

Skepticism about perceptual content

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1 Contents v. objects of perception

The view that perceptual experiences have contents is the view that perceptual experiences represent the world as being some way. Equivalently (in my view): that experiences present the world as being some way; that in a perceptual experience the world seems to be a certain way/appears to be a certain way; that there is a way the world is, according to a perceptual experience; that in perceptual experience the world looks/sounds/tastes/feels/smells a certain way. We often talk in these ways about perceptual experiences, so it is plausibly a part of our pretheoretic view of perceptual experiences that they have contents.

Alston (2005) disagrees:

“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)

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)?

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.”

The beginning of a reply to this worry is that the view that experiences have contents is not the view that experiences are relations to contents. (1) Experiences could be relations to things other than contents, but still have contents. The example of sense datum theory/sensory profiles. (2) Experiences could not be relations to anything, but still have contents. The example of adverbialism.

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

3 Experiences without content?

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?

4 Content and illusion

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]”

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, 2007) 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: indeterminacy again. Also some worries about what 'where your experience represents the endpoints as being' means.

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: not sure what to say about this case. 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.

5 Content and generality

Brewer's second main argument against the 'content view' is that, since every proposition contains some 'generality', it is implausible that propositions could be the contents of perceptions. Here's the way he puts the problem:

'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, Ball's 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 person's 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 does not follow from this that states of affairs involving objects other than the object perceived are on par with the state of affairs perceived — at least not if the contents of perception can involve objects (or, on a Fregean construal, object-dependent senses). So it certainly does not follow that we lose all right to say that ‘the actual physical objects’ before us are represented in perception. Nor is it clear why the representation of some properties but not others is ‘some intellectual act of classification or characterization.’ As far as I can tell, this argument is just rhetorical.

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 theories of content we’ve discussed fail without leaping to the conclusion that there is no such thing as having a thought with a certain content.)

6 Campbell on 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)

Two kinds of reply: (i) 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. (ii) The view that experiences have contents seems compatible with Campbell’s favored ‘relational view of experience.’

7 Perceptual content and phenomenal character

Some different views about the relationship between content and phenomenology, and some skepticism about the idea that content and phenomenal character can be identified.

References

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