What is perceptual content? What is phenomenal character?

Some general stuff about the seminar:

- What we will talk about.
- Readings are all linked from the online syllabus. "MS" readings.
- My attitude toward required readings.
- The format of the class will be very unimaginative. I will come in with some views about the topic to be discussed that day, and will argue for them. You will either passively accept these arguments as correct, or will try to refute, improve upon, or circumvent them. The class will be much more fun if you do the second.
- There are no required student presentations. But you are welcome to present some ideas/arguments to the class whenever you would like to do so. Just let me know a week or so in advance. This tends to work best if it is an informal "bouncing ideas off a wall" rather than a formal presentation.
- Projectors vs. handouts.
- Everyone taking the course for credit will write a term paper. The term paper should approximate, and be written as, a journal article. Just as there is wide variance in the scope and length of journal articles, so with your term papers.
- What auditors should do.

Let's begin by distinguishing two ways of talking about perceptual experiences: in terms of their content, and in terms of their phenomenal character.

The phenomenal character of a perceptual experience is: how that experience feels; how it seems, from the point of view of the perceiver; what it is like to have the experience. Two experiences have just the same phenomenal character iff what it is like to have one experience is what it is like to have the other experience. If two experiences have the same phenomenal character, then they should be indistinguishable from the point of view of the perceiver; there should be no way (holding fixed background beliefs and other extrinsic facts) for the subject to know which experience he is having.

The content of a perceptual experience is: the way that experience presents the world as being; the way that world is, according to that experience; the way that world appears (looks, smells, sounds) to be to the perceiver. The content of a perceptual experience determines the veridicality conditions of that experience: it determines the way the world would have to be for the experience to be accurate.

There are reasons to be skeptical about the attribution of either phenomenal or representational properties to experiences, which we will talk about in a bit. But at this point, you should have an intuitive handle on what these properties are supposed to be. You should also see that, for all we've said, phenomenal and representational properties of experiences seem to be distinct properties. (Lockean spectrum inversion as an argument for this.)

So far I've been talking (as is often done) about these properties as properties of experiences. This often leads into hairy questions about the metaphysics of experiences, and questions about when experiences are "the same experience" and when they are distinct. I think that questions of this sort are often just verbal questions and hence better bypassed. Hence, officially, we will think about our phenomenal and representational properties as properties of subjects rather than properties of experiences. They will be properties like "the property of having an experience that represents x as round" and "the property of having an experience with such-and-such phenomenal character."

One of the reasons why the philosophy of perception is so interesting is because perception is the arena in which these two paradigmatic `marks of the mental' seem to be most closely related. One of the central questions in the philosophy of perception, and one of the questions which we're going to talk about, concerns the relationship between these two.

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Nowadays it is pretty rare for people to flatly deny that there is anything that it is like to have an experience. What is a bit more common is for people to say that, even if in some sense there is something that it is like to have an experience, there are no real phenomenal properties of subjects which would, e.g., allow us to ask whether A and B are really instantiating the same phenomenal properties or not (i.e., whether what it is like to be A = what it is like to be B).

Behaviorally and functionally undetectable spectrum inversion scenarios as an example of a scenario which might encourage this attitude. Wittgenstein, like the verificationists, took these sorts of inverted spectrum scenarios to be incoherent.

Stalnaker considers views of this sort in "Comparing qualia across persons." An analogy to show how this sort of view could make sense: a definition of desirability for a person in terms of individual preferences. This permits synchronous comparisons of relative desirability for a person, but not comparisons across people.

How might one argue for views of this sort? Stalnaker gives one sort of argument. But let's consider a different one. If there are such things as phenomenal properties, then each of the following look pretty plausible:

- If a subject has experiences with, respectively, phenomenal properties F and G, and the subject can distinguish between the two, then F≠G.
- If a subject has consecutive experiences with, respectively, phenomenal properties F and G, and the subject cannot distinguish between the two, then F=G.
- Phenomenal sorites are possible.

