

# What does it mean to say that perceptual experiences have contents, and do they?

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## 1 Two aspects of perception: content and phenomenal character

Informal exposition of the two central terms for our discussion of perception: phenomenal character and content.

The phenomenal character of a perceptual experience is: how that experience feels; how it seems, from the point of view of the perceiver; what it is like to have the experience. Two experiences have just the same phenomenal character iff having one experience is indistinguishable from having the other; if they seem the same ‘from the inside.’

The content of a perceptual experience is: the way that experience presents the world as being; the way that world is, according to that experience; the way that world appears (looks, smells, sounds) to be to the perceiver. The content of a perceptual experience determines the veridicality conditions of that experience: it determines the way the world would have to be the experience to be accurate.

(Compare the way you would explain talk about the content of beliefs to an undergraduate. You would say that the content of a belief is the way the world is, according to that belief; the way the believer takes the world to be; and that the content of the belief determines the way the world would have to be in order for the belief to be true.)

Pautz (2009) objects that explaining ‘content’ talk in this way trivializes debates about whether experiences have contents and about what those contents are. He is right that, on this construal,

it is very plausible that experiences have contents. But that is because it is very plausible that experiences have contents. I think that it is an overstatement to say that on this sort of view the claim that perceptual experiences have contents is trivial. Some people do seem to deny this claim. (After all, *some* people deny the corresponding claim about belief and thought.) But Pautz is right that oftentimes when people say that they are denying that experiences have contents, they are denying something much stronger than the claim that in visual experiences, for example, there is a way that the world visually seems to the subject. I'll return to this below.

I think that Pautz is incorrect when he says that this sort of explanation of the content of perception trivializes debates about the nature of the contents of experience. Compare the case of the content of belief. We can agree that debates about the nature of the content of belief are nontrivial. Why should perception be any different?

At this point, the key thing is to understand, at least in a preliminary way, what it means to talk about the phenomenal character of an experience, and what it means to talk about the content of an experience. You should also see that these things at least seem conceptually distinct: for all we have said, there might be an interesting relation between the two, or there might not be.

One of the reasons why the philosophy of perception is so interesting is because perception is the arena in which these two paradigmatic 'marks of the mental' — intentionality and phenomenal character — seem to be most closely related. One of the central questions in the philosophy of perception, and one of the questions which we're going to talk about, concerns the relationship between these two.

## 2 Why think that perceptual experiences have contents?

In my view, the claim that perceptual experiences have contents needs little positive argument, at least when read in the above way. The intuitive view is surely that (e.g.) visual experiences present the world as being some way, that there is such a thing as the world visually appearing to be a certain way. At least, this seems as much the pre-theoretic view as the view that beliefs have contents. The interesting question, I think, is whether any of the arguments which have been given against perceptual content should lead us to give this view up.

But there are three standard kinds of arguments given for perceptual content, each of which is a kind of 'best explanation' argument:

- Thinking of perceptions as having contents provides the most natural treatment of illusion and hallucination. It is plausible, pretheoretically, that illusions involve some mistaken/false representation of the world. But one can have an illusory experience which one knows to be illusory. In that case, one does not have a belief with a false content — so what sort of state could have the false content? A very natural answer is: the perceptual state itself. Your perceptual experience is giving you a false picture of your environment. (This is not to say that there is no other way to think about illusion — just that this is one very natural understanding of the distinction between illusion and veridical experience.) For a nice discussion of this, and a critical discussion of views of illusion which avoid commitment to perceptual contents, see Byrne (2009), §V-VI; for an opposed view of illusion, see Brewer (2007a).
- The view that perceptual experiences have contents is the best explanation of our ability to have contentful thoughts about our environment.
- The view that experiences have contents is the best explanation of the fact that we can

have justified beliefs about our environments on the basis of perceptual experiences. (These latter two are the main subject of McDowell (1994).)

### 3 Arguments for skepticism about perceptual content

But as mentioned, the main action here is not around arguments for perceptual content, but on arguments against it.

#### 3.1 *Johnston on veridical illusion and veridical hallucination*

Perhaps the most popular sort of objection to the contents of experience turns on worries about the consistency of the directness of perceptual access to the world with the view that perceptual experiences are fundamentally relations to propositions. Often these arguments seem purely rhetorical. But Johnston (2006) gives an example designed to show that the view that experiences are propositional attitudes can't capture certain key distinctions between perceptual experiences.

The distinction between veridical hallucination and veridical experience. The examples of the twins in the Ames room and seeing in the dark. (See Johnston (2006), pp. 271-9.)

Johnston's intuitions about these cases might without absurdity be denied. But I think that he is onto something. However, I don't see that these cases are an objection to the idea that experiences have contents. (To be fair, Johnston does not say that they are.) To say that every perceptual experience involves a relation to a proposition which is its content is not to say that this is all that there is to perceptual experience, or even to say that perceptual experiences are 'fundamentally' propositional attitudes.

