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A Nonrepresentational Approach to Perception[1]

Current orthodoxy treats perceptual episodes as bearers of "intentional" or "representational content." In other words, it is generally supposed that perception is representational. Call this the *representationality thesis*, or *representationality* for short. Much of contemporary perceptual theory is thus concerned with the nature of perceptual content. For instance, Gareth Evans, Tyler Burge, and Hubert Dreyfus argue that perceptual content must be nonconceptual, while John McDowell, John Searle, and others argue that perceptual content must be conceptual.[2] However, the shared assumption of representationality is almost never put into question. Most philosophers take representationality to be obvious. The purpose of this paper is to challenge this supposed obviousness.

The paper is in two parts. The first part briefly specifies six issues central to contemporary perceptual theory for which representationality might seem necessary. The second part then sketches a nonrepresentational theory of perception that neatly handles all of these issues.

1. Motivating Representationality

(A) Hallucination. An adequate treatment of the phenomenon of hallucination may seem to require representationality. Philosophers generally treat hallucinatory episodes as perceptual episodes that take place in the absence of any object perceived. And since many representations have the logical feature that from their existence nothing at all may be inferred about the existence of what they purport to represent, representationality seems to provide an

1 I wish to thank Charles Travis, Tom Ricketts, and David Finkelstein for comments on earlier versions of the material in this paper.

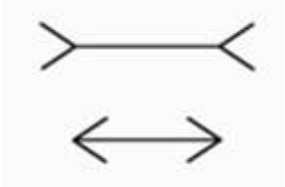
2 Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Tyler Burge, "Perceptual Entitlement," in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 (2003), pp. 503-548; Hubert Dreyfus, "The Return of the Myth of the Mental," in: *Inquiry* 50 (2007), pp. 352-365; John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, 1996); John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).

easy way to account for the possibility of hallucination. On the other hand, if we give up representationality, it may be altogether unclear how to account for the phenomenon of hallucination without resorting to otherwise discredited theories of perception such as sense-data theory or adverbialism.

(B) Perceptual Knowledge and (C) Demonstrative Thought. Perception plays an enabling role vis-à-vis certain representational states of mind. For instance, perception is manifestly a means by which we acquire knowledge about the particular layout of our surroundings. Furthermore, whatever I perceive is something about which I can *ipso facto* entertain demonstrative thoughts. (When I look out of the window, I visually take in a landscape that I can thereby refer to using demonstrative expressions such as 'this landscape'.) Any adequate theory of perception must therefore do justice to perception's enabling role vis-à-vis perceptual knowledge and demonstrative thought. Taking perceptual episodes to be representational provides obvious strategies for doing this, the basic idea being that perception enables cognition by means of the uptake of perceptual contents into thought. On the other hand, if we deny that perceptual episodes are intentional, we might seem to be at a loss to do justice to perceptually-based cognition of any kind.

(D) Rational Constraint. John McDowell has argued that in order to make sense of our capacity to think empirically contentful thoughts we must understand the world as exercising rational constraint on our activity of thinking by means of experience; and if only items of propositional shape can provide rational constraint, it seems that perceptual episodes must be representational.[3]

(E) Illusion. Perceptual episodes can be misleading. For instance, consider the Müller-Lyer illusion. Appearances to the contrary, the following horizontals are of the same length:



3 Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, op. cit., *passim*.

According to most philosophers, what explains this is how the lines are represented in experience.[4] On the other hand, if we deny representationality, it may seem impossible to account for the fact that perceptual appearances can be misleading with respect to how things are without also denying that things such as the Müller-Lyer lines figure among the genuine objects of perceptual experience.

(F) Perceptual Consciousness. A central area of research in perceptual theory concerns the character of perceptual consciousness or what it is *like* to undergo a perceptual episode, and there is all but unanimous agreement that at least *some* aspects of perceptual phenomenology are to be accounted for in terms of the representational features of perceptual states. But to deny representationality is necessarily to deny this. Thus, denying representationality may seem to leave us ill-equipped to provide a plausible account of the character of perceptual consciousness.

In sum, representationality provides clear strategies (and may seem indispensable) for handling six topics central to contemporary perceptual theory. However, the next part of this paper sketches a nonrepresentational approach that neatly handles these same issues.