But together these entail a contradiction. What should we say about this? If we think that nothing plausible can be said about cases of this sort, then this might lead us to reject the idea of phenomenal properties altogether.

But, I think, a pretty plausible case can be made that interpersonal comparisons of phenomenal character do make sense. First, it is just really hard to believe that comparisons of phenomenal character between consecutive experiences of mine do not make sense. And, if we grant this, it's hard to not also grant that comparisons between experiences separated by, say, 1 second don't make sense. But then what can be the principled reason for resisting comparisons between experiences of a single subject separated by an arbitrary amount of time?

One might say that what matters is not the amount of time, but rather whether the subject at the later time remembers the experience at the earlier time; on this view, it's only meaningful to compare the phenomenal characters of experiences which are memory-related in this way. Is this plausible?

Why, if we allow arbitrary intrapersonal comparisons of phenomenal character, it is hard to not also allow interpersonal comparisons.

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One argument, which I find pretty persuasive, is based on analogy with states like belief which we can in the present context assume to have contents. How would one argue that beliefs have contents? One might cite the intuition that beliefs can be correct or incorrect, and that we can explain this in terms of the truth or falsity of the propositions which are their contents; or one might cite the connections between beliefs and other states which seem to have content (desires, assertions, etc.). But don't the same considerations apply to perceptual experience? If so, then the claim that perceptual experiences have contents should seem as uncontroversial as the claim that beliefs have contents — it should, at least, be our default assumption in the absence of arguments to the contrary.

But suppose that one does not find this analogy with belief compelling. Is there any way to argue that perceptual experiences have contents? Siegel considers a few arguments in favor of this in her book, *The Contents of Visual Experience*, and ultimately defends the following "argument from appearing."

THE ARGUMENT FROM APPEARING

Premise (i)
All visual perceptual experiences present clusters of properties as being instantiated.

Premise (ii)
If an experience *E* presents a cluster of properties *F* as being instantiated, then:
Necessarily: things are the way *E* presents them only if property-cluster *F* is instantiated.

Premise (iii)
If necessarily: things are the way *E* presents them only if property-cluster *F* is instantiated, then:
E has a set of accuracy conditions *C*, conveyed to the subject of *E*, such that:
C is satisfied in a world only if there is something that has *F* in that world.

Premise (iv)
If *E* has a set of accuracy conditions *C*, conveyed to the subject of *E*, such that *E* is accurate only if *C*, then:
E has a set of accuracy conditions *C**, conveyed to the subject of *E*, such that *E* is accurate iff *C**.

Is this argument convincing?

Would anyone who did not believe that perceptual experiences had contents accept (i)?

[For a structurally similar argument, which relies on awareness and seeming rather than presentation, see Schellenberg, "Perceptual content defended," pp. 719-20.]

A different sort of argument defends the view that perceptual experiences have contents as the best explanation for some phenomenon or other.

There are a few different versions of this sort of argument. One might focus on the explanation of our ability to have justified beliefs or knowledge about our immediate environment, or on our ability to have contentful thoughts about the external world. These sorts of arguments seem to be part of what's going on in McDowell's *Mind & World*. Or one might take perceptual contents to be the best explanation of what's going on in illusory experiences. (See Byrne's "Experience and content" for an argument for this.

I am not sure in the end that it matters much whether these arguments are convincing. Given the (I think) obvious analogies between perception and belief (and other propositional attitudes), and the plausibility of the claim that beliefs have contents, it matters less whether we can give a non-question-begging argument for the conclusion that perceptual experiences have contents than that we can give satisfactory responses to the arguments for skepticism about perceptual content that have been given.

So let's look at those. As we'll see, while these are framed as arguments against the idea that perceptual experiences have contents, they're usually really better understood as arguments for something else.

