

The Significance of High-Level Content^x
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There has been much debate about whether visual experiences have high-level contents, such as the content that something is a lemon, or that one event is a cause of another, or that someone is in pain. (For our purposes, I will simplify and say that a high-level content of an experience is any content of an experience that concerns more than color, shape, and location.) If visual experiences have high-level contents---my focus will be on the visual---then there are more ways for them to misrepresent than one might have thought. If someone is merely pretending to be in pain, or the plastic juice container is not a lemon, then your experience of them could be inaccurate even if your experience is entirely accurate with respect to color, shape, and location.

Although there is much more to be said to clarify and to adjudicate the debate (see e.g. Siegel 2006, the papers collected in MacPherson and Hawley 2009, and Masrour 2011), my aim in this paper is to survey its wider significance. As a counterfactual historian might ask, “*what if* Germany had won the second world war?”, I will ask---less momentously---“*what if* experiences had high-level content?”

The debate is of great significance concerning the nature of perception. Consider classic sense-data views which accept

(The Phenomenal Principle): If it visually appears to you that something is F, then there is something that is F that visually appears to you (Robinson 1994).¹

^x Thanks to Richard Boyd, David Chalmers, Stewart Cohen, Juan Comesaña, Matt Frise, Terry Horgan, Kate Manne, John Morrison, Adam Pautz, Richard Price, Susanna Siegel, Jonathan Vance, and Jonathan Vogel, as well as to audiences at the University of Arizona, Jawaharlal Nehru University, a Harvard University seminar, and a workshop on perception at Barnard.

¹ Contrast the converse principle that, if something that is F visually appears to you, then it visually appears to you that something is F. Sense-data theorists needn’t accept any such

Sense-data views standardly apply this principle to cases of hallucination, to get the result there are objects of which we are aware in such cases. Their next step is that, since we are not aware of mind-independent objects in cases of hallucination, we must be aware of mind-dependent objects in cases of hallucination. Their final step is to conclude that we must be aware of mind-dependent objects in any case of visual experience, even if it is not a case of hallucination.

One might protest against the Phenomenal Principle that there needn't be any object of which one is aware in a case of hallucination, but the sense data theorist will be unmoved by the point. However, certain high-level contents of experience would undermine the Phenomenal Principle on the sense-data theorist's own terms. Suppose our experiences represent things as being mind-independent in addition to representing things as being square or as being blue. As Peter Strawson puts it, "mature sensible experience (in general) presents itself as, in a Kantian phrase, an *immediate* consciousness of the existence of things outside us (1979: 97)." If our experiences represent things as being mind-independent, then if the Phenomenal Principle were true, we would be aware of mind-independent objects even in cases of hallucination. This is a conclusion that even the classic sense-data theorist wanted to avoid.²

It makes a difference whether experiences have high-level contents.

This paper will primarily be an essay in counterfactual epistemology, about what differences it might make in epistemology if experiences had high-level contents. To bring out that there are at least some ramifications of the view, let me consider the importance of

principle. For instance, many of them will want to maintain that, although sense-data are mind-dependent, they do not wear their mind-dependence on their sleeves.

² Perhaps a sense-data theorist might accept that sense-data are mind-independent, without simply being ordinary things such as tables or chairs. My argument isn't aimed against such a theorist, and might indeed be exploited by her.

For further problem cases raised by high-level contents, consider the following:

If I hallucinate an iPad, am I related to a sense-datum which is an iPad???

If I hallucinate my mother, am I related to a sense-datum which is my mother???

For another upshot of high-level content for the philosophy of perception, consider the question of whether our experiences can have contents which are not just false but necessarily false. Suppose I'm walking around a lake, and am charmed when it visually appears to me that *that* is a swan. Sadly that thing is merely a plastic bag. Now something that is a plastic bag couldn't have been a swan. So if my experience has the high-level content that that is a swan, my experience has a content which is necessarily false.

high-level content for foundationalism.

On any foundationalist approach, as I will use the term, our visual experiences give us *immediate justification* for some beliefs, that is, give us justification in a way which does not rely on our justification to hold any other beliefs (Pryor 2005). Think about how a pain plausibly can justify your belief that you are in pain, without your relying on any further beliefs. On any foundationalist approach, there are *basic perceptual beliefs*, beliefs which are immediately justified by experiences, much in the way that pains justify beliefs that you are in pain (or “properly basic beliefs”, as Plantinga would prefer to put it). Further, on any foundational approach, as far as all other justified beliefs about the external world are concerned, they trace at least some of their justification to the basic beliefs.

Foundationalists vary according to which basic perceptual beliefs they allow. A traditional foundationalist will say that only putatively infallible beliefs about the internal world, about your current states of mind, are basic perceptual beliefs. A moderate foundationalist will allow that some fallible beliefs about the external world are basic perceptual beliefs. However, the basic perceptual beliefs allowed by the moderate foundationalist standardly concern only such matters as the colors, shapes, and locations of external things.

Traditional and moderate foundationalism are open to a standard objection: the limited basic beliefs they allow threaten to be too narrow a basis for our wide-ranging beliefs about the external world.

If experiences have high-level contents, it is tempting to think that a much more generous foundationalist view becomes viable, on which we need not build up to beliefs concerning causation, kinds, or others’ mental states (see Johnston 2006 and Masrour 2011 for points in this vicinity). If experiences have high-level contents, it is tempting to think that the basic beliefs can include beliefs concerning causation, kinds, or the mental states of others. The beliefs allowed by generous foundationalism are a much more promising basis for the rest of our justified beliefs about the external world (although they could still turn out to be too narrow).

The view that experiences have high-level contents thus promises to be of great significance for epistemology.

The potential import of high-level content is not restricted to foundationalists, and in what follows my discussion will not be restricted to them. One might agree with some

foundationalists that there are basic perceptual beliefs about the external world, while denying that these basic beliefs are always part of the source of the justification of the rest of our beliefs about the external world. The thesis that we have basic high-level beliefs would remain bold and striking, regardless of the relation of basic beliefs to our further justified beliefs.

