

Perceptual representation of external particulars

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October 27, 2009

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There are (at least) two fundamental questions about perceptual representation of external particulars. One is the question of what the contents of the relevant perceptual experiences are. The second is the question of the conditions under which a subject can have experiences with the relevant contents (whatever they are).

1 What are the contents of visual experiences of external particulars?

The options for answering our first question are canvassed in Tye (2009). These basically boil down to two: the view that such experiences have general contents which would be expressed by sentences involving quantifiers, like definite descriptions; and the view that experiences have singular contents which (on a Millian view) have the relevant objects as constituents. We'll discuss these in turn.

1.1 *Perceptual experiences have only general contents*

Imagine that I am looking at a dog, Fido. On this view, the content of my experience does not have Fido himself as a constituent, but rather has a content which might be expressible as follows: 'there is something in front of me which is brown and furry and ...'

The main arguments for this view are really arguments against the opposing view that experiences have singular contents. (We will be delaying our consideration of arguments against the existence of singular propositions as such, and focus for now on arguments directed specifically against the idea that such propositions can be contents of visual experiences.)

The intuitive case against singular contents can be put like this: imagine a pair of experience of Castor and Pollux which have just the same phenomenal character. Then the way Castor visually seems to be in the first is the same as the way in which Pollux visually seems to be in the second. But then the contents of the visual experiences must be the same, contra the singular proposition view, which would make the first about Castor and the second about Pollux.

This argument seems to rely on the following inference:

In E1, o is visually represented as F (and nothing else is represented as being any other way).	
In E2, o^* is visually represented as F (and nothing else is represented as being any other way).	
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E1 and E2 have the same content.	

But this seems to require (at least) the further premise that $o=o^*$. There is a difference between two experiences sharing the way they present their respective objects and two experiences representing the world as being the same way.

Here are some arguments against the ‘purely general’ view:

1. The view seems to count some intuitively non-veridical experiences as veridical. Tye discusses a case in which a yellow cube is placed behind a mirror which reflects the image of a white cube which, due to lighting conditions, appears yellow in the mirror. The content of the experience on the present view is the general proposition that there is a yellow cube at such and such distance from oneself – and this is true. But the experience also seems to be, in some sense or other, getting things wrong, which the present view can’t capture.

The proponent of this view might reply that the content of the visual experience is something more complex — like that there is a yellow cube which is causing this experience in me. (Searle has a view like this.) But as Tye points out, we could construct deviant causal cases in which the yellow cube behind the mirror is a cause of the experience; the more complex view would have to say that the experience represents a yellow cube as causing this experience in a non-deviant way, which seems implausible.

2. Caplan and Schroeder (2007) point out that the general view runs into problems with the representation of space and time. Intuitively when I have a visual experience of a furry dog, the experience doesn’t just represent that there is a furry dog somewhere at some time, but that there is a furry dog here and now. But how are the here and now represented? The proponent of purely general propositions must say that there is some description ‘the F ’ which involves no particulars and uniquely picks out the relevant time (or place). But it is not obvious that we typically have, or perceptually represent, properties which can do this work.

One might try to get around this problem by letting the relevant descriptions be egocentric: maybe the time is picked out by ‘at the same time as this experience’ and the place by ‘my location.’ But this introduces two more particulars which need

to be eliminated: an experience, and me. Can these be eliminated in favor of pure descriptions, which make no reference to particulars?

3. Johnston (2004) emphasizes the role of experience in making objects available for de re thought. But in general possession of even a uniquely identifying description for *o* does not make it possible to have de re thoughts about *o*. Hence perceptual experiences must themselves be have de re – i.e., singular – contents. In general, I am inclined to think that the following principle about perceptual content is very plausible:

Perception/Availability Principle

If two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to the subject of the perception, then they differ in content.

Suppose that two experiences have just the same content. Then they represent the world as being just the same way; they present just the same objects as having just the same properties. How could one make available thoughts about an object or property which the other did not?

We'll return to this principle later, when we talk about perceptual representation of natural kinds.

One can try to get around this as follows: (i) say that de re thought is not singular thought, but a certain subclass of descriptive thought; perhaps involving certain properties especially tightly connected to the identity of the object in question, and (ii) say that we perceptually represent such properties. One option along these lines is to focus on haecceitistic properties. Three versions of this view: (a) world indexed properties, (b) the property of being identical to *o*, and (c) primitive haecceities. Why (c) seems the best for present purposes, but also raises some worries about what perceptual representation of these properties could be like.