Here, I think, are the main argument's against perception's having representational properties, which we can consider in turn:

1. Perceptual contents can't explain the distinction between veridical experiences and "veridical hallucination" and "veridical illusion." (Johnston)
2. The "veil of perception" objection. (Brewer, and many others)
3. If perception has content, then we can't use perceptual experience to explain our ability to grasp concepts. (Campbell)
4. We can "analyze away" talk about the contents of perceptual experience (in terms, e.g., of the contents of other sorts of states), so there's no reason to posit representational properties of perceptual states. (Alston, Crane)
5. If some experiences have contents, then all do. But certain illusions are such that no coherent content can be assigned to them. (Brewer)
6. If, e.g., visual experiences had contents, then there should be attributions of those contents in ordinary language; and, if there were, these would have to be attributions of how things "look" to a subject. But in fact no usage of "looks" corresponds to claims about the representational properties of experiences. (Travis)

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Here's Johnston's version of #1:

> To get an initial grip on that suggestion, consider the more familiar case of so-called "veridical hallucination." Macbeth might hallucinate a dagger in the air at a relative distance and orientation, a distance and orientation at which there actually happens to be an exactly matching real dagger hanging by an invisible thread. The hallucination "occludes" the real dagger in this sense: it is because he is hallucinating a dagger over there that he does not see the real dagger over there. (Imagine the situation physiologically; his visual cortex gets into a state because of stimulation coming from somewhere other than the sensory nerves.) He has a deviant visual experience, which just happens to match the scene. He is not seeing the dagger, even though his visual experience supports the proposition that there is a dagger of just the right sort there. So Macbeth's visual experience is defective though *fully veridical*, i.e., unimpeachable in propositional terms. Even though Macbeth's experience encourages wholly correct beliefs about how things are in the scene before his eyes, beliefs such as that there is *a real dagger there*, it does not disclose the truthmakers for the relevant beliefs. That is, Macbeth is not visually aware of *the (real) dagger's being there*, a condition of the dagger that makes true the proposition that the dagger is there.

The idea here is that a description of Macbeth's visual experience in terms of its representational properties would leave something out; it would fail to capture the sense in which his experience is defective. And one can see that it is defective by nothing that we'd be inclined to say that even though Macbeth truly believes that there is a dagger before him, he does not know that there is.

But, pretty obviously, this is an argument that there is more to a perceptual experience than its representational properties — not an argument that perceptual experiences lack representational properties.

A comparison might be useful. Think about the act of assertively uttering a sentence. This sort of act always involves a propositional attitude: one bears the assertion relation to a proposition (or several propositions). But this does not mean that the act-type in question is fundamentally a relation to a proposition, or should be analyzed in terms of a relation to a proposition. The act-type in question is fundamentally a matter of bearing a relation to a sentence-token; but that doesn't mean that there are not interesting questions about the propositions asserted by such acts, or that understanding the relationship between those propositions and other aspects
of the act is of no importance.

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This seems to depend on an inference from the claims that (i) perceptual experience represents objects as being ways that other objects could be, and (ii) perceptual experience does not represent the properties of objects in full determinacy to the conclusion that (iii) perceptual experience does not "subjectively present" actual physical objects. This inference does not seem to be valid.

Here's a representative version of #2, from Bill Brewer (emphasis mine):

> 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—even perfectly veridical perception, whatever exactly this may be—does not consist in the simple presentation to a subject of various constituents of the physical world themselves. Instead, if 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. She may supposedly be referring to a privileged such entity *in thought*, but it is hard to see how it is that thing, rather than any other, which is truly subjectively presented to her.[9]

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Why (3) is not very convincing: the distinction between explaining the possibility of having **thoughts** with certain contents, and explaining the possibility of being in **some propositional attitude state or other** with those contents. Obviously it would be circular to use representational properties of perceptual experience to do the second; but they might still do the first. And whether or not we think that perceptual experiences have representational properties, we'll have to do the second some way or other. Why is this easier if we deny that perceptual experiences have contents?

Presumably the idea is that in that case we could explain the latter via the non-representational properties of perceptual experience. But, as noted in connection with Johnston's objection, there's no reason for the believer in perceptual content to deny that experiences have such properties.

