

## IS PERCEPTION A PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDE?

BY TIM CRANE

*It is widely agreed that perceptual experience is a form of intentionality, i.e., that it has representational content. Many philosophers take this to mean that like belief, experience has propositional content, that it can be true or false. I accept that perceptual experience has intentionality; but I dispute the claim that it has propositional content. This claim does not follow from the fact that experience is intentional, nor does it follow from the fact that experiences are accurate or inaccurate. I end by considering the relationship between this question and the question of whether experience has non-conceptual content.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

It has for a long time been noted by philosophers that we talk about our perceptual experiences in a number of different ways.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we describe our experiences using perceptual verbs with sentential complements, as when we say that someone can see (or hear) that the bus has arrived. On other occasions we use transitive perceptual verbs whose direct objects are given by noun phrases, as when we say that someone saw (or heard) the bus, or saw (or heard) the arrival of the bus; sometimes what is perceived is given by so-called ‘small clauses’, as when we say that someone saw (or heard) the bus arrive. The kinds of things which are referred to by these noun phrases and small clauses are varied: complex events, people, sounds and smells are among them. There are other obvious distinctions to be made in our ways of talking about experiences. For example, some ways of talking about experience are factive (‘sees that ...’) or relational (‘sees ...’), while some are not (‘seems to see ...’); and then there is the less everyday, more philosophical idiom ‘has an experience as of ...’.

Faced with this variety, it is natural to ask whether any of these ways of talking is more fundamental. Is there a way of talking about perception, or perceptual experience, which corresponds more closely with its metaphysics

<sup>1</sup> For a classic discussion, see F.I. Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

or its phenomenology? Opinions differ. In this paper, I shall examine an answer to this question which has gained some popularity in recent years, the view that perceptual experience is a propositional attitude. According to Alex Byrne, it is widely accepted that

perceiving is very much like a traditional propositional attitude, such as believing or intending ... when one has a perceptual experience, one bears the perception relation to a certain proposition *p*.<sup>2</sup>

It is natural for someone who takes this view to hold, then, that the canonical or fundamental form which ascriptions of perception should take is one in which perceptual verbs have sentential complements. Since experiencing is a relation to a proposition, the best way to ascribe an experience to someone is to say that they perceptually experience that ..., where the '...' is filled in with a sentence which expresses that proposition.<sup>3</sup> Some philosophers also believe that if the content of experience is propositional, then the content of experience is the kind of thing that can be the content of a belief or judgement, since these are propositional too. This claim has been famously defended by John McDowell. In *Mind and World*, he argues that

In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is that things are thus and so. That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement: it becomes the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at face value.<sup>4</sup>

McDowell's idea is a specific version of the claim that experience has a propositional content. He thinks that experience can only have this structure if its content is conceptual. Some of those who believe that experience has a non-conceptual content (like Byrne) disagree with this claim: experience can have a propositional content without that content being conceptual. None the less these philosophers agree that experience has propositional content, and in this sense it is a propositional attitude.

In this paper I shall argue that both Byrne and McDowell are wrong: the content of experience is not propositional, and so it cannot be the kind of thing that can be the content of a belief or judgement. Neither perceptual experience, nor perception proper, is a propositional attitude.

Some assumptions: I assume the now standard terminological distinction between *perceptual experience*, which is non-factive or non-relational, and

<sup>2</sup> A. Byrne, 'Perception and Conceptual Content', in E. Sosa and M. Steup (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 231–50, at p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> For some statements of this view, see J. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge UP, 1983), ch. 3; C. Peacocke, *Sense and Content* (Oxford UP, 1983), ch. 1; M. Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (MIT Press, 1995); M. Thau, *Consciousness and Cognition* (Oxford UP, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard UP, 1994), p. 26.

*perception*, which is both factive and relational. I shall adopt the usual understanding of propositional contents, or propositions, as the bearers of truth-value, the meanings of indicative sentences, the relata of truth-functional logical relations, and so on. However, nothing in particular turns on any particular detail of the theory of propositions assumed.

I shall first introduce one neutral way to understand the idea of the *object* of a mental state, and I shall define one sense in which experiences have *content*. I shall then examine the familiar claim that experience must have a propositional content because experiences can be accurate or inaccurate. I shall argue that accuracy is not the same thing as truth (for example, a picture can be accurate or inaccurate without being true or false). It is undeniable that we do use propositions to describe, express or otherwise give the contents of some of our experiences. But I shall argue that it does not follow from the fact that we give the content by using a proposition that the proposition *is* the content of the experience. I shall conclude by commenting on the connection between this issue and the debate about non-conceptual content.