A comparison might be useful. Think about the act of assertively uttering a sentence. This sort of act always involves a propositional attitude: one bears the assertion relation to a proposition (or several propositions). But this does not mean that the act-type in question is fundamentally a relation to a proposition, or should be analyzed in terms of a relation to a proposition. The act-type in question is fundamentally a matter of bearing a relation to a sentence-token — but that doesn't mean that there are not interesting questions about the propositions asserted by such acts, or that understanding the relationship between those propositions and other aspects of the act is of no importance.

In general, we should distinguish between talk of the *objects* and the *contents* of perception. One sort of relational theory of experience thinks of the objects of experience as propositions. But one can believe that experiences have contents without endorsing this view of the metaphysics of experience.

#### 3.2 *Content and the 'veil of perception'*

A distressingly common complaint against the view that perceptions have content is that it fails to account for the directness of perceptual experience; that contents are something like a veil interposed between perceiver and world. A representative example from Brewer (2006):

“Perceiving is not a matter of being saddled with representational content, however world-dependent this may be. It is rather a matter of the conscious presentation of actual constituents of physical reality themselves, particular such things, just as they

are, which is what makes all contentful representation of that reality in thought even so much as possible.”

Why this worry seems more serious if you think of the contents of experience as Fregean senses.

A connection between this sort of worry and the problem about objects vs. contents of perception above.

### *3.3 Some experiences lack content, so all do, part I: animal perception*

The view that perceptual experiences have content is naturally interpreted as the view that *all* perceptual experiences have content. It is difficult to see how having content could be an accidental feature of a type of mental state.

Alston (2005) argues that it is at least possible, and is probably actually the case, that some perceptual experiences lack content:

“It would suffice to establish that possibility to point out perceivers to whom objects look in certain ways and who are not at a stage of cognitive development that enables them to mentally represent SOA’s as obtaining. . . .if we take lower animals of the order of frogs and insects who do have perceptual capacities, it is very plausible both that objects consciously appear to them in certain ways and that they are incapable of doing anything that could properly be called representing those objects as having certain properties.”

Why think that frogs and insects are incapable of perceptually representing objects as having properties?

### *3.4 Some experiences lack content, so all do, part II: illusions*

As Brewer (2006) points out, it seems to follow from the idea that perceptions have content that some perceptual experiences could misrepresent the world: they could have as their content a false proposition. It is also natural for the believer in perceptual content to think of illusions and hallucinations as cases of this kind. This appears to be a strength of the view that perceptions have contents; but Brewer thinks that it is a problem for the view. His basic idea is that the possibility of falsity conflicts with the kind of direct access that perception gives us to the world; the problem is

“The incompatibility, between this idea that perceptual experience consists in direct conscious access to constituents of the physical world themselves, and the possibility of falsity in perceptual content which is characteristic of any form of [the view that perceptions have content]”

So far this is hardly an argument. But Brewer doesn’t rely on this intuition; he argues that the view that perceptions have contents can’t give a convincing treatment of illusions like the Muller-Lyer illusion. According to the view that perceptions have content, in the case of such illusions the content of one’s experience is a false proposition. But Brewer (2006, 2007b) thinks that it is hard to see what this proposition could be, for the following reasons:

1. Either one line must be represented as longer than it is, or the other must be represented as shorter than it is. But it is implausible to think that my experience of the lines represents them as being a determinate amount longer, or shorter, than they are.

*Reply:* some views of perceptual experience think of the contents of perceptions as invariably determinate. But this is an inessential aspect of the view that perceptions have content and, in my view, not a very attractive one. Why not think that perceptions, like thoughts, can represent one line as longer than another without representing it as some determinate length longer than the other?

2. Your experience represents the four endpoints of the two lines as being where they really are; your experience of the location of the endpoints is veridical. But you also represent the lines as of different lengths; so the content of your experience as a whole is a necessarily false proposition.

*Reply 1:* indeterminacy again. Also some worries about what ‘where your experience represents the endpoints as being’ means.

*Reply 2:* perhaps in this kind of case one’s perceptual experience has a contradictory proposition as its content.

3. The ‘dynamic’ version of the illusion, on which the hashes coming off of the endpoints shrink till they vanish. The view that experiences have content is committed to the view that you represent the lines as gradually changing in length. But this is not the way it seems; perceptually, the lengths of the two lines appear to remain constant.

*Reply:* This is the most interesting of Brewer’s cases. I am inclined to say that your experience represents the lines as of different lengths, and then at some point comes to represent them as the same length, but that this change comes to pass without your representing either line as changing in length over time. I don’t see that this involves your perceptual experience at any time as having an impossible proposition as its content. Of course it is true that the content of your experience at the later time is inconsistent with its content at an earlier time, but that is what we’d expect, given that your perceptual experience initially represents the lines as having a different length and later as having the same length.

### 3.5 Directness and the representation of particulars

A second way of developing the worry that thinking of perceptions as having contents makes perceptual experience unacceptable indirect is due to Bill Brewer.

