

## **The Admissible Contents of Experience**

**Fiona Macpherson**

This essay provides an overview of the debate concerning the admissible contents of experience, together with an introduction to the papers in this volume. The debate is one that takes place among advocates of a certain way of thinking of perceptual experiences: that they are states that represent the world. For to say that a state has content is to say that it represents; and its content is usually taken to be that which is represented. One should not be tempted to think that the debate is therefore marginal or esoteric, for this view of perceptual experience has been by far the dominant view of perceptual experience in recent years in philosophy (and in psychology and neuroscience). The debate is about what answer to give to a fundamental question about the nature of perceptual experience, namely: what objects and properties can it represent?

One can ask this question about the admissible contents of perceptual experience about perceptual experience *in toto* but one can also ask it about the perceptual experiences associated with each sensory modality. Thus, one can ask what objects and properties visual or auditory or tactile experiences can represent, and so on. One can also ask it of experiences that are not in any one modality (if indeed there are such experiences, for it is controversial whether there are). Such experiences are sometimes called “cross-modal” experiences or “amodal” experiences.<sup>1</sup> A good example of such an alleged experience would be a perceptual experience that represented that the flash of light that one saw was

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “cross-modal” experience is in fact used to refer to many different sorts of experience but the usage in the main text is one standard type.

the cause of the sound that one heard. In fact, the question about what the admissible contents of experience are is most frequently asked about the experiences in one modality at a time. Somewhat predictably among these, it is vision that has received the most attention. In this introduction, I will focus on outlining the debate concerning visual experience, and one can extrapolate as to how the debate would go in other cases.

### **1. Perceptual Experience as a Representational State**

As mentioned above, many people hold that perceptual experiences are representational states. What does this mean and why do people hold it to be true? To say that one state represents another is to say, at least in part, that one state is about another. Consider examples of things other than experience that are said to represent. Some are man-made. For example, photographs typically represent that which was in front of the lens when they were taken. A photograph of a tree, we might say, represents a tree. A painting of a flower represents a flower. Certain natural, non-man-made states of the world are sometimes said to represent too. The angle of a column of smoke represents the speed of the wind. The number of rings in the trunk of a tree represents its age. Another case, quite different from the other two, is language. Sentences represent or are about things. The sentence, 'The wind blew through the branches of the tree' represents that the wind blew through the branches of the tree. The paradigm case of mental states that represent are the propositional attitudes, such as belief and desire. Propositional attitudes are so called because one takes an attitude (holding true in the case of belief; wanting to be true in the case of desire) towards a proposition. For example, if I believe that basking

sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde then I take the attitude of holding it to be true towards the proposition that basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde. If I desire it then I want it to be true that basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde. If I believe or desire that basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde then my mental state is about or represents that basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde.

Why do people think that beliefs are representational states? One reason is that beliefs have accuracy or correctness conditions. That is to say that there is a way the world could be that would make the belief true and a way that the world could be that would make the belief false. In the case of my belief that basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde, the way the world would have to be in order to make the belief true is if basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde, and it would be false otherwise.

This feature of beliefs, which at least in part makes them representational states, explains why some people think that in order for a state to be a representational state it has to have the possibility of misrepresenting the world. However, this claim is not obviously true. The reason is that beliefs about necessary states of affairs, particularly logically or conceptually necessary states of affairs, do not, at least in one sense, have the possibility of misrepresenting. For example, my beliefs that two plus two equals four, that vixens are female foxes and that David Hume is David Hume couldn't misrepresent the way the world is as these states of affairs necessarily obtain.

Do declarative sentences also have accuracy-conditions? Consider the sentence, "There are basking sharks in the Firth of Clyde". Just as my belief which I would express by uttering this sentence has accuracy-conditions, so too, it

might seem, does the sentence. One complication here, however, is that some philosophers think that some or all sentences are context sensitive. That is to say that what they mean changes according to their context. For example, the sentence I told you to consider might mean (and probably typically means) that there are cetorhinus maximus in the Firth of Clyde. But in the context where I was telling you about Glasgow gangsters and their penchant for sunbathing on the Waverley, a boat that frequently sails down the Firth of Clyde, then the sentence might mean that there are loan sharks on sun loungers in the Firth of Clyde. If some sentences are context sensitive, then it would be accurate not to say that sentences have correctness conditions, full-stop, but that sentences in a particular context have correctness conditions.