## II. CONTENT AND OBJECT

The terms ‘content’, ‘intentional content’ and ‘content of experience’ are technical terms. So we should not expect to be able to analyse them in terms of the meaning of the ordinary word ‘content’. Any discussion of the idea of the ‘content’ of experience should take place against the background of the theoretical assumptions which should be made about content and experience. It would not, for example, be helpful to start off by assuming that ‘content’ means *propositional content*, since then I would have to express my thesis by saying that perceptions do not have content at all; but this would be a very misleading thing to say in the context of today’s philosophy of perception. In any case, philosophical discussions of intentional content have not always used the term to mean propositional content, so history does not oblige us to take this starting-point.

The notion of content belongs within the theory of intentionality. Intentional mental states fall into different kinds: there are hopes, beliefs, fears, desires and so on. All these mental states exhibit what has been called ‘aboutness’ or ‘directedness’: they are about or directed on things. I express this idea in a general way, as follows: for every intentional state of kind  $\phi$ , there is something on which the  $\phi$ ing is directed. What the  $\phi$ ing is directed on is the object of the state. This is what I mean by saying that every intentional state has an object. Like many others, I take my lead from a

famous remark of Brentano's: 'in presentation, something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on'.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes we can say that what the  $\phi$ ing is directed on is what is  $\phi$ ed. For example, in a state of desire there is something that is desired: what is desired is the object of the desire. In a state of fear, there is something that is feared; in a state of love, there is something that is loved; and so on. What is  $\phi$ ed in each of these cases is the object of the  $\phi$ ing. In some cases this need not be true. In the case of the paradigm intentional state of belief, for example, *what is believed* is the propositional content of the belief. But we also need the idea of what a belief is 'about'; so I shall say that the object of a belief is what it is about.

In some cases, the object of a state might be something that does not or cannot exist. I might hope for everlasting world peace, desire a cheap bottle of champagne or fear the ghost under the bed, even though there are not, and never will be, any such things. But in other cases, the object of an intentional state does exist, and when it does, it is an ordinary real thing. So when I am imagining my mother in her kitchen, what I am imagining is my mother herself, the real person, in her very real kitchen. When the object of an intentional state exists, then it is the very same thing as a real existing entity.

We cannot describe the whole nature of every intentional state by describing the kind of state it is (fear, imagination, desire, etc.) and describing its object. For there are many ways to imagine my mother in her kitchen: she might be baking bread, she might be listening to the radio, she might be frying onions, and so on. A particular episode of imagining my mother will present my mother in one way and not in others. These ways need not be determinate in every respect. But every episode of visual imagining will certainly exclude some ways of presenting the object of the episode.

This is where I would introduce the idea of content. There are three distinct reasons for introducing this idea, which I label *aspect*, *absence* and *accuracy*.

(i) *Aspect*. The object of a state of mind can be presented or represented in many ways, even when the states of mind are of the same general kind (desire, fear, etc.). States can have the same objects but differ in the *aspects* under which they represent these objects.<sup>6</sup> In the general framework I am proposing here, that fact that an object is represented under an aspect is

<sup>5</sup> Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* [1874], ed. L. McAlister (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, repr. London: Routledge, 1995), p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> I follow Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (MIT Press, 1992), p. 131, in this use of the word 'aspect'; for more details see T. Crane, *Elements of Mind* (Oxford UP, 2001), §6.

what is called the content of that state. There is a further question about whether different objects can be represented under the same aspect. Philosophers who agree with Frege's doctrine that sense determines reference deny this, since they believe that a difference in reference must correspond to a difference in sense. I reject Frege's doctrine, but I shall not pursue the matter here.<sup>7</sup>

(ii) *Absence*. Searle says in *Intentionality* that not all intentional states have objects, since he takes objects of intentional states to be entities. I prefer to say that some intentional states do not have existing objects, or real objects. None the less, whichever of these ways of talking is preferable, there is something real in each intentional state, and that is what we can call its *real content*: there is a representation of an object, whether real or unreal, in every intentional state or act.<sup>8</sup> For some intentional states, their reality can be what it is independently of the real existence of their objects. The state is of a certain kind (belief, hope, whatever) and it also incorporates a representation of its object. This representational aspect of the state is its content.