2. A Nonrepresentational Alternative

On a *nonrepresentational* approach to perception, perceptual episodes as such do not have intentional contents. Furthermore, according to the view that I favor, *naïve realist nonrepresentationalism* (NRN), to perceive is to stand in an irreducible, nonintentional, yet cognitively significant relationship to ordinary particulars such as tomatoes. The only "contents" of perception are the very objects and events that are perceived together with their perceptible features. Philosophers who have found reason to adopt such a view include J. L. Austin, J. Campbell, M. G. F. Martin, C. Travis, and B. Brewer.[5]

4 Ibid., p. 11n9.

5 John L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962); John Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002); M.G.F. Martin, "The Transparency of Experience," in: *Mind and Language* 17 (2002), pp. 376-425; Charles Travis, "The Silence of the Senses," in: *Mind* 113 (2004), pp. 57-94; Bill Brewer, "Perception and Content," in: *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006), pp. 165-181; idem, "Perception and Its Objects," in: *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007), pp. 87-97.

(A) Hallucination. According to NRN, perceptual episodes *essentially* involve cognitive access to the world. Since hallucinatory episodes do not as such involve cognitive access to the world, hallucinatory episodes are not perceptual episodes. Instead, hallucinatory episodes are essentially counterfeit perceptual episodes. As I understand it, capturing this fact is the central purpose of a so-called "disjunctive" view of perception. And if part of the appeal of representationality was that it promised to handle cases of hallucination by explaining how a *perceptual episode* could occur in the absence of any object perceived, a disjunctive theory of perception simply denies that there is any such thing to be explained: perceptual episodes *cannot* occur in the absence of an object perceived. Thus, provided that disjunctivism is a live option, the phenomenon of hallucination gives us no reason to endorse representationality.

(B) Perceptual Knowledge and (C) Demonstrative Thought. NRN holds that to perceive is to stand in an irreducible, nonintentional, yet cognitively significant relationship to garden-variety particulars. But just what is the cognitive significance of this relationship? Here is a plausible answer: perceptual relations are essentially and unanalyzably *knowledgeable perspectives on the world*, which is *not* to say that perceiving is *itself* knowing. Rather, the idea is this:

If S perceives an object, O, then there is some property, F, such that O is perceptibly F and S perceives of O that it is F, and thus, knows of O that it is F.

Focusing on the case of vision, the idea is, first, that some features of objects are visible features, and second, that, if S sees O, there must be some F that is a visible feature of O such that S *visually recognizes* of O that it is F, and so, *knows* of O that it is F. (Keep in mind that, here, *seeing that*… is a *way of knowing*, and *not* itself a *perceptual* state; it is knowing *by* seeing.) So, just what S can know about an object by seeing it depends, first, on the object's visible features, and second, on S's visual recognitional capacities.

I will consider some examples when I turn to the topic of illusion. First, however, if perceptual episodes are essentially and unanalyzably knowledgeable perspectives on the world, then there is no need for an explanatory account of how perceptual episodes enable knowing. Second, it seems evident that the kind of knowledge that perceptual episodes occasion is first and foremost *demonstrative* knowledge, where what is known is a proposition of

the form *This is F*. And if I can demonstratively refer to particular objects in the expression of knowledge about them, then no additional explanation is required for how I could be in a position to entertain all kinds of demonstrative thoughts about those same objects. In sum, whereas representationality may be motivated by a felt need for an explanation of how perception could enable knowledge and demonstrative thought, the articulation of NRN that I favor takes these enabling relations to be primitive, and thus, as essentially beyond the scope of philosophical explanation.

(D) Rational Constraint. In *Mind and World*, McDowell claims that unless we see the world as exerting rational constraint on our activity of thinking, we will be unable to make sense of our thinking as about, or "answerable to," the world at all.[6] I think that this is correct, but does it entail representationality? To get this issue properly in view, we need to better understand the notion of rational constraint.

Suppose that I imprison you in a cell. This would constrain your activity—but would the constraint be rational? No: even if it were rational for me to imprison you, the force of the constraint on your activity would be that of, say, iron and concrete, not that of reason. By contrast, your activity is rationally constrained if there is a *reason* for you to act in a particular way. Activity is rationally constrained if there is a way that it *ought* to unfold. A rational constraint imposes standards of correctness and incorrectness: a rational constraint is a *rule*. Obviously, then, only *free* activity can be rationally constrained.

