PERCEPTUAL CONTENT

VARIETIES OF CONTENT

Content and Consciousness
What relation is there between the content of a perceptual state and conscious experience? One proponent of an intentional approach to perception notoriously claims that it is 'nothing but the acquiring of true or false beliefs concerning the current state of the organism's body or environment' (Armstrong 1968, p. 209). Many critics of Armstrong have supposed that it is a defect of Armstrong's own account and even of any intentional theory that it cannot give an adequate account of what conscious experience is like. Beliefs need not be conscious states of mind, and there is no reason to think that the acquiring of beliefs need be conscious either. Armstrong claims, not implausibly, that there can be unconscious perception, but the complaint remains that he cannot give an adequate account of conscious perception, given the 'nothing but' element of his account. However, an intentional theory of perception need not be allied with any general theory of consciousness, one which explains what the difference is between conscious and unconscious states. If it is to provide an alternative to a sense-datum theory, the theory need only claim that where experience is conscious, its content is constitutive, at least in part, of the phenomenological character of that experience. This claim is consistent with a wide variety of theories of consciousness, even the view that no account can be given.

An intentional theory is also consistent with either affirming or denying the presence of subjective features in experience. Among traditional sense-datum theorists of experience, H. H. Price (1932) attributed in addition an intentional content to perceptual consciousness. Among recent accounts, Peacocke (1983, ch. 1) and Shoemaker (1990) both attribute subjective properties to experience – in the former case labelled sensational properties, in the latter qualia – as well as intentional content. One might call a theory of perception that insisted that all features of what an experience is like are determined by its intentional content, a purely intentional theory of perception. Harman (1990) is an example of one who holds such a view.

Experience and Belief
Armstrong not only sought to explain perception without recourse to sense-data or subjective qualities but also sought to equate the intentionality of perception with that of believing. There are two aspects to this: the first is to suggest that the only attitude towards a content involved in perceiving is that of believing, and the second is to claim that the only content involved in perception is that which a belief may have. The former suggestion faces an immediate problem: if having a perceptual experience acquires the corresponding belief, then such a case is where the subject already possesses the requisite belief – here Armstrong talks of perception maintaining, rather than leading to the acquisition of, belief. The more problematic case is that of disbelief in perception, where a subject has a perceptual experience but refrain from acquiring the corresponding belief. For example, someone familiar with the Müller–Lyer illusion in which lines of equal length appear unequal is unlikely to acquire the belief that the lines are unequal, and on encountering a recognisable example of the illusion. Despite that, the lines may still appear unequal to them.

Armstrong seeks to encompass such cases by talk of dispositions to acquire beliefs and talk of potentially acquiring beliefs. On his account this is all we need say of the psychological state enjoyed. However, one can admit that the disbelieving perceiver still enjoys a conscious occurrence experience, characterizing it in terms of a disposition to acquire a belief seems inadequate. There are two further worries. One may object that the content of perceptual experiences may play a role in explaining why a subject disbelieves, in the first place: someone may fail to acquire a perceptual belief precisely because how things appear to her is inconsistent with her prior beliefs about the world. Secondly some philosophers have claimed that there can be perception...
without any corresponding belief. Cases of disbelief in perception are still examples of perceptual experience that impinge on belief; where a sophisticated perceiver does not acquire the belief that the Müller–Lyer lines are unequal, she will still acquire a belief about how things look to her. Dretske (1969) argues for a notion of non-epistemic seeing, on which it is possible for a subject to be perceiving something while lacking any belief about it because she has failed to notice what is apparent to her. If we assume that such non-epistemic seeing nevertheless involves conscious experience it would seem to provide another reason to reject Armstrong’s view and admit that if perceptual experiences are intentional states then they are a distinct attitude-type from that of belief. However, even if one rejects Armstrong’s equation of perceiving with acquiring beliefs or dispositions to believe, one may still accept that he is right about the functional links between experience and belief, and the authority that experience has over belief, an authority which can nevertheless be overcome.

CONCEPTUAL AND NON-CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

Increasingly, proponents of the intentional theory of perception argue that perceptual experience is to be differentiated from belief not only in terms of attitude, but also in terms of the kind of content that experience is an attitude towards (see CONTENT). According to them we need to accept that there are varieties of content, that we need to distinguish between what has been called ‘conceptual’ and ‘non-conceptual’ content.

It is claimed that one cannot accommodate the nature of perceptual experience solely in terms of conceptual content, the only kind of content that beliefs and other propositional attitudes possess, but must ascribe to it a non-conceptual content.

If thought is structured, having a thought is to exercise the conceptual abilities corresponding to the concepts that compose that thought (see CONCEPTS). An individual’s possession of a given concept is revealed in the range of thoughts that she is able to have that contain that concept (cf. Evans, 1982, ch. 4). The conditions on any of her conceptual mental states possessing a content will then derive from the conditions of her possessing the concepts that compose that content. If perceptual experiences possess certain contents where the corresponding conditions on concept-possession are not met, they thereby possess a non-conceptual content. The various arguments used to support the claim that experience has a non-conceptual content tend to include two components: the first is to argue that a given condition on possessing a concept has not been met by a given individual; the second is to give grounds for nevertheless attributing a given content to the experience.

