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PERCEPTION AND CONTENT

BILL BREWER

It is close to current orthodoxy that perceptual experience is to be characterized, at least in part, by its representational content, roughly, by the way it represents things as being in the world around the perceiver. Call this basic idea the content view (CV). There is debate within (CV) concerning the extent to which such content captures the subjective nature of experience; and, indeed, this issue poses something of a dilemma for (CV). For, consider the content of any particular perceptual experience. Is this very content also the content of a possible non-experiential thought or belief by the subject? If so, then what is added to it, in perception, to produce the characteristically conscious, subjective nature of the experience? If not, then how are we to explain its status as an essentially experiential representational content – a genuine content, which nevertheless cannot be the content of anything other than perceptual experience? This dilemma is in my view ultimately fatal, although I do not pursue it directly here. My aim is rather to bring out as clearly as I can what I regard as the core errors of (CV) which lie behind the dilemma.

The obvious model of representational content, for expounding (CV), is that of a person's thought about the world around him, as this is expressed in his linguistic communication with others, and registered by their everyday attitude ascriptions to him. Let us begin, then, with S's thought that a is F: a thought about a particular object in his environment, a, to the effect that it is F. Call this the initial model for content, (IM).

Motivated in part by the need to achieve a satisfactory relation between the content and the consciousness of perception, in the context of (CV), McDowell insists at this point upon a crucially qualified application of (IM) to the case of perceptual experience, by stressing that the singular components of genuinely perceptual contents are object-dependent demonstrative senses (see esp. McDowell, 1998a, 1998b, Lect. III, and 1998c). We therefore move from S's thought that a is F to his thought that that (man, say) is F. He adds a further qualification, that a person has no real control over which such contents come to him in perception: given the way things are in the world around him, and the various interests and concerns which he has in attending to it as he does, he is simply 'saddled' with determinate such contents (see esp. McDowell, 1994). Thought, on the other hand, is an operation of his spontaneity: he is in a certain sense free in his active formulation of the content 'a is F' in thought.¹

I endorse both of these qualifications in Perception and Reason (1999). Not wishing to do any injustice to the properties which we perceive the things around us to have, though, in comparison with the objects themselves which we perceive to have them, I add a third. The general components of genuinely perceptual contents are instantiation-dependent predicational demonstrative senses (Brewer, 1999, ch. 6, esp. pp. 186 ff.). So we arrive at a specific version of (CV), on which perceptual experience is supposed to be, or at least involve, the passive entertaining, or coming to mind, of doubly world-dependent demonstrative contents such as that that (man) is thus (in height, facial expression, or whatever).²

¹ It is notoriously difficult to make this sense both precise and plausible, though.

² Another approach to the modification of (IM), for application to perceptual experience within the context of (CV), is of course to elucidate a sense in which

I now think that all of this is too little too late, as it were: the whole framework of (CV) has to be rejected. Even its most modified version, above – on which perceptual experience is assimilated to being saddled with doubly world-dependent demonstrative contents – retains two fundamental features of (IM), which are in my view objectionable in any account of perceptual experience. The first is that contents admit the possibility of falsity, and that genuine perception is therefore to be construed as a success, in which the way things experientially seem to the subject to be is determined as true by the way things actually are in the world around him. It might just as well have been false instead. The second is that contents involve a certain kind of generality, representing some object, or objects, as being a determinate way, that a range of qualitatively distinct such things in general may be. These two objectionable features of (CV) turn out to be intimately related. Pinpointing them in the variously modified versions of (CV) is far from straightforward, and almost nothing in this area is uncontroversial; but my project for what remains of this paper is to work out their objectionable consequences in detail.³

perceptual content is supposed to be non-conceptual (see, e.g. Evans 1982, Peacocke, 1992, Cussins, 1990, Crane, 1992). This approach cannot possibly succeed in my view. For it shares the core errors of (CV), which come under critical scrutiny in the present paper, and it has other objectionable features of its own besides (see, e.g. Brewer, 1999, ch. 5, and Brewer, 2005).

³ Although almost orthodoxy, (CV) has been subject to probing critical scrutiny elsewhere recently. For example, Martin (2002) objects that it is inconsistent with the transparency of experience, properly construed; Campbell (2002) objects that it fails to do justice to the intuitively explanatory role of perceptual experience in connection with the very possibility of demonstrative thought about the perceived world; Travis objects, amongst other things, that it is not possible, as (CV) requires, to recover determinate representational content from the truths about how things look, for example, to a person in perception; and Gupta (2006) objects to its basic assumption that perception makes a categorical, as opposed to hypothetical, contribution to the rationality of belief. A complete treatment would compare and contrast these objections with my own argument against (CV) below; but this is not possible within the confines of the present paper.

