

# The Content of Perceptual Experience

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## Conflicting appearances

Let us return to the argument from illusion, in yet another form:

- 1 A stick in front of me looks bent.
- 2 A stick in front of me looks straight.
- 3 There is at most one stick in front of me.
- 4 No stick can be both bent and straight.
- ∴, 5 In at least one case, my perceptual experience is non-veridical.
- 6 In the non-veridical perceptual experience, I am presented with a mind-dependent intentional object.
- 7 Both perceptual experiences have the same type of intentional object.
- ∴, 8 The intentional object of both experiences is mind-dependent.
- 9 Sticks are not mind-dependent.
- ∴, 10 I neither case do I see the stick.

Austin denies that (1) and (2) are compossible. Irréalists deny (9), and may therefore also deny (3). (6) appears vulnerable, but depending on how we understand ‘intentional object’ and ‘mind-dependent’, it allows of uncontroversial interpretations. (7) is denied by disjunctivists. The phenomenal principle, or something like it, may be appealed to justify (5), by deriving it from (1), (2), (3) and (4):

- 1 A stick in front of me looks bent.
- ∴, 11 There is something of which I am aware that is bent.
- 2 A stick in front of me looks straight.
- ∴, 12 There is something of which I am aware that is straight.
- 3 There is at most one stick in front of me.
- 4 No stick can be both bent and straight.
- 13 There is at most one thing of which I am aware in the two cases.
- ∴, 14 Neither in (1) nor in (2) am I aware of the stick.

This is not a particularly good argument, however: the conclusion is too strong (as it incorporates already a version of (7)), and the additional premise (11) is hard to justify. Johnston, for example, denies (5) because he denies (13) – there are two sensible profiles of which I am aware, one of which is a proper part of the other. How does Johnston, however, account for (1) and (2)?

As an argument for sense-data, the argument is in danger of undermining itself. For it is not clear how the sense-data theorist derives or otherwise justifies (5). The sense data theorist reinterprets (1) and (2) as

- 1’ It appears to me: something is bent\*.
- 2’ It appears to me: something is straight\*.

Bentness\* and straightness\* are not properties of sticks, but of sense-data: if they can both be had by the same sense-datum, then we do not have an analogue of (4); if they cannot, then we do not have an analogue of (3).

Adverbialists may also be interpreted as denying (5). They reinterpret (1) and (2) as

- 1’’ I am appeared to bent-ly.
- 2’’ I am appeared to straight-ly.

As we do not have analogues of (3) and (4), (5) does not follow. But can it be denied? What about:

- 15 If am appeared to bent-ly and straightly, then in at least one case, my perceptual experience is non-veridical.

If (15) is plausible, then adverbialism does not help. Does the plausibility of (15), however, rest on something like (13)? Then the adverbialist seems to have the same problem than the sense-data theorist.

Alternatively, adverbialists may be construed as denying (6), or perhaps the existence of intentional objects at all. There is nothing that appears to me to be such-and-such, nothing I am aware of, nothing that looks to me a certain way. This is in danger of losing the explanandum, however: if (1) is construed as (1’), then why is it that we feel, in the presence of (adverbialist versions of) (3) and (4) a conflict between (1) and (2)?

Perspectival realists also deny (5) by reinterpreting (1) and (2). Their version is:

- 1<sup>'''</sup> The stick appears-bent-to-me.
- 2<sup>'''</sup> The stick appears-straight-to-me.

Again, it is not straightforward that there is a conflict and we have something like (5) at all.

## Different types of conflict

General motivation: is some dualism of objects and how they are needed to account for impressions of multiplicity?

Straightforward application to perception: object constancy. However, we have constancy phenomena for properties too: colours, velocity.

Compare

- (i) I believe that  $p$  and I believe that  $\neg p$ .
- (ii) I intend to  $\phi$  and I intend to  $\neg\phi$ .
- (iii) I desire to  $\phi$  and I desire to  $\neg\phi$ .
- (iv) I am afraid that  $p$  and I am glad that  $p$ .
- (v) I am afraid that  $p$  and I believe that it is not dangerous to me that  $p$ .
- (vi) I intend to  $\phi$  and I believe that it is impossible to  $\phi$ .
- (vii) I desire to  $\phi$  and I believe that it is not good for me to  $\phi$ .
- (viii) I intend to  $\phi$ , and I can  $\phi$ , and I do not do  $\phi$ .