McDowell's idea is that we must see the world as rationally constraining the free activity of thinking if we are to understand thought as directed onto the world at all. That is, if our thinking is genuinely about the world, then the world must be the rule according to which we ought to think.[7] But since a rule to which we have no access cannot be a rule *for us*, the world must somehow be *given* to us as a rule for thinking. According to McDowell, the manner in which the world is thus given can only be *experience*. This is what he calls "minimal empiricism."[8] The declared aim of *Mind and World* is to show that, pace Sellars and Davidson, minimal empiricism is an innocent idea. McDowell's method is to argue for the availability of a conception of

6 McDowell, *Mind and World*, op. cit., p. xii.
7 Ibid., pp. xi-xii.
8 Ibid., p. xii.

perception as *fact-presentation*. If the world dictates how we ought to think, then we ought to think according to how the world is—according to the facts. Thus, a conception of perception as fact-presentation is a pure conception of perception as rule-giving vis-à-vis empirical thinking. As McDowell writes, "experience is simply the way in which observational thinking is directly rationally responsive to facts."[9] Finally, facts are propositional in form. Therefore, if McDowell is right that *experience* must be the manner in which the world is given to us as a rule for thinking, then it seems that perceptual episodes must be representational. But is he right about this?

We can see our way to an alternative account of rational constraint by considering the relationship between thinking and knowledge. As McDowell presents it, thinking is free activity that "aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief."[10] In other words, thinking is the free activity of making up one's mind. On a traditional conception of knowledge, knowing is then the result of thinking that is well-conducted under the right sort of circumstances. However, if we endorse a model of knowing as a relational mental state, as McDowell and Timothy Williamson do, on which *knowing is the presence to mind of a fact*, then I think we should deny that knowing is a result of thinking, conceived as the free activity of making up one's mind.[11] Indeed, I think we should deny that knowing is a free activity at all. It is simply not the case that I am responsible for my knowledge. It is no more up to me what facts are present to my mind than it is up to me what I see when I open my eyes. But where there is no responsibility, there is no freedom; and where there is no freedom, there is no place for rational constraint.

Now, on the approach to perception that I am presenting, perceptual knowledge is a necessary byproduct of perception and there is nothing of substance to be said about how perception enables knowledge. Perception is simply productive of knowledge. This seems to preclude taking knowing to be an activity that is rationally constrained by perceptual experience, and this, in my view, is a good thing. Instead, we should say that it is by means of *knowledge itself* that the world exerts rational constraint on our activity of

9 John McDowell, "Reply to Commentators," in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998), pp. 403-31: p. 406.

10 McDowell, *Mind and World*, op. cit., p. xii.

11 John McDowell, "Knowledge and the Internal," in: *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, 1998), pp. 395-413; Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

thinking. This is a surprising thesis only if we remain attached to the idea that knowing is in some sense a consequence or result of thinking. But if we take knowing to be a sui generis and world-involving mental state, then it can play exactly the role that McDowell accords to perception. In knowing, facts are present to the mind. Thus, in knowing, I am aware of (am given) rules for the conduct of my thinking. I then use what I know to fix my beliefs. In so doing, I exercise freedom in thinking that is rationally constrained by my knowledge, and thus, by the world, for what I know is a matter of how the world is. And while my beliefs are based on the evidence my knowledge constitutes, my knowledge is based on no evidence at all. (In this sense, my knowledge is altogether groundless; but groundlessness is no objection to the ground.) Thus, pace McDowell, we need not attribute intentional features to perceptual episodes in order to understand how the world could exert rational constraint on our activity of thinking. We can instead take perceptual episodes to be nonrepresentational mental events that are necessarily productive of knowledge and treat perceptual knowledge as the manner in which the world rationally constrains thinking.

(E) Illusion. To understand how NRN can handle cases of illusion, we need to better understand the notions of perceptible features and recognitional capacities. Consider the following example: I enter the gallery and see the painting. If I see the painting, then I know something about it. Perhaps I cannot see that it is a Vermeer, but I must know *something* about it on the basis of seeing it—for instance, that it is definitely not a Cézanne, or that it is a portrait. And sometimes even when a painting is right before my eyes I don't see it at all. It is within my visual field, I am sensorily stimulated by it, but I don't see it. In this case, there is no predicate F such that I see of the painting that it is F. And so I don't have any current perceptual knowledge about the painting.

Now, what I am capable of knowing about an object depends on what concepts I possess. But what I am capable of knowing about an object *just by perceiving it* additionally depends on my *recognitional capacities*. Paul may have the concept *painting by Vermeer*, but he may not know a Vermeer when he sees it. Perhaps he can't tell a Vermeer from a Cézanne or a painting from a print. Presumably, however, if Paula has the capacity to know a Vermeer when she sees it, then her knowledge that the painting on the wall is a Vermeer is *exhaustively explained by* her seeing it. There is simply no room left to

wonder how she could know this. (This is not to say that you couldn't wonder at Paula's *capacity* to visually distinguish a genuine Vermeer from a competent forgery.) Finally, it seems that recognitional capacities are strongly *occasion-sensitive*. Under normal circumstances, I know a tomato when I see one. But when there are tomato-façades around, I might no longer possess this visual recognitional capacity, though I might think that I do. (Similarly, when a Van Meegeren forgery is in the neighborhood, Paula may no longer know a Vermeer when she sees one, though she may think that she does.)