What of natural, non-man-made states of the world, such as the angle of the column of smoke or the rings in the trunk in the tree? There is a tradition in philosophy which holds that these natural indicators cannot misrepresent, for they are conceived of as states that covary without exception with that which they represent. This is because it is claimed that it is in virtue of their strictly covarying that they are representational states. In other words, if an exception to strict covariance was found then the alleged natural indicator would not be held to represent that which it failed to strictly covary with.<sup>2</sup> However, one could hold instead that natural indicators represent something only so long as they reliably covary with that thing, not perfectly covary. For example one might think that as long as the number of rings in the trunk of a tree frequently or normally covaries with the ages of a tree then they represent the age even if in the odd year of bad

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example, F. Dretske *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (MIT Press, 1981)

growth some trees do not lay down an extra ring – in which case the number of rings would be misleading with respect to, or would misrepresent, the age of the tree.

What of photographs and pictures? One might think that they don't have accuracy-conditions for one might think that they don't represent that the world is a certain way.<sup>3</sup> A painting of a chair, for example, might represent a chair, but it may not represent that there is such a chair. It might be a painting of a chair the artist merely imagined which doesn't exist or a painting of a chair which once existed but does no longer and the artist may not intend to represent that that chair exists by painting such an image. Similarly, one might think that a photograph of a chair might represent a chair but it does not represent that it exists now. One might retort here that photographs at least represent that a certain state of affairs once existed. For example, a photograph might represent that a chair with a certain look once existed and was in George Square. And the photograph might represent that whether or not that state of affairs ever existed, for the photograph might be misleading in certain respects. Although people say that photographs don't lie, it is true that if they have been digitally altered or if they are taken from a misleading angle they might lead you to believe the world was one way but it was really another. Similarly, one might retort that paintings represent that a state of affairs could exist. And one might think that while most pictures will accurately represent things that could exist, some might misrepresent states of affairs that couldn't exist. For example a picture of a flying

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that Crane (in this volume) holds that pictures can be accurate or inaccurate but not true or false. He therefore claims that the content of pictures is not propositional.

pig would misrepresent that a pig can fly when this is nomologically impossible. M. C. Escher painted what look to be spatially impossible objects, such as the Penrose triangle, in the full knowledge that such an object is a geometrical impossibility. Further moves could be made in this debate. What is certainly true is that if pictures or photographs can misrepresent one has to give a different account of this from that which one gives of belief misrepresentation.

Another reason that beliefs are held to be representational states is that ascribing such states that represent certain things to subjects helps explain and predict subjects' behaviour. For example, if I believe that basking sharks swim in the Firth of Clyde then, given that I have certain desires, such as the desire to spot them, this may explain why I frequently look out for them in the Firth of Clyde and may predict that I will go to the Firth.

These two reasons for thinking that beliefs are representational states – that they have accuracy-conditions and that attributing them to subjects helps to explain and predict their behaviour – have been cited as reasons that also explain why we should think that perceptual experiences are representational states. Let us consider each in turn. Why think that perceptual experiences have accuracy-conditions? Suppose I have a visual experience I would describe as being a visual experience as of a basking shark on the shore. One might think that this type of experience could be accurate or inaccurate. This is because there may really be a basking shark on the shore or there may not. There may be a seal on the shore, which I mistake for a basking shark, or there may be no shark and no object mistaken for a shark, for I may be hallucinating. (Note that hallucinations are such that although, as a matter of contingent fact, they tend to

be inaccurate, they need not be and could be accurate – these are called veridical hallucinations.) If this is correct then the type of experience that I undergo has accuracy-conditions and can represent accurately or inaccurately (that is misrepresent) depending on whether those accuracy-conditions obtain. (Note that philosophers use this “as of” locution in “as of a basking shark” as opposed to just saying “of a basking shark” simply to signal that there need be no basking shark in the world which the experience is of – it may merely appear to be of a particular basking shark that exists in the world.)

