Types of perceptual content

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January 29, 2006

Roughly, the content of a perceptual experience is the way that that experience represents the world as being. Our aim for now is to see if we can get clearer on what sorts of things the contents of perceptions are.

1 Objects vs. contents of perception

We are now switching from discussion of the objects of perception to discussion of the contents of perception. These topics are closely related; but you should not take talk about the contents of perception to be just another way of talking about the objects of perception. The following, at least, appear to be differences:

- Views which deny that there are objects of perception do not have to deny that there are contents of perception; an adverbial theorist might still think that perceptions represent the world as being a certain way. E.g., an adverbial theorist might think that the content of an occasion of sensing F-ly is something like: 'there is something F here.'
- 'Content' is often taken to be roughly interchangeable with 'proposition.' When we ask about the content of someone's belief, we are asking what proposition they believe; when we ask about the content of a sentence, we are asking what proposition the sentence expresses. Some theorists deny that experiences have contents because they think that the objects of experience are not propositions, but rather something else – like external particulars, or universals. But to say this is to adopt a very narrow standard for what it would mean for a perception to have a given content. Just as an adverbial theorist might think that experiences represent the world as being a certain way without thinking that

there are any objects of perception, a direct realist of Johnston's sort might think that the contents of experiences are propositions made up out of universals and external particulars while taking the objects of experience to be universals and external particulars rather than propositions constructible out of them.

- We should also recognize the possibility that a theorist could take the contents of an experience to be a quite different sort of thing than the object of an experience. E.g., a sense datum theorist takes the objects of experience to be mental particulars, but might want the contents of experience to be something which can be true or false to the perceiver's environment. Such a theorist might take the content of an experience whose object is a sense datum of type t to be something like the class of states of affairs which typically or normally cause a sense datum of type t. It might be objectionable to separate content from object in this way; but that is something which should be argued, not just stipulated.

2 Three views of content in the philosophy of language

Probably the most systematic treatment of the nature of contents has been carried out in the philosophy of language. We should not assume at the start that the contents of perceptual experiences are the same sort of thing as are the contents of sentences; but we can look at the leading views of content from the philosophy of language as a way to get a sense of what our options are in the perceptual case.

Recent philosophy of language has recognized three main views of content.

Possible worlds semantics

Above we noted that, intuitively, the content of an experience is the way it represents the world as being, just as the content of a belief is the way that it represents the world as being. Possible world semantics gives a very straightforward reading of this intuitive gloss. Think of all the ways that a world could be that would make a sentence true: the meaning of a sentence is the set of all these ways the world could be. I.e., the meaning of a sentence is the set of possible worlds with respect to which the sentence is true.

It seems fairly straightforward to carry this over to the case of perception. For any perceptual experience, it seems that there are various ways the world could be that would make that experience veridical. Let the set of these ways the world could be – that set of possible worlds – be the content of that experience.

Some people see the fact that this view makes reference to possible worlds as a major disadvantage. I am inclined to think that this worry is either overblown, or results from an overly serious reading of 'world' in 'possible world.'

A more significant disadvantage of this view is it implies that if two sentences are true in the same possible worlds, then they have the same meaning. But intuitively it seems that two sentences can be necessarily true – i.e., true in every possible world – without having the same meaning. E.g., '2+2=4' and 'Arithmetic is incomplete.' In this sense, the contents of sentences seem to be more fine-grained than sets of truth-supporting circumstances.

Russellianism

Suppose that you are convinced by this last worry. One thought is that possible worlds semantics goes wrong by failing to recognize the fact that content is structured. You might come to this thought as follows: the fact that '2+2=4' and 'Arithmetic is incomplete' havee different contents has something to do with the fact that the first but not the second is in some sense specifically about the number 2. Possible worlds semantics in a sense ignores this by taking the contents

of sentences to be not things built up out of what the sentences are about, but rather sets of possible worlds (which will contain lots of things that the sentence in question is not about, as well as those things that it is about).

This might suggest the following sort of view: expressions stand for things in the world. Proper names stand for objects; predicates stand for properties. The contents of sentences are complex objects which have as their parts such things as objects and properties.

One advantage of this view is that it makes meanings relatively unmysterious. We might already have metaphysical reasons for believing in universals; so Russellian theories of meaning don't seem to force us into any extra metaphysical commitments.