I The Possibility of Falsity

According to (CV), perceptual experience is (partially) to be characterized by its representational content: the way it represents things as being in the world around the perceiver. Such contents are determined as true or false by the way things actually are out there. On the highly plausible assumption that perceptual contents are not normally necessary truths, they admit the possibility of falsity. Genuine perception therefore involves a successful match between mind and world, between content and fact, which might instead have been otherwise, in correspondingly unsuccessful cases.

As I read McDowell, his version of (CV) exhibits this feature straightforwardly. Perception has object-dependent demonstrative content, 'that (man) is F', for example. This has a particular man in the world as a constituent, upon whose existence, and appropriate relation with the subject, the experience essentially depends. The content is true if that man is indeed F, and false if he is not. I understand McDowell's view to be that the latter is a genuine possibility, which obtains in certain cases of illusion; or, if not in illusion itself, then in cases in which a person maintains endorsement of the content of his perception whilst that very object ceases to be F, out of view, say.

The possibility of falsity is less straightforward on the version of (CV) which I defend in Perception and Reason. (1999). For I insist also upon the involvement in genuine perceptual contents of instantiation-dependent predicational demonstrative senses. Experiences therefore depend, amongst other things, upon, both the existence of a

particular object in the world, and its instantiation of a specific property, which jointly suffice for the truth of their contents of the form ‘that (man) is thus (in height, facial expression, or whatever)’. The possibility of the falsity of the contents which characterize such experiences still exists, though, and is arguably actual in a case like the following. S sees a man with a certain facial expression; her experience has the content ‘that (man) is thus (in facial expression)’; the man turns away and simultaneously changes his facial expression, but S retains the belief which she acquired by simply endorsing the content of her perception: the content is false. It might be replied that the perceptual content, strictly speaking, is identified after the turning away by the sentence ‘that (man) was thus (in facial expression)’, which is true. Given that the time intervals involved may be arbitrarily short, and that the endorsement of any content takes time, this reply is likely to create general difficulties for the (CV)-theorist. In any case, less controversial possibilities suffice to make the point. The initial perceptual content is the bringing together of an object-dependent singular demonstrative sense and an instantiation-dependent predicational demonstrative sense. Both of these must be available to S independently; and each may individually be involved in a false content. Indeed, both are involved in the false content expressed after the man turns away in the case above by the sentence ‘that man is thus’, regardless of whether this is the same content as that of S’s immediately previous perception or not. Furthermore, at the moment at which S perceives that that (man) is thus (in facial expression), say, her thought that possibly that man is not thus is clearly true.

The possibility of the falsity of perceptual content plays a key role in (CV)’s treatment of cases of illusion. Indeed, it is normally thought to be a strength of (CV)

that it has available the characterization of illusions precisely as cases in which perceptual experience falsely represents the way things are in the world around us. In this respect, (IM), and McDowell's intermediate position, have an advantage over the most modified version of (CV) given above. A major motivation for McDowell's qualified application of (IM) to perceptual experience, though, as I read him, and certainly a large part of what propelled me in Perception and Reason (1999), is the idea that perceptual experience presents us directly with the objects in the world around us themselves. This brings with it a corresponding reduction in scope of the possible falsity of perceptual content, and therefore threatens to undermine the treatment of illusion as experience with false content.

I now think that the appeal to false experiential content is not an obligatory, or even a satisfactory, account of illusion. Furthermore, the reduction in the scope of the possibility of falsity in perceptual content, as illustrated in the progression from the initial model, (IM), to the most modified version offered in Perception and Reason (1999), is inadequate as an attempt to capture the sense in which perceptual experience simply presents us with the objects in the world around us. I consider these points in turn.

The (CV) treatment of illusion as false perceptual-experiential content can seem obligatory. For the only alternative to characterizing experience by its representational content is to characterize it as a direct presentation to the subject of certain objects, which themselves constitute the way things are for him in enjoying that experience. Call these the direct objects of experience: the objects which constitute the subjective character of perceptual experience. The argument from illusion is supposed to

establish that, at least in cases of illusion, and therefore also in all cases of experience subjectively indistinguishable from some possible illusion, including those of genuine perception, such objects must be mind-dependent ideas, sense-data, or whatever, rather than mind-independent things themselves. For, since cases of illusion are precisely those in which mind-independent things look, say, other than the way they actually are, the direct objects of illusory experiences, as defined above, must actually have properties which the mind-independent objects themselves do not; and so the two must be distinct. This appeal to mind-dependent entities as the direct objects of experience is rightly regarded as untenable. Thus, (CV)'s defining characterization of perceptual experience by its representational content appears obligatory, since it allows the only satisfactory description of illusion, as involving false such content.