There are some dissenting voices, however. Some philosophers – disjunctivists – think that if one sees a basking shark and if one hallucinates a basking shark then one has perceptual experiences that differ in important mental respects to the extent that we should think of them as being different fundamental types of state - that is as differing in their most important nature.<sup>4</sup> Such philosophers hold different views of what the mental differences are between the states. For example, some think that they differ because one is involved in perceptually experiencing a basking shark and the other simply cannot be distinguished from that state just by reflection on the nature of the experience itself by the subject of the experience; some think that they differ in their phenomenal character; some think that they differ in their epistemological status. Some of these philosophers think that you can only have the same fundamental type of perceptual experience that you have when you see a basking shark accurately, when you see it accurately. You cannot have this type of

---

<sup>4</sup> Disjunctivists include M. G. F. Martin, John McDowell, Bill Brewer and William Fish. The various types of disjunctivism are discussed in A. Haddock and F. Macpherson "Introduction: Varieties of Disjunctivism" in our *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* (Oxford UP, 2008).

experience when you either misperceive the seal as being a basking shark or if you just have a hallucination as of a basking shark. I believe that they hold this because they reason as follows: perceptual experiences of the fundamental type had when seeing a basking shark on the beach accurately are partly composed of the basking shark on the beach. If there is no basking shark on the beach then it cannot partly compose whichever experience the person is having, such as a hallucination of a basking shark or an illusory experience as of a shark caused by a seal. Thus the person can't be having the same fundamental type of experience. Because there is no possibility of having that fundamental type of experience in those circumstances then there is no possibility of the experience misrepresenting on this view. And if one thinks that for a state to be representational there has to be the possibility of it misrepresenting then this line of thought would entail that that type of experience is not representational. The jargon sometimes used to express this is that these experiences "present" the world as being a certain way, they don't represent it as being that way.<sup>5</sup>

However, this argument has recently been replied to by Susanna Siegel.<sup>6</sup> She argues that even if the type of perceptual experience as of a basking shark had when accurately seeing a basking shark couldn't be had inaccurately, this doesn't mean that that type of experience doesn't represent. She claims that that type of experience can still have accuracy-conditions and, in virtue of that fact alone, it is representational. One can accept that one is unable to have this same

---

<sup>5</sup> Versions of view are defended in C. Travis "The Silence of the Senses", *Mind* 113 (2004), pp. 57-94 and B. Brewer "Perception and Content", *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006), pp. 165-81.

<sup>6</sup> S. Siegel "Do Visual Experiences Have Contents?", in B. Nanay (ed.), *Perceiving the World* (Oxford UP, 2010), pp. 333-68.



fundamental type of mental state inaccurately, but nonetheless accuracy-conditions can be specified by comparing the conditions in which one can have the perceptual experience with the conditions that might exist in other possible worlds. The experience is clearly accurate with respect to this world but it is inaccurate when we compare it to other possible worlds in which the conditions required in order for us to have the experience in the actual world do not obtain. In this way, she argues, we can claim that the experience has accuracy-conditions and in this minimal sense, at least, is representational even though the experience cannot be had inaccurately and so cannot misrepresent. Philosophers are currently debating whether this minimal sense of representation is the sense of representation that people care about when they claim that experiences represent and if it is not, what exactly that sense is. But recall the example discussed above – that of necessarily true beliefs. It seems that these beliefs can't be false, but nonetheless they each represent certain things (that two plus two equals four, that vixens are female foxes or that David Hume is David Hume). If that is right then it seems that the fact that certain types of experience can't be had inaccurately should not tell in favour of them not being representational.

Let us turn now to the second reason for thinking that experiences are representational – that attributing perceptual states with representational contents to subjects helps to explain and predict their behaviour. Is this true? It can seem so. If I have a visual experience that represents a basking shark, it may explain why I keep looking in the direction that I do (perhaps at it swimming up and down the coast). It may explain why I utter, "I see a basking shark" or why I jump up and down with excitement. According to those who reject disjunctivism,

and hold that one can have the same fundamental type of experience when accurately perceiving the world or when inaccurately perceiving the world or when hallucinating, it is because my experiences represents that there is a basking shark that I behave as I do and do so whether or not there is a basking shark there. You may also be able to accurately predict my behaviour based on my having an experience with that representational content together with other things you know about me – perhaps my desire to swim close to the second largest living shark in the northern hemisphere’s most southerly fjord.

