

Perceptual experience, sensation, and non-sensory propositional attitudes

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One way to demarcate the class of perceptual experiences is to say that they are those mental states (events) which have both a content and a phenomenology. But this is not satisfactory, for a few reasons:

- Standardly, a distinction is made between perceptual experiences and bodily sensations. But bodily sensations have a phenomenology, and many think that the locatedness of such sensations shows that they have a content.
- There is a phenomenology to many intuitively non-sensory propositional attitudes, such as making an occurrent judgement, daydreaming, and remembering. It might be objected that in these cases the connection between content and phenomenology is contingent rather than necessary; but it is controversial whether there is a necessary connection between content and phenomenology even in paradigm cases of perceptual experience.

1 Perceptual experience and bodily sensations

One way to approach the question of what distinguishes bodily sensations from perceptual experiences is to see what problem we run into if we say that bodily sensations are a kind of perceptual experience. So, for example, pain might be a perceptual experience of bodily damage. This view is defended in Armstrong (1962) and Armstrong (1968), among other places.

One objection (about which see Aydede's SEP entry on 'Pain') is that in the case of perceptual experiences, but not pains, there is a distinction between appearance and reality. I can have a visual experience which seems to be of a horse without there being a horse present; but it does not seem (to some people, at least) that I can be mistaken about whether or not I am in pain.

A reply is that 'pain' is a name for the perceptual experience type, not a name for what experiences of that type represent. So the sense in which I can't be mistaken about whether I am in pain is in the same as the sense in which I can't be mistaken about whether I am having a visual experience which seems to be of something red.

A problem with that reply is that it conflicts with an aspect of pains which intentionalists like to emphasize: their locatedness. Say that I have a pain in my arm. The perceptual experience of damage in my arm is clearly not located in my arm, any more than the visual experience of a horse is located in the horse. But then if pains = perceptual experiences of bodily damage, how can my pain be in my arm?

One reply to this problem is to say that terms for bodily sensations are ambiguous: in some of their uses they stand for perceptual experiences, in others they stand for what those perceptual experiences represent. (So itches do really represent itches.) Does this seem plausible, or is this ‘the lazy man’s approach to philosophy’?

A second reply is to say that the perceptual experiences really are located in the place where the bodily damage is. But it is hard to know how to square this with phantom limb cases, in which we want to say that the person really is in pain, but does not have a pain in his leg.

So maybe the view that bodily sensations are just perceptual experiences of states of one’s body is OK. This looks good for those intentionalists who want to give a general account of phenomenology. But it leads to some constraints on theories of content, which now have to provide an account not just of the contents of beliefs, desires, etc. but also the contents of bodily sensations.

Suppose that you are convinced that ‘being in pain’ is an intrinsic property. Then it looks like our theory of content will have to be ‘internalist.’ But that doesn’t seem to work well for the (mental equivalents of) names and kind terms (at least). So maybe the view that bodily sensations are a kind of perceptual experience forces us toward a kind of mixed theory of content; or maybe it favors the sort of functional-role theory defended by Loar.

A second problem (emphasized for the case of pain in Aydede (2006)) is the problem of explaining why ‘pain’ unlike ‘see’ is not in its primary use a success verb; we say that someone with phantom limb pain really is in pain, but not that someone who has an illusion of an apple really sees an apple. So it seems as though in pain we are more focused on the (alleged) perceptual experience, while in cases like vision we are more focused on what it is an experience of. This does not seem to show that pain is not a kind of perceptual experience, but it does seem to call out for some explanation.

A further and perhaps related source of concern about the idea that pain is a kind of perception are the clear differences between the kind of access to the colors and shapes we get from vision with the (to say the least) indistinct access we get to bodily damage in the case of pain. We can of course say that pains are just a less finely-tuned kind of perceptual experience. This doesn’t sound right to me; but it’s also hard to see what other view of pain we might have that would be better.

2 Perceptual experience and non-sensory attitudes

If it seems odd to assimilate pains to perceptual experiences, it seems much more odd in the case of occurrent propositional attitudes that have a phenomenal component, like making a judgement or entertaining a visual memory.

It is not hard to find salient differences between perceptual experiences and any one member of this class, but it is not so easy to find relevant differences which apply across the board. One idea is:

Perceptual experiences provide new information about the world, whereas judgements, daydreams, and memories do not.

But this can't be quite right. For one thing, not all experiences provide information about the world – hallucinations don't. So maybe we want

Perceptual experiences can provide new information about the world, whereas judgements, daydreams, and memories cannot.

But it is not clear that judgements can't provide new information about the world. Suppose you work through a chain of reasoning to arrive at a conclusion. Isn't the conclusion new information, relative to the premises?

A related idea which seems to solve this problem is

Perceptual experiences can provide new materials for thought, whereas judgements, daydreams, and memories cannot.

Here we focus on the making of new sub-propositional contents available for thought, rather than the formation of new beliefs. But there are two kinds of worries about the second half of this claim. (1) Memories – Martin's example of the dodecahedron. (2) The problem of new abstract concepts which are not equivalent to a description formed out of observational concepts. The example of names introduced via description.

Possible reply to (1): perhaps the original experiences already made the relevant contents available.

Possible reply to (2): maybe we can solve half the problem by focusing on cases of *de re* thoughts about external particulars. Not sure what to do with the case of names introduced via description, like 'Neptune.' Are we forced into saying that Neptune had to be represented in Le Verrier's experience before he coined the name?

A very different approach to demarcating perceptual experiences from non-sensory attitudes would focus on the fact that judgements, memories, etc. can at least sometimes be intentional actions whereas having a perceptual experience seems like something that happens to you, rather than something you do. So maybe:

Judgements, daydreams, and memories can be intentional actions, but perceptual experiences can't be.

Two possible objections: (1) skepticism about the idea that judgements etc. can be intentional actions. (2) intuitively, 'looking at the apple' could be an intentional action.

So we have to say that looking at an apple (in this sense) is not a perceptual experience, but a kind of action which leads to a genuine perceptual experience, thought of as the visual experience which results from your looking at the apple.

Why all of these attempts rely on the view that the propositional attitude types are genuine kinds.

References

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