributed to objects regardless of the use of appearance words; the distinction between comparative use and noncomparative use is a semantic distinction, which concerns how we use appearance words in different contexts and what they mean in different contexts. For example, when I claim that Joe looks Scandinavian to me, I attribute a distinctive visual appearance to Joe, because she looks to me like a typical

Scandinavian woman ordinarily looks to me. Thus, the comparative use is consistent with appearance objectivism, and is also consistent with Byrne's own suggestion that appearance expression conveys a thing's distinctive visual gestalt. This suggests that in picking out a visual gestalt, the noncomparative use is not special. So, in this sense, the noncomparative use is not a genuine third notion of looks. Byrne as well as others misunderstand Chisholm's comparative use. They overlook Chisholm's appearance objectivism is independent of the comparative or noncomparative use.

Unfortunately, Byrne and others also misinterpret Travis's view. Travis's visual looks, which are interpreted as corresponding to Chisholm's comparative use, is wrong. In general, as Wilson correctly points out, Travis does not make a semantic objection to the content view. His objection is about the metaphysics and epistemology of appearances (Wilson, 2018). As explained in § 2, on Travis's account, 'visual looks' are equivocal and 'thinkable looks' are not perceptual, so no looks can deliver the representational content required by intentionalists. However, Byrne (2009); Siegel (2010a, b; Schellenberg, (2011); Brogaard (2017)) all attribute the semantic view to Travis's objection. For example, Byrne writes, "But Travis is wrong to conclude that our ordinary talk provides no support for (CV)" (2009, p. 444). Siegel makes the similar claim, "Something close to the semantic objection seems to be in play in Travis (2004). Travis raises doubts that any actual uses of *looks* in English report contents of visual perceptual experience" (2010a, p.355). Schellenberg is not exceptional, "He (Travis) considers the comparative and the epistemic sense of looks, although he does not use these labels to distinguish these different senses of looks. Following Chisholm, we can understand the comparative sense of appearance words as pertaining to cases in which appearance words are used to make comparisons in the ways things look" (2011, p.721). Brogaard's view may be in the middle between Travis and Byrne/Siegel/Schellenberg, she agrees with Byrne's observation on the comparative use that 'visual looks' corresponding to, but she also writes, "Travis's point, however, is not merely linguistic. It is clearly meant to extend also to looks-*qua*-mental events, that is, to the looks or appearances associated with perceptual experiences" (Brogaard, 2017).

Let us examine again what visual looks are in Travis's mind. Travis characterizes 'visual looks' independently of Chisholm's *semantic* distinction between the comparative use and the noncomparative use. Simply put, Travis focuses on the nature of visual looks, on how the look is produced and its relation to the given conditions, which is a metaphysical account. He writes,

Whether something has the look is settled simply by its visual effect. It has the look, perhaps, only under given conditions for producing that effect—only when viewed thus (such as from a certain angle). The look may be detectable only by one which suitable visual equipment. But to have the look (viewed thus) is to have it full stop—*independent* of how its so looking bears on whether to take it to be any given thing it thus looks like. (Travis, 2013, p. 35)

In this passage, Travis describes 'visual looks' of an object as objective: it is determined by its visual effect under certain conditions; and having a visual look is inde-

pendent of whether the look is taken to be compared to things that have the look. Travis's account on 'visual looks' is thus metaphysical.¹⁰

Travis is misinterpreted by both Byrne and Schellenberg perhaps because he also writes, "For whether X looks *like* Y is very liable to depend on how *comparisons* are made...on some understanding or other, she looks (just) *like* any of indefinitely many different things" (2013; italics added). In this passage, the terms "looks like" and "comparisons" are used. But he only means that visual looks are occasion-sensitive, and an object may have different looks viewed differently. He does not refer to Chisholm's sense of comparative use, because the comparative use, according to Chisholm, is a way of understanding the *meaning* of appearance phrases, where "looks F" is understood in terms of how an F thing looks under certain conditions. Indeed, both the comparative use and the noncomparative one are concerned with the meaning or the use of appearance words. Chisholm's appearance objectivism is an addition to his semantic discussion. As I analyzed in § 4, both uses attribute appearances to the perceived objects. If my interpretations on Travis and Chisholm are right, then Byrne, Siegel, and Schellenberg's interpretation on both are wrong.