There is a great deal going on in this argument; and this is not the place for a proper discussion of all the issues raised by illusion.⁴ All I can do here is to sketch the form of an alternative approach to illusion which is ignored by the argument, and then go on to explain why I think that the (CV) approach is unsatisfactory.

The alternative approach is a variant of Berkeley's (1975a, 1975b) conception of perceptual illusion as experience of physical objects themselves, which is apt to mislead us about their nature, although it is also crucially different in certain key respects. I claim that this allows the characterization of perceptual experience in both illusory and non-illusory cases by appeal to its mind-independent direct objects, in precisely the above sense. The error in illusory cases lies in the fact that such objects have the power to mislead us, in virtue of their perceptually relevant similarities with

⁴ See my forthcoming(a) and forthcoming(b) for a full treatment.

other things (see also Travis, 2004). Let me illustrate very briefly how this approach handles an exemplary case: the Müller-Lyer illusion.

Two lines which are actually identical in length are made to look different in length by the addition of misleading hashes. Rejecting any appeal to two mind-dependent items which actually differ in length, as we surely must, the proponent of (CV) insists that we describe this as a case in which the two lines are falsely represented in perceptual experience as being of unequal length. I claim that the subjective character of a person's perceptual experience of the Müller-Lyer diagram is constituted, amongst other things, by the two mind-independent lines themselves, distributed in space as they actually are – that is to say, equally extended. Nevertheless, the hashes at the ends of the lines have the power to mislead her as to their relative lengths. It is still controversial what the correct explanation is of the Müller-Lyer illusion; but, whatever this is, where (CV) applies it in explanation of how the subject's perceptual system arrives at a false representation in experience of their length as unequal, I apply it in explanation of how that very diagram, presented as it is in experience, has the evident power to mislead her, whether or not this error is actualized in any false judgement. For example, a plausible account along these lines cites the visually relevant similarities between the Müller-Lyer diagram and a configuration of two unequal lines, one longer and behind its plane, the other shorter and in front, projecting equally onto the plane of the diagram itself. These are objective similarities between the direct object of the viewer's experience and a configuration of two unequal lines, which are visually relevant, crudely, in virtue of the similar subpersonal treatment of the two pairs of lines by the visual system. Thus her experience, with the

Müller-Lyer diagram as its direct object, is misleading as to the relative lengths of its lines.⁵

(CV)'s appeal to false experiential content is in general unnecessary as an account of illusion, in my view. Certain developments of (CV) also attempt to reduce the scope of the possibility of falsity in perceptual content, given that it is available, by insisting upon the object- and instantiation- dependence of the singular and predicational senses involved. I claim that this is inadequate as an attempt to capture, within the context of (CV), a genuine, and fundamental, insight, that perceptual experience presents us with the objects in the world around us themselves.

The key insight here again has something of a Berkeleyian pedigree (see, esp. 1975a, III). The intuitive idea is that, in perceptual experience, a person is simply presented with the actual constituents of the physical world themselves. Any errors in her world-view which result are products of the subject's responses to this experience, however automatic, natural or understandable in retrospect these responses may be. Error, strictly speaking, given how the world actually is, is never an essential feature of experience itself. The incompatibility, between this idea that perceptual experience consists in direct conscious access to constituents of the physical world themselves, and the possibility of falsity in perceptual content which is characteristic of any form of (CV), comes out clearly, and to the detriment of the latter, in my view, in the following considerations.

⁵ See my 'How to Account for Illusion' for an extended development and defence of this view.

A first issue concerns the determinacy of the purported perceptual representation of inequality in the case of the Müller-Lyer. Is the line with inward hashes represented as shorter than it actually is; or is the line with outward hashes represented as longer than it actually is; or both; and by how much in each case? That is to say, how exactly would the world have to be for the purported perceptual representation to be veridical? (CV)'s talk of perceptual content requires a specific answer to this question.⁶ Yet it far from clear how one is non-arbitrarily supposed to be given. It might be replied that the perception represents the Müller-Lyer lines merely determinably, as one a little longer than the other. This forfeits the (CV) theorist's preferred account of the fine-grainedness of perception, though, as consisting in the maximal degree of determinateness in perceptual content, as opposed, often at least, to the more determinable contents which figure in belief (see e.g. Evans, 1982, p. 229; Peacocke, 1992; McDowell, 1994, Lect. III and Afterword, Pt. II; Brewer, 1999, 5.3.1). Thus, we have a tension here, at the very least, between the (CV) account of the Müller-Lyer error as a false perceptual representation that two lines are different in length, although to no determinate degree, and the standard (CV) account of the fine-grainedness of perceptual discrimination, as due to the maximal determinateness of perceptual content. The (CV) assimilation of perceptual presentation to contentful thought is clearly forced.

