

# Perception & availability for thought

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Claims about the availability of contents for thought are claims about the abilities of subjects. For a content to be available to a subject at  $t$  is for that subject to be able, at  $t$ , to have thoughts, beliefs, or other 'cognitive' mental states involving some propositions of which that content is a constituent.

Given that we're assuming a Russellian view of the contents of perception and thought, these sub-propositional contents will be objects, properties, and relations. What does it mean to say that a certain object, or property, is a constituent of a given proposition?

This question is one to which we'll return below when we turn to the question of what Russellian propositions are. But we can give a theory-neutral, if incomplete, characterization of the idea via an example. Consider the proposition that predicates blueness of a certain pen cap. Call this proposition PROP. Then the following seem to be true:

Necessarily, anyone who entertains a thought with content PROP entertains a thought about that particular pen cap.

Necessarily, anyone who entertains a thought with content PROP entertains the thought of some object that it has the property of being blue.

As I will use the term, the truth of the above claims is sufficient for the particular pen cap and the property of being blue to be *constituents* of PROP.

Why think that one of the roles of experience is to make contents available for thought? The point is most straightforward to make if we think about the case of thoughts whose contents involving objects. It's quite plausible that, of all the objects in the world, some are now available to you for thought, and some are not. You are presumably in a position to have de re thoughts about yourself and other objects in your immediate vicinity; but you're probably not presently able to have de re thoughts about the various socks currently in my sock drawer. There are various things that you might do remedy this limitation on your cognitive abilities. Perhaps, for instance, you could do so by acquiring, from another competent speaker, a name for one of the socks. But one thing you could clearly do is have a visual experience of my sock drawer — that, at least, would put you in a position to have de re thoughts about some of the socks in the drawer.

Given that we are thinking of experiences have states with contents, it seems very plausible that there is some connection between an experience's content and the contents which the experience makes available for thought. I suggest the following:

*Availability/Difference*

Necessarily, if two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to the subject of the perception (holding fixed the background beliefs and cognitive abilities of the subjects), then they differ in content.

What it is for an experience to *make* a thought available to a subject? The basic idea is that a perceptual experience can be the explanation of a subject's acquiring the ability to think certain thoughts. It's plausible that it's only ever part of the explanation — for one, the subject must be the sort of being that can have thoughts at all, and thoughts of the right type. But it seems pretty clear that it can be part of the explanation because, to return to the example above, you weren't able to have de re thoughts about the items in my sock drawer prior to having the relevant experience.

Given this characterization of the notion, I think that Availability/Difference is quite hard to deny. For suppose that two experiences have just the same content. Then they represent the world as being just the same way; they present just the same objects as having just the same properties. How could one make available thoughts about an object or property which the other did not?

Possible objection: my experience of a fly, and frog's experience of the very same fly. Why this is not really an objection.

Availability/Difference is a principle which allows us to draw conclusions about differences in perceptual content across subjects from facts about which thoughts are available to those subjects. But it is very natural to think that any principle of this sort, which involves comparisons between subjects, must be true because of some more basic principle which governs the connection between perceptual content and availability for thought of particular subjects. A natural and simple suggestion is something like

If an object or property is part of the content of a subject's experience at  $t$ , then that object or property is available for thought to that subject at  $t$ .

Why this seems too strong.

What we'll need is substantially weaker:

*The Availability Requirement*

If an object or property is part of the content of a normal adult human subject's experience at  $t$ , then that object or property is available for thought to that subject at  $t$ .

This principle, if true, allows us to derive negative claims to the effect that a certain object or property is not perceptually represented by a subject at  $t$  from the corresponding negative judgements about that's subject's abilities to have certain thoughts involving those objects and properties. In this sense, it allows us to argue in the opposite direction of Availability/Difference.

This principle may well seem less obvious than Availability/Difference. Why think that it is true? One simple argument for it is given by reflection on examples. Consider your present visual experience of the shapes and colors of objects around you. Can't you consider whether those object's really have *those* colors and *those* shapes? If so, then the color and shape properties presented in experience are available to you for thought.

If this seems to be true of representations of color and shape properties, then one might think that this generalizes to perceptual representations of objects and properties. For any way your perceptual experience represents the world as being, can't you wonder whether it really is that way?

Why the restriction to times is needed: Kelly's example of the color swatches.

A return to our three arguments for nonconceptualism: these seem like challenges to the Availability Requirement.