To sum up. Take Byrne as the representative. Byrne's astray response to Travis's objection is based on his misdiagnosis of Travis's notions of looks and his misinterpretation on Chisholm's account of appearance words. Byrne mistakenly relates 'visual looks' to the comparative use and identifies the comparative use as the ultimate problem for being unable to fix representational content. Based on this misdiagnosis, he puts forward the solution by appealing to Chisholm's noncomparative use. The central idea of his argument is that the noncomparative use, as an alternative to the comparative use, picks out a distinctive visual gestalt which is able to fix representational content. However, as I argued above, the comparative use also picks out a distinctive visual gestalt according to a proper understanding of Chisholm. That is, if a distinctive visual gestalt can fix representational content as Byrne suggests, then Travis' 'visual looks' interpreted as Chisholm's comparative use, should have also been able to fix representational content too. Thus, the comparative use should not be blamed. Moreover, to interpret Travis' 'visual looks' as corresponding to Chisholm's comparative use is itself a mistake, because Travis's notion of 'visual looks' is a metaphysical one but not a semantic one. Therefore, Byrne's solution, no matter whether it is true or false, is based on misinterpretations.

6 Does Byranean Solution Work?

One may content that maybe Byrne and others do not need to take all Chisholm's package regarding appearance words. Let us consider whether his solution, based on "visual gestalt", works regardless of those misinterpretations. Recall Travis's central point: the senses are silent. Why? Because there can be many actual scenarios that realize a particular look. Visual experience does not 'indicates' that a particular content *should* be read off. Or as Raleigh repeats Travis's point,

¹⁰ Wilson (2018) has a more detailed analysis on Travis's view on looks.

“when things look a certain phenomenal way to me, a way of looking that is bound to be shared by all sorts of very different perceptual scenarios, why think that this way things look represents that any one in particular of these scenarios is the actual environmental scene, rather than any of the other scenarios?”
 (2013a, p. 1219)

The point is that phenomenology or looks are neutral. They do not indicate a canonical actual scenario as its representation. Or as Raleigh himself paraphrases the claim, “Why can’t properties be presented in experience without them being presented ‘as being instantiated’? ‘Being instantiated’ indicates that a particular content is registered. This inquiry is specifically for Siegel who appeals to the notion of being instantiated in her argument from appearing. Ivanov (2017) shows that only universals are instantiated, but in perceptual experience, the phenomenological evidence only supports the presence of property-instance, not facts as the notion of ‘instantiated’ indicates.

Byrne’s central idea is that a distinctive visual gestalt does fix a particular representational content, so senses are not silent but points to a particular content, and the particular content is aggregated by low-level predicates. For example, centaurs have a certain kind of body hair, torso, coloring, gait, and so forth. As such, if o looks F to S then S exes, of o, that it is F*, where F* is either F or the salient features related to F. Take Byrne’s example, if a naked mole rat looks old to S, then S exes of the rat that it is wrinkled, pink, etc. In this example, ‘old’ does not appear in the content. Byrne’s visual gestalt means to exclude various contents caused by occasion-sensitivity. In other words, the visual gestalt is not occasion-sensitive.

Brogaard’s argument for intentionalism may in some sense explain why a distinctive gestalt as an aggregation presented in experience. She writes, “Human beings evolved to have brains that in the right kind of environment learn to calculate things like color-, size- and shape-constancies.” She further argues by referring to Pylyshyn’s (1999) perceptual principles that our perceptual experience are governed by non-rational perceptual principles. So, she concludes that “the way things perceptually appear is independent of the agent’s high-level epistemic states”. This conclusion, she thinks, sufficiently rebuts Travis’s argument, because she thinks that Travis’s objection relies on the following premise: “There is no unique way that things perceptually appear [or look] to be, independently of the agent’s particular epistemic state (i.e., her decisions, beliefs, etc.)” (Brogaard, 2017).¹¹

Here goes the replies to Byrne and Brogaard. First, I think that philosophers who are aligned with Travis’s objection (cf. Raleigh, 2013a, b; Ivanov, 2017) will say, even if we have a distinctive visual gestalt, we still need not concede that the visual gestalt is presented as ‘being instantiated’. Maybe perceptual principles are as Brogaard describes: they govern the low-level qualities’ aggregation. But these principles still do not force visual gestalt to be presented as ‘being instantiated’. That is to say, even

¹¹ I am suspicious that Travis’s objection relies on a subject’s epistemic state as Brogaard thinks. As I propose, Travis’s visual looks are objective. Raleigh (2013a, b; Wilson, (2018)) also do not think that visual looks are dependent on epistemic states.

though a distinctive visual gestalt can exclude indeterminacy, Travis's followers can still resist the content view.