Second, and relatedly, one might ask where, exactly, in space, the endpoints of the two main lines are supposed to be represented as being. Facing the diagram head-on, in good lighting conditions, and so on, focus on one on these four endpoints: where

⁶ All I mean here is that there must be a specific answer to the question what the content of any given experience is. This content itself may be thought determinable or quantificational to some extent. See below.

does your experience place it? Well, mine places it where it actually is, or at least there is no obvious obstacle to its doing so. Similarly with respect to the three other endpoints. So, presumably, according to (CV), my perception represents all four endpoints as where they actually are, which is to say it represents the endpoints of each of the two main lines as at equally separated points in space. In this sense, then, the lines are represented as equally extended. Yet, at the same time, it is supposed to represent them as unequal in length: this is its account of the illusory nature of the experience. So, at best, (CV) is committed to regarding the representational content of the Müller-Lyer experience as impossible. It cannot possibly be veridical, not even when faced by the Müller-Lyer diagram itself, in perfect viewing conditions. This strikes me as an unattractive result. There is nothing wrong with entertaining an impossible thought content: 'Hesperus is distinct from Phosphorus' is plausible such. The difficulty is that (CV) appears committed to the following. Having the Müller-Lyer diagram subjectively presented in perceptual experience is a matter of representing an impossible state of affairs. For one would surely like to be able to say that what is represented in such a case cannot be impossible, since it is actual. One is seeing precisely what is there – lines just where they are and nowhere else – however misleading that very diagram may be. Impossibility in content may be avoided by the suggestion that the content of the (ML) experience conjoins an indeterminate representation of the positions of the four endpoints, as, roughly, in four regions around their actual locations, with the representation of an indeterminate inequality in their relative lengths. Again, though, the fineness of grain in perceptual content, supposedly characteristic of its distinction from non-experiential thought content, is lost.

Third, suppose that you are faced with the Müller-Lyer diagram. Gradually the hashes at the ends of each of the two main lines shrink in size, until eventually they vanish. If you are like me, then you do not have a sequence of experiences representing the two main lines as gradually changing in length – one growing and/or the other shrinking – until they coincide, as (CV) presumably contends. Instead, you gradually come to realize that any previous inclination to take them to be unequal in length was mistaken, as the power of the hashes to mislead in this way diminishes. You are evidently presented in experience throughout with the very same pair of lines, equally extended in space as they actually are, whose unchanging identity in length becomes gradually more apparent to you, as their similarities with an alternative configuration of unequal lines at different distances become less salient, as any suggestion of depth given by the hashes disappears.

The case is clearly poorly modelled by (IM), which assimilates it to your entertaining the following sequence of thoughts, gradually ‘getting warmer’, as they say in children’s games, with respect to the height of a 5’ 6” person you are about to meet: ‘Jane is 6’’, ‘Jane is 5’ 11”’, ... ‘Jane is 5’ 7”’, ‘Jane is 5’ 6”’. Your false representation of her height gradually improves until it finally becomes true. Provided you understand her name, you are thinking about Jane all along, and eventually represent her height correctly; but this is quite different from having her in view at any stage. This is not essentially a matter of representing anything as being any specific way, which it may or may not turn out to be; but is rather a matter of having that very person presented in conscious experience. Similarly with respect to seeing the Müller-Lyer diagram

McDowell's insistence that the contents of perceptual experience involve object-dependent singular demonstrative senses is no help in removing this obstacle to (CV), so far as I can tell. For suppose this time that you meet Jane, who then leaves the room. You then thinks the following series of thoughts: "That woman is 6'", "That woman is 5' 11\"", ... "That woman is 5' 7\"", "That woman is 5' 6\"". Still, this is quite different from seeing her before you. Insisting that you simply finds yourself saddled, passively, with the sequence of contents in question does nothing to remedy the situation either. This may just happen, as you cannot take your mind off her when she has left.

Insisting further, as I do in Perception and Reason (1999) that your experience is not a genuine perception of the Müller-Lyer diagram until you represent both lines' lengths accurately and equally – at which point 'those lines are thus (in length)' is the content of your perceptual experience – and that your previous experience is to be assimilated to a hallucination of two unequal lines gradually getting closer to each other in length, caused by that diagram, hardly helps matters either. For, as things are, you are presented in experience with those very lines in the diagram from the start, even though their accompanying hashes give them the power to mislead you as to their relative lengths. It is this power to mislead which gradually reduces as the hashes shrink, regardless of whether you are actually misled by them in your beliefs. The two main lines of the diagram, extended equally in space as they actually are, which have this diminishing power to mislead as their hashes are removed, are presented in

experience throughout, and (CV), of whatever variety, is hard pressed properly to respect this.⁷

Generalizing somewhat ambitiously from this discussion, I suggest that there is a tension between the (CV) approach to illusion as false perceptual representation and the idea that the physical objects of illusion are genuinely subjectively presented in illusory experience.