1.2 Perceptual experiences sometimes have singular contents

These problems for the existential view seem to me to provide a strong reason for going for singular propositions as the contents of perceptual experiences. This view also seems to me to better fit the phenomenology of perceptual experience, which seems to represent particular objects as being certain ways, and not just to represent certain properties as being instantiated by something or other.

But this view is not exactly free from problems, either. Here are some worries:

1. What about hallucinatory experience in which there seems to be an object which is *F*, but really there is no object there?

There are two standard views about these sorts of cases (this is similar to the problem of empty names as it arises in the philosophy of language): (i) gappy propositions; (ii) 'fallback' descriptive contents. Or one might combine these, and say that even when I really do perceptually represent *o* as *F*, I also perceptually represent that something is *F*. This last option is what Tye calls the 'multiple contents thesis.'

2. A related worry concerns cases of veridical hallucination; the present view can't capture the sense in which these experiences get things right (without going for the multiple contents thesis), so long as singular representation of o requires that o cause the relevant experience in a non-deviant way (more on this below).
3. Much to my displeasure, this view seems to run into an argument which I've raised against other views toward which I am not very favorably disposed – namely, the worry that these sorts of singular propositions violate something like the following principle:

*Fallibility**: if an experience can represent objects x, y, \dots as instantiating R , then it can do so even if x, y, \dots do not instantiate R .

Suppose (though this is not obvious) that perceptual experiences represent external particulars as existing. Then the content of a perceptual experience might be (in part) the singular proposition that o exists. But we can give two arguments that one can't have such an experience unless it is veridical:

- *The argument from serious presentism.* Let p be the proposition that o exists. For one to have an experience with p as content then, by serious presentism, p must exist at the time of the experience. But (again by serious presentism, plus the assumption that being a constituent of a proposition is a matter of standing in certain relations to other things), if o is a constituent of p , then if p exists at the time of the experience, then o must as well.

I'm increasingly inclined to respond to this sort of worry by denying serious presentism, partly because of stuff about cross-temporal relations. I'm not inclined to deny serious actualism, but there is no corresponding problem for the singular proposition theory, since it is presumably impossible to perceptually represent o as F in w unless o exists in w . But if you are committed to serious presentism then I think that this argument does put some pressure on the singular proposition view. (Though one could of course also just take it to be an argument against Fallibility* or the view that we perceptually represent objects as existing.)

- *The argument from the conditions for de re perceptual representation of objects.* Maybe I can represent o as F only if o is an appropriate cause of my visual experience. Then it seems that o has to exist in order for me to have the experience. (I guess o could go out of existence between the causation of the experience and the experience.)

One might worry about any such conditions for de re perceptual representation. Can't I have an illusory experience in which I represent an person as present who isn't?

2 Under what conditions does one visually represent an external particular?

Two of the worries above – the one about Fallibility* and the one about veridical hallucination – involve the question of the conditions under which one's visual experience involves a singular proposition about o .

This question is not much discussed; a much more discussed question is the question of the conditions under which object-seeing is possible. Object-seeing is evidently factive, in the sense that one cannot see o unless o is around to be seen. Causal, or partly causal, theories of object-seeing are the orthodoxy. (For an interesting argument that the best theory of object-seeing will involve phenomenological as well as causal constraints, see Siegel (2006).)

Our question is whether the perceptual representation of o as F requires that the subject see o . If so, then the worries about veridical hallucination and Fallibility* are reinforced.

But it is not obvious that this is the view that we should take. No one thinks that having a singular thought or belief about o requires that that thought actually be caused by o , even if some more indirect causal connection between o and the state underwriting the thought is required. So why should we think this in the case of visual representation?

This still leaves unanswered the question of what could make it the case that a given visual experience involves a singular representation of o . This is a very hard question which I'm not sure has an answer. One interesting case to think about is the case of a hallucination of a former acquaintance – what makes the hallucination of that person? This is a case (I concede) in which it is natural to appeal to the relations between perception and thought, as it seems that such cases are only possible when one has an antecedent capacity to have a thought about the object hallucinated. As Johnston (2004) says, it is hard to see how we could have a hallucination of an object with which we have no prior acquaintance.

References

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