

## The Contents of Visual Experience

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**The Content View (CV):** Visual perceptual experiences have accuracy conditions.

- ♦ they are assessable for accuracy
- ♦ they have accuracy conditions
  - trivial vs substantive accuracy conditions
  - constraint on determination: phenomenal adequacy

### Strong vs. Weak CV

Strong CV: The having of content is the most basic structure of visual experience

Weak CV: The property a mental state of having of content need not be basic. This mental property may be consequential rather than fundamental.

### Possible notions fundamentality:

- explanation of phenomenal character?
- explanation of other cognitive roles of experience
- metaphysical structure of the mental property

### A Case for the (weak) Content View

- Platitude: you see an object, it looks some way to you.
  - the way depends on perspective, acuity
  - contrast camouflage
  - the platitude helps us fix on a specialized sense of ‘looks’ in which an object looks a certain way to someone who sees it.
- What are perceptual visual experiences?
  - not states of seeing that p, or seeing o, or seeing o’s being F, because these may be the result of inference.
  - placeholder for the platitude
  - this is a phenomenological category – so there may be experiences other than perceptions (or hallucinations that seem like perceptions from a first-person perspective) that don’t count as perceptual experiences even though they are perceptions. Eg Perky case where perception feels like an imagination.
  - contrast with typical ‘visual sensations’, eg seeing stars from being hit hard on the head, or having phosphenes.
- Given that when you see an object, there is some way that it looks to you, there are two kinds of non-neutrality in visual perceptual experience.

- (i) In contrast with visual imagination:  
commitment to the actual presence of a shiny cube  
'assertoric force', 'coercive power'
  - (ii) In common with visual imagination:  
both kinds of experience attribute properties to objects  
e.g, redness and cubicality.
- Once these contrasts are granted, it makes sense to ask, does the thing seen actually have the properties it looks to have?
  - If it makes sense to ask this, then visual perceptual experiences have accuracy conditions. (The consequent = CV).

**Further theses on which the CV is neutral**

- T1. Visual experiences have contents given by accuracy conditions, including conditions on how the subject's external environment must be for the experience to be accurate.
- T2. Visual experiences have object-independent contents given by accuracy conditions
- T3. Visual experiences have object-dependent contents given by accuracy conditions.
- T4. Visual experiences have contents given by all of its accuracy conditions.

The contents of an experience are *object-dependent* if (a) an external object *o* is a constituent of the contents, and (b) in order to take the experiential attitude toward the content, the subject must be seeing *o*.

→ NB: The case for the CV is not neutral on T1, but CV itself is.

**Example of Weak but not Strong CV: The Fact View**

Suppose you see red cube just to your left – call it Cube. Let *G* be the cluster of properties that Cube looks to you to have. According to the Fact View,

- (a) you stand in a perceptual relation – call it *R1* – to a fact: Cube's being *G*;
- (b) the fact is not assessable for truth: it's a truth-maker rather than a truth-bearer;
- (c) standing in *R1* to Cube's being *G* constitutes the fundamental structure of your visual experience.

→ A proponent of the Fact View could reject the strong Content View, while accepting the Weak Content View.

For each fact of the form *x*'s being *F*, there is a proposition of the form: *x* is *F*. We can thus define another relation – call it *R2* – that one stands in to a proposition that *x* is *F*, when one stands in *R1* to *x*'s being *F*.

Relation R2 need not reflect any basic structure of experience.

- Campbell and Johnston, opponents of the strong CV, seem willing to talk about contents nonetheless: eg, Johnston describes the twin case as one in which the contents are correct; Campbell didn't object when asked.

### Leftover Questions

- ❖ Which accuracy conditions give the contents of experience?
  - coarseness of grain (Russellian vs. Fregean contents)
  - which properties?
- ❖ What relation to content is involved in experience?

### The Attitude-Content View

While it is implicit in the Content View that experiences are in some sense structured by contents and some attitude toward those contents, the Content View is silent on what the attitude is. For all the Content View says, it could be belief.

Thesis (A): Visual perceptual experiences are structured by attitude and content, where the attitude is distinctive of visual experience: not reducible to or defined in terms of any other attitude, including belief.

Weak vs. Strong versions of (A)

**Attitude-Content View:** Visual perceptual experiences have contents that are given by their accuracy conditions, and consist in taking an attitude toward those contents that is distinctive of visual experiences.

#### Some contrasts

- de re vs. non-de re imaginings
- perceptual visual experiences vs. the 'inner light show'

### Two-part case for the weak version of (A)

**Part 1:** Show that the very idea of such a distinctive attitude is coherent and well-behaved.

- Imaginative vs. perceptual modes of property-attribution.