My focus will remain on issues about immediate justification. As far as non-immediate justification is concerned, everyone who's not a skeptic should agree that we can have non-immediate justification for beliefs with high-level content. An experience in conjunction with the right justified background belief can justify you in believing all manner of things. For example, if you're properly informed about how vision works, your experience of redness could end up justifying you in believing that the cones in your eyes are responding to light. The most striking possibility in the vicinity is that we have immediate justification for beliefs with high-level content.³

To survey the significance of high-level content, I will consider various potential links between the view that we have basic perceptual beliefs, and the view that our experiences have high-level contents. Here are two of the most stark one might propose:

(Experience to Belief): If you have an experience with the high-level content that p, then the experience (at least defeasibly) gives you immediate justification to believe that p.

(Belief to Experience): If you have an experience which gives you immediate justification to believe the high-level proposition that p, then the experience has the content that p.

In what follow I will evaluate the two theses above, as well as further claims in their vicinity. In section 1, I will consider the case in favor of Experience to Belief, and will look

³ High-level content could still be important for those who deny that we have immediate justification from our experiences for belief about the external world. For example, if our experiences have high-level contents, it might be that our experiences will justify high-level beliefs only by depending on a priori beliefs about the link between our experiences and the world, rather than depending on any a posteriori justified beliefs about the link between our experiences and the world. It would already be a striking result if our experiences plus a priori beliefs could get us to justified high-level beliefs. High-level content could connect as well with traditional coherentist views in epistemology. If those views at least allow a constraint that beliefs must cohere with experiences, it might well matter to those views if our experiences have high-level contents (Thanks here to Terry Horgan).

at a series of challenges to claims along its lines. My conclusion will be that if we have any basic beliefs about the external world at all, we should expect to have some basic high-level beliefs about the external world if experiences have high-level contents. In section 3 I will turn to claims along the lines of Belief to Experience. If the claim is true, we could make headway in the debate about what contents experiences have if we could establish that there are basic beliefs in high-level propositions. However, I will argue that, even if our experiences don't have high-level contents, we could still enjoy immediate justification for beliefs in high-level contents. Although the prospect of basic beliefs about causation or other minds is important, it is not actually necessary for experiences to have high-level contents to reach it.

Some preliminaries about experience and belief are due before we proceed any further.

The Experience to Belief thesis and its converse suggest that experiences can share their contents with beliefs, but one might deny that experiences ever share their contents with beliefs. It will be convenient to speak as if they do, but let me explain how I could take on board the possibility that experiences and beliefs never share their contents.

First, it could be that experiences do not have the sorts of contents which are true or false, but still have a kind of content which is assessable for accuracy (Burge 2003). To accommodate this possibility, we could focus on propositions which specify the accuracy conditions of experiences, where the propositions which specify accuracy conditions are truth evaluable, whether or not the contents of experience are truth evaluable.

Second, it could be that experiences have a kind of content which is assessable for truth, but simply differs in other ways from the contents of beliefs. For example, it might be that experiences typically involve a relation to pairs of objects and properties, whereas beliefs always only involve a relation to sets of possible worlds (see Byrne 2005a and Speaks 2005). Here again we could set up the discussion in terms of contents of beliefs which are suitably related to contents of experience, at a minimum by being necessarily equivalent with the relevant contents of experiences.⁴

⁴ Even if experiences fail to have contents at all, as is maintained by Travis (2004) or Brewer (2006), we perhaps could reformulate our questions to respect the point. Rather than saying that Anne's experience has the content that John is in pain, we could say that Anne is aware of pain in having the experience, or is aware of John's being in pain in having the experience. Or if you prefer, we could speak of what Anne is "presented with" or "confronted with" when

Let's now turn to the specific epistemological questions about high-level contents.

Section 1. What if experiences have high-level contents?

1.1. The case for significance

The Experience to Belief thesis in effect says that, if our visual experiences have high-level contents, then we have basic high-level beliefs (I set aside the complication that we might have immediate justification for a high-level belief we do not or cannot use). One might simply assume that the Experience to Belief thesis is true. On this line of thought, the view that experiences have high-level contents gets us right away to the view that we have basic perceptual beliefs in high-level contents.

The line of thought would make the view that experiences have high-level contents very important in epistemology. If we were to perceive the moral properties of actions, for instance, we would then be in a position to have basic beliefs about the moral properties of actions.⁵ Or if we were to perceive the mental states of others, we would then be in a position to have basic beliefs about their states of mind.⁶

Let's calm down---the Experience to Belief thesis should not be assumed to be true. To see why, remember that there is much debate about whether experiences immediately justify any beliefs at all about the external world. According to philosophers such as Pollock (1974), Pryor (2000), and Huemer (2001), the answer to this question is "yes". According to philosophers such as Wright (2002) or Cohen (2002), however, the answer to the question is "no".

Views about what contents experiences have---whether low-level or other---do not settle the question of whether there are any basic beliefs about the external world. After all, a traditional foundationalist might readily grant that experiences have low-level content

she has the experience. It will be more straightforward however to speak of experiences as having contents in what follows.

⁵ For relevant discussions of moral perception and moral epistemology, see Harman (1977), Sturgeon (2002), Watkins and Jolley (2002), McGrath (2004), Väyrynen (2009), Audi (2010).

⁶ For relevant discussions of the perception of other minds and the epistemology of other minds, see McDowell (1982/1998), Avramides (2001), Cassam (2007: ch. 5), and Smith (2010).

concerning the external world, but still deny that they immediately justify even low-level beliefs about the external world. And current philosophers such as Wright or Cohen can easily grant that experiences have low-level content concerning the external world, while denying that they immediately justify low-level beliefs about the external world. Attributing low-level contents to experiences does not settle the question of whether experiences immediately justify any beliefs at all about the external world. And there is no reason to think that attributing high-level contents to experiences should make any difference.

The Experience to Belief thesis can't be taken for granted. I will now consider two arguments in favor of the claim.