The objective counterpart to the idea of a visual recognitional capacity is the idea of a *visible feature*. What we are capable of knowing about objects and events by seeing them is what visible features they possess. Visual recognitional capacities are capacities for recognizing visible features (*mutatis mutandis* for other sensory modalities).

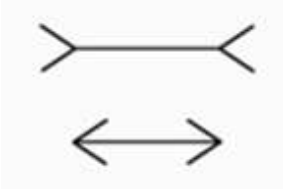
But what is the difference between a feature simpliciter and a *visible* feature? Well, being a tomato is in every context a feature of a tomato. On the other hand, being a tomato is *not* in every context a *visible* feature of a tomato. If there are tomato-façades in the area, then being a tomato may not be a visible feature of local tomatoes. Visible features are thus a particular *kind* of feature, and they are no less real than other kinds of features. Being visibly a tomato is a perfectly real feature of most tomatoes in most circumstances. This is just to say that, in most circumstances, we can have visual recognitional capacities for tomatoes, though, of course, we may not. In any case, visible features, like visual recognitional capacities, are strongly occasion-sensitive. There is no such thing as a context-invariant visual recognitional capacity for tomatoes, and there is no such thing as the context-invariant feature of being visibly a tomato.

Consider more closely the case of the tomato-façade. Being a tomato is in most contexts a visible feature of tomatoes, but being a tomato is *never* a visible feature of a tomato-façade. On the other hand, tomato-façades have the visible feature of *looking like* tomatoes. (Of course, this is also a visible feature of most tomatoes. Most tomatoes look like what they are.) This suggests that there are *two kinds of visible feature* (VF):

1) the VF of being F; and

2) the VF of looking F.

Recognizing two kinds of visible feature allows us to account for cases of illusion. Take the Müller-Lyer lines.



It is a real and visible feature of these horizontal lines that they look to be of different lengths. Removing the arrows deprives the lines of this feature.

In both images, the horizontal lines are of the same length. In the first image, they have a misleading visible feature; in the second, they do not. But in both cases I *see* the lines just as they are. That is, I take in their visible features. Nothing goes wrong in my perceiving: there is no "misperception" when I look at the Müller-Lyer lines and they appear to be of different lengths. That they appear to be of different lengths is a genuine (if misleading) visible feature of the lines. However, if I am unfamiliar with the Müller-Lyer, I may mistake the visible feature of *appearing* to be of different lengths for a visible feature of *being* of different lengths. In this case, I will *misjudge*: I will think that I *see that* the lines are of different lengths, and so think that I *know* that they are thus, but I will be mistaken. The truth of the matter is that I see *merely* that the lines *look* to be of different lengths and I know *merely* that they *look* to be of different lengths. Familiarity with the Müller-Lyer will thus keep me from thinking that I know something that I do not know.

Representationality is frequently motivated by the thought that the *perceptual experience* of illusion involves error. But, according to NRN, perceptual experience as such cannot involve error. When we perceive, we take in the world just as it is. Error arises, if it does, only in what we make of what we take in.

(F) Perceptual Consciousness. It seems that NRN must take the phenomenal character of a perceptual episode to be constituted by the very objects or events perceived. In articulating such an approach, Tim Crane writes: "…the key idea is this: the phenomenal character of a genuine perception is determined by how the perceived world is."[12] This view is often treated as obviously incorrect: after all, if the phenomenal character of a perceptual episode is determined by "how the perceived world is," then how could perceptual appearances mislead? But this objection relies on a too narrow view of how the world is. If we recognize that objects and events typically have (perfectly real) perceptible features (PFs) of two different kinds—PFs of being F and PFs of appearing to be F—then we can easily explain how appearances can mislead even while the very objects and events perceived, together with their perceptible features, constitute the phenomenal character of a perceptual episode. For instance, the fact that the Müller-Lyer lines have the real and perceptible feature of looking to be unequal in length explains how seeing two lines of equal length could be *like* seeing two lines that are unequal in length.

If the view that I have sketched here is plausible, then, contrary to what most philosophers seem to assume, the correctness of the representationality thesis is far from obvious. In particular, doing justice to the phenomena of hallucination, perceptual knowledge, demonstrative thought, rational constraint, illusion, and perceptual consciousness may *seem* to require representationality, but does not. There is a nonrepresentational approach to perception that neatly handles them all.

12 Tim Crane, "Is There a Perceptual Relation?," in: Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (eds.), *Perceptual Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 126-146: p. 140.