I can think, of a figure which you hide behind a screen, that it is square, when actually it is circular; but, if we insist on characterizing my perceptual experience as a representation of something as square before me, then how can we claim that it is actually a circle which is subjectively presented, even if there actually is a circle out there, where I represent a square as being, which is somehow causally relevant to my purported perceptual representation?

Consideration of perceptual illusion brings out, I think, the need for two levels in the subjective character of experience. I would myself accommodate these, first, as the mind-independent direct object itself, just as it actually is, which is constitutive of this subjective character, and, second, as the way in which this object may mistakenly be perceptually taken: the way it has the evident power to mislead one into thinking it is. I have been suggesting that (CV) is torn between, either leaving the mind-independent object itself, as it actually is, out of the subjective picture altogether – as in the case of the circle supposedly seen as a square, above – or forcing both into an impossible representational content – as in the case of the Müller-Lyer lines simultaneously

⁷ I now see that this line objection to my earlier version of (CV) (1999) is very closely related to those urged by Mike Martin (2001).

represented as extended between equally distant endpoints, and yet unequal in length – which is therefore implausibly never actually veridical, even when faced with the very illusory phenomenon in question..

The basic worry here is really very simple. Its being the case that one's thought about the physical world is dependent for its truth or falsity upon the condition of a particular object out there is one thing, having that very physical object subjectively present in perceptual experience is quite another. (CV) unacceptably assimilates the latter to the former. Attempting to mimic the Berkeleyian insight, that, in perceptual experience, a person is subjectively presented such constituents of the physical world themselves, within the context of (CV), by insisting that various, or all, of the elements of perceptual content are world-dependent, fails. Perceiving is not a matter of being saddled with representational content, however world-dependent this may be. It is rather a matter of the conscious presentation of actual constituents of physical reality themselves, particular such things, just as they are, which is what makes all contentful representation of that reality in thought even so much as possible.

II The Involvement of Generality

(CV) characterizes perceptual experience by its representational content. In doing so, it retains a key feature of (IM), namely, that content admits the possibility of falsity: the world might not actually be the way a given content represents it as being. Indeed, it is often assumed to be a major benefit of (CV) that this feature may be put to use in its explanation of perceptual illusion. I argued, in section I above, that this assumption is mistaken, and that the possibility of falsity is a net cost, not a benefit, to (CV). The

current section proceeds as follows. First, I explain the sense in which (CV)'s commitment to the problematic possibility of falsity, as I see it, is due to the involvement, in the very idea of representational content, of a certain kind of generality. Second, I argue that it is this way in which such generality is essentially involved in the notion of perceptual content which ultimately obstructs (CV)'s proper appreciation of the Berkeleyian insight that perception is fundamentally the presentation to a subject of the actual constituents of the physical world themselves.

The claim that content involves generality is most obvious in (IM): S's thought that a is E. Here a particular object, a, is thought to be a specific general way, E, which such objects may be, and which infinitely many qualitatively distinct possible objects are.⁸ 'E' is associated with a specific general condition; and the particular object, a, is thought to meet that very condition. McDowell's insistence that the contents of perceptual experience involve object-dependent singular demonstrative senses makes no significant difference at this point. To think that that (man) is E, say, is equally to think, of a particular man, that he meets a specific general condition, which he and indefinitely many other, qualitatively distinct, things might, at least in principle, actually meet. Similarly, the doubly demonstrative contents of Perception and Reason (1999) – such as 'that (man) is thus (in height, facial expression, or whatever)' – again represent a particular thing as being a determinate general way, which, again, infinitely many qualitatively distinct possible objects are.

⁸ I focus here on the case of subject-predicate thought, which most explicitly registers the combination of particularity with generality. My own view is that this combination is integral to the truth-evaluability of any content. The 'particulars' involved need not necessarily be persisting material objects, or, indeed, 'objects' of any kind. Even the most abstract formulation of a truth-evaluable content as that things (or the relevant realm of reality) are (is) thus and so (as opposed to some other way), displays the particular/general combination.

In the first and second cases, of thought, and of perceptual content according to McDowell, the general condition in question is identified in such a way that the possibility is left open that the particular thing represented might itself fail to meet it, leaving the content actually entertained on that very occasion false. The result is supposed to be some kind of perceptual illusion. In the third case, of my own account of perceptual content in Perception and Reason (1999), the possibility of falsity – that that (man) might not be thus (in height, facial expression, or whatever) – still exists, as it were, although its actually obtaining is not compatible with the availability to the subject in experience of the particular content representing it. Still, even in this case, the specific general condition ascribed in the content of perceptual experience involves abstracting in one among indefinitely many possible ways from the particular object purportedly perceived to be just that way. This, I contend, is the source of (CV)'s failure properly to respect the Berkeleyian insight that perceptual experience fundamentally consists in the presentation to a person of the actual constituents of the physical world themselves.

