

Perceptual representation of objects

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So far I've argued that the contents of perceptual experiences can be no more fine-grained than Russellian propositions.

But this leaves open the question of exactly which Russellian propositions can serve as the contents of perceptual experiences. Do they, for example, ever contain objects as constituents, or are they always purely general propositions whose constituents include only properties and relations?

Consider a pair of experiences of a pair of subjects, A and B. The two experiences are indistinguishable, and each is a visual experience of an unlabeled white golf ball against a green background. It's a reasonable assumption that these experiences, as so described, could be alike with respect to the perceptual representation of all properties of the golf ball, the background, and the relations between the two. So it is plausible that if the two experiences differ in content, they must differ in something other than the objects and properties they represent as in the environment of the subject; and if this is so, the only candidate difference in representation seems to be a difference in the representation of the golf balls themselves.

But it seems that the two experiences do differ in content. Let's call the golf balls involved in the experiences, respectively, ball-A and ball-B. We can presume that, prior to their experiences, neither A nor B were able to have *de re* thoughts about either ball. (After all, you're currently not able to have *de re* thoughts about most of the golf balls currently in existence.) But things change with their visual experiences. During and after his experience of ball-A, A is able to have *de re* thoughts about ball-A. He can, for instance, judge *of that ball* that it is dimpled. Of course, he's in no position to do this of ball-B; he couldn't have *de re* thoughts about ball-B before his experience of ball-A, and it is hard to see how his experience of ball-A could have helped. And since the situations are symmetrical, B seems to be in just the opposite position with respect to the two golf balls.

But then it follows immediately from Availability/Difference that the two experiences do differ in content: holding fixed the relevant facts about the two subjects, the two experiences nonetheless make available different *de re* thoughts to them. Hence the experiences differ in content.

And, once we get this far, it is hard to deny that the golf balls themselves are constituents of the contents of the relevant experiences. After all, how *else* could these contents differ, other than one containing ball-A and the other containing ball-B? One

would have to find some difference in the properties represented in the two experiences; but this seems unlikely.

Why we should not wheel in haecceities here.

It's very hard to deny that our two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to their respective subjects; and it is also very hard to deny that the experiences are alike with respect to their representation of the properties of the golf balls. So, if we're going to deny that objects can be parts of the contents of visual experience, the most plausible way of doing this is to deny Availability/Difference.

Here's one way in which you might do this: you might think that which thoughts a given experience makes available for thought to a subject depends not just on the content of the experience, but also on the causes of the experience. So perhaps, to use our current example, our two golf balls don't differ in content; the crucial difference between them, which explains the differences in the availability of our two de re thoughts, is that in the first case golf ball A is among the causes of the experience, whereas in the case of the second experience, golf ball B is among the causes.

The challenge for a view of this sort is to explain exactly which causal relation C is such that o's bearing C to an experience is sufficient for that experience to make available de re thoughts about o.

One can't, obviously, just require that o be among the causes of the experience. If Bob is the one who put ball-A there, then he's among the causes of the first experience, but that plainly doesn't put A in a position to have de re thoughts about Bob. Similarly for an individual molecule which is a constituent of golf ball A.

One might suggest that we should require not just that o is among the causes of the relevant experience, but also that some of o's properties are represented in that experience. Since neither Bob nor the molecules which compose Ball-A are white, round, and dimpled, this looks promising. But of course another golf ball — ball-C — could have been among the causes of the experience. (Maybe it bumped ball-A into place.) But this would not put A in a position to have de re thoughts about ball-C.

Instead we might require not just that o's properties are represented, but that they are represented *as* properties of o. This would do the trick — but at the cost of re-introducing objects as parts of the contents of experience, which was the thing that the detour through causes of experiences was meant to avoid.

A different suggestion would be that o must be among the *immediate* causes of the experience, as Ball-A is, rather than merely helping to bring about the experience, as Ball-C does. The distinction, though, is pretty obscure — is a golf ball seen through a pane of glass an immediate cause of the experience of the ball? Moreover, lots of things

can be among the immediate causes of an experience and yet not be thereby available to the thought of the subject of the experience — like a photon.

Maybe there's some way around these problems. But they make me think that Availability/Difference is pretty secure, and hence that the present argument in favor of objects being parts of the contents of experience is a difficult one to resist.

Three problems to which this argument gives rise:

1. The first is that it opens the door to an immediate argument for externalism about the contents of perceptual experiences, which to many has seemed to be in conflict with the conjunction of the intentionalist theses already defended and a plausible internalist thesis about phenomenal character.
2. The second is that, given that the experiences of A and B could plainly be indistinguishable, this example suggests that, even if phenomenal character supervenes on certain representational properties, the latter do not supervene on the former — the experiences of A and B seem to provide a counterexample to any such supervenience thesis. And this means that the truth of our intentionalist supervenience theses cannot be explained by the identity of the relevant representational and phenomenal properties.
3. The third is a constellation of more general metaphysical worries about the idea that propositions could have objects as constituents. The worry is particularly acute for objects like Ball-A which seem to exist only contingently, because it suggests that certain propositions could exist only contingently, which in turn leads to difficulties understanding how propositions which attribute nonexistence to those objects could exist, and be true, at those worlds where they don't exist.