What's needed: a list of conditions that jointly obtain when and only when contents are entertained in the distinctively experiential way.

- ♦ the experience inherits its status as veridical or falsidical from the status of its contents as true or false (relative to a situation) [modulo indexicality]
- ♦ experientially represented objects seem to be actually present

- ♦ experiences purport to tell you which objects properties are attributed to (unlike all imaginings besides de re imaginings)
- ♦ if a content is experientially entertained, then the contents are phenomenally adequate to the experience

**phenomenal adequacy:** presupposed in debates about intentional objects (cf Robinson), size constancy (cf Peacocke's two trees), Searle's causal contents (cf Armstrong, Burge, Soteriou), inverted spectrum (cf criticisms of Russellian contents), color (Chalmers).

**Part 2:** Argue that the attitude so defined is more theoretically useful than alternatives

### **Belief-based theories**

- experiences are acquisitions of beliefs  
**Objection:** you might not actually form a belief!
- experiences are dispositions to form beliefs  
**Objection:** intuitively, it's experience that explains why you form the belief.

### **Two-factor theories**

Two factors, contingently related:

non-representational phenomenal state  
non-phenomenal representational state

- experience = the complex of the two factors.  
**Objection:** what explains how you end up disposed to form the belief?
- experience = the non-representational phenomenal factor  
**Objection 1:** modal commitments (phenomenal adequacy)  
**Objection 2:** no plausible relation for the factors to stand in, assuming that there are no necessary connection between distinct existences.

### **The Fact View Revisited**

- The Fact View is a way to deny the Strong Version of the CV and ACV.

**Next:** Defuse a challenge to the strong version of (A).

**Johnston's claim about the twins:** only the Fact View accounts for the defect in the twin case.

- What's wrong with the proposal that the defect lies in the relation between the entertaining of content, and the fact? Eg, the fact does not cause the entertaining in the right kind of way. In the example, the twins' sameness in height isn't appropriately related to the experiential entertaining of the true proposition that the twins are the same height.

Johnston considers and rejects one version of this view at the bottom of p. 274:

“There is a temptation to suggest that the reason why the subject is not properly said to see that the twins are the same height is that he does not know that they are the same height. That temptation is to be resisted, not because the subject does know that they are the same height, but because the suggestion misconstrues the relation between seeing that p and knowing that p.

The suggestion requires that seeing that p entails knowing that p. *If* that were so, then the best way of understanding that entailment would be to treat it as like the entailment between something being red and it being colored. Seeing that would be a determinate of the determinable, knowing that p; it would be just one specific way of knowing that p.

We do not *explain* the absence of a determinate by citing the absence of its determinable. So also we do not explain the subject’s failing to see that the twins are the same height by citing the fact that he does not know that they are the same height.”

- The appropriate relation doesn’t have to invoke knowledge, in which case Johnston’s response doesn’t address the proposal. Eg, the experience is caused under conditions prone to standard illusions (viz., the Ames Room).
- Even if the appropriate relation does invoke knowledge, the general principle about the explanatory direction from absence of a determinable by absence of determinate seems questionable. What aren’t quarks red? –Because they’re not colored. What counts as a good explanation probably depends on contrast classes anyway. If we want to know why the yellow apple isn’t crimson, it won’t be a good explanation to say that it’s not red. If we want to know why the number 3 isn’t crimson, it seems like a good explanation (or at least a good answer to the why-question) that it’s not colored at all.
- It is open to the proponent of the Content View (strong or weak) to define complete perceptual success (strong veridicality) in terms of knowledge.

**Other challenges to the strong CV** (possible term paper topics):

- Gupta in Gendler/Hawthorne (“Experience and Knowledge”)
- Campbell on the explanatory role of experience
- Travis on underspecification of contents

**Questions to think about:**

Q1. Are Travis or Gupta’s challenges also challenges to the weak CV? (We’ve seen that Campbell’s isn’t).

Q2. Some of the challenges we've discussed so far grant that there is such a state or event, but deny that it has contents (eg the raw feel view, the Fact view). Others have likewise granted that there is such a state or event with contents, but deny that it exhausts experience (eg the two-factor view) or that it is constituted by the kind of attitude the ACV proposes (eg the belief-based view). In contrast, perhaps other challenges, eg Travis, can be seen as challenging the idea that there is a thing – a state or event – that is identified with an experience and can be the bearer of accuracy conditions. The CV (either version) is false if there is no state or event, experience, that has contents.

Next week Alex will defend a related but more moderate position that denies that experiences are events.