However, that this explanation is available to nondisjunctivists does not mean that a similar sort of explanation is not available to a disjunctivist who thinks that experiences do not represent the world but rather present it. He or she will explain and predict the behaviour of subjects based on what the subject’s experience presents when they are accurately perceiving, and based on what the subject thinks that their experiences presents when they are not accurately perceiving.

It lies beyond the scope of this introduction to argue as to which view – representationalism or forms of disjunctivism that reject representationalism - is the right one. For our purposes we need only note that the debate about the admissible contents of experience takes place among those who think that experiences do represent the world. However, it seems to me that a similar debate could take place among those who think experiences present the world rather than represent it. They could debate about which features of the world are presented by experience. However, in practice there has been no such debate, primarily I believe, because those who endorse this view are very liberal about

what experience can present, whereas those who think experiences are representational have tended to fall into two camps: those who are liberal who believe experiences can represent low-level and high-level properties, and those who are conservative and who believe that experiences can only represent low-level properties. With the assumption in place for the rest of this introduction that perceptual experiences do represent, I will now explain the debate about the admissible contents of experience.

## **2. Introducing the Debate**

Let us suppose that visual experiences represent objects and represent them as having certain properties. The range of properties that objects can have is vast. There is the property of being a certain colour, shape, size, temperature, having a certain smell or taste, having certain causal properties, emitting certain sounds, having a certain texture. An object might also have the property of being a certain individual such as your brother, or the first man on the moon. An object might be one of a certain man-made kind, such as being a knife or a chair, or it might be a natural kind such as being a tree or a sycamore tree, or being an amphibian or a natterjack toad.

It seems obvious that visual experiences represent some of these properties and not others. Most people would agree that visual experiences represent the shape, size, colour and position of objects – properties to do with the visual appearance of things (low-level properties). And most people are

agreed that vision does not and could not represent every property. There are two reasons for thinking this.

The first is that there are some properties that the visual system simply isn't and couldn't be sensitive to. Which properties those are is controversial but I speculate, although it is only speculation, that most people would agree that visual experiences cannot represent the following: the proper sensibles of senses other than vision – sounds in the case of hearing, temperature in the case of touch and so on – and properties such as being radio active, emitting an electric field, being six hundred years old.

The second reason is that there is often a distinction between what our visual experiences represent and the beliefs that we form on the basis of those experiences. This distinction is often masked by the fact that we often claim to see what we strictly speaking, on reflection, would hold that we only believe or know. (Perhaps this occurs in part because in English we often use the word 'see' to mean 'know'.) Here is an example. My mother comes into the kitchen in the morning. There are muddy footprints on the floor. She might say 'I see Fiona came home late last night.' Now she certainly believes that I did. But does she strictly speaking see that I came home late? Does she have a visual experience that represents my coming home late? I am strongly inclined to say that she does not. She sees the muddy footprints. What exactly she has a visual experience as of is debatable. One might think that it is as of muddy footprints or that it is as of dark objects on a lighter surface background. Whichever, it seems obvious that she does not have an experience as of me coming home late. She merely believes this on the basis of inferring from what she does strictly

speaking does see – the muddy footprints. On reflection on such cases we might come to think that the properties that our experiences do represent is somewhat restricted.

There are a large class of properties over which there is a large dispute concerning whether visual experience do or can represent them. These include: being an artificial kind, being a natural kind, being a specific individual, causation, the nature of the backsides of objects, the nature of the occluded parts of objects, directionality (high-level properties).

It would be good if we could clearly delineate those properties that everyone agrees visual experiences can represent and those that are subject to debate, and those that everyone is agreed that they cannot. Unfortunately, this is difficult to do and there is no agreed way to do it. Listing properties, as I have done thus far, is the typical way.

We should note that what people's experiences represent may differ. Extreme examples include the colour blind whose experiences may represent fewer colours compared to the normally sighted and people with perfect pitch who may represent more specific information about pitch than people with relative pitch. So when people ask what the admissible contents of experience are they are typically either asking about what the normal person's experience represents or they are asking what it is possible for anyone's experience to represent.

It might seem odd, on reflection, that there is a debate about what the admissible contents of experience are, at least among people who have normal

perceptual experiences. One might think that all we need to do is to introspect and see what our experience is like to determine the answer. Our experiences purport to inform us about the way the world is, so why can't we just report how they so inform us and thereby report what they represent, and why don't we find agreement?