A second advantage of this view is that it makes the relationship between propositions and the facts which make them true relatively unmysterious. Indeed, the relation in the case of true propositions might just be identity.

A third advantage of the view is that Russellian propositions are more fine-grained than sets of possible worlds. The Russellian can, e.g., distinguish between the contents of pairs of sentences like 2+2=4' and 'Arithmetic is incomplete' which are true with respect to just the same possible worlds.

But you might worry that Russellian propositions are still not fine-grained enough. Suppose, for example, that a Russellian says that the meaning of a simple name is its referent. Then the Russellian must say that all names that have the same referent have the same meaning. But it is clearly possible for me to understand both 'Superman can fly' and 'Clark Kent can fly' while thinking that the former is true and the latter false; and this has led many people to think that co-referential names like 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' must, contra this kind of Russellian, differ in meaning.

Fregeanism

Fregeans offer a yet more fine-grained approach to meanings. On one version of the view (which is not exactly Frege's) the meaning of a name is not an object, but a mode of presentation of (way of thinking about) an object, and the meaning of a predicate is not a property, but a mode of presentation of (way of thinking about) a property. Frege called these modes of presentations of objects and properties *senses*. Fregean contents are complex objects, like Russellian propositions, but unlike Russellian propositions are composed of senses rather than of objects and properties.

Fregeanism often comes with a criterion, sometimes called 'Frege's criterion', for determining when two expressions have different senses. Roughly, according to this criterion, two sentences differ in meaning if and only if it is possible for a rational person who understands both to think that one of the sentences is true, and the other one false. (Two names differ in meaning if and only if it is possible for two sentences which differ only with respect to those names can differ in meaning; and so on for other kinds of linguistic expressions.) Since it appears to be possible for a rational agent (e.g., Lois Lane) to understand both 'Superman can fly' and 'Clark Kent can fly' while thinking that the former is true and the latter false, the Fregean will think that 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' have different senses. This seems to be the intuitively correct view.

A persistent problem for this view is explaining what sorts of things senses are. To give a criterion for when two expressions express different senses is not to explain what senses are. Even if one is willing to admit abstract objects in general, one might be skeptical about admitting a large class of abstract objects, beyond such relatively respectable entities as universals and numbers, just to serve as the contents of linguistic expressions.

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A natural thought is that the contents of perceptions should either be or be closely related to propositions of one of these three sorts. We'll now investigate the prospects of each.

3 Perceptual contents as sets of possible worlds

I can think of two possible arguments for this view.

One starts with the premises that the contents of thoughts and sentences are sets of possible worlds, and argues that, ceteris paribus, we should take the contents of perceptions to be the same sorts of things as the contents of thoughts and sentences. While I think that the latter consideration is plausible, I do not think that it is plausible that thoughts and sentences have sets of possible worlds as their contents, for pretty much the reasons sketched above. So I don't think that this argument is persuasive.

The second begins with a combination of two views in metaphysics: possibilism, which recognizes the existence of possible objects in addition to the set of actual objects, and a kind of nominalism which recognizes no abstract objects other than sets of particulars (and so rejects entities like universals and Fregean senses). (David Lewis held a view of this sort.) On this view, there are no such things as Russellian and Fregean propositions, so the possible worlds view of content wins by default. Since I reject both of these metaphysical views, I don't think that this argument is persuasive either.

Moreover, absent these metaphysical views, the view that the contents of perception are sets of possible worlds seems very unnatural. Ideally I think that we should want there to be some connection between the objects of experiences and their contents; and the immediate objects of experience are not sets.

So I suggest that we regard the choice between Russellian and Fregean propositions as the starting point for discussion of the nature of perceptual content.

4 Perceptual contents as Russellian propositions

Intuitively, the view that the contents of experience are Russellian propositions has a lot to recommend it. We have seen that it is plausible to regard the objects of experience as external particulars and universals; Russellianism takes the contents of experiences to be complexes built out of these very things. This is very appealing.

Another sort of intuitive argument (maybe not altogether distinct from the first) is that it seems that our experiences represent objects in our environment as having certain properties, and standing in certain relations to each other. This fits nicely with the Russellian view of content.

