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Can perceptual experiences justify beliefs?

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Can Perceptual Experiences Justify Beliefs?

1. INTRODUCTION

The question whether perceptual experiences justify perceptual beliefs is ambiguous.¹ One problem is the well known skeptical puzzle. How can perceptual experiences justify beliefs if those experiences may systematically deceive us? Our experiences might be just as they are and yet the world might be radically different. But there is also another problem about the justification of perceptual beliefs which arises independently of the skeptical puzzle. This other problem has to do with our understanding of the notion of justification itself. It seems natural to think that justification can exist only when what is justified is inferentially linked to the justifier. The question, then, is whether perceptual experiences can serve as an inferential basis for perceptual beliefs. The content of experiences does not seem to be the same sort of content that is possessed by beliefs. So the nature of the relation between experiences and beliefs is far from obvious. In this paper I survey various attempts of justifying the view that there is an inferential relation between experiences and beliefs so that the latter can be justified by the former and I argue that none of those attempts is satisfactory. I also suggest that the problem which those attempts address may be illusory. Even though it seems true that experiences and beliefs possess different kinds of contents, there may be no logical gap between those contents that needs to be bridged by some philosophical reflection.

¹ By perceptual beliefs I will mean beliefs based on current experience.

2. REASONS VERSUS CAUSES

The problem of the nature of the relation between experiences and beliefs has been brought into sharp focus by Donald Davidson.² Davidson claims that experiences cannot justify beliefs because the relation between perceptual experiences and beliefs is not inferential but only causal.

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified. (1986, p. 311)

Davidson assumes that sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes because the content of sensations is **nonconceptual**. Propositional attitudes are essentially states with **conceptual** content and hence sensations are not propositional attitudes because sensations lack conceptual content. What is the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual contents? Consider propositional attitudes first. These are states like belief, desire, hope, etc. Propositional attitudes are defined as attitudes to propositions. Belief is the attitude of taking some proposition to be true. Thus if you believe that snow is white, you take it to be true that snow is white. The proposition that snow is white specifies the content of your belief. If, by contrast, you desire that winter is over, the content of your desire is specified by the propositional clause „winter is over”. The content of a belief is what would be the case if the belief were true. The content of a desire is what would be the case if the desire were fulfilled. These contents, then, are conceptual. You cannot believe that snow is white unless you have grasped the concepts of snow and being white. Similarly, you cannot desire that winter is over unless you have grasped the concepts of winter and being over. All the above concepts are constitutive of the propositions to which you take an attitude. The concepts of snow and being white are constitutive of the proposition that snow is white, and the concepts of winter and being over are constitutive of the proposition that winter is over.

To put things in most general terms, the content of propositional attitudes, according to Davidson, is conceptual in the sense that it cannot be specified independently of concepts possessed by the subject of those attitudes. So sensations, according to Davidson, are not conceptual because their content is independent of what concepts the subject of sensations possesses in his or her conceptual repertoire. Sensations, therefore, lack the essential property of beliefs and cannot be treated on a par with them. Sensations are not propositional attitudes. So there can be no inferential relation between experiences and beliefs. So if justification is a matter of an inferen-

² See D. Davidson, *A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge*, [w:] *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore, Oxford 1986, Oxford: Blackwell.

tial relation between propositional attitudes, it is difficult to see how perceptual experiences could have any justificatory role. Experiences cause our beliefs but do not justify them.

For clarity, the exact structure of Davidson's argument can be spelled out as follows:

1. Justification is inferential.
2. Inferential relations hold only between propositional attitudes, for example, beliefs.
3. Perceptual experiences are not propositional attitudes.
4. So perceptual beliefs cannot be inferred from perceptual experiences (from 2 and 3).
5. So experiences do not justify perceptual beliefs (from 1 and 4).

Is Davidson's argument sound? The crucial assumption on which it hinges, apart from the assumption that experiences are not propositional attitudes, is the assumption that justification is inferential. By this assumption, if perceptual experiences are to justify beliefs, it must be possible to infer the latter from the former. In other words, experiences must provide **reasons** for beliefs.