The first focuses on the causal history of high-level beliefs.

The first step of the argument is that, if your experiences have high-level contents, then you are able to form justified beliefs on their basis without performing any conscious inference. For example, if your experience has the content that NN is in pain, you are able to form a justified belief that NN is in pain without consciously reasoning about the matter.

The second step of the argument is that, if you are able to form a given justified belief that *p* on the basis of an experience without performing any conscious inference, then you have immediate justification from the experience to believe that *p*. If you are able to form a justified belief that NN is in pain on the basis of your experience without consciously reasoning, then you have immediate justification from your experience to believe that NN is in pain.

Putting these two steps together, the argument concludes that, if experiences have high-level contents, then you enjoy immediate justification from them for high-level beliefs.

As many philosophers would agree, the main problem arises at the second step of the argument. The absence of conscious inference does not guarantee the presence of immediate justification.⁷ We certainly should not make the general claim that, if one has a justified belief that *p* without conscious inference, then one has an immediately justified belief that *p*. Such a claim overgenerates wildly. Suppose that, after pestering you to watch the challenging films of Lars von Trier, I finally give you the complete works of Lars von Trier

⁷ McDowell makes the point himself in the following passage:

“the rejection of the inferential model [of knowledge of other minds] does not turn on mere phenomenology. Theory can partly ground a claim to knowledge even in cases where it is not consciously brought to bear; as with a scientist who (as we naturally say) learns to see the movements of particles in some apparatus (1982/1998: 344).”

on DVD, and later see the set in your living room, still pristine in its shrink wrap. Here I will straightaway form the (disappointed) belief that you have not watched the complete works of Lars von Trier, without any conscious inference. The belief I form is justified. But I still do not have an immediately justified belief that you have not watched the complete works of Lars von Trier.

To diagnose the problem, we need to recall that the question of whether my belief is immediately justified is a question about the structure of my justification for the belief. In this particular case, the justification of my disappointed belief essentially relies on my justification for my belief that, if the set is still shrink-wrapped, you haven't watched the complete works of Lars von Trier. So the disappointed belief is not immediately justified, even though I formed it without conscious inference. To think otherwise is to confuse issues about the psychology of belief formation with epistemic issues about the structure of their justification. There may well be some connections between the psychological and the epistemic issues---perhaps your belief is immediately justified by your experience *only if* you can justifiedly form the belief without conscious inference. Be that as it may, the psychological point about the absence of conscious inference is insufficient for the epistemic point about the presence of immediate justification.

Let me now consider a variant of the argument which tries to avoid the problem.⁸ The new argument uses positive claims about the causal history of high-level beliefs, rather than merely negative claims about the absence of conscious inference.

The first premise of the argument is now that, if your experiences have high-level contents, then you are able to form justified high-level beliefs on their basis without performing any conscious inference, and *instead by taking the experiences at face value*.

The second premise of the argument is now that, if you are able to form a justified belief on the basis of an experience without conscious inference, and instead by taking the experience at face value, then you have immediate justification from the experience for the belief.

As before, the argument concludes that, if you have experiences with high-level contents, then you have immediate justification from them for high-level beliefs.

The new argument improves on the old one, but we do face a difficulty concerning

⁸ Thanks to David Chalmers for bringing me to consider this argument.

what is meant by “taking an experience at face value”. If the phrase allows that you might still rely on background beliefs when you “take an experience at face value”, forming a justified belief by taking an experience at face value will be consistent with the absence of immediate justification. On this reading, the second premise is not true. Alternatively, if we build in that you are not relying in any way on background beliefs, the first premise becomes controversial.

I bracket the question of whether the face value argument is an effective tool to establish that, if experiences have high-level content, then we have basic high-level beliefs. It may or may not persuade those who doubt that experiences give us immediate justification for any external world beliefs. Be that as it may, the argument is effective for those who do accept that experiences give us immediate justification for some beliefs. The argument can be used to establish to their satisfaction that, if experiences have high-level contents, then we have some basic high-level beliefs. In sum, if experiences have high-level contents, *and* give us immediate justification for some beliefs, then experiences will give us immediate justification for some high-level beliefs. However, this line of thought does assume that there are no further hurdles for the immediate justification of high-level beliefs, an assumption we should now evaluate.⁹

1.2. The case against significance

In the previous section we considered arguments for the epistemic significance of high-level content. My task now is to consider arguments broadly against the epistemic significance of high-level content. Since the arguments bear on the question of which beliefs

⁹ For a line of doubt about the Experience to Belief thesis suggested to me by Richard Price, consider the access internalist proposal that, in order for your experience with the high-level content that *p* to give you reason to believe that *p*, you must know that you have the experience with the high-level content that *p*. On this line of thought, ignorance of philosophy of mind leads to the incapacity of experience to justify belief. In order for the line of thought to succeed, the access internalist thesis must be carefully formulated. On many views, having failed to form a belief that one has an experience (whether due to conceptual incapacity or negligence) results in ignorance about whether one has the experience, but does not prevent the experience from providing justification for belief. Weaker access internalist theses can be brought in at this stage, but now there will be controversy over whether we fail to meet their requirements, in addition to controversy over whether they are true.

have the potential to be basic beliefs, the interest of the arguments is quite general.

The arguments have the following structure. They start by proposing a constraint on immediate justification. They proceed by trying to show that the constraint is not satisfied by any high-level content (one might merely argue that some high-level contents of experiences do not, but the stronger claim is the more interesting one to examine).

Here I will consider several important constraints which might be proposed. The constraints are interesting because they could be endorsed even if you think we have basic perceptual beliefs about the external world---further barriers could be in the way of our having basic high-level beliefs about the external world.

In evaluating these arguments, we will need to consider whether the proposed constraint is a genuine one, and whether it applies to all the relevant cases.

The first argument focuses on considerations about consciousness. The idea is that high-level contents are too dissociated from consciousness to be immediately justified by experiences. Given that high-level contents can vary while the conscious character of an experience is held fixed, they are not close enough to consciousness to be immediately justified by the experience. But we need some background to set up the first argument more thoroughly.

