

Fregeanism about perceptual content

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1 Three theories of propositions

There are three main views of the nature of propositions these days:

Possible worlds semantics: contents are intensions, i.e. functions from worlds to truth-values.

Russellianism: contents are structured objects the constituents of which are worldly items such as objects and properties.

Fregeanism: contents are structured objects the constituents of which are ways of thinking about, or modes of presentation of, objects and properties.

I set PWS aside for the familiar reason that there are differences in content which correspond to no differences in truth-conditions, and hence which can't easily be modeled by views which identify propositions with sets of possible worlds or other truth-supporting circumstances.

As is well-known, this comes out most clearly in the identification of all necessarily true and necessarily false propositions. The classic exposition of this argument is Soames (1988).

Examples of perceptions with necessarily true and necessarily false contents are harder to come by than examples of sentences or beliefs with these contents. Possible examples include perceptual representation of the essential properties of things (an experience which represents my desk as wooden, an experience which represents the light as metal) and the waterfall illusion, in which the subject claims that her experience represents something as both moving and not moving (Crane (1988)).

So it is plausible that the real contenders here are Fregean and Russellian theories. We'll consider arguments for the former first. We can think of arguments for Fregeanism about perceptual content as falling into two categories: direct arguments from perceptual phenomena, and indirect arguments from Fregean theses about thought and language.

2 Perception-based arguments for Fregeanism

The main (only?) perception-based argument for Fregeanism is that it provides the resources to resolve the problems posed for intentionalists by cases in which we have a phenomenal difference without any apparent differences in the representation of properties. Examples we have discussed: spectrum shift/inversion, perceptual constancy. In each case, the Fregean can say that while there is no difference in Russellian content, there is a difference in Fregean sense: we have in this case a pair of experiences which put different conditions on reference, but which have the same reference. The experiences are thus perceptual analogues of coreferential descriptions. This sort of argument is made in Chalmers (2004) and Thompson (2009).

In a sense, this is a very typical sort of Fregean argument. It is argued that there is some difference in content for which the Russellian fails to account, and Fregean senses are introduced as providing the relevant distinctions in content missing from the sparse Russellian view.

Chalmers (2004) and Thompson (2009) defend a theory of this sort, on which Fregean senses are indexical 'centering features' much like those used by Egan (2006) to defend appearance properties. They can be thought of roughly as the *characters* of sentences like 'the color property which typically cause experiences like this in me' or 'the color which typically causes phenomenal-red experiences in me.' So the full content of an experience would be something like the content of the sentence 'the object causing this experience has the color which typically causes phenomenal-red experiences in me.'

It should be noted that this explanatory virtue depends on taking the senses which represent colors in perceptual experience to be non-rigid: to designate different properties with respect to different circumstances.

This view seems to be open to the same psychedelic/constant switching argument which can be brought against radical anti-intentionalism. It seems that there could be a person for whom experiences of phenomenal-green and phenomenal-red are normally caused by the same types of surfaces. But then an experience which flipped back and forth between phenomenal-green and phenomenal-red for them would represent the relevant surface as having a constant color, which is absurd. (One might then move to a covariational theory to block this sort of coreference, but this will lead to the problems discussed earlier.)

One can solve this sort of problem by letting the senses of color experiences rigidly designate the relevant color properties. But this would erase the advantages of the view in providing differences in content where the Russellian can't.

3 Arguing from Fregeanism about thought to a Fregean view of perception

A different sort of argument begins by assuming that a Fregean view of the contents of thought is correct, and argues that the contents of experiences should be the same sorts of things as the contents of thoughts.

Both premises of this argument are controversial. The assumption that the contents of perceptions are the same sorts of things as the contents of thoughts is one of the things that is denied by proponents of nonconceptual content. But it is also an assumption which can be given a fairly plausible motivation; it does seem as though in taking one's experiences at face value, one can believe the world to be a way that a perceptual experience presents it as being.

The assumption that the contents of thought and language are Fregean propositions is also controversial. The main arguments for this claim are versions of Frege's puzzle. Two versions of the puzzle: informativeness, and substitution failures. Why these are only arguments for Fregeanism (as opposed to non-Millian Russellianism) given certain further assumptions.

The main problem for Fregeanism: the three arguments of *Naming and Necessity*. These are in the first instance arguments against descriptive Fregeanism; why it is hard to see what non-descriptive Fregeanism could be if we keep the assumption that sense determines reference.

References

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