## Representationalism

Representationalists are common-kind theorists who do not posit problematic mental objects.

How is that possible? In veridical experience, the subject stands in direct relation to mind-independent object, but this is not what is important in perceptual experience. What is important is that the experience represents the world. In cases of hallucination or illusion our experience misrepresents the world.

Representationalism claims that perceptual experiences are representational states: Experiences represent the world to us via "experiential content".

### The Content of Experience

Consider

- (a) Julien believes that Philipp is drunk.
- (b) David desires that Philipp is drunk.

They have a common form:

- (a) X believes that Y.
- (b) X desires that Y.

(a) and (b) are different propositional attitudes that have the same content (Y). X takes a certain attitude towards a proposition (Y), i.e. attitude of believing or desiring. Propositional attitudes are about certain things. Y specifies the content of the attitude- what it is about: the propositional content. Commonly held about propositional contents:

1. Contents can be true or false
2. Propositional contents are constituted by propositions and propositions can be expressed by uttering/thinking a sentence. Propositional content: specified by 'that'-clause and proposition ('Philipp is drunk'). Propositional attitude expressed by beliefs, desires, hopes, fears etc.
3. Different sentences can express the same proposition: "Jack has lost his bag" / "Jack a perdu son sac" different sentences, same proposition.

Representationalists claim that perceptual experiences have propositional content. Suppose Nick has a visual experience such that it seems to him as if there is a green worm on a rock. We have:

- (c) Nick seems to see that there is a slimy worm on a rock.

The propositional content of that experience is "that there is a slimy worm on a rock". When someone has a visual experience it seems to them as if P. The proposition that specifies how it seems also determines the content of the experience. Important: Even if Nick knows he hallucinates, the content of his visual experience is still "there is a slimy worm".

Idea: Perception is mainly there to give information about the world to a subject, hence experiences represent the world. In hallucination and illusion experiences misrepresent the world.

## Varieties of representationalism

Propositional content is also called “conceptual content”: content that can be expressed by a sentence. In order to grasp a propositional content one must grasp the concepts that comprise that content. (To believe there is cheese on the table then you must possess the concept of cheese). All propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires etc) have propositional, conceptual content. Whether or not perceptual experiences have conceptual content, or another kind of content is a big debate. Conceptual versus non-conceptual content:

1. Conceptual content:
  - (a) can be expressed by a sentence
  - (b) is either true or false
2. Non-conceptual content:
  - (a) cannot be expressed by language

Some philosophers believe that experience have non-conceptual content, either in addition or instead of conceptual content. Argument for conceptual content: Having a perceptual experience is very close to entertaining a belief: because it seems to the subject as if there is a slimy worm, he must have the ability to have the belief there is a slimy worm

Problem 1: Only creatures that possess suitable concepts can have visual experiences with a certain content  
But what about subjects that

- do not possess the required concepts
- do not possess any concepts at all

According to non-conceptualists, ascribing those subjects non-conceptual content seems the only way to make sense of their behaviour.

Problem 2: But what is it to possess a concept? How do we know if a subject possess a concept? There are roughly two kinds of accounts:

- Low grade view: A subject possesses a concept of X, if they can discriminate X from other things and re-identify X on other occasions.
- High grade view: A subject possesses a concept of X, if they possess a language which contains that concept.

Question: Can we argue for a non-conceptual view, where “concept” is understood in a low-grade way? We have to find an example of a subject having experiences, without being able to discriminate the objects of experience beforehand and without being able to reidentify them. Can a subject have visual experiences with contents, when the subject lacks the concepts to specify the contents?

## Belief or doxastic theories of perceptual experience

First representationalists tried to hold that perceptions are just beliefs. Example: Georg Pitcher, David Armstrong. David Armstrong in “A Materialist Theory of Mind”: “Perception is nothing other than the acquiring of a belief about the current environment by means of senses”. Perception here is perceptual experience, i.e. illusions, hallucinations and veridical experiences.