There are a couple of reasons why this may be the case. One is that we may ourselves find it hard to tell apart perceptual experience from belief. So perhaps some people mistakenly report belief content as being the content of experience or *vice versa*. Another reason is that perhaps what our experiences represent is not always available to us as subjects of those experiences. For example, there are some theories of representation that claim that what an experience represents depends on what it is caused by and covaries with in the world. But what it covaries with may not be a matter available to the subject of that experience – at least just by introspection. Another example is that some philosophers hold that what our experiences represent is not what we typically think that they represent. For example, some philosophers think that our experiences do not represent colours – which are surface properties of objects, as we typically think – but closely related properties such as colours in specific illuminations or mental properties that our experiences have when we look at objects.

### **3. Reasons to be a Low-Level Theorist**

Low-level theorists are motivated by the thought that if two experiences are different in what they represent then they must have different phenomenal characters. That is to say that “what it is like” to have the experiences for the subject must be different.<sup>7</sup> This seems plausible for it is a common assumption (although not among certain disjunctivists) that two experiences are different if and only if they have different phenomenal characters. A second reason to hold this arises if one accepts one of the most popular theories of phenomenal character in philosophy of mind today, namely representationalism. According to this view, phenomenal character supervenes on representational content or, according to a stronger form of the view, the two are identical.<sup>8</sup> In fact, as we will in due course see, many theorists who argue for high-level content also accept the idea that if two experiences are different in what they represent they must have different phenomenal characters and vice versa. Whether representationalism is true or not is a topic that lies outwith the scope of this introduction. However, it is plausible to think that at least in a very large number of cases, perhaps within a subject over some specified period of time, differences in phenomenal character supervene on differences in representational content and vice versa.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> This phrase was introduced into the philosophical lexicon in T. Nagel, “What is it Like to Be a Bat?”, *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974), pp. 435-50.

<sup>8</sup> Prominent representationalist works include M. Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness: A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind* (MIT Press, 1995); F. I. Dretske *Naturalising the Mind* (MIT Press, 1995); W. G. Lycan, *Consciousness and Experience*, (MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> See F. Macpherson, *F. Representational Theories of Phenomenal Character*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Stirling (2000), available online in STORRE, The University of Stirling’s digital Repository: <http://hdl.handle.net/1893/25>.

So, starting with the thought that two experiences have different contents only if they have different phenomenal characters, low-level theorists mount a series of arguments on a case-by-case basis. They try to argue that two experiences, which a high-level theorist might claim have different contents, have the same phenomenal character, and therefore represent the same thing. And they argue that the content that both share is a low-level content. For example, Colin McGinn argues that we should restrict the content of visual experiences to propositions whose content can be specified in general terms and not particulars.<sup>10</sup> He asks you to imagine seeing your bible. He claims that the experience that you have cannot represent that your bible is in front of you because you would be having an experience with the very same phenomenal character if you were not seeing your bible but a bible that looked *exactly* similar in all respects. For example, if your bible had a dog-ear, the other bible would have one too. McGinn is thinking that different objects can have the same appearance and thus can cause the same experience in me. Therefore I can't represent that a particular object is present – I can only represent that there exists a certain sort of object in front of me – one with a certain look. Of course, if I have a visual experience that represents an object with a certain look – a look that my bible shares – and if I believe that my bible has that look and is the only one around with that look then no doubt I will come to believe that my bible is present on account of the experience that I have. But according to the low-level theorist this content is solely the content of belief. It is not the content of the experience.

---

<sup>10</sup> C. McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, (Oxford UP, 1982) pp. 38-39.



One could extend this type of reasoning to natural and artificial kinds. For example, suppose you have a visual experience that you might naturally describe as being one as of a toad on a rock. Perhaps your experience, on reflection, doesn't really represent a toad on a rock for wouldn't one have an experience with the same phenomenal character if one were not looking at a toad on a rock but merely a toad skin enclosing a supportive wire framework, or if one were looking at a wax-work of a frog that was so realistic one couldn't tell it apart by sight from a real toad? Likewise, one might naively think that one's experience could represent that a Geiger-counter was present. But couldn't one have the very same visual experience if an object with the mere look of a Geiger-counter was present without that object having the property of being able to detect radiation?