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This is a commonly cited reason in defense of denying that perceptual experiences have contents. The idea is that our intuitions about the contents of perceptual experiences can be explained away in terms of, for example, dispositions to form beliefs with those contents. But if we can so "analyze away" the contents of perceptual experience, why believe in them?

I think that this is less plausible than it at first sounds, for two reasons. First, it is far from clear how the relevant analysis is supposed to work. One might suggest something like:

> A's perceptual experience has content P iff that perceptual experience causes A to be disposed to believe P.

But this fails to account for cases of known illusion, like the Muller-Lyer, or the "gray spots" which seem to appear at the points of intersection between the boxes on the course home page. It fails in the other direction if we consider subjects who are so constituted as to come to be disposed to believe Goldbach's conjecture whenever having a certain olfactory experience. How might the analysis be modified to fit those cases?

Second, it is not obvious that it matters whether we can construct an extensionally adequate biconditional of the above sort. Suppose that the following is necessarily true:

> A believes P iff were A confronted with the question of whether P is true, and disposed to be forthright, he would assert P.

Would this show that beliefs don't "really" have contents, but assertions do? I don't see why — especially since we could probably construct a parallel "analysis" of assertion in terms of belief.

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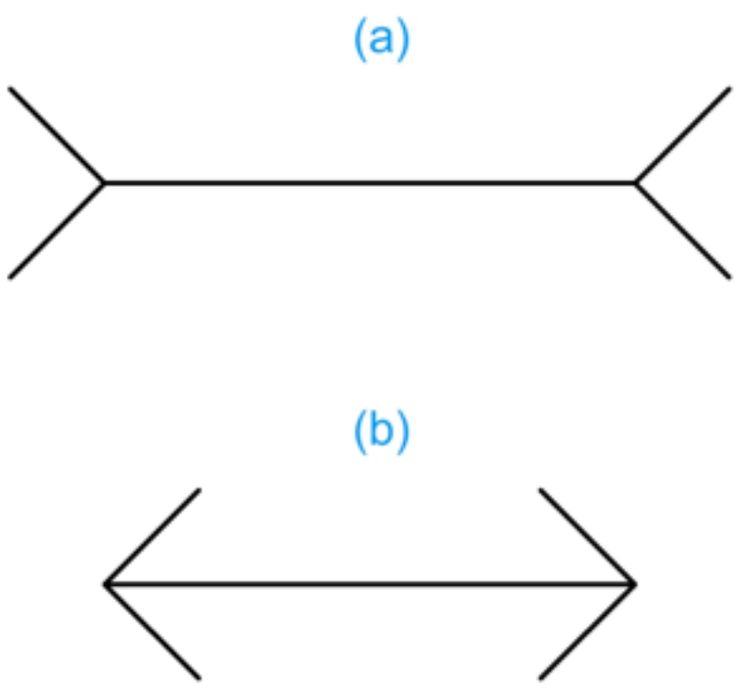
In defending (5), Brewer in "Perception and Content" asks us to consider the Muller-Lyer illusion:



He then asks a series of questions about the illusion, to which he thinks proponents of the view that perceptual experiences have contents owe answers, and to which they can provide no satisfactory answers:

1. The lines are supposed to be falsely represented as different in length. But is (a) falsely represented as longer than it is, or (b) falsely represented as shorter than it is? There seems to be no non-arbitrary way to answer this question.

2. Consider your representation of the locations of the endpoints of each of the two lines. Presumably these are each veridical. But then it follows from the content view that your experience in the Muller-Lyer illusion is an impossible proposition.

3. Consider a dynamic version of the Muller-Lyer, in which the outer lines are shrinking gradually until they vanish. The lines do not appear to be changing in length. But they would have to so appear if the content view were true, since presumably at the end of the sequence they appear to be the same length, and at the beginning of the sequence (by hypothesis) they appeared to differ in length. (Experimental interlude to test the datum at: http://www.to14.com/game.php?id=4d486a3695d59)

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On (6): I have nothing to add to the discussions in Siegel and Schellenberg.