

Nonconceptual content

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1. Intramodal vs intermodal intentionalisms.....	1
2. Direct arguments for nonconceptual content.....	3

1. INTRAMODAL VS INTERMODAL INTENTIONALISMS

The distinction between intermodal and intramodal intentionalisms is one of degree. Consider some pair of state types, $T1$ and $T2$. The intermodal intentionalist about these state types will claim that if we select any pair of states from these types, even if one is of type $T1$ and the other of type $T2$, necessarily, if these states have the same content, then the phenomenal character of those states will also be the same. The purest form of intermodal intentionalism will claim that this supervenience thesis is true *for every pair of state types*.

Intramodal intentionalists will claim that it fails for at least one pair of state types, though there's room for disagreement within intramodal intentionalism about which distinctions between state types are relevant.

This purest intermodal intentionalism seems to be open to a quick and decisive objection. Consider a visual experience which represents the environment of the perceiver as being a certain way. Even if, for example, visual experiences typically represent the world in greater detail than do beliefs, there's no reason to think that it is impossible to have beliefs which represent the world with greater detail than ours typically do — and there's no reason to think that, with their increased detail, such beliefs would suddenly acquire the phenomenal character of visual experiences.

However, the view that perceptual experiences and beliefs have different kinds of contents, so that no perceptual experience/belief pair could share a content, has been a very popular one in recent philosophy — it is one of the views that is expressed by the thesis that perceptual experiences have “nonconceptual content.” Let's call this thesis “nonconceptualism”:

Nonconceptualism: Necessarily, perceptual states and beliefs have different kinds of contents.

What could such a difference in kind between contents be? One way of spelling this out would be in terms of the distinction between the following two conceptions of content:

Russellianism: contents are structured entities the constituents of which are worldly items like objects, properties, and relations. If two mental states represent the same objects as instantiating the same properties and relations, then they have the same Russellian content.

Fregeanism: contents are structured entities the constituents of which are ways of thinking about, or modes of presentation of, objects and properties. Two mental states can have the same Russellian content, and yet differ in their modes of presentation of that content.

The distinction between Fregeanism & anti-Millianism.

The most popular nonconceptualist view assigns Russellian propositions as the contents of perceptual experiences, and Fregean propositions as the contents of thoughts, beliefs, and other like propositional attitudes. Were this view correct, this would be a way to preserve the purest intermodal intentionalism, since beliefs would no longer be a counterexample to the thesis that any mental state at all with the content of (say) a certain visual experience would also have the phenomenal character of that visual experience.

Two reasons why the importance of nonconceptualism for the viability of this purest intermodal intentionalism should not be exaggerated: (i) blindsighters, (ii) subpersonal representational states.

Why nonconceptualism needs argument: consider the analogous proposal that suppositions and beliefs have different kinds of content. This seems quite implausible, mainly because it seems that there can be something that at one time I suppose to be the case, and later come to believe to be the case. (This is reflected in ordinary speech — we might say that *A* believes what *B* is supposing.) The simplest view of this sort of transition — from supposing to believing — is that one really can suppose and believe exactly the same thing at different times — that one really can bear these two different attitudes to one and the same content. And this simple view entails that suppositions and beliefs have the same sorts of contents.

But we seem to find just the same sorts of transitions between perceptual experiences and beliefs.

Two main strategies for defending nonconceptualism: (1) one might try to establish the nonconceptualist thesis directly: by presenting an argument for the conclusion that, whatever our views about the nature of the respective contents might be, the contents of perceptions and beliefs must be different sorts of things. Or, (2), one might try a more indirect route, by separately defending views about the contents of perceptual experiences and beliefs which, together, entail that those contents are different sorts of things.

2. DIRECT ARGUMENTS FOR NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT

Attempts to argue directly for the view that the contents of perceptual experiences and beliefs are different sorts of things are usually really arguments for something else. The following informal arguments are a representative example:

[1] Consider an ordinary visual experience — say, the experience of looking out of your front door. Now imagine trying to write down all of the information given to you by that visual experience. Surely, you wouldn't be able to do this. To see this, imagine trying to describe the very slight differences in color between two blades of grass on your front lawn — the distinctions made in experience are simply more fine-grained than those which you can make in words or in thought.

[2] Our ability to have demonstrative thoughts about objects is explained by our perceptual representation of those objects. But then the contents of those perceptual representations can't *already* be conceptual; if they were, they would presuppose rather than explain our ability to have demonstrative thoughts about objects.

[3] It is implausible to think that all animals capable of perceptual representation possess concepts. Hence the contents of the experiences of these lower animals must be nonconceptual. But it is also implausible to think that the content of my visual experience of a colored surface must be different in kind from the content of the visual experiences of such an animal. So if the perceptual experiences of the lower animals are nonconceptual, so must be the perceptual experiences of human beings.

Why these arguments don't work.

Arguments [1]-[3] have a lot in common. None really seems to be directed at nonconceptualism, in the sense of the preceding chapter; and each seems to be directed instead at the quite different conclusion that, possibly, some subject of perception is capable of perceptually representing some contents which they are incapable of entertaining in thought. If, as above, we use "possessing a concept" for, roughly, "able to have beliefs and thoughts involving that concept", then one might express the conclusion of these arguments as the claim that one needn't possess the concepts used to specify the contents of one's perceptual states.

A mystery: why should this be thought to entail nonconceptualism? The arguments above (again, if they work) show that there is some proposition p and subject such that the subject is able to have perceptual experiences with p as content but not able to have beliefs with p as content. How is this supposed to show that, *necessarily*, for *every*

proposition p and *every* subject S , it is not the case that S can have both perceptual experiences and beliefs with p as content?

What we should ask, then, is why one might think that the truth of

[A] Possibly, a subject has a perceptual experience with content p but is not able to have thoughts or beliefs with this content (i.e., does not “possess the concepts” which would be used to specify the content of the perceptual experience).

shows that

[B] Perceptual experiences and thoughts have different kinds of content (from which it follows that no subject can have a perceptual experience and a thought which have the same content).

One might argue that the truth of [A] is best explained by the truth of [B]. We might ask: *why* are perceptual states such that one needn't possess the concepts used to specify their content, whereas by contrast beliefs are such that one must possess all the concepts used to specify their content? Wouldn't this be explained by beliefs, and not perceptual experiences, having a special, conceptual kind of content?

Though this argument has some intuitive appeal, that appeal vanishes on inspection. Remember that “possessing a concept” is just shorthand for “is able to have thoughts and beliefs involving a concept”. So what is supposed to need explanation is that

(i) one can have a perceptual experience with a certain content without being able to have a belief with that content

whereas

(ii) one cannot have a thought or belief with a certain content without being able to have a thought or belief with that content.

(ii) is just an instance of the triviality that no one does anything which they aren't able to do, and so hardly needs explanation. (i), on the other hand, hardly cries out for explanation in terms of a distinction between two types of content. Why should the claim that some creatures possess mechanisms of perceptual representation which are more fine-grained than their mechanisms of belief formation, and hence able to represent more propositions than the latter, indicate anything more than just that?