If one accepted this kind of reasoning then it would be reasonable to hold that the contents of visual experience should be restricted to general contents and observable properties – that is properties that one can tell an object has just by looking such as shape, size, colour and position.

#### **4. Reasons to be a High-Level Theorist**

Prior to the papers in this volume being published, the main arguments against the low-level view were made by Susanna Siegel.<sup>11</sup> She claims that some natural kind properties, such as being a pine tree, can feature in the content of perception. She asks us to imagine that we are novices at identifying trees. While

---

<sup>11</sup> S. Siegel "Which Properties are Represented in Perception?", in T. S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds.) *Perceptual Experience* (Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 481-503.

a novice, we look at a particular tree that is in fact a pine tree and have a visual experience. We then become tree experts. We can tell what kind of tree each tree is by looking. She claims that the overall phenomenal character of one's mental life will be different when one looks at a pine tree when one is an expert, and can identify the pine tree as such, compared to when one looks at a pine tree when one is a novice, and can't identify the tree. She claims that this difference in the overall phenomenology is due to a difference in the phenomenology of the visual experiences had in each case. She also claims that if two experiences differ in phenomenal character then they differ in representational content. Finally, she claims that if there is a difference in content here then it is best explained by the natural kind property being a pine tree being represented in the second but not the first visual experience. The example is of a type now known as 'contrast cases'.

There are two main replies that one can give to this argument. The first is to question whether the difference in the phenomenology of your conscious mental life is a difference in the phenomenology of experience. One could claim that the difference lies in other phenomenal states. A plausible claim would be that when you are a novice you consciously believe that a tree is in front of you. When you are an expert you consciously believe that a pine tree is in front of you. And one could claim that what it is like to have these two different beliefs is not the same. Thus the difference in phenomenal character is attributable to the different beliefs you have. Thus the phenomenal *difference in experience* required in order for there to be a difference in visual content is not there.

A second reply accepts that there is a difference in the phenomenology of your experience when you are a novice and when you are an expert, but it does not accept that such a difference shows that a natural kind like 'pine tree' is represented in your experience. Rather, it is argued, a certain outline shape (perhaps of the leaves or of the whole tree) or pattern on the bark or colour of the leaves or bark becomes salient to you when you are an expert, and this is to say that this feature is represented only when you are an expert or represented in more detail in your experience when you are an expert. Perhaps this is because you pay attention to the feature when you are an expert or perhaps it is because your eyes foveate on this feature when you are an expert more than they did when you were a novice.

Another argument that one might give for certain experiences having high-level content questions why, when we think that we have identified two visual experiences with the same phenomenal character, we should always think that what they represent is that which is in common to the world in front of the observer on both occasions that they have the experiences. For example, take your experience of a toad and your experiences of the toad husk that looks like a toad. Let us agree that these two objects cause visual experiences with the same phenomenal character in a subject. The low-level theorist will say that both represent an object with certain shape, size and position properties and that the property of being a toad is not represented. But the high-level theorist could question why the low-level theorist is so confident that the accuracy-conditions for this experience are simply that a toad-looking object is present and hence that both experiences are accurate. Rather, they might claim that both

experiences represent that a toad is present and this is the accuracy condition. On this view the visual experience of the toad would be accurate but the visual experience of the toad husk would be inaccurate. It would misrepresent that a toad was there when there was merely a toad husk. But, the argument would continue, this reflects the way our experience strikes us. One would be surprised were one to find out that there were merely a toad husk in front of one,

This second argument shows that it will often be very difficult to determine what the accuracy-conditions of a type of experience is. And the former argument shows that determining whether a change in the phenomenal character of one's mental life is a change in the phenomenal character of an experience or of some other aspect of mental life may be very difficult. In addition, knowing what the changes in phenomenal character of an experience signal about the difference in representation is tricky. In short, determining what the admissible contents of experience are is a hard task.

## **5. Why Is the Debate Important?**

The debate as to what the admissible contents of experience are is important for many reasons. One reason is that there are many different theories of how an experience gets to have the content that it does. For example there are functional role accounts that say that the role of the experience in the subject's mental life determines its content and there are causal covariation accounts where what an experience represents is determined by what it is caused by and covaries with and many more accounts. Whether any of these theories are plausible will

depend on their ability to account for the forms of representation that we think can and cannot occur. Thus having an independent grasp on this issue will be crucial.

