

Some more thoughts about perceptual content

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1 The content of perception vs. the content of belief

One question we raised last time is why there is more skepticism about the idea that perceptions have content than that beliefs have content.

One idea was that in ordinary language we say that beliefs are true or false, but not that perceptions are true or false. One might reply that we think that intentions and desires have content, but that we don't say that intentions and desires are true. But this reply to the argument has limited bite — the distinction between desires/intentions and beliefs based on 'direction of fit', and why perceptions (if they have content) seem like they should be classed with beliefs as having a world-to-subject direction of fit. To defuse the objection we need a type of mental state with this direction of fit, which has content, and which we are not inclined to call true or false.

But it is not easy to know how much we should trust ordinary language arguments of this sort. (It might be interesting to know whether in other languages it is natural to apply the truth-predicate to experiences.) And one can also insist that we say things about perception which are very close to attributions of truth-value, e.g. that according to my visual experience the apple is red, and the apple is red.

Another worry might be that we can't give an uncontroversial and non-metaphorical definition of 'the content of a perceptual experience.' But even if this is true, is this a contrast with the case of belief? Don't we there also rely on the same mixture of paraphrase and metaphor (e.g. *taking* the world to be a certain way)?

2 Perceptual content and inclinations to believe

Something else that came up last time was the relationship between the contents of perceptions and the contents of the beliefs that the subject is inclined to form on the basis of the perception. One might want to endorse some version of the following sort of equivalence:

A 's visual experience has the content $p \iff A$'s visual experience causes him to be inclined to believe p

If some thesis of this sort is necessary, then one might use this equivalence to define 'content of a visual experience.'

Last time I said that a view of this sort would not be a view according to which perceptual experiences have content. I think that this was probably not quite right, but that something in the neighborhood is.

It seems to me that a reasonable case can be made that this sort of equivalence fails in both directions:

Left to right: A is having an illusory experience which he knows to be illusory. Maybe it is a very boring example of a visual illusion which he has been shown over and over again in a course on perception.

Right to left: A is so constituted that whenever he has a visual experience of a certain very precise shade of blue he acquires an inclination to believe that the Goldbach conjecture is true.

To me, it seems quite plausible that in the first case one perceptually represents (say) the two lines as differing in length, and that in the second case one does not perceptually represent a proposition about the relationship between each number greater than 2 and the sums of smaller prime numbers. I'm tempted to say that someone who disagrees on this point is denying the reality of the phenomenon that I'm calling 'perceptual representation.' Intuitively, it seems like such a big disagreement that it's hard to believe that we're both talking about the same thing.

3 Notational variants?

One view which is sometimes suggested as an alternative to the view that perceptual experiences have contents is the 'theory of appearing' (see Alston (1999)). I think (Byrne (2009) argues this) that this theory implies that perceptual experiences have contents, because it implies statements which are notational variants of attributions of contents to perceptual experiences.

Compare:

o appears F to A vs. it appears to A that o is F

o appears as bearing R to o' vs. it appears to A that o bears R to o'

This is not a criticism of the theory of appearing. Rather, it provides the beginnings of a translation scheme which should allow proponents of that theory to understand talk about the contents of perception.

References

- William P. Alston, 1999. Back to the Theory of Appearing. *Philosophical Perspectives* 13:181–203.
- Alex Byrne, 2009. Experience and Content. *Philosophical Quarterly* 59(236):429–451.