Let me start by clarifying the term “phenomenal character”, where two experiences have the same phenomenal character just in case what it’s like to have one is the same as what it’s like to have the other. The crucial question for us here concerns the relation of the high-level content of an experience to its phenomenal character. In particular, is the high-level content of a given experience shared with every experience with the same phenomenal character? To address this question, we may introduce the term “phenomenal content” in the following way:

(Definition of Phenomenal Content): For any experience *e* and any content *c*, *c* is a *phenomenal content* of *e* just in case every experience with the same phenomenal character as *e* has *c*.

We may now ask, are high-level contents of experiences also phenomenal contents of experiences?¹⁰

Now that the key notions are in place, let me sketch the argument which uses these notions:

(The Phenomenology Constraint): A visual experience gives one immediate justification for a belief only if the content of the belief is a phenomenal content of the experience.

(Application): High-level contents are not phenomenal contents of experiences.

So,

No experience gives one immediate justification to believe any high-level content that p.

Let's now consider the motivation of the key premises more closely.

I will argue against the Phenomenology Constraint in what follows, but let me start by rehearsing a line of thought in favor of it. Compare a subject who enjoys conscious visual experience of a sphere, and a blind-sighted subject who does not have conscious visual experience of a sphere, but who nevertheless registers the presence of a sphere in non-conscious informational processing, and who is willing and able to make judgments about whether or not a sphere is present. One might plausibly claim that the sighted subject has justification to believe that a sphere is present, and that the blind-sighted subject does not. Further, if this is so, the sighted subject presumably has justification for his belief due to the visual phenomenology he enjoys (see also Johnston 2006). After all, both subjects are in perceptual or quasi-perceptual states which have the content that a sphere is present, and any difference in the manner of representation of this content is itself best explained by the difference in visual consciousness between them. The phenomenal difference between the sighted and blind-sighted subject is arguably the best candidate to explain the putative epistemic difference between them.

If visual phenomenology is part of the source of the justification of our perceptual beliefs, it is reasonable to expect that phenomenology in some way constrains the question of which beliefs are immediately justified by experiences. In particular, one might propose that

¹⁰ For sample arguments that experiences have phenomenal contents, see Siewart (1998), Byrne (2001), or Tye (2002).

Notice that phenomenal contents of experiences are not defined as being narrow contents, where a content is narrow if it is not individuated by one's relations to the environment. For all we've said, it might be that the phenomenal contents of experiences are themselves externally individuated (Lycan 2001).

the Phenomenology Constraint articulates how basic beliefs must be related to the phenomenal characters of the experiences which justify them. After all, if the Phenomenology Constraint didn't obtain, then two subject could be the same with respect to consciousness, yet different with respect to which beliefs their experiences immediately justify. If such a scenario were possible, why not then allow that two blind-sighted subject could be the same with respect to consciousness (in that neither has visual consciousness), yet still be immediately justified in holding different beliefs about their surroundings?

I'll grant for now that there's reason to believe the Phenomenology Constraint, and turn to the claim that no high-level contents are phenomenal contents.

It's plausible that at least some putative high-level contents of experiences are not phenomenal contents of experiences. Consider for instance the case of natural kind contents such as those involving *tiger*, and grant for the sake of argument that they are indeed contents of some visual experiences.¹¹

Assume in particular that Oscar has a visual experience with the content that there is a tiger. The question is whether some phenomenal duplicate of Oscar fails to have an experience with that content. To see why the answer is negative, consider a counterpart of Oscar, on Twin Earth, where there are no tigers and never have been any tigers, and where instead there are only superficially similar creatures we may call twin-tigers.

The first premise is that Twin Oscar lacks an experience with the content that there is a tiger. The exact explanation of why is hard to provide without having a worked out theory of how the contents of experiences are fixed, but it plausibly has something to do with the fact that no one on Twin Oscar's planet has ever interacted with tigers.¹²

Notice the first premise is silent about what content Twin Oscar's experience does have. To see why this is a virtue of the formulation, compare a formulation which does take a stand on what content his experience has. The resulting version of the argument threatens to be self-defeating---it is at least awkward to attribute a content to Twin Oscar's experience while holding that interaction with twin-tigers is necessary to entertain that very content. Given that we have not interacted with twin-tigers, we are presumably not able to entertain

¹¹ For relevant discussion here, see Tye (1995), Bayne (2009), Pautz (2009), and Price (2009).

¹² For a more subtle discussion of what it would take to entertain such contents, see Burge 1982.

all the contents Twin Earthlings are able to entertain. We can avoid the difficulty by focusing on what content Twin Oscar's experience lacks, rather than on what content it does have.

The second premise is that Twin Oscar does have an experience with the same phenomenal character as Oscar's. To defend this premise we can rely on the idea that twin-tigers are superficially the same as tigers. Here I am not relying on any assumption as strong as the idea that phenomenal character narrowly supervenes on how one is intrinsically (which is disputed by Lycan 2001 and others). We don't need to say that Oscar and Twin Oscar are intrinsic duplicates, what matters is instead their shared phenomenology. I am instead simply relying on the ordinary description of the Twin Earth cases. I take it to be implicit in the ordinary understanding of the cases that, if Oscars look at a tiger in optimal conditions, and Twin Oscar looks at a corresponding twin-tiger in optimal conditions, what it is like to have each of their experiences is the same.

Given the two key premises, Oscar's visual experience does not have the phenomenal content that there is a tiger, even if it does have the high-level content that there is a tiger.

If the Phenomenology Constraint is correct, Oscar will not be immediately justified by his experience in believing that there is a tiger, even if it does have the high-level content that there is a tiger. And one might in a similar way apply the constraint to other cases at least of contents concerning kind-membership.

Let me now evaluate the Phenomenology Argument.¹³ The first point I want to emphasize is that the constraint plausibly does not apply to all putative high-level contents, even though it plausibly does apply to some. Here we are conceding for the moment that the Phenomenology Constraint is correct, and checking how far the argument goes if so.