Nonetheless, this view does face several important objections.

4.1 Objection 1: Russellianism cannot explain certain differences in phenomenology

Let's say that the 'phenomenology' of an experience is what it's like to have that experience. Many people have found the following view about the relationship between phenomenology and content to be plausible: any two experiences (at least of the same sensory modality) which represent the world as being the same way should have the same phenomenology. This view is sometimes called *intentionalism* or *representationalism*, though there are many different versions

of this position worth distinguishing. We'll get into these distinctions later in the course; for now we'll just focus on the one-direction intra-modal version stated above.

If you buy into intentionalism of this sort, then you might find the following kinds of cases worrying for the Russellian:

> *Color constancy.* When clouds pass overhead darkening the grass in front of me, the color of the grass does not seem to change; so one might think that the Russellian content of my perceptual experience of the grass remains unchanged. But the phenomenology changes.
>
> *Shape configurations.* There is a phenomenological difference between the visual experience of a square and a diamond. But it is not obvious that there is a difference in Russellian content, since the two figures seem to have same two shape properties.
>
> *Perceived locations and relations to perceivers.* Suppose that there is some object at location L, which is the right side of my visual field but the left side of your visual field. Both of us, if our experience is veridical, perceive the object as having the same location property – namely, being located at L — but the phenomenologies of our respective experiences differ.

(There are also related problems having to do with inverted spectrum cases, but we'll be leaving those till later in the semester.)

How could a Russellian respond to these three cases? A first try at a response: find represented properties which can account for the differences. E.g., in the case of color constancy, we could appeal to the property of being less well lit, or in a shadow. If these can be part of the content of experience, then the Russellian can use them to account for the relevant differences in phenomenology. A second try: modes of presentation, but not as contents.

A (possibly) deeper problem: how to incorporate 'egocentric properties' within the Russellian framework. These seem to be needed to handle the second and third cases above. The intuitive difference between 'to my right' and 'to the right of JS.'

4.2 Objection 2: Russellianism posits differences which are not present in the phenomenology

The above objection was based on the premise that any two experiences with different phenomenologies should have different contents (i.e., same contents, same phenomenology). but you might find another premise which connects content to phenomenology promising. On this view, a theory of the contents of perception should not posit differences in content which do not correspond to any difference in phenomenology. This is thus the converse of the above principle: it says that sameness phenomenology implies sameness of content. (You might recognize this as a close relative of Johnston's 'phenomenal bottleneck principle.')

If you accept this premise, then you might find the following kinds of cases worrying for the Russellian:

> *Indistinguishable objects.* On Monday I perceive Castor in some scenario. On Tuesday I perceive his identical twin, Pollux, in the same scenario. The two experiences have the same phenomenology, but according to the Russellian, different contents: the content of the first contains Castor, and the content of the second contains Pollux. And Castor and Pollux are distinct.

Matching hallucinations. On Monday I have a veridical experience which is of some external particular o. On Tuesday I have an indistinguishable hallucinatory experience which bears no relation to o. Again, the phenomenology appears to be the same; but the Russellian says that the contents of the first include o, but that the contents of the second do not.

5 Perceptual contents as Fregean propositions

we should recognize that there are problems with applying the apparatus of Fregean sense to the case of perceptual experience. Unlike the Russellian, who constructs propositions out of objects and properties, the Fregean introduces a new class of items — senses — to play the role of contents. It is therefore reasonable to think that the Fregean should be able to provide some constraints on when two bearers of content have the same Fregean sense, and when they do not. When the bearers of content in question are sentences, such constraint is standardly provided by some version of Frege's Criterion:

> Two sentences S and S' have the same content iff any rational agent who understood both would, on reflection, judge that S is true iff he he would judge that S' is true.

But how are we to apply this to the case of perception? We could say something like

> Two experiences e and e' have the same content iff any rational agent who had both experiences would, on reflection, judge that e is veridical iff he he would judge that e' is veridical.

But this does not seem to be what the Fregean should want; two experiences can represent the world as being just the same way even though a rational agent would judge, for reasons extrinsic to the having of the experience, that one is veridical and the other not. (Maybe in one case the agent is in conditions which he knows to be likely to produce illusions in one of the cases.)