(iii) *Accuracy*. Some intentional states present their objects in a certain way, but they might not be like that. Some intentional states can be inaccurate. I can fantasize about an inexpensive bottle of champagne, but there is no such thing. In so far as my fantasizing was representing reality, it is not accurate. Intentional states, then, can be accurate or inaccurate. This is a matter of how they represent their objects; and this, again, is what I call content.

These three ideas – aspect, absence and accuracy – are what make necessary the introduction of representational content. They do not all apply to each intentional state; but at least one of them applies to every kind. How should we apply this to the idea of perceptual experience?

Perceptual experiences can be of different kinds – they can be visual, auditory, etc. – and they have objects. The objects of perceptual experiences are *what* is seen, *what* is heard and so on. Since it is plausible that different experiences of the same kind can differ in the aspect under which they represent their objects (*aspect*), they can represent what does not exist (*absence*) and they can be accurate or inaccurate (*accuracy*), then this is why it is plausible to say that experience has content. I realize this is not uncontroversial, but I shall not defend this idea further in this paper.

The notion of the content of experience, then, is the notion of the way the world is represented in experience. The basic commitment one incurs in saying that experience has content (in this sense) is the commitment that

<sup>7</sup> But see K. Farkas, *The Subject's Point of View* (Oxford UP, 2008), ch. 7.

<sup>8</sup> The idea derives from Husserl, *Logical Investigations* [1901], tr. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 1970), No.V, ch. 2.

experiences represent the world. This way of introducing content is in line with most contemporary uses of the term. For those who reject the idea that experiences represent the world tend also to reject the idea that experiences have content.<sup>9</sup> Hence my usage of the term ‘content’ is not just a stipulation: it corresponds to the way many philosophers use the term.

However, it does not follow from the way in which I have introduced the notion of content that content must be propositional. In the next section I shall consider, and reject, one reason which has been given for thinking that it must be.

### III. ACCURACY AND TRUTH

Those who think that perception is a propositional attitude often point to the fact just mentioned that experiences have accuracy- or correctness-conditions.<sup>10</sup> If an experience represents its object in a certain way, then the experience is accurate if and only if it has an actual object which is as the experience represents it as being. The content of the experience then is the proposition which gives how the object or objects of experience are represented to be. I see the grey cat on the mat, it is represented in a particular way in my experience; the experience is accurate (correct) if that is how the cat and the mat actually are. The content of the experience is, then, the proposition that *the cat is on the mat*.

The propositional-attitude thesis (as I shall call it) is not the thesis that perceptual experiences are beliefs, a view famously defended by Armstrong.<sup>11</sup> There are many well known reasons against identifying experiences with beliefs. (More precisely, since experiences are events rather than states, the identification should at most be with the *acquisition* of beliefs.) For example, systematic illusions show that experiences can present the world in a way we know it not to be, but this is not plausibly represented as a case of contradictory beliefs. But the propositional-attitude thesis does not say that perceptions are beliefs, it says only that they have the same kind of *content* as belief. As McDowell says, the content of an experience is ‘the sort of thing one can also ... judge’.<sup>12</sup> What one can judge is a proposition,

<sup>9</sup> For non-representational views of experience, see B. Brewer, ‘Perception and Content’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (2006), pp. 165–81; C. Travis, ‘The Silence of the Senses’, *Mind*, 113 (2004), pp. 57–94; J. Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (Oxford UP, 2003). Brewer explicitly rejects the use of the word ‘content’ in the theory of perception.

<sup>10</sup> See S. Siegel, ‘The Contents of Perception’, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-contents>.

<sup>11</sup> D.M. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind* (London: Routledge 1968).

<sup>12</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard UP, 1994), p. 36.

something which is true or false. Since propositions are what are true and false, then the propositional-attitude thesis says that the contents of experience can be true or false.

But this claim does not follow from the fact that experiences can be accurate or inaccurate. Accuracy is not truth, since accuracy admits of degrees and truth does not. (The same can be said of correctness.) A picture, for example, can be more or less accurate, but a picture is not true or false. So there is no straightforward deductive inference from the claim that experiences can be accurate and inaccurate to the conclusion that they can be true or false, that they have propositional contents.

The defenders of the thesis can respond that the conclusion is not meant to follow; rather it is the *best explanation* of the fact that experience has accuracy-conditions. It also explains the other two *As* of §II above: *absence* (so long as the propositions in question are not ‘object-dependent’) and *aspect* (so long as the propositions in question are not ‘Russellian’). This is a possible thing to say. But the comparison with pictures suggests that it is not the best thing to say. Light may be shed if I pursue this comparison further.