Suppose that you see a particular red football – call it Ball. According to (CV), your perceptual experience is to be characterized by its representational content. Let us take it for granted that this content makes singular reference to Ball. Your experience therefore represents that Ball is a specific general way, F, which such objects may be. Whichever way this is supposed to be, its identification requires making a determinate specification of one among indefinitely many possible generalizations from Ball itself. Ball has colour, shape, size, weight, age, cost, and so on. So perception must begin by making a selection amongst all of these, according to (CV). Furthermore,

and far more importantly for my present purposes, on any given such dimension – colour, or shape, say – the specification in experience of a determinate general way that your perception supposedly represents Ball as being requires further crucial abstraction. Supposing that your experience is veridical, it must be determinate to what extent, and in which ways, Ball’s actual colour or shape might vary consistently with the truth of the relevant perceptual content. This is really just to highlight the fact that (CV) is committed to the idea that your perceptual experience has specific truth conditions, which go beyond anything fixed uniquely by the actual nature of the particular red football – Ball – which you see.

According to (CV), then, perception – even perfectly veridical perception, whatever exactly this may be – does not consist in the simple presentation to a subject of various constituents of the physical world themselves. Instead, it offers a determinate specification of the general ways such constituents are represented as being in experience: ways which other such constituents, qualitatively distinct from those actually perceived by any arbitrary extent within the given specified ranges, might equally correctly – that is, truly – be represented as being. Any and all such possible alternatives are entirely on a par in this respect with the object supposedly perceived, so far as (CV) is concerned. Thus, perceptual experience trades direct openness to the elements of physical reality themselves, for some intellectual act of classification or categorization. As a result, (CV) loses all right to the idea that it is the actual physical objects before her which are subjectively presented in a person’s perception, rather than any of the equally truth-conducive possible surrogates. She may

supposedly be referring to a privileged such entity in thought, but it is hard to see how it is that thing, rather than any other, which is truly subjectively presented to her.⁹

However automatic, or natural, such general classification may be, it still constitutes an unwarranted intrusion of conceptual thought about the world presented in perception into the (CV) theorist's account of the most basic nature of perception itself. The selective categorization of particular constituents of physical reality enters the picture of a person's relation with the world around her only when questions of their various similarities with, and differences from, other such things somehow become salient in her thought about them, rather than constituting an essential part of their subjective presentation to her in perception. Perception itself constitutes the fundamental ground for the very possibility of any such abstract general thought about the physical world subjectively presented in it.

Proponents of (CV) may hope to soften the impression that their characterization of perceptual experience by its content in this way constitutes a mistaken importation of selective intellectual abstraction, or categorization, into the account of perception, along the following lines. Genuine – that is veridical – perception presents a person with various constituents of the physical world themselves; but it must be acknowledged that this always involves less than perfect acuity. There is a

⁹ An important line of reply at this point would appeal to the direct presentation in experience of the properties of things out there in the world, as a way to capture the generality in perception. These properties are elements of physical reality, it may be said. Hence their presentation in experience does nothing to threaten the idea of perception as a direct openness to the world. Of course physical objects have all the properties which they have. I deny, though, that these are features of the physical world on a par with the objects themselves which have them, in the way in which this reply requires. Thanks to Tim Crane for this suggestion. Far more is necessary than I can provide here adequately to respond to it.

determinate range of respects in which those very things might have been different without any relevant difference in the impact made by them upon the subject in question. Thus her perception is bound to involve a degree of generality. The general way that her experience represents such things as being, is precisely that way which would determine the resultant perceptual content as true if and only if the relevant worldly constituents were as they actually are, or were different in any of these respects.

Such hope is in my view misguided. For this proposal faces a number of serious difficulties.

First, it has more than a whiff of circularity. The suggestion is that perceptual experience is to be characterized by its representational content, which is in turn to be identified by a certain procedure which takes as its starting point a worldly situation in which that very content is supposed to be determined as true. That is, the truth conditions definitive of the experiential content in question are to be specified by a kind of generalization from a paradigm instance of its actual truth. Yet how is it supposed to be determined what is to count as such an instance of its truth, for the purposes of generalizing to these truth conditions, in advance of any specification of those very conditions? This proposed procedure for the characterization of perceptual experience cannot even get started unless it has already been completed. It is therefore either useless or unnecessary.