Argument against belief theory: Most philosophers hold that perceptual and sensory experiences (eg pains, itches) are a different type of mental state to the propositional attitudes. Why?

1. Introspection suggests so.
2. No distinctive phenomenology with propositional attitudes, but with experiences.
3. Experiences are often said to be necessarily conscious and occurrent (present) states; propositional attitudes not (we might have subconscious beliefs, desires... but experiences?).
4. Considerations about non-conceptual content (if one accepts them).

Motivation for belief theories:

1. to get rid of sense-data and phenomenal character;
2. to provide a type identity /functionalist story about belief and reduce mental states to physical states.

Problems

1. “acquiring of belief”- clause
2. Perceptual experiences are necessary conscious and occurrent: they are conscious events. Beliefs not.  
Reply A: Acquiring a belief is a conscious event. Counter-reply: Acquiring a belief can be unconscious too (When I consciously perceived the ceiling of this room, I unconsciously acquired the belief that the room still has a ceiling)
3. Can't we perceive something and not acquire a belief? Perhaps we already knew it or we don't believe what we see. Reply A: We have at least an inclination to form a belief. I would have formed a belief if I had not already got it. I would have formed the belief in the absence of countervailing circumstances.

General problem: Perceptual illusions persist even when one knows that one has one and its nature: Müller-Lyer-Illusion.

## Reductive versus non-reductive representationalism

Some form of representationalism is called “reductive”, because (i) phenomenal character is reduced to having a particular content; and (ii) the having of a particular content is explained in physical terms. Reductive representationalism: Belief theories and strong representationalism.

Non-reductive representationalism is weak representationalism (Ned Block, Christopher Peacocke): Experiences are non-conceptual, but represent; non-reductive: phenomenal character (not explained in terms of physical and or functional features); compatible with sense datum view : sense-data may also be held to represent the world

Strong representationalism (Tye, Dretske): non-conceptual or conceptual; reductive: phenomenal character can be explained in physical terms. Reductive representationalism is based on the Transparency thesis:

(T) Experiences have no introspectible features that are not also representational contents.

When you have an experience of a tree, you just see the tree- you don't see “the experience” itself. A TV for example is something that represents without being transparent: it represents the world, but we can also see the TV itself.

1. all features of an experiences represent (no features of the experience that do not belong to the (representing) content)
2. phenomenal character is (fully) explained by content of experience

(1) is supported by transparency claim. (2) is supported by the fact that differences in phenomenal character are always accompanied by differences in content and vice versa. When you experience a chameleon that changes its colour, then

- the phenomenal character, i.e. what it is like to have this experience, will change
- the content of your experience will change (i.e. when you believe in conceptual content, the content will change eg from “there is a green chameleon” to “there is a red chameleon”).

So, strong representationalists believe that

- experiences have content (conceptual or non-conceptual),
- experiences represent via their content (the content represents the world),
- phenomenal character, i.e. ‘what it is like to have an experience’, and content always change together (when one changes the other changes too).

Some people, like Tye, conclude that phenomenal character *is* content.

To prove strong representationalism wrong we must:

- find a feature of our experience that is not representational (does not just represent the world, but is a feature of the representing thing, the experience); or
- find an example that involves a difference in phenomenal character without difference in content or vice versa.

## Causal conditions

Example: veridical hallucinations.

Analogy with emotions: are evaluative properties *represented* in perceptual experience?

Basic idea: Perception grounds knowledge, so must be conceptual.

Problem with this: Grounding may be cross-categorical.

Compare

1. *S* sees that *a* is *F*.
2. *S* sees *a* as *F*.
3. *S* sees *a*, which is *F*.

This is supposed to be “somewhere between”

1. *S* thinks that *a* is *F*.
2. *S* thinks of *a* as *F*.
3. *S* thinks of *a*, which is *F*.

and

1. *S* remembers that *a* is *F*.
2. *S* remembers *a* as *F*.
3. *S* remembers *a*, which is *F*.

General problem: whatever the relevant factors in the grounding base are, they arise, both in individuals and in the species, in a gradual way. There is inevitable vagueness in where the digital property of ‘having concepts’ is first exemplified. Talking of ‘proto-concepts’ does not help, but just pushes the problem down the line.