Like an experience, a picture can be more or less accurate. A proposition, on the standard understanding at least, cannot be more or less true. Truth and falsehood are all or nothing. It is central to the idea of a proposition that it can be true or false, since truth and falsehood are the crucial semantic concepts of propositional logic. Propositional logic shows how the truth or falsehood of complex propositions depends on the truth or falsehood of others. Truth-functions operate on propositions: propositions can be negated, disjoined, conjoined; they can imply one another or be equivalent. That there are things which stand in these logical relations is one of the reasons for talking in terms of propositions at all (though of course not all philosophers of logic accept this).

None of this is true of pictures. Just as pictures are not true or false, so they do not stand in logical relations.<sup>13</sup> Complex pictures do not stand to their pictorial parts as complex propositions stand to their constituent propositions. Pictures do not imply one another; they cannot be negated or disjoined. In this way they are like experiences.

Perhaps it will be replied that although pictures and experiences do not stand in logical relations, their *contents* might. Just as we should distinguish between a sentence and its content, we should distinguish between a picture and its content. A sentence as such is a thing which can be characterized non-semantically. When a sentence is characterized semantically (interpreted),

<sup>13</sup> Pace J. Westerhoff, ‘Logical Relations between Pictures’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 102 (2005), pp. 603–23.

we say that it *expresses* a proposition. After all, on the standard view it is propositions, not sentences, which stand in logical relations, since the things which stand in logical relations must be the bearers of truth-values.

We can distinguish in a similar way between a picture and its content. Pictures themselves can be characterized non-semantically. When characterized 'semantically', in terms of what it depicts, then we can say that a picture represents something. What it represents (and the way it does so) is the content of the picture. This content, the objection goes, can be affirmed and denied, it can be negated and disjoined, it can imply other contents. So although pictures themselves do not stand in logical relations, nothing has been said to prevent their *contents* standing in logical relations. Therefore nothing has been said to prevent their contents from being propositional.

We should, of course, concede the distinction between a picture (the physical object) and its content. We should also concede that logical relations hold between the contents of sentences. This is illustrated by the fact that just as pictures themselves do not assert anything, so sentences themselves do not assert anything either.

But none the less the analogy between pictures and sentences fails at a crucial point. This can be brought out by considering assertion. As just noted, a sentence itself does not assert anything. Nor does a proposition assert anything. Assertions are speech acts. Speakers use sentences to assert things: what they assert is the proposition some sentence expresses. How can a parallel thing be said about pictures? Pictures themselves do not assert something, but can someone assert something by using a picture? Can someone assert the proposition which the picture allegedly expresses?

It seems to me that someone could assert something by using a picture – but *only* by saying something too. If I take Jacques-Louis David's famous picture of the coronation of Napoleon, and I want to assert what it represents, then I have to *say* 'Napoleon crowned himself' or something of this sort. I cannot simply use the picture itself to assert this. (How could I possibly do this? By holding it up to my audience? But what would make that an assertion?) Similarly, I can only deny what the picture represents by using some words to do so. I can hold up the picture and say 'This is not how it was: Napoleon did not crown himself'. There is no way of simply using a picture alone to deny what it represents. The same applies to the logical operations of negation and disjunction. You can only negate or disjoin the content of a picture by using some non-pictorial symbol. You cannot simply append another picture to a picture and display a logical relation between them.

The upshot is that even though we must distinguish between the picture and its content, and between a sentence and its content, this does not imply



that pictures and sentences both have propositional content. For in order to obtain something which one can assert, or to which one can apply logical operations, you need to employ non-pictorial symbols. Without these non-pictorial symbols, it makes little sense to say that the content of the picture can be something which can be asserted, denied, negated or disjoined.

But the propositional-attitude theory can be defended from a different direction. Although it may be conceded that the content of the picture cannot be asserted (nor negated, disjoined, etc.) by using pictures only, could there not be a sentence that has the *same* content as the content of the picture? In other words, may not the following principle (P) be true?

P. For any picture *P*, there is a sentence which gives the content of *P*.

This principle seems undeniable. For given what I mean by the content of the picture – how the object of the picture is represented – then this principle is merely a commitment to the idea that there can always be a sentence which describes what a picture represents and how it represents it. Short of an argument for the conclusion that there are some ineffable aspects of the content of pictures, there seems no reason to deny this.