This first objection may be thought to provide further motivation for the idea that perceptual content is both object-dependent and instantiation-dependent

demonstrative content. For, in that case, the worldly situation, which provides the starting point for the generalization procedure supposedly definitive of the content of a given perceptual experience, will be the actual situation accessible to the subject at the time. The problem is that this will only generate the right result in cases in which the subject's experience is genuinely perceptual, as opposed to illusory or hallucinatory. For, on this approach, such phenomena are characterized as something like failed attempts at entertaining a (likely non-existent) doubly world-dependent demonstrative content of this kind, accompanied by various relevant descriptive representations. Again, though, it is far from clear how we are supposed to determine whether or not a given case is one of genuine perception, as opposed to illusion or hallucination in this sense, in the absence of a prior specification of the content of the experience in question, which is precisely what we cannot have.

Second, suppose that we have somehow determined that the case before us is one of genuine – that is, veridical – perception, rather than illusion or hallucination; and suppose, further, that we have some way of fixing the actual constituents of the subject's environment which are experientially accessible to her. The proposed specification of the representational content of her experience then proceeds as follows. Its truth conditions are satisfied if and only if, things are precisely as they actually are, or they are different in any of the various respects in which they might have been different without making any relevant difference to their impact upon her. This immediately raises the question which differences are relevant, in the impact made upon the subject. Any change in the worldly constituents in question makes a difference of some kind, even if this is only characterized in term of her embedding in a different environment. Relevant changes, though, transform the world from a

condition in which the initial, target, content of her perceptual experience is to be regarded as true, to one in which it is to be regarded as false. So the question of which worldly differences are relevant is clearly crucial. I cannot establish here that no satisfactory account of what makes such differences relevant can possibly be given. So this line of argument is bound to remain a challenge to the present defence of the way in which (CV) imports generality into the characterization of perceptual experience, rather than a conclusive refutation. Still, the following four proposals are clearly problematic.

1. A worldly change is relevant iff it makes an intrinsic physical difference to the subject's perceptual system. This is plausibly neither necessary nor sufficient for the world to change its condition from one in which the subject's initial perceptual content is true to one in which it is false, according to (CV). Any trace of that form of externalism in the contents countenanced for perceptual experiences, on which these fail to supervene upon a subject's intrinsic physical condition simply consists in the denial of its necessity; and some such externalism is widely endorsed by proponents of (CV) (see e.g. Pettit and McDowell, 1986; Burge, 1986; Peacocke, 1992; and Davies, 1997). On the other hand, the idea that an effect on the intrinsic physical condition of the subject's eyes, say, is sufficient to transform any worldly condition in which a given experiential content is veridical, into one in which it is not, surely individuates perceptual contents far too finely. For we are notoriously capable, from a very early age, of representing crucial environmental constancies, such as shape and colour, as such, across variations often far more significant than these. The required (CV) response that the overall perceptual content changes in some way in every such case strikes me as rather desperate.

2. A worldly change is relevant iff it actually makes a difference to the way the subject believes things are out there. Again, this is arguably neither necessary nor sufficient for a worldly change to be relevant in the required sense. If she is suitably preoccupied with the colour of an object before her, for example, variation in its shape, say, to an extent which would render her perceptual representation of this shape false, may nevertheless make no impact whatsoever on her actual beliefs about it. On the other hand, (CV) must presumably allow for the possibility, at least, that a change in the way things are in the world around her makes a difference to the subject's beliefs about the world entirely independently of the way things are actually represented as being in her experience. Indeed, proponents of the present version of (CV) have no alternative that I can see but to appeal to this very idea, of worldly changes affecting a person's beliefs otherwise than by influencing the content of her experiential representations, in explanation of the systematic effects of various masked stimuli, for example.

3. A worldly change is relevant iff it actually does make, or might, without modifying its intrinsic physical effects upon the subject, have made, a difference to the way she believes things are out there. Perhaps a possible effect upon the subject's worldly beliefs of this kind is a necessary condition of any worldly change which renders a previously veridical experiential content false, although any such possibility is intuitively causally explanatorily grounded in experiential change rather than constitutively explanatorily of it. Still, since the current condition upon the relevance of a world difference is strictly weaker than the previous one, which I argued is insufficient, it must be insufficient too: rapidly masked stimuli may actually (hence

actually-or-possibly) affect a subject's beliefs about the world without showing up in any way in experience.