“Suppose that you see a particular red football — call it Ball. According to (CV), your perceptual experience is to be characterized by its representational content. Let us take it for granted that this content makes singular reference to Ball. Your experience therefore represents that Ball is a specific general way, F, which such objects may be. Whichever way this is supposed to be, its identification requires making a determinate specification of one among indefinitely many possible generalizations from Ball itself. Ball has colour, shape, size, weight, age, cost, and so on. So perception must begin by making a selection amongst all of these, according to (CV). Furthermore, and far more importantly for my present purposes, on any given such dimension — colour, or shape, say — the specification in experience of a determinate general way that your perception supposedly represents Ball as being requires *further crucial abstraction*. Supposing that your experience is veridical, it must be determinate to what extent, and in which ways, Balls actual colour or shape might vary consistently with the truth of the relevant perceptual content. This is really just to highlight the fact that (CV) is

committed to the idea that your perceptual experience has specific truth conditions, *which go beyond anything fixed uniquely by the actual nature of the particular red football — Ball — which you see.*

According to (CV), then, perception . . . *does not consist in the simple presentation to a subject of various constituents of the physical world themselves.* Instead, it offers a determinate specification of the general ways such constituents are represented as being in experience: ways which other such constituents, qualitatively distinct from those actually perceived by any arbitrary extent within the given specified ranges, might equally correctly — that is, truly — be represented as being. Any and all such possible alternatives are entirely on a par in this respect with the object supposedly perceived, so far as (CV) is concerned. *Thus, perceptual experience trades direct openness to the elements of physical reality themselves, for some intellectual act of classification or categorization.* As a result, *(CV) loses all right to the idea that it is the actual physical objects before her which are subjectively presented in a persons perception, rather than any of the equally truth-conducive possible surrogates.”*

Emphasis is mine. What seems right about this quote is that typically one’s experience of an object will attribute to that object properties which other objects have, or could have. However, it certainly does not follow from this that states of affairs involving objects other than the object perceived are, so far as that perceptual experience goes, on par with the state of affairs perceived. One might think that the experience represents Ball as *F*, not just that there is something *F* in the vicinity. Nor is it clear why the representation of some properties but not others is ‘some intellectual act of classification or characterization.’ It is difficult for me to come up with a charitable interpretation of this argument.

Brewer goes on to challenge the believer in perceptual content to specify the facts in virtue of which some aspects of the scene before her are represented in a given perceptual experience, and others are not. This is indeed a difficult question. But it is not as though posing this question shows that it cannot be answered, and it is not clear that if we can’t answer it, it follows that there is no such thing as perceptual content. (Compare the case of thought. You might think that all the going theories of mental content fail without leaping to the conclusion that there is no such thing as having a thought with a certain content.) Moreover, an analogous worry can be raised for any theory of perception: in virtue of what does a perceptual experience consist in relations to some objects but not others/some sense data but not others/involve one mode of adverbial sensing rather than another?

### 3.6 *The explanatory role of experience*

Campbell (2002a,b) worries that the view that experiences have contents makes experiences ill-suited to play the role of making new contents available for thought. Here’s one way he puts the argument:

“The argument turns on an appeal to the explanatory role of experience. Experience is what explains our grasp of the concepts of objects. But if you think of experience as intentional, as merely one among many ways of grasping thoughts, you cannot allow it this explanatory role.” (135)

It is hard to see why the fact that both perceptions and thoughts have contents should preclude the idea that the former can explain the possibility of the latter. This seems to depend on assimilating the view that perceptions have content to the view that perception is a species of

thinking. But I don't see why we should want to do that, or why we have to. McDowell, for one, sees this clearly in *Mind and World*:

“If we say that there must be a rational constraint on thought from outside it, so as to ensure a proper acknowledgement of the independence of reality, we put ourselves at the mercy of a familiar kind of ambiguity. “Thought” can mean the *act* of thinking; but it can also mean the *content* of a piece of thinking: what someone thinks. Now if we are to give due acknowledgement to the independence of reality, what we need is a constraint from outside *thinking* and *judging* . . . The constraint does not need to be from outside *thinkable contents*.” (28)

### 3.7 The argument from dispensability

Here is how Alston (2005) describes his opposition to the attribution of contents to perceptions:

“My central argument against [the view that perceptions have contents] is that we lack a sufficient reason for positing any such representation. The first point to note here is that in the absence of such a sufficient reason there is no basis for attributing a representative function to PE. The only other basis there could be is that PE presents itself, is experienced as, a representation. But that is clearly not the case. When something I see looks a certain way to me (conical, red . . .) it doesn't appear on the face of it to be a representation of anything. The mind is not irresistibly conveyed to something it is representing the way the mind is when one looks at a (realistic) painting or a photograph. The experience is not of that sort. Phenomenologically it has the character of a presentation of an object as being such-and-such. The experience terminates in the object presented without, so far as it appears, functioning to put S in mind of something else. Hence we need a reason beyond the phenomenological character of the experience to take it to be a representation.” (275-6)

(For related sentiments about the dispensability of content attributions to perceptual experiences, see Crane (2009).)

What is the argument here? Could we make an analogous point about mental states which uncontroversially have contents, like judgements?

There is a worry here that the disagreement is merely verbal. When Alston says “Phenomenologically it has the character of a presentation of an object as being such-and-such” this seems to me to be pretty much the same thing as “it represents the object as being such-and-such.” Alston would not agree. But what does he require of states having contents that perceptions lack (or at least seem to lack)?

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