For a good example of a high-level content to which the argument does not apply, consider causal contents (for related discussion, see Bayne 2009 and Siegel 2009). Suppose a member of a bomb squad has decided to cut the yellow wire of a bomb, and that she sees the digital clock of the bomb freeze upon cutting the yellow wire. Such a case is arguably one in which causal relations are represented in vision.

Suppose the visual experience of the bomb squad member indeed does represent

¹³ According to the views of philosophers such as Ned Block, Sydney Shoemaker and David Chalmers, even color contents are not phenomenal contents of experiences. So the Phenomenology Constraint might be used to argue that experiences do not even give immediate justification for low-level beliefs, such as beliefs which attribute colors to things. For more discussion, see Silins (forthcoming).

causation. Here a Twin Earth case presumably could not be contrived in which a phenomenal duplicate of the person fails to have an experience which represents causation. The causal relation might well be realized in different ways in different worlds, but I take it phenomenal duplicates would still be alike in terms of representing causation itself. And it is also unclear how else one might argue that a phenomenal duplicate of the person fails to have an experience which represents causation. So causal contents plausibly escape the net of the Phenomenology Constraint, even if some high-level contents do not.

There are important further cases as well. Consider the possibility that our experiences represent objects as causing our own experiences of them (Searle 1983). Or consider the possibility that our experiences represents objects as being capable of existing independently of our experiences, or at least as being such that their locations are not dependent on our perspective on them (Strawson 1979; Siegel 2006). Twin Earth cases are extremely hard to contrive for each of these sorts of contents, and it is equally unclear how else one might reach the result that these high-level contents fail to be phenomenal contents.¹⁴

The argument using the Phenomenology Constraint leaves open the possibility that we have some basic high-level beliefs.

In response, one might stress that the argument still deflates the significance of the thesis that experiences have high-level contents, by limiting the range of cases to which it applies. I respond by arguing that the Phenomenology Constraint on which it relies is incorrect.

Suppose you are looking at a basketball in optimal conditions, and form the decidedly low-level belief that *that is orange*. Unless we forbid experiences from immediately justifying any beliefs about the external world, this belief is as good a candidate as any to be immediately justified by your experience. Given how simple the belief is, you plausibly do not need to rely on background beliefs to gain justification from your experience to hold the belief. Consider after all that G.E. Moore, in giving his “proof” of the existence of the external world, would seem fine in departing from the belief that *this is a hand* (whether or not he reaches his destination of establishing the existence of the external world). He is not required to depart merely from the belief that *there is a hand*. Now, *that is orange* is not a phenomenal content of your experience. If you had perceived a numerically different though

¹⁴ For dispute, see Price (2006, chap. 1).

qualitatively identical basketball, the content available in the original case would not have been available to you, although what it's like to have your experience would have been the same. So this case of a simple demonstrative belief is a counterexample to the Phenomenology Constraint, along with many other cases of demonstrative beliefs.

Given that the Phenomenology Constraint is in fact false, the argument based on it fails to establish any conclusion about whether high-level beliefs are immediately justified by experiences.

Let me now consider a different line of argument, one which promises to be much more general. It uses considerations about the causal history of an experience's having high-level content. The core idea is that, given the role of background beliefs in how experiences come to have high-level content, experiences with high-level contents are unable to confer immediate justification on high-level beliefs. We can express the line of thought in terms of the notion of "theory-dependence". The argument would that (i), if experiences have high-level content, then they are "theory-dependent" with respect to high-level contents and (ii) if experiences are theory-dependent with respect to high-level contents, then they do not immediately justify beliefs in high-level propositions.

The standard reply is that "theory-dependence" is not enough by itself to generate an epistemic problem. Even if background beliefs do play some role in explaining why experiences have high-level contents, that need not prevent experiences from supplying immediate justification for high-level beliefs---the dependence in question might be merely causal rather than epistemic (Pryor 2000, Väyrynen 2007). Compare the case of a priori justification. Even if color experiences play a role in making it possible for one to have the concept *red*, that need not mean that we can have no a priori justification for beliefs involving the concept, such as the belief that redness is a color (Kitcher 1980, Burge 1993). Similarly, even if background beliefs play a key role in the causal history of experiences with high-level contents, that need not mean that those experiences are incapable of providing immediate justification for high-level beliefs.

The standard reply makes an important point, but the challenge from considerations about causal history goes deeper. The dependence of high-level contents on background beliefs could be merely causal, but that doesn't mean that the dependence is merely causal. Experiences with high-level content could still depend on theory in a way which is indeed problematic. In what follows I will discuss two specific ways background beliefs might play

a damaging role in the causal history of experiences with high-level contents. The standard reply does not yet address these more specific problems.

One challenge from causal history relies on an epistemic picture of how experiences acquire high-level content. The key idea is that, if my experience has the high-level content that *q*, it does so in part in virtue of my having independent justification for some further belief. For example, if my experience has the high-level content that *q*, perhaps it does so thanks to my having independent justification to believe that the experience is a reliable indicator that *q*. The next key idea is that, if my experience has the content that *q* only in virtue of my having independent justification to hold some further belief, then my experience will be unable to give me immediate justification to believe that *q*. That's because we would have the following structure of dependence:

justified high-level belief → experience with high-level content → justified background belief

If the high-level belief is justified at all, that would be in virtue of the experience's having a high-level content. But if the experience has the high-level content in turn in virtue of my having independent justification to believe something else, my experience will end up justifying the high-level belief at least in part in virtue of my having independent justification to believe something else. This chain of dependence would rule out that the justification is immediate by our definition of "immediate justification".¹⁵

The major problem here is that this "epistemic" view of high-level content is implausible. Suppose that my experience has the content that something is a tiger and that I then gain misleading evidence that things with that look aren't tigers, or misleading evidence against whichever belief is privileged by the "epistemic" approach to high-level content. Finally, and crucially, suppose I neglect to revise my beliefs in light of that evidence, so that I retain whichever beliefs were privileged by the theorist, while lacking justification for them. In such a case I take it my experience would retain the content that something is a tiger. Even if some beliefs are essential for me to retain the experience with the high-level content, it looks like no *justified* background belief is essential for me to continue to have experiences with the high-level content. So the first challenge fails.