4. The nature of this insufficiency suggests a fourth approach, which is surely in the vicinity of what (CV) needs here, although I shall argue that it is either circular or independently highly objectionable, for precisely McDowellian-Wittgensteinian reasons. The proposal is that a worldly change is relevant, in the required sense, iff it makes a difference to the subject's experience of the world. This immediately raises the question, though, how such differences in experience are to be characterized. I can see just two possibilities, neither of which is acceptable. First, they are differences in its representational content. The idea would presumably be something like this. A person has a perceptual experience, and we are presuming, for the sake of the argument, both that it is veridical, and that we have identified the worldly objects and their features which it concerns. In order to determine its specific representational content, we are to consider the various ways in which these very objects might have been different with respect to such features. The content will be true in all of those cases in which such variation does not change its content. In other words, in order to carry out this procedure for the determination of perceptual content, we have already to have fixed that very content. So the procedure is clearly unacceptably circular. Second, the differences in experience, by reference to which the required notion of relevant worldly variation is to be characterized, are differences in its intrinsic phenomenal character, which is prior to, and independent of, its representational content. Here, the suggestion is something like this. Perceptual experience consists in a presentation to the subject of certain specific phenomenal qualities. In order to determine its characteristic representational content in any given case, we consider the

counterfactual changes in the world around the subject, upto the various points at which these phenomenal qualities themselves change as a result. The truth-condition of the content in question is that the world be within that range of possibilities. The result is a familiar form of indirect realism, on which certain phenomenal qualities are natural signs of various worldly states of affairs (Ayers, 1993, vol. I, ch. 7). The extent of the generality introduced into perceptual content corresponds to the degree of acuity in the signing system. This is certainly not the place for an extended discussion of this proposal. It is sufficient for present purposes simply to make two critical points, very much inspired by McDowell's Wittgenstein. First, Wittgenstein's 'private language argument' (1958, §§ 243 ff.) puts serious pressure upon any attempted individuation of subjective qualities prior to, and independently of, the individuation of the worldly things to which they are our experiential responses. Yet some such is essential to the current indirect realist strategy. Second, even if it were possible, the upshot of the strategy would be an account of perceptual experience on which the subject is entirely ignorant as to how it actually is that his experience supposedly represents the world as being (see McDowell, 1994, Lect. I, 1998c; Brewer, 1999, ch. 3).

This fourth approach may be in the vicinity of what (CV) needs here, at least in acknowledging that it is the nature of experience which grounds the actual and possible changes in belief cited by the second and third proposals above, if they are to be germane to determination of the content of such experience. Unfortunately for proponents of (CV), though, it is circular if it attempts to combine this with a characterization of experience itself exclusively in terms of its representational content; and it collapses into an untenable indirect realism if it attempts to supplement

this content-characterization with any appeal to more basic, mind-dependent, subjective qualities of experience. The right response to this impasse, in my view, is to reject (CV) altogether. The course of perceptual experience does indeed provide the subject with the grounds for her actual beliefs about the world, and also for the various other beliefs which she might equally have acquired had she noticed different things, or had her attention instead been guided by some other project or purpose. It does so, though, not by serving up any fully formed content, somehow, both in advance of, but also in light of, these attentional considerations, but, rather, by presenting her directly with the actual constituents of the physical world themselves.

Of course there are many more possible proposals than the four which I have considered here. Still, I do think that one might perfectly reasonably conclude from this representative sample of failures, that the current attempt to defend (CV)'s importation of the essential generality of representational content into its account of the nature of perceptual experience faces a very serious challenge in explicating its crucial notion of a worldly change which is relevant to the transition from truth to falsity in any given perceptual experience.

Suppose, finally, though, that we can somehow overcome this second problem of giving an account of which worldly changes are relevant in the required sense. The current version of (CV) proceeds as follows. Perceptual experience is to be characterized by its representational content. The truth-conditions definitive of any specific such content are to be arrived at by abstraction from a worldly exemplar of its veridicality, as appropriately governed by the given notion of relevant worldly changes: very roughly, admit into the truth-conditions, along with the paradigm

exemplar, all and only those alternative possibilities which do not make a relevant difference in that sense. A third serious difficulty is that the intuitive result of this procedure is a specification of the content of perceptual experience, for the subject, along the following lines. Things are as they are – give or take any variation that does not make a relevant difference – however that may be. In the absence of any more basic presentation to the subject of the actual constituents of the physical world themselves, as I recommend in opposition to (CV), then, although some determinate way things are represented as being out there may be identified by a specification of content along these lines, the subject himself is quite ignorant in an absolutely fatal sense of which way this actually is. Perception intuitively puts us in a position to discern how the world is around us, and thus continuously to update our world-view accordingly in the beliefs we form given our attention, interests and purposes. The idea that it simply announces that things are as they are, give or take any variations which don't make a relevant difference, is clearly quite useless in this regard.

I conclude, therefore, that the almost orthodox Content View, (CV), should be rejected. We should, instead, explore the viability of accounting for the most basic subjective character of perceptual experience by reference to its mind-independent constituent direct objects themselves: the actual elements of the physical world which are subjectively presented in such experience. Content does enter a complete account of our perception of the world around us; but only as the result of an intellectual abstraction, or generalization, from the basic nature of such experience, given the mode of our attention to its constituent direct objects.¹⁰

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