It might be thought that some pictures are too complex to allow description in language. But where is the argument for this? Principle (P) does not say that the sentence must be short, or that it must be restricted to any one language, or that we cannot make up words for aspects of the content when lacking them in a natural language. In fact, it is easy to show that (P) is true, if we allow that sentences containing demonstratives can give descriptions of pictures, and help to express their content. A sentence of the form ‘Napoleon did this and this ...’ can express the content of David’s picture. It is not an objection to say that someone would not be able to understand this sentence without seeing the picture. Sentences containing demonstratives obviously can express propositions; what it takes to understand an utterance of such a sentence is another question, on which principle (P) is silent.

Principle (P), then, says that there is always a sentence which gives the content of a picture. ‘Gives’, in this context, means *describes*. But describing the content and *being* the content are not the same thing. The content of a representation, I have stipulated, is how its object is represented. Content in this sense can be described in many ways; the description of this content is not the same thing as the content itself. For example, the content of a picture can be given by asserting ‘This is the content of this picture’ or ‘This is what this picture represents’.

This distinction can be developed by drawing on a recent suggestion by Zoltán Szabó. He argues that there is a distinctive mental state of believing

in things, in terms of which the notion of ontological commitment can be explained.<sup>14</sup> Philosophers who think that all intentional states are propositional attitudes reject this: they say that ‘believing in’ can always be given some kind of propositional analysis – believing in Fs just is believing that there are Fs. But Szabó argues that this approach cannot make sense of a number of perfectly intelligible phenomena: for example, someone can acknowledge that there are things in whose existence they do not believe. One of his examples is based on Hamlet’s remark to Horatio: ‘There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy’. The speaker is not saying that there are things of this kind, and we do not believe that there are things of this kind. Rather, he is expressing a certain kind of epistemic modesty.

Szabó’s view is that ‘believing in’ is an intensional transitive verb, which can take a singular or plural object. Belief-in has much in common with belief-that; in particular, and most importantly, it aims at a correct representation of the world. This representation Szabó calls (following Russell) a *term*, and he represents the term for the plural object Fs by ‘[Fs]’. The condition for the correctness of this representation he gives as follows:

[Fs] is representationally correct iff Fs exist and the conception of Fs is true.

The idea is that it is not enough for your belief in Fs to be correct that Fs merely exist; in addition, you have to have a conception of Fs, and this conception has to be true. I do not need to go into the details of this novel proposal. The point I shall use for the moment is that one can represent the condition for the correctness of a representation in terms of a sentence, the right-hand side of the biconditional quoted above, without the representation itself’s being sentence-like. So even if the right-hand side of this biconditional gives the content of the representation [Fs], this is not enough to make this representation propositional.

The thesis that pictures have propositional content cannot, therefore, be the same as the thesis expressed by principle (P). To say that for every picture there is a sentence which expresses a proposition and this sentence gives the content of the picture is not the same thing as saying that pictures have propositional content.

<sup>14</sup> Z.G. Szabó, ‘Believing in Things’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66 (2003), pp. 584–611.

#### IV. THE CONTENTS OF EXPERIENCE

I shall now apply some of these ideas about pictures to the content of experience. I started by discussing the idea that the fact that a state or representation has accuracy-conditions does not itself imply that it has a propositional content, since propositions are (by definition) true or false, and accuracy is not the same as truth. This is why I introduced pictures: pictures can be accurate or inaccurate but not true or false. Thus presented, this argument was unpersuasive; but it led to arguments which were, I hope, more persuasive.

I shall now argue that a view on which the content of perceptual experience is more like the content of a picture gives a better account of the fact that experiences can be accurate or inaccurate than the propositional-attitude theory does. I do not mean to imply that having a visual experience is like looking at a picture. This is not the right way to think about experience, for many familiar reasons. But the comparison between pictures and experiences is none the less apt because one of the things a painter, for example, is doing when painting a (realistic) picture is portraying *how things look*. The point, then, is not that visual perception is essentially pictorial; it is rather that picturing is essentially visual.

In the previous section I claimed that pictures do not have propositional content because propositions can be asserted or denied, and they can stand in logical relations. The only sense in which pictures stand in logical relations is when someone uses a picture along with some non-pictorial representation to make some claim. Similarly, if a proposition were the content of a perceptual experience, then it should be capable of being negated, disjoined, conjoined, etc. But it seems that just as one cannot do these things to the content of pictures, one cannot do them to the contents of experiences either.

The only literal sense which could be made of negating, disjoining and asserting the content of pictures was in the context of descriptions of pictures. We need to distinguish, then, between the content of a picture and a description of the content (or a description which gives the content). This distinction can apply to intentional states. There is a principle for intentional states which parallels the principle (P) for pictures:

I. For any intentional state *I* there is a sentence which gives the content of *I*.

But just as principle (P) does not imply that pictures have propositional content, so principle (I) does not imply that intentional states have propositional

content. One case of an intentional state which is clearly not a relation to a proposition is provided by love. Napoleon's love for Josephine is not a propositional attitude. But none the less there is a sentence which describes the content of Napoleon's love, i.e., describes what he loves and the way in which he represents her, namely, *as Josephine*, and that sentence is 'There is someone who is identical with Josephine'. This is not *who* Napoleon loves, of course: it is a description of whom he loves (the object of his love). It gives or describes the content of his love, without *being* the content of his love.

For perceptual experience, the relevant principle is (E):

E. For any perceptual experience *E*, there is a sentence which gives the content of *E*.

Principle (E), like (P), is an unexceptionable principle. Of course, it may be difficult in some cases to describe in non-demonstrative ways what the content of the experience is, but we can always do it with a sentence that includes a demonstrative – 'Things are like this', or 'Things look like this', or something of that sort. Again we should not worry that someone would not know what was being said unless they could see what the speaker was seeing; principle (E), like (P), makes no claim about what it is to understand the sentence which gives the content of an experience.

None the less it is clear that (E) cannot be all that is meant by the thesis that perceptual experience is a propositional attitude. As Byrne states the thesis, perceptual experience is a matter of standing in a 'perception relation' to a proposition.<sup>15</sup> Someone sceptical about propositions, and relations to them, can agree with (E) without agreeing with Byrne's thesis. For all that (E) says is that the content of any experience can be given or described by a sentence. As I have shown, this does not imply that the content is propositional.

Nor does principle (E) imply McDowell's thesis that what we 'take in' in experience is also something we can judge, unless all that 'taking in' means is that one can assert a sentence which describes what one experiences. (Certainly, for McDowell, this is necessary for 'taking in', but it is not sufficient.) For whenever we make a judgement and express it in language, we are expressing something which has a sentential form. This is why when we make a *judgement* about how things look, or how they are in the experienced environment, what we *judge* is a proposition: something we judge to be true or the case. Of course; but this is a consequence of making

<sup>15</sup> Byrne, 'Perception and Conceptual Content', in E. Sosa and M. Steup (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 231–50; cf. D. Stoljar, 'The Argument from Diaphanousness', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supp. Vol. 30 (2004), pp. 341–90; Thau, *Consciousness and Cognition*.

the judgement, not of having the experience. Or at least, that is all that is implied by principle (E).

It might be said on behalf of McDowell that the essence of his account of perception is that what we take in are *facts*, things' actually being such and such. This is certainly how he originally presented his disjunctive theory of appearance: an appearance of an X is either a *mere* appearance, or it is the fact that there is an X before you making itself manifest.<sup>16</sup> But whatever the merits of that idea, it does not support the claim that what in experience we take in is what we can judge. For we do not judge facts; we judge that something *is* a fact, in other words, that something is true. McDowell clearly thinks that we can withhold judgement on what we 'take in' in experience: that is, we can judge that it is not a fact. The idea that we perceive facts may well be the right description of veridical perception; but it does not fit well with the idea that what we perceive is what we can judge.

The propositional-attitude thesis, then, is more than the anodyne principle (E). It is a claim about the *structure* of experience, and the structure of its content, that is, how experience represents the world, not how those representations can be described. The propositional-attitude theory (in Byrne's formulation) says that experience has a relational structure, as belief does: it is a relation to a proposition. It says that the content of an experience – its objects and the aspects under which they appear – is always that something is such and such, and that the content is true when things are like that, and false when they are not.

One lesson of the comparison with pictures is that just because things are represented in a certain way, this does not mean that the representation is true or false. Another lesson is that although what is represented can be described in a sentence (as principles (P) and (E) say), this is not the *only* way to describe what is represented. What does David's painting represent? 'Napoleon crowning himself' would be an answer; and 'Napoleon crowning himself' refers to an event, not a fact (though of course, if there was such an event, then there is also the fact that there was such an event). So a picture can represent an event; and so can an experience. The content of an experience (what you experience, and how) might be snow falling in the back yard. This is an event (though of course, if there really is such an event, there is also the fact that there is such an event). Shedding the straitjacket of the propositional-attitude theory permits saying that an event, presented in a certain way, can be the content of a perceptual experience.