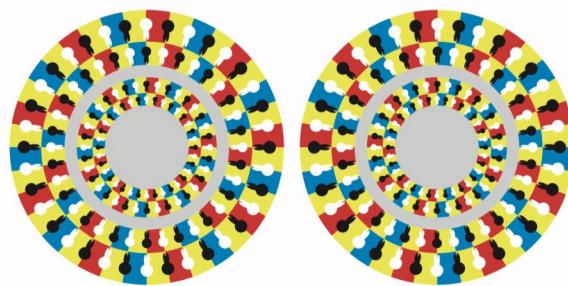
Secondly, a visual gestalt may still associate with more than one kind of objects (or higher-level properties), so if contents could be read off, exclusive contents might still arise. Recall the case that a wax statue exhibited in the museum bathed in a warm light. It looks both wooden and waxy to the subject at the same time. So the statue's distinctive gestalt is associated with both wooden and waxy statues. It is not the case that the subject has a certain belief or makes a certain comparison on a given occasion. Rather, the statue truly looks these ways, no matter who looks at it under such viewing conditions. Hence, if the representational content is read off from a distinctive visual appearance, then in the statue's case a pair of mutually exclusive content arise. They are \langle The statue is wooden \rangle and \langle The statue is waxy \rangle . Given the accuracy conditions, one's visual experience of the statue would be both accurate and inaccurate. But it is unacceptable that visual experience is both accurate and inaccurate, just as it is unacceptable that a belief is both true and false.

Byrne anticipates such an objection. He writes, "...perceptual content, if there is such a thing, goes with the ways things look when they look_{nc} F, which need not include Fness" (Byrne, 2009, p. 443). This is why he thinks that if o looks F to S, then S exes, of o, that it is F*, where F* is not necessarily equivalent to F, as his naked mole rat example illustrated. In the wax statue case, F stands for waxy or wooden which need not be included in the perceptual content. What registered into the subject's representational content might be warmness, yellowness, smoothness, statue-shaped, etc. All those qualities are associated with both being waxy and being wooden. So, there is no incompatibility in the representational content.

This response has at least one difficulty. In the statue's case, if only those low-level predicates are registered into the subject's representational content, then the content would be like \langle the statue is warm, yellow, smooth \rangle . It follows that the subject's visual experience at any rate will be evaluated to be accurate, since both being waxy and being wooden are associated with the same distinctive appearance expressed by predicates such as warm, yellow, smooth, statue-shaped, etc. If so, intentionalists do not seem to be allowed to report their experience as they commonly do, say, "my visual experience represents the statue to be waxy". This is because the predicates 'waxy' and 'wooden' are not registered into the content. That is, Byrne's view implies that the only read off contents are those low-level ones. This consequence seems unacceptable for intentionalists because they do claim, "my visual experience represents the statue to be waxy or to be wooden."

One may defend Byrne's gestalt view as follows: the resulting content need not posit incompatible properties, even if we intuitively associate this linguistic description with the resulting experience. Intentionalists can simply reject the claim that the description 'waxy or wooden' accurately captures the content of experience.¹² This defense assumes that only higher-level experienced properties are incompatible. But consider the Uzumaki effect (Fig. 1). If you stare at the image, it does not rotate; yet if you move your eyes, it becomes rotating. The effect is best seen in your peripheral vision. Being moving and being still are relatively low-level properties, but we

¹² I thank one referee for posing this challenge.

Fig. 1 The Uzumaki effect

still experience incompatible properties about an image. That is to say, the resulting content, even only concerning low-level predicates, mutually exclusive contents may arise.¹³

Therefore, even if the misinterpretations on Chisholm and Travis are put aside, Byrnean solution to Travis's objection still fails.

7 Concluding Remarks

Travis's objection to the content view has at least three interconnected levels. First, looks cannot fix a particular content as the indeterminacy objection shows. Secondly, if contents could be read off from looks, mutually exclusive contents may be read off, which conflicts accuracy conditions that many intentionalists hold. This is what the exclusive objection demonstrates. Thirdly, even if looks could be determinate, looks are still silent.

I have rebutted a popular response from Byrne, Siegel, and Schellenberg. They appeal to Chisholm's noncomparative use to avoid Travis's objection. Unfortunately, as I demonstrated, they not only misinterpret Chisholm's original conceptions of appearance words, but also misinterpret Travis's 'visual looks'. I have also shown that Chisholm's noncomparative use is ill-defined. Moreover, as I argued in § 6, even putting aside their misinterpretations, namely that let Byrne not take all Chisholm's package, his core argument based on a distinctive visual gestalt of experience fails to convey fixed representational content. This is because some objects' distinctive visual features are associated with more than one kind of objects; if representational content is read off from this distinctive visual gestalt, exclusive contents can be read off, even at the low-level qualities. Therefore, the argument from appearance does not convince us to accept the content view.

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¹³ Brogaard (2017) has a more detailed discussion of dual looks.

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