Whether justification is always inferential is not obvious. There is a conception of justification, called **reliabilism**, which does not require from justified beliefs that they be grounded in reasons. According to that conception, a belief is justified so long as it is produced by a reliable mechanism. Thus perceptual beliefs are justified so long as they are held on the basis of a reliable perception. If we adopt the reliabilist conception of justification, Davidson's argument loses its force. However, we can leave that issue aside. Davidson's argument raises an interesting question even if we grant that justification is inferential. The interesting question is whether or not perceptual experiences can be reasons for holding perceptual beliefs.

There are two ways to answer this question affirmatively. On the one hand, one can deny that the content of experiences is nonconceptual. On the other, one can try to justify the idea that experiences justify beliefs even assuming that the content of experiences is nonconceptual. The first route has been taken by John McDowell.³ According to McDowell, the content of experiences is conceptual, and, therefore, experiences are propositional attitudes. Consequently, experiences can stand in inferential relations to beliefs. The other route has been taken by Christopher Peacocke and Alan Millar.⁴ They both reject Davidson's assumption that inferential relations hold only between propositional attitudes. According to Peacocke, there is a sense in which experiences can be reasons for our beliefs even though experiences are not

³ See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Mass. 1994, Harvard University Press.

⁴ See Ch. Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992, MIT Press and A. Millar, *Reasons and Experience*, Oxford 1991, Oxford University Press.

propositional attitudes. And Millar thinks that we can make sense of the idea that there are some quasi-inferential links between beliefs and experiences.

In what follows I will describe and critically evaluate all those responses to Davidson's problem. Contrary to McDowell I will argue that the content of experiences is nonconceptual. Then I will argue that Peacocke's and Millar's solutions are not satisfactory, either.

3. THE CONTENT OF EXPERIENCES

Let's begin with McDowell. According to McDowell, there are no good reasons to think that the content of experiences is not conceptual. The content of perceptual experiences is conceptual. The content of experiences is that things are thus and so. This content, then, gives us the reason to believe that things are thus and so if we do not have any reasons to believe that our experiences are misleading.

There are two basic reasons that lead people to think that experiences are nonconceptual, which we might call the explanatory reason and the phenomenological one, and as we will see, McDowell thinks that none of those reasons is compelling. The explanatory reason has to do with the behaviour of animals and infants. Neither animals nor infants seem to be using concepts, yet it is hard to deny that they do have perceptual experiences akin to the experiences of adult human beings. In the case of infants at least, we have a strong experimental evidence that they do not perceive a „blooming, buzzing confusion” of sensations but rather a world composed of determinate and bounded objects behaving in reasonably fixed and determinate manners. But it is hardly intelligible that we could credit infants with the possession of the concept of an object. The mastery of concepts requires drawing appropriate inferences and we have no reason to believe that infants are capable of inferential thinking.⁵ The phenomenological reason, on the other hand, is that there are features of perceptual experience that we seem to be unable to explain on the assumption that experience is conceptual. What are those features? First of all, the content of perceptual experience seems to be more finely grained than the content captured by our concepts. For example, our color concepts do not match all differences between colors that we can perceptually discriminate. My experience of red28 is representationally different from my experience of red31, even though I have no stored memory representations of these specific hues and hence no such concepts as **red28** and **red31**. Secondly, the content of perceptual experience has an analogue nature rather than digital. This means that perceptual experience captures a continuum of dimensions so that any value on a given dimension — hue, shape, size, direction — may enter the fine-grained content of experience. The content captured by means of con-

⁵ An interesting discussion of that issue can be found in Bermudez. See J. Bermudez, *Nonconceptual Content: From Perceptual Experience to Subpersonal Computational States*, „Mind and Language”, vol. 10, 1995.

cepts, by contrast, is digital. We speak of this hue of red, for example, and that hue of red, which means that each hue is sharply distinguished from another. Thirdly, our spatial perception is unit-free which can be illustrated by the fact that when we see a table to have a certain width, for example, we do not perceive that width in inches, say, as opposed to centimeters. Lastly, perceptual experience seems to be belief-independent. There are plenty of familiar cases of visual illusions that continue to present their illusory appearance even though we do not believe that things are as they look. So this means that the content of perceptual experiences cannot be explained as the content of appropriate beliefs.