A natural move at this point is to fall back on the notion of indiscriminability, or something like it. Perhaps the Fregean should say that two experiences have the same Fregean content just in case they are indiscriminable: that is, just in case they have the same phenomenology. But it is at this point that the view stops being looking like a version of Fregeanism at all, for this criterion of sameness and difference of senses implies that sense does not determine reference. After all, two experiences can have the same phenomenology while being about different objects, or different properties; consider cases of identical twins, or superficially indistinguishable natural kinds.

But let's set this aside for now; the Fregean view of the contents of perceptual experience faces a more fundamental problem.

First, note that if the content of experience is Fregean rather than Russellian, then, since there will be many Fregean senses corresponding to each visually represented property, there will be, for each Russellian proposition attributing a property to an object, many Fregean propositions which are are 'about' the same object and property, but differ with respect to the mode of presentation of the property. (There will also be different Fregean propositions which differ with respect to the mode of presentation of the object, but ignore that for simplicity.) Now consider two such Fregean propositions, fp_1 and fp_2, which correspond, in the above sense, to a Russellian proposition rp. They key question is then: Is the phenomenology of an experience which has fp_1 different from one which has fp_2 as its content, or not?

The latter option does not seem attractive. For one thing, I've already suggested that the best criterion for sameness and difference of sense applicable to the case of perception will be one which identifies sameness of sense with sameness of phenomenology, and difference of sense with difference of phenomenology. A Fregean who accepts that conclusion can hardly turn around now and say that experiences with contents fp_1 and fp_2 (which are by hypothesis distinct) have the same phenomenology. But, independently of this point, the move seems implausible. If the Fregean says that, for any two Fregean propositions corresponding in the above sense to a single Russellian proposition, having a visual experience with one as content is, phenomenologically, just the same as having a visual experience with the other as content, then it looks as though Fregeanism is introducing distinctions where there are no genuine differences. After all, the claim will be that in many, many cases a pair of experiences will represent the same objects as having the same properties, *and* seem just the same to the perceiver, and yet have different contents.

So let's suppose that a phenomenological difference accompanies the difference in content between two experiences which, respectively, have fp_1 and fp_2 as their contents. By hypothesis, experiences with contents fp_1 and fp_2 do *not* differ in the properties that they attribute to any object: otherwise they would not correspond to the same Russellian proposition. But, despite not attributing any different properties to any object, they seem different to the perceiver. The problem is that this combination of characteristics seems to run afoul of the fact about perception which Moore noticed in "The Refutation of Idealism" when he wrote, "When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous." One way to develop Moore's thought here is this: the only introspectible elements in perceptual experience are the ways that the experience represents the world as being. Shoemaker puts this point as follows:

> "To say that this variation is only a variation in the how of perceptual representation [i.e. a mode of presentation] and in no way a variation in what is represented [i.e. a represented property], seems to me at odds with the phenomenology. ... Similarity in the presenting manifests itself in represented similarity in what is represented .... More generally, the best gloss on the Moorean transparency intuition is that the qualitative character that figures in the perception of the color of an object is experienced as in or on the perceived object."

The problem this creates for the Fregean is as follows: we argued above that pairs of Fregean propositions which correspond to the same proposition will have to be such that (i) they have different phenomenologies, and (ii) they do not differ with respect to which objects they represent, or what properties they represent those objects as having. But if Shoemaker is right, it is impossible for both (i) and (ii) to be true of a pair of experiences, since qualitative differences always show up as differences in how the represented scene is perceived as being; and differences in how the represented scene is perceived as being must be differences in the properties that some object or other in that scene is perceived as having.

So, in general: the differences in content posited by the Fregean conception of content either, if accompanied by differences in phenomenology, conflict with the transparency of experience, and, if unaccompanied by phenomenology, conflict with the most plausible way to give criteria for sameness and difference of Fregean contents. The best conclusion seems to me that the differences in content posited by the Fregean conception of the content of experience do not exist.

So the framework of Fregean propositions does not fit the case of perceptual experience well at all. There seems to be no room for the representational differences which Fregean propositions introduce, and, as far as I can see, any reasonable way of giving a criterion for sameness and difference of Fregean senses will involve giving up the doctrine, which seems central to Fregeanism, that sense determines reference.