The debate is also important for assessing whether representationalism is true. Recall that this theory claims that there can be no differences in phenomenal character without differences in content and *vice versa*. Whether this is plausible or not may depend on the representational resources to which one has access, in order to explain differences in phenomenal character.<sup>12</sup>

Any issue in philosophy of mind where what is at stake is whether a person has a belief or an experience of a certain sort will be influenced by this debate. This is because it may help determine that a belief is present rather than an experience if the content of the state in question is not one that an experience could have. Thus, for example, it may help in determining whether cognitive penetration has occurred for it may determine that certain contents could not be contents of experience.<sup>13</sup>

The debate also has links to various epistemological questions. This is because what the content of perceptual experiences can be will affect what we should think concerning whether and how experiences justify beliefs – and thus one's epistemological theory.

---

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Macpherson, "Ambiguous Figures and the Content of Experience", *Noûs*, 40 (2006), pp. 82-117.

<sup>13</sup> See Macpherson, "Cognitive Penetration of Colour Experience: Rethinking the Issue in Light of an Indirect Mechanism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming).

## **6. The papers in this volume**

Each of the papers in this volume address one or more of the issues discussed above.

Tim Bayne argues that high-level contents can feature in perceptual experience. He focuses on associative agnosia, a deficit in which subjects' form perception is intact but they do not recognise objects as belonging to kinds that they are familiar with. He claims that the best explanation of such subjects is that they are missing high-level phenomenology.

Stephen Butterfill, relying on Michotte's psychological experiments, which provide interesting cases of contrast cases, argues that we can perceive causation. He claims that perception of causation is one instance of categorical perception. At the same time, he holds that causation is not represented in perceptual experience.

Alex Byrne spends some time in his paper arguing that perception involves representational content. But he does not think that it involves having perceptual experiences with representational content for he eschews the very idea of experience as philosophers conceive of it. He thus opposes the view that perception does not involve representation, but endorses the view that it does not involve experience. He then claims that the content of perception is not very rich and that this fact vindicates one claim of those who believe that no content at all is involved in perception. The claim is that perceptual errors are due to false beliefs not false experience.

In his contribution, Tim Crane argues that perceptual experiences have content but that this content is of a specific kind. It is not propositional and thus not like the content of belief, even though it has accuracy-conditions. He relates these claims to his long-standing view that the content of perceptual experience is nonconceptual.

The idea that there are elements of experience beyond the facing surfaces of un-occluded parts of objects, such as the backsides and occluded parts of objects is explored by Alva Noë. These phenomenally “present as absent” elements, he claims, are represented in experience in virtue of deployment of knowledge of the ways in which my movements produce sensory change. Noë goes on to compare and contrast perceptual experience and belief. They are both methods of access to objects and properties but ones that involve the employment of different access skills.

Adam Pautz’s chapter identifies three conceptions of experiential content. A debate about whether experiences have content must concern the identity conception, he argues, for only this makes the debate non-trivial. According to this conception, an experience has content when its subject stands in a special relation, 'sensorily entertaining', to a proposition. He argues experiences do have this kind of content as it best explains certain experiential features. He claims these contents are general, not singular, mainly on grounds of simplicity. Finally, he discusses which properties feature in the contents of experience, using which beliefs our experiences can ground as a guide.

Richard Price argues in favour of a low-level view. He claims that several contrast cases which are cited in the literature as being one that show that high-

level properties must be represented are unconvincing and, at the very least, natural kind properties need not be posited as part of the content of experience.

Like Butterfill, Susanna Siegel also focuses on whether causation can feature in the content of visual experience. She argues that the Michotte experiments are suggestive but not conclusive. She then develops interesting contrast cases to support her claim that causation can be represented in experience. Finally, Siegel defends the idea that experience may nonetheless remain silent about, that is not represent, certain properties of causation.

In the concluding paper in this volume, Michael Tye discusses whether experiences have existential contents, singular contents, gappy contents or multiple contents. According to Tye, content has a structure with a place for an object to fill. In veridical perception it is filled and we get a singular content. In hallucination it is unfilled and we get a gappy content.

These papers form an exciting body of work. Diverse opinions are forcefully argued for. The papers suggest new and exciting directions for research and from which I believe future work on the admissible contents of experience will flow.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Michael Brady for his helpful comments.