In response, McDowell argues all of those reasons for thinking about the content of experiences nonconceptually can be rejected. First, there is no reason to think that the perceptual experience of adult human beings has a common core with the experience of infants and animals. We can grant that we share perception with infants and animals. But this does not commit us to assuming that we have what infants and animals have, namely nonconceptual content, plus something extra given that we can conceptualize the content of our experiences. Instead, we should assume that our perceptual experience and the experience of animals and infants are of two different kinds or that our perceptual experience is a special kind of perceptual sensitivity to the environment.

With respect to the phenomenological reasons for thinking of the content of experiences nonconceptually McDowell says the following. There is no inconsistency in holding that an illusory appearance, even though belief-independent, is conceptual. Having things appear to one is already a matter of applying concepts. Thus the content of illusory appearance is conceptual. What distinguishes it from the content of non-illusory appearance is only that the former, unlike the latter, is not endorsed in the form of a judgment. In response to the issue of the fine-grained character of the content of perceptual experience, McDowell says that, contrary to appearances, we are not restricted to general color concepts like „red” or „green”, say. We can easily acquire more finely grained concepts like „that shade of red” or „that shade of green”. These concepts are indexical in the sense that their reference can be fixed only in the presence of particular shades of colors but nonetheless they are full-blooded concepts in so far as they can be used again, even within a short range of time since the moment of their introduction, to refer to other samples of color. In a similar way, McDowell might explain the analogue and unit-free nature of perception. He might say that by means of indexical concepts we can capture any value on any given dimension of perceptual content and that by applying the indexical concept „that width” we can capture the relevant aspect of spatial perception without having to conceptualize it in terms of units.

I do not think, however, that McDowell’s response is satisfactory. We do not need to deny that we can represent the content of our experiences by means of the appropriate indexical concepts. The trouble is that we do not normally apply such concepts. The application of indexical concepts requires that one stores in memory

specific, fine-grained features of representational content, yet we do always seem to satisfy that requirement. It seems that we may represent the content of our experiences without paying enough attention to its finely-grained features to store them in memory. Storing these features in memory would require an extra cognitive effort which we normally do not take.⁶

I conclude, then, that we would better think of the content of our perceptual experiences as nonconceptual rather than conceptual. McDowell may be right when he says that our perceptual experience is of a different kind than the experience of young infants and animals. But still, it is hard to deny that the content of our experiences is much more finely grained than what we do actually conceptualize. And this is the reason why that content is nonconceptual after all.

4. REASONS BASED ON NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT

If the content of perceptual experiences were conceptual, there would be no difficulty in holding that experiences justify beliefs. But, as I mentioned, Peacocke and Millar argue that experiences can justify beliefs even if we assume that the content of experiences is nonconceptual. So let's look at their arguments, in turn.

Consider Peacocke first. According to Peacocke, even though the content of our experiences is nonconceptual, there is some rational link between that content and perceptual beliefs. The idea is simply that if one's perceptual systems are functioning properly, so that the nonconceptual representational content of one's experience is correct, one's beliefs based on that content will come out true. So, for example, if the content of the perception of a square object is correct, one's beliefs to the effect that a given object is square will be true. So this, according to Peacocke, means that the relevant experience gives one good reasons for believing that there is a square object.

In this description of why the linkages are rational linkages, I make essential use of the fact that the nonconceptual content employed in the possession condition [the condition for a subject to possess the concept square] has a correctness condition that concerns the world. The account of the rationality of this particular linkage turns on the point that when the correctness condition of the relevant nonconceptual content is fulfilled, the object will really be square. (1992, p. 80)

As it has been pointed out by McDowell, however, Peacocke's reasoning is not convincing. Even if there is the sort of a rational link between perceptual experiences and beliefs that Peacocke has in mind, it does not follow that perceptual experiences constitute a subject's reasons for her beliefs. The perception of a square object, for example, is not in itself the reason for which one could believe that there is a square object. It is the belief about the connection between the correctness of the content of that experience and the truth of the corresponding perceptual belief that could be the

⁶ In this respect I agree with Michael Tye. See M. Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass. 1995, MIT Press, p. 139.

reason for forming that belief. But obviously we do not normally form perceptual beliefs for reasons of that sort.

McDowell illustrates this point by a skilled cyclist making the appropriate bodily adjustments in rounding curves.