¹⁵ The argument here assumes that if fact #1 obtains in part in virtue of fact #2, and fact #2 obtains in part in virtue of fact #3, then fact #1 obtains in part in virtue of fact #3.

There is still a further challenge from causal history to consider. We can set it out as follows:

When an experience has the high-level content that p, it has the content that p in part in virtue of some belief one has.

When an experience has the content that p in part in virtue of some belief one has, it gives one justification to believe that p only in virtue of one's having justification for the belief.

So,

When an experience has the high-level content that p, it does not give one immediate justification to believe that p.¹⁶

The idea here is that, if an experience depends on a belief to have its content, then the experience depends on one's having justification for that belief in order to supply justification. To see the motivation of the constraint, consider the following sort of example. Alexa has an experience with the high-level content that a is a sheep dog, in virtue of having a belief that things with such and such a look are sheep dogs, where that belief is in fact not a justified belief. If her experience could still justify her belief that a is a sheep dog, she would then be able to gain some confirmation for her belief that things with that look are sheep dogs upon having the experience. Given that the belief she started out with was unjustified, such a procedure will strike many as illicit---"garbage in, garbage out", one might say. We arguably should endorse the second premise of the argument to explain why (see Siegel forthcoming for further discussion of such cases).

The point here is not that the experience is unable to supply justification if its content is fixed by another belief one has. The experience may well be able to supply justification if the background belief is itself in good standing. The worry is in particular that the experience will be unable to provide *immediate* justification, since the experience will give justification at best in virtue of the background belief's being in good standing.

This line of argument is more promising, but it relies heavily on the details of how experiences come to acquire high-level contents, details I take to be too controversial to invoke in the argument without further defense. It may well be that experiences can come to have high-level contents without the intervention of intermediate background beliefs. In particular, experiences might come to have high-level contents through the mediation of

¹⁶ For a potential occurrence of this argument in the literature, see Plantinga (1993: 99-101)

personal level states which are not beliefs such as desires, or through subpersonal states which are not beliefs. One important possibility here is that experiences come to have high-level content thanks to states which do not have propositional content at all. Perhaps when acquired expertise allows you experience something as being a sheep dog, that expertise is a matter of having a recognitional *ability* rather than a matter of being in a state with propositional content (more on recognitional abilities in the section to come).¹⁷ The current challenge cannot succeed unless these viable options are ruled out.¹⁸

If you do accept that experiences have high-level contents, and you do accept that experiences allow us to have some basic beliefs about the external world, you have no reason to refrain from also accepting that experiences allow us to have some basic high-level beliefs about the external world. We will be able to form justified high-level beliefs by taking our experiences at face value. High-level content does have a striking kind of role to play.

Section 3. What if experiences don't have high-level content?

So far we have evaluated claims in the vicinity of

(Experience to Belief): If you have an experience E with the high-level content that p, then E (defeasibly) gives you immediate justification to believe that p.

Let's now turn to the converse claim that

(Belief to Experience): If you have an experience E which gives you immediate justification to believe the high-level proposition that p, then E has the content that p.

¹⁷ For discussion of the role of desires in fixing contents of experience, see Balceris and Dunning (2006) and Stokes (forthcoming). For discussion of the role of physiological states in fixing contents of experience, see Proffitt et al (2001).

¹⁸ A further objection to the argument was pointed out to me by Adam Pautz. Consider content holist views according to which, for instance, you believe that Moby Dick is a whale only if you have ever so many further beliefs, given how the contents of beliefs are individuated. Such views presumably are not committed to the claim that your belief that Moby Dick is a whale is justified, or is able to justify, only if all of those further beliefs are justified. This suggests that a belief can play a role in determining the content of a mental state without needing to be justified for the determined mental state to receive or give justification.

If the Belief to Experience thesis is correct, the prospect opens for a case in favor of the view that experiences have high-level contents. If one could show that we have basic beliefs in high-level propositions, and could do so without relying on the assumption that experiences have high-level contents, one would then have a “transcendental argument” that experiences do have high-level contents after all---a condition for the possibility of our basic high-level beliefs would be that we have experiences with high-level contents.

I’ll first discuss how one might establish that we have immediate justification from experiences for some high-level propositions (without using the claim that experiences have high-level contents). I’ll then cast doubt on the Belief to Experience thesis itself. This will qualify the epistemic significance of high-level content views. They are not required to reach the conclusion that we have basic high-level beliefs.

One argument appeals to the difficulty of articulating how certain high-level beliefs are justified. As Alan Millar puts it in “Perceptual Recognitional Abilities and Perceptual Knowledge”,

I tell from the layout of the environment and from the orientation and behavior of my friend that he has seen and recognized his dog. Telling from these factors should not be conceived as a matter of inferring from assumptions as to the layout and about the behavior and orientation of my friend. I would be hard put to capture by description the clues to his having spotted the dog, just as I would be hard put to capture by description the features of a familiar face on the basis of which I recognize whose face it is. The model we should work with is recognition rather than reasoning from evidence.

It is indeed difficult to identify the specific basis on which you believe your friend spotted his dog, or on which you believe that Eric is here. But this does not yet give us good evidence that you have non-inferential knowledge of the relevant claims (assuming you know them). Compare: I might have reasoned my way to the answer of a logic puzzle with many steps and great difficulty, and acquired inferential knowledge of its answer, yet still be hard put to say how I did it. A factor can play a significant role in my having justification to believe something while I have only poor access to it.

A different argument appeals not to the difficulty of articulating low-level premises for high-level beliefs, but instead to the inferior epistemic status of low-level premises relative to high-level beliefs.