For example, it may be argued that only relatively sophisticated creatures such as ourselves, who employ language and are able to think about our own states of mind genuinely possess concepts, and so have conceptual thought. On the other hand, it may be claimed, other animals and infants, although not sapient, are sentient; and their experiences, no less than ours, purvey information to them and control their behaviour. It is not implausible to claim that there are some ways in which we experience the world in which they can too. If that is so, then there is a common content between some of their mental states and ours, even though only we are concept-possessors. It cannot be a constraint on that content that one possess the requisite concepts, hence that content is non-conceptual (Evans, 1982, ch. 5; Dretske, 1982, ch. 6).

Another argument derives from the phenomenological character of experience. It is often claimed that the character of a perceptual experience is much richer and more fine-grained than is the corresponding propositional attitude to which it may give rise. Confronted by a beech tree, a subject may be unable to put into words the specific outline that she sees the tree to have, or the various shades its leaves possess. Furthermore, outside of the context of actually viewing the tree, she may be unable to
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recognize the same shape again, or to think about it. Nevertheless she may be able to discriminate between that particular outline of the tree or shade of leaf and others that it could have had. Here it is tempting to claim that how things look to her outrun the conceptual capacities that she then possesses, as evidenced by her verbal descriptions of what is before her, or her later ability to think about it.

One response to this line of reasoning is to point out that she is at least able to attend to and indicate the outline when presented with it, and think, 'That outline is particularly striking'—so it is not true that how things appear to her cannot have a bearing on her thoughts. This is a nice issue, and it is not clear that the response answers the full force of the original intuition. The fact that a perceiver may, through attending to features of her experience, come to be able to demonstrate that feature, or even acquire a recognitional capacity for it, certainly supports the claim that each aspect could be matched by a corresponding concept. That does not yet show that in order for the perceiver to have an experience with that content, she must thereby possess the relevant concept. Rather it seems more plausible to say that we can explain the demonstrative concept she possesses in that context, or the recognitional capacity she acquires, in terms of the content of the experience. This would require us to suppose that the experience has the content independently of the conceptual capacities she actually possesses.

What forces us, an opponent of this view might press, to view the extra element as intentional but non-conceptual, rather than non-intentional and possibly subjective? Subjectivists have commonly argued for the need for some subjective features to experience on precisely the ground that we need to recognize the phenomenological differences between sensing and mere thinking. Likewise they have often treated this subjective aspect as the 'given' in experience which plays a part in explaining the acquisition and application of empirical concepts. Within the present context, the non-conceptual content appealed to by intentional theories seems to have taken over both roles.

In defence, the proponent of a plurality of contents may seek support in two directions. On the one hand, she may insist that introspection supports the view that even those aspects of experience that outrun the subject's current conceptual capacities seem to be as of the objective world, and do not seem to be subjective. On the other, the theorist may appeal outside of philosophical debates, to the notions of content at play within psychological theories of perception to show the need for notions of content which are not obviously tied to the subject's conceptual powers.

Whether this response is finally sufficient is perhaps undecided. What is clear is that where the problems of perception are themselves ancient, debates about perceptual content are as yet in their infancy.

Bibliography

PHYSICALISM (1)

The term 'physicalism' has been used in a variety of family-resemblance related ways in recent philosophy of mind. The same is true of 'materialism'. Often the two terms are used interchangeably, although there has also been some tendency to employ 'materialism' more generally than 'physicalism' — in particular, to use 'physicalism' for psychophysical IDENTITY THEORIES, while employing 'materialism' in a more inclusive way (as in 'eliminative materialism' and 'non-reductive materialism'). Here I will survey the range of philosophical doctrines that have been placed under the rubrics 'physicalism' and 'materialism' from the late 1950s to the present, in an effort to give a sense for the differences among these doctrines, the underlying similarities, and some of the reasons why there has been disagreement about what should count as a physicalist or materialist conception of mentality.

On this topic, as with many topics in philosophy, there is a distinction to be made between (i) certain vague, partially inchoate, pre-theoretic ideas and beliefs about the matter at hand; and (ii) certain more precise, more explicit, doctrines or theses that are taken to articulate or explicate those pre-theoretic ideas and beliefs. There are various potential ways of precisifying our pre-theoretic conception of a physicalist or materialist account of mentality, and the question of how best to do so is itself a matter for ongoing, dialectical, philosophical inquiry. (In order to emphasize this conceptual slack, I will hereafter use 'materialism' for the body of pre-theoretic ideas, and will treat the various potential precisifications as alternative referents of 'physicalism'.)