

The scope of perceptual content, II: properties

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Earlier we talked about the question of whether external particulars are parts of the contents of perceptual experiences. A similar question arises at the level of properties. We can ask: which properties do perceptual experiences represent as instantiated in the environment of the perceiver?

1 What are the candidates?

Color properties are a good example of an uncontroversial candidate for inclusion in the contents of perceptual experience. But once we get beyond that, things get controversial pretty quickly. Here are some other candidates:

1. perceiver-relative properties, like relative orientation and distance
2. fancier perceiver-relative properties, like perceiver-independence, or having a location which does not depend on the perspective of the perceiver.
3. dispositional properties, like being fragile
4. counterfactual properties, like being such that normal perceivers would have a red-feeling experience of x in normal daylight
5. causal relations
6. natural kind properties, like being gold or being water

7. ‘artefact’ properties, like being a table
8. syntactic properties, like being a letter or word of a certain sort
9. semantic properties, like having a certain meaning
10. ‘connoisseur’ properties, like a wine’s being oaky or picking out the oboe in a symphony

There could obviously be some overlap between these categories – for example, perceiver-independence might be a counterfactual as well as a sophisticated perceiver-relative property, and on some views causal relations are counterfactual relations. And obviously group (10) is a hodge-podge, grouped together only by how the ability to perceptually represent the relevant properties is acquired.

We’ll be interested as much in how one might argue for or against inclusion in any of these cases as in what the right answer for each of these candidates is.

What hangs on this? (i) intentionalism issues; (ii) issues about the relationship between perception and thought; (iii) issues about epistemology of perceptual belief.

2 Arguments for inclusion

2.1 From perception/availability

When we discussed perceptual representation of external particulars we discussed the following principle:

Perception/Availability Principle

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

As before, ‘making a content available’ is a matter of giving the perceiver a certain ability: namely, the ability to have thoughts whose content involves the relevant object or property.

Why this principle, if true, counts in favor of the inclusion of (6). Can it be used to defend inclusion for any other categories?

2.2 From phenomenal difference

The most common sort of argument in favor of inclusion goes like this: there is a phenomenal difference between two experiences; there could be no difference in content between the experiences other than a difference in the *F* properties; hence

the F properties are perceptually represented. (This is one direction of what Siegel (2007) calls the ‘method of phenomenal contrast.’)

One might think that this form of argument just assumes intentionalism. But some ways of running the argument assume something weaker than interpersonal intentionalism — for example, if we consider only consecutive experiences of a single subject.

One thing which proponents of this sort of argument often seem not to notice is that it seems to assume the falsity of Fregeanism about perceptual experience — after all, the phenomenal difference in the relevant cases might just be explained by a difference in mode of presentation without a difference in the properties represented.

Here are some instances of this argument:

- for (2): Siegel (2006a) on the contrast between good and odd experiences of a doll.
- for (5): Siegel (2008) gives the example of a pair of experiences each of which represents a ball landing in potted plant followed by the lights going out, but in one experiences it visually seems that the ball’s landing caused the lights to go out. Siegel says that “it seems plain that there can be a phenomenal difference between two such experiences,” which she described as a way in which the pair of events seems unified in one of the experiences but not in the other.
- for (6): Siegel (2006b) and the example of a pair of experiences of a forest, before and after one has learned to recognize pine trees. They differ phenomenally in the second experience represents certain similarities, or groupings, as salient. (This way of developing the example makes it seem sort of similar to (10).) (Could one object by saying that this just involves the representation of the items as belonging to a group, rather than representing them all as members of the natural kind pine tree?)
- for (7): one might construct a similar sort of argument based on learned abilities to distinguish things – imagine looking across an office space while seeing all the chairs as forming a group, and as not doing so. It seems as though there would be a phenomenal difference there.
- for (7): Bayne (2009) on associative agnosia.
- for (8) and (9): various sorts of differences between visual and auditory experiences of sentences in languages which you don’t understand, or which use an alphabet with which you are not familiar.
- for (10): going to the symphony before and after your intensive music appreciation class.

Are these arguments convincing?

3 Arguments against inclusion

3.1 *From lack of phenomenal difference*

Just as people argue from phenomenal difference to a difference in content, they sometimes argue from the absence of a phenomenal difference to the absence of a difference in content. More precisely, they sometimes argue like this: try to imagine two experiences which differ only in the representation of some property F ; if one can discover no phenomenal difference between the two experiences, that means that properties like F really are not perceptually represented.

Hume is an example of a philosopher who at times seems to have a procedure like this in mind; see his discussions of causation and the self.

This sort of principle conflicts immediately with Perception/Availability; it also has immediate consequences for our views about representation of external particulars. (Recall the argument from Caplan and Schroeder (2007) about representation of space and time.)

Sometimes it is said that the ‘kind of content’ we should be interested in when we talk about perception is ‘phenomenal content’, which is ‘the kind of content which supervenes on phenomenal character.’ We will talk more about this next time; but it should be clear from the foregoing that we can’t just stipulate that we are talking about phenomenal content, because it is a substantive claim that experiences have phenomenal contents — especially if we assume that contents are the sorts of things that have truth conditions.

Symmetry arguments using a principle of this sort can obviously be used to argue against perceptual representation of objects or kinds, since there can obviously be indistinguishable objects or kinds. Price (2009) gives an argument of this sort, though he takes it (mistakenly, I think) to rely on the assumption of internalism about phenomenal character.

3.2 *From lack of an invariant or distinctive look*

Siegel usefully separates having a distinctive look — having a look which is different than how anything else looks — from having an invariant look — looking the same across various samples. As she points out, some properties, like being a philosopher, have neither an invariant nor a distinctive look. She takes this to be strong evidence that properties of this sort are not perceptually represented.

But this sort of argument seems to have wide generality. Water obviously does not have a distinctive look — but does it even have an invariant look? Think about ice and snow, and the St. Joe river vs. the Caribbean. How about artefacts like tables and chairs?

3.3 From Frege's puzzle cases

Byrne (2009) argues against the inclusion of (6) as follows: one natural kind k might look a certain way in one environment, but quite different in another; Byrne uses the example of lemons looking yellow and oval when grown in one kind of soil, but looking like cucumbers when grown in another kind of soil. Suppose that I represent them each as members of k . Then if presented with them side by side, I will be representing two things before me as k ; but I clearly needn't be in any position to see that they are each members of k . Hence I must not really have been representing them each as k .

Why this argument is not convincing — comparison with other cases involving belief.

4 A general worry about the whole debate

One worry about this debate is that the whole thing is merely verbal. Suppose we agree about, for example, the relevant phenomenal differences, and agree that they must be explained in terms of representational differences of some sort. Is there any principled way to decide whether the representational differences are specifically perceptual representational differences? It looks like this sort of worry demands the use of some substantive principles about the relationship between perception and thought/belief. These might be epistemic principles about the relationship between the contents of experiences and the beliefs they justify, or empiricist principles about the explanation of subjects being able to think thoughts with certain contents.

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