To get the right sort of example in mind, imagine you find yourself confronted by a

huge plate of nachos. There are ever so many colors and shapes you perceive here---triangles of yellow chips, circles of jalapeños, cubes of tomato, each occluded in various ways by an all too generous squirt of sour cream. Your confidence in the proposition which details the colors and shapes in the scene [Colors] is not very high (if it is even defined at all), and, interestingly, your confidence that there are nachos before you [Nachos] is much higher. Now, one might think that, if your rational confidence in Nachos is higher than your rational confidence in Colors, we then have an important clue that you are immediately justified in believing Nachos rather than Colors. So one might argue from the asymmetry as follows:

You have more justification to believe Nachos than you have to believe Colors.
If you have more justification to believe Nachos than you have to believe Colors, then you are immediately justified in believing Nachos.
So,
You are immediately justified in believing Nachos.

One might further generalize this sort of argument to a wide range of cases. Consider the various cases of recognition of other people, beliefs about their specific mental states, and beliefs about what kinds of things are before you. In each of these cases one might plausibly maintain that we have more justification for the relevant high-level contents than for the corresponding low-level contents detailing the scenes. This suggests that the high-level beliefs are not justified by the availability of an inference from low-level beliefs, since the relevant low-level beliefs are in fact less justified than the high-level ones.¹⁹

The line of thought is presumably sound in assuming that, if you believe that Q solely on the basis of inference from your beliefs that P and if P, then Q, then you can't be more justified in believing that Q than you are in believing that P. Your beliefs which play a mediating role plausibly do set a ceiling for the justification of your beliefs which are mediated.

But the proponent of the argument must further assume that, if one is only mediately justified in believing Nachos, then the justification must proceed via extremely detailed and determinate low-level contents such as Colors. But there's no reason to think that the justification for high-level contents must go in such a way. I do not have the true account of

¹⁹ Experimental work on facial recognition and scene perception is highly relevant here---I hope to pursue the connection in future work.

how the inferential justification of high-level beliefs would go, but it could easily go via low-level contents which are not extremely detailed and determinate. For example, in the case of the nachos, one might be exploiting one's background reason to believe that, if something looks like *this*---where looking like *this* is a matter of appearing to have such and such coarse grained color, shape, and location properties---then it's a plate of nachos. Even if the belief that the thing looks like *this* is difficult to gloss in further detail, the belief can still be playing a role in the justification of the belief that there is a plate of nachos in the scene. The crucial point does not concern how to gloss the mediating belief, the crucial point is instead that you can have as much justification for the potential mediating belief as for the high-level belief that there is a plate of nachos in the scene. (And as argued above, the low-level proposition can be playing a role even if it is hard for one to articulate the proposition).²⁰

It is difficult to defend the view that we have basic high-level beliefs without invoking the claim that experiences have high-level contents---the prospects are poor for the transcendental argument in favor of the claim that experiences have high-level contents.

Still, we should not assume that it is essential for experiences to have high-level contents for us to have basic high-level beliefs. There is in fact good reason to suspect that the Belief to Experience thesis is false. That is because it is not in general correct that experience give us immediate justification to believe only their contents. Since there's no reason to suspect that high-level propositions should behave any differently, we should doubt the Belief to Experience thesis.

In one type of case, experiences arguably can give us immediate justification to believe that we have them, without themselves having the content that we have them (see e.g. Goldman 2008). If we can be immediately justified in believing anything, we should be able to be immediately justified in believing that we have a given visual experience. And the

²⁰ There is a further problem here as well.

To see the further problem, remember that an experience gives me immediate justification only if it gives me justification in a way that does not depend on my having justification for some background belief. So if any background belief plays a role in giving me justification, that it is enough for me to fail to have immediate justification, even if the belief is a general belief which plays a role in each case of perceptual justification. My belief that there is a plate of nachos before me could then be mediate justified without being mediated by any low-level beliefs concerning the external world. In particular, it might be that my experience gives me justification only in virtue of my having justification to believe that my experiences are reliable. This belief might play a role in the nachos example even if no belief concerning color, shape and location plays a role in the example.

experience is itself the best candidate to be the source of our justification, given that we do not seem to have distinct experiences of our experiences ourselves. Finally, our experiences arguably do not represent themselves (this last claim is controversial however, and is contested by theorists such as Searle 1983 or Horgan and Kriegel 2007).

For a type of case which might be accepted even by theorists such as Searle or Horgan and Kriegel, consider judgments of color similarity (Johnston 1992, Byrne 2005b). For instance, when I look at the clear blue sea, my experience makes it manifest to me not just that that is blue, but also that [that color is more similar to purple than it is to yellow]. Reflection on my experience here can make the proposition about color similarity obvious to me, without my relying on further background beliefs. In such a case, my experience gives me immediate justification to believe the proposition about similarities between colors. However, the proposition is a poor candidate to be a content of your experience (see Byrne 2005b, section 6). So we have another reason to doubt the Belief to Experience thesis, since being a content of an experience does not seem necessary for being immediately justified by an experience, and since there is no apparent reason to treat high-level propositions differently.

The possibility is open for experiences to immediately justify high-level beliefs even if experiences fail to have high-level contents. However, the question is open of how exactly such a possibility would be realized. I will survey two stories one might give, to bring out some of the difficulties facing the development of a positive account.

One story could be supplied by simple reliabilism regarding perceptual justification. Consider the following sufficient condition in particular:

If your experience E is reliably correlated with its being the case that p, then E gives you immediate justification to believe that p.

Much could be said to clarify and qualify this view, but we should be able to work with a rough grip on it (for a current development of a view like this, see Goldman 2008, also Brandom 2002).

The key point is that simple reliabilism is indifferent to questions about what contents experiences have. The view focuses on the reliable correlation between occurrences of E and its being the case that p, the view does not focus on the representational content of E. Now

our experiences plausibly are reliably correlated with the truth of various high-level propositions, whether or not the experiences actually have high-level contents. For example, the sort of experiences we have when we see tigers in good conditions are reliably correlated with the presence of tigers. So, given the simple reliabilist view, our experiences give us immediate justification for beliefs about tigers.²¹

Simple reliabilism is controversial (for classic criticisms, see Bonjour 1985, Fumerton 1996, Vogel 2000). But an account could be provided in other ways, without invoking simple reliabilism.