A satisfying explanation might show how it is that the movements are as they should be from the standpoint of rationality: suited to the end of staying balanced while making progress on the desired trajectory. But this is not to give the cyclist's reasons for making those movements. The connection between a movement and the goal is the sort of thing that could be a reason for making the movement, but a skilled cyclist makes such movements without needing reasons for doing so. (1994, p. 163)

Similarly as a skilled cyclist doesn't make the appropriate movements for the reason specified above, or for any reasons whatsoever, we do not normally form perceptual beliefs by assuming that if our experiences represent the world correctly, beliefs formed on the basis of them will come out true. Obviously, this is an over-intellectualized story of what happens when we form our perceptual beliefs. Normally we do not have any idea whatsoever about the representational content of experiences and their correctness conditions.

5. QUASI-INFERENTIAL LINKS BETWEEN EXPERIENCES AND BELIEFS

Let's now turn to Millar's conception of the inferential relation between experiences and beliefs. Similarly to Peacocke, Millar claims that perceptual experiences can be reasons for holding or withholding perceptual beliefs despite of the fact that their content is nonconceptual. However, Millar's reasons for thinking so are not the same as Peacocke's.

Consider the following example. Bill, who is short-sighted, is standing at a bus stop. He sees a bus from a distance and comes to believe that it is a number 3. Now, even though it might be true that a number 3 is coming, we may think that Bill's belief is not justified given that his perceptual mechanism is not reliable over distances of a certain length. But suppose that Bill begins to wonder whether it is really a number 3 by recollecting the visual experience he had when he looked at the bus. In effect, Bill comes to realize that he didn't clearly discern the numeral on the bus. Clearly, it makes sense to say that the recollection of the visual experience puts Bill in the position of a doubt as to whether his experience was such as to entitle him to believe that a number 3 was coming. This doubt has nothing to do with the belief, which might suddenly occur to Bill, that he is short-sighted. The source of Bill's doubt is Bill's visual experience itself, more precisely, the visual recollection of that experience.

This example, according to Millar, suggests that perceptual experiences can have an evaluative and not merely causal role in relation to beliefs. Millar explains this

role in terms of the competent exercise of conceptual capacities. The basic idea is that a subject's belief is justified only if it is caused by the relevant kind of experience. So, for example, if you have the concept of a pumpkin, your beliefs about pumpkins will be justified if they are caused by pumpkin-type experiences. In the example of Bill, a similar condition is not satisfied. It seemed to Bill that a number 3 bus was coming but Bill could not really discern the numeral on the bus. So Bill did not form his belief in accordance with the condition for the competent mastery of concepts and, in this sense, his belief was not justified. Millar puts this point in the following way:

Experiences do cause us to have beliefs but they do so by interacting with conceptual capacities. The formation or maintenance of beliefs whose justification derives in part from current experience must result from the competent exercise of these capacities. (1991, p. 111)

Millar argues on this basis that we should recognize what he calls **quasi-inferential** links between experience types and beliefs. An experience of an F-type, together with a belief that there are no countervailing facts, is quasi-inferentially linked to the belief that an F is there.

It is interesting to note the difference between Millar's account and Peacocke's. Whereas Peacocke justifies the view that experiences are inferentially linked to beliefs by arguing that the relation between experiences and beliefs is not causal, Millar's admits that the relation is causal. However, Millar points out further that this causal relation nonetheless provides grounds for justification because it is constrained by our competence with concepts. Experiences do not cause us to have any arbitrary beliefs, what beliefs they cause us to have is regulated by our conceptual capacities.

In response, I do not think, however, that Millar's solution is convincing, either. This is because the notion of the competent use of concepts seems to presuppose the idea that our perceptual beliefs are justified by the relevant kinds of experiences. One cannot be judged to have mastered the concept of a pumpkin, say, unless one's beliefs about pumpkins are justified by pumpkin-type experiences. So Millar's account of the justificatory role of experiences is question-begging.

6. NONCONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATIONAL CONTENT

We have considered two attempts to justify the view that even though experiences are not propositional attitudes, they can nonetheless justify beliefs. None of those attempts seems to be successful. So is there any other way of solving the puzzle of how experiences can justify beliefs if we assume that experiences are not propositional attitudes?

In my view, before thinking of any other alternatives, we should first ask what motivates the view that inferential relations should hold only between propositional attitudes. As we saw, this is the key assumption that raises our puzzle. But what is

the motivation for this assumption in the first place? Peacocke and Millar