When we move beyond vision to the other senses, this approach is equally attractive. The objects of the sense of smell, I would claim, are

<sup>16</sup> McDowell, 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), pp. 455–79.

smells, represented as such. The object of smell is what you smell. You smell the cheese by smelling the smell of the cheese, and it is presented to you as such, not as the cloud of particles which the cheese releases when you unwrap it. You hear the sound of the coach on the cobbles; you taste the sourness of the wine; you feel the ferns tickling your leg.... These are what you hear, what you taste, what you touch. Once we escape from the grip of the propositional-attitude theory, we can accept these natural idioms at face value, as giving the obvious phenomenological content of perceptual experience.

On this alternative picture, what is represented in experience are objects, properties and events, in what might loosely be called a 'manifold', but which does not have the structure of judgeable content. We are faced with the perceptual 'given' in all its complexity, and we make judgements about how things are or how things look (sound, smell, etc.) on the basis of this. In attending to some element or elements of what is experienced, we judge that things look, or are, a certain way. Perceptual judgement (judgement made on the basis of perception) is normally selective, and the result of attention. This is, of course, only a starting-point for a description of the relationship between perceptual experience and judgement. But whatever the exact account of this relationship, my point in this paper is that it is a mistake to read back from the content of a perceptual judgement a hypothesis about the structure of experience on the basis of which it is made.

## V. NON-CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

What is the relationship between the line of thought defended in the previous section and the recent debate about non-conceptual content? The idea that the content of perceptual experience is a different kind of thing from the content of belief and judgement might be thought to be related to this debate. One might think this, perhaps, because of McDowell's association of the propositional-attitude thesis with the thesis that experience has conceptual content. But in fact the question whether the content of experience is propositional is a different question from whether it is conceptual, on the correct understanding of the conceptual/non-conceptual debate, though it is easy to link the two questions. I shall end this paper with some comments on this issue.

I agree with Richard Heck that there are two ways of understanding the thesis that experience has non-conceptual content. One is a view about the structure or composition of contents themselves, so to speak. On this view, conceptual contents are contents which are composed of concepts,

where concepts are (for example) entities individuated at the level of sense rather than reference. Non-conceptual contents are therefore contents which are not composed of concepts. I shall follow Heck in calling this way of understanding the idea of non-conceptual content ‘the content view’.<sup>17</sup>

On the alternative view, the thesis of non-conceptual content is fundamentally a thesis about types of mental states (so it is not really very well named). The view says that a conceptual state is one to be in which requires the possession of certain concepts, *viz* the concepts which canonically characterize the content of the state. A canonical characterization of a state of mind is one which characterizes it in such a way as to capture the point of view of someone who is in that state. So a state is conceptual when the subject *S* does have to possess the concepts that are required in order to characterize it from *S*’s own point of view. A non-conceptual state is, then, a state to be in which does not require the possession of such concepts. This view of the non-conceptual is what Heck calls the ‘state view’.

In the past I have defended the state view both as a thesis about the way to understand ‘non-conceptual’ and as a way to understand experience.<sup>18</sup> Given what I have said in this paper, it follows that I should withdraw my claim in previous work (‘The Non-Conceptual Content’, §4) that the content of perception can literally be the content of a belief. This is not a consequence of the state view of non-conceptual content, and reflection shows that it is itself of dubious coherence.

My reason for understanding ‘non-conceptual’ in terms of the state view, as opposed to the content view, is essentially the following. If the content view were the right way of understanding ‘non-conceptual’, then a Lewis/Stalnaker conception of the contents of beliefs (as sets of worlds or sets of *possibilia*) would be a conception of non-conceptual content, since neither worlds nor individuals are concepts. But a theory which counted beliefs as having non-conceptual contents would miss the point of the original introduction of non-conceptual content, which was to identify a form of mental representation which is in some ways more primitive, more basic than belief.<sup>19</sup> If the purpose of introducing the notion of non-conceptual content is to identify such a form of representation, then we should reject the content view and accept the state view. But what is the relationship between the state view and the view that experience is a propositional attitude?

<sup>17</sup> R. Heck, ‘Non-Conceptual Content and the “Space of Reasons”’, *Philosophical Review*, 109 (2000), pp. 483–523.

<sup>18</sup> See T. Crane, ‘The Non-Conceptual Content of Experience’, in T. Crane (ed.), *The Contents of Experience* (Cambridge UP, 1992), pp. 136–57, and ‘Content, Non-Conceptual’, in E.J. Craig (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford UP, 1982).

It seems to me that these views are strictly speaking independent of one another. Suppose you believe that perception has a propositional content. Nothing follows from that about whether you have to possess the concepts which are canonical for the content in question in order to be in that state. That is, nothing follows about whether the state is a conceptual state. Suppose, on the other hand, you believe that perception does not have a propositional content. Likewise, nothing follows about whether in order to be in that state you have to possess the concepts which canonically characterize that content. That is, nothing follows about whether this state is a conceptual state.

Approaching the issue from the other side, suppose you had reason to believe that perceptual states are non-conceptual. Nothing would follow about whether the content in question is propositional or non-propositional. Likewise if you thought that perceptual states are conceptual.

Is this independence an artefact of my commitment to the state view? Suppose for a moment that the content view is the right way of conceiving of the thesis that a state has non-conceptual content. Then if experience had a non-conceptual content as the content view understands this, the question would still be open whether it had a propositional content, so long as propositions can be constituted by things other than concepts. Likewise, if experience had a conceptual content as the content view understands this, then the question would still be open whether it has a propositional content, so long as propositions are not by definition the only kind of content states can have. Of course, I have argued briefly above that the content view is mistaken. But my point here is that even if it were not, then the issues about the propositional content of experience and its non-conceptual content would still be independent.

These issues are conceptually independent, then; strictly speaking, they are not the same issue. But it would be wrong for an investigation into perception to treat them independently. For after all, a theory of perceptual representation needs to take a stand on whether it is conceptual (in the sense of the state view) just as the theory needs to take a stand on whether the representation is propositional. My own view is that perceptual states are non-conceptual as well as non-propositional. By this I mean that in order for *S*'s perceptual state to represent *X*, *S* does not have to possess the concepts which canonically characterize *X*. Although this is a 'state view' conception of non-conceptual content, it does have consequences for what kinds of abstract objects should be employed to model the state best. In particular, the 'canonical characterization' requirement does place a constraint on what kinds of contents perceptual states must have: the contents must be individuated in terms of aspects or *quasi*-Fregean 'modes of presentation'.



Purely ‘Russellian’ contents will not do. This is because the canonical description of experience describes it in terms of the way it represents the objects of experience to the subject. (Given the way in which I have introduced the idea of content, this is a constraint I willingly accept.<sup>20</sup>)

An account of the content of experience which shows how it is both (a) non-propositional, and (b) non-conceptual (in the state view’s sense) might look something very similar to Christopher Peacocke’s conception of ‘scenario content’.<sup>21</sup> Peacocke proposed that we should think of the content of a perceptual experience as given by a set of ways of filling out the space around the perceiver consistent with the correctness of the experience. Such a set he called a ‘scenario’. An experience is correct, Peacocke claimed, when the actual space around the perceiver is in this set. On the face of it, Peacocke’s theory might seem to be a version of the content view, but properly understood, it is a version of the state view. The reason why a state with scenario content is non-conceptual is because *S* is not required to possess any of the concepts that canonically characterize the scenario in order for *S*’s state to be canonically characterized in terms of it. Here the distinction made in the previous section, between the content of a state and a description of that content, may be useful: relating the experience to a scenario is a way of giving a description of the content of the state. It is because this abstract object can be used in the description of the experience that the experience might be said to have this object as its content. But it is non-conceptual because of what this attribution requires of its subject, not because of anything to do with the structure of the object itself. Peacocke’s proposal is, therefore, congenial to the main conclusion of this paper.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I have argued that experience does not have propositional content. I have not argued for this claim directly, but indirectly, by showing that it does not follow either from the claim that experiences have accuracy-conditions, or from the claim that the content of experience can always be described in a sentence which expresses a proposition. It remains, of course, to give a positive characterization of perceptual content which does not treat it as propositional. But the present paper has a more general lesson for theories of perception, and if its argument is correct, then this general lesson should

<sup>20</sup> I am especially indebted here to Ian Phillips.

<sup>21</sup> Peacocke, ‘Scenarios, Concepts and Perception’, in Crane (ed.), *The Contents of Experience*, pp. 105–35. For a discussion of Peacocke, see J.L. Bermúdez, ‘The Sources of Self-Consciousness’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 102 (2001), pp. 87–107.

form a starting-point for discussions of perception. The general lesson is this: we do not have to choose between a theory which treats perception as propositional (like Byrne, Siegel, Peacocke and Thau) and those which treat it as relational (like Brewer, Campbell and Travis). For there is, it seems, a third way: experience might be representational without being a propositional attitude.<sup>22</sup>

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