A potentially different approach uses the notion of a “perceptual recognitional ability”. The idea is developed by Millar (2000) as follows:

The proposal, then, so far as visual knowledge is concerned, is that to tell perceptually that something is an F *from the way it looks* involves judging that it is an F by way of exercising a capacity for discriminating things having the look of Fs. There is no need to suppose that the subject who can tell by the look of something that it is an apple must have inferred that it is an apple from a prior assumption about how it looks (2000: 86).”

Millar’s discussion is of non-inferential perceptual knowledge rather than non-inferential perceptual justification, but I’ll assume that non-inferential perceptual knowledge implies non-inferential perceptual justification. Millar’s overall proposal ends up then entailing that one can gain non-inferential perceptual justification to believe that something is an apple, by exercising the right discriminatory capacity, whether or not one’s experience has the content that something is an apple. It is instead enough to respond in the right way to the look of the thing, without performing any inference from beliefs about how the apple looks (and presumably without performing any inference at all). As Millar goes on apply the proposal,

²¹ One might object that, if our experiences are reliably correlated with the truth of a given content, then our experiences have that content, since a suitable correlational theory is correct of how experiences get to have their contents. On this line of thought, even if simple reliabilism is true, it still fails to supply cases in which we have immediate justification for high-level beliefs despite lacking experiences with high-level contents. The problem with the response is that it invokes too crude a theory of how experiences get their contents. Our experiences are reliably correlated with ever so many properties, including properties of the brain and of light, without representing them all.

Alternatively, one might insist that once a relevant perceptual process is suitably specified by the reliabilist, they will settle on the view that only an experience with the content that p can give one justification to believe that p. Without further defense though the move looks ad hoc.

one might be able to have non-inferential perceptual knowledge that someone is expressing anxiety, or of what someone is saying, or perhaps even of what action is called for by a certain situation (2000: 87-8).²²

The crucial questions about the proposal are about how to clarify the idea of “exercising a discriminatory capacity”, and about how to defend the claim that exercising such a capacity secures non-inferential justification/knowledge.²³ In particular, there is a challenge to develop the approach without simply collapsing it into a version of reliabilism (see Goldman 2008 on Feldman 2003). If having a “recognitional capacity” with respect to lemons is simply a matter of reliable perceptual judgment as to the presence of lemons, it’s not clear what Millar’s approach adds to reliabilism. Now, one might be happy to develop the “recognitional capacity” approach in terms of reliabilism, but arguably there is a need for a story which does not proceed in terms of reliability. In particular, we might want to account for a sense in which a brain in a vat could be said to have a “recognitional capacity” with respect to lemons, even though the brain in a vat is unreliable with respect to the presence of lemons---how to develop a story here however is unclear (for sketches of one,

²² The line of thought is now endorsed by McDowell as well:

On my old assumption, since my experience puts me in a position to know non-inferentially that what I see is a cardinal, its content would have to include a proposition in which the concept of a cardinal figures... But what seems right is this: my experience makes the bird visually present to me, and my recognitional capacity enables me to know non-inferentially that what I see is a cardinal. Even if we go on assuming my experience has content, there is no need to suppose that the concept under which my recognitional capacity enables me to bring what I see figures in that content (2009: 259)

²³ Millar 2000 develops the proposal by using the notion of a “distinctive appearance”:

If one knows perceptually that A is an F from the way it appears, relative to some sense, then A must have an appearance relative to that sense which is (nearly enough) *distinctive* of Fs in that most things which have that appearance are Fs (2000: 87).²³

The necessary condition proposed here is too strong. Suppose I adeptly disguise myself as Michelle Obama and sneak in to a party where she is present. Her appearance will now fail to be distinctive of being Michelle Obama, since only one out of two things with that appearance is her. Still I will have no trouble in gaining perceptual recognitional knowledge that Michelle Obama is present, even if others do.

Rather than focusing on the proportion of things which have the appearance which are Fs, it would be better to focus on whether the subject is in danger of making a mistake on a similar basis about whether A is an F. I am in no danger of making such a mistake, even though others are.

see Reynolds 1991 and Markie 2004, 2006).²⁴

In sum, the prospects are poor for starting from the claim that we have basic beliefs, to get to the conclusion that we have experiences with high-level contents. This challenge to the Belief to Experience thesis undermines the significance of the idea that experiences have high-level contents---the thesis need not be accepted to reach the striking conclusion that it is possible to have basic high-level beliefs. Still, it is not easy to provide a positive account of how experience would give immediate justification for high-level beliefs without having high-level contents---that question remains open.

Conclusion

My guiding question in this survey has not been “do experiences have high-level contents?”, but rather, “what if they do?” Suppose that experiences have contents concerning other minds, causation, kinds, and other matters going beyond color, shape and location. Even if experiences have high-level contents, they could still fail to allow us to have any basic beliefs about the external world at all. However, if our experiences do give us immediate justification for some beliefs about the external world, and do have high-level contents, they arguably do give us immediate justification for some beliefs we form by endorsing their high-level contents. However, it is dubious that the model of endorsing contents is the only model for how we could get a basic high-level belief---arguably experiences could give us immediately justified beliefs about the external world whether or not they have high-level content.

High-level content is important for epistemology, and anyone interested in the epistemology of perception would do well to consider whether our experiences represent more than colors, shapes, and locations. But the importance of high-level content should not be exaggerated.

²⁴ A further challenge is that, depending on how the notion of a “perceptual recognitional capacity” is fleshed out, having such a capacity with respect to lemons might suffice for experience to have high-level contents regarding lemons. If having the right kind of expertise affects the contents of one’s experiences, and having a perceptual recognitional capacity is an instance of having that kind of expertise, the recognitional capacity approach would end up being one on which experiences do have high-level contents after all. Thanks to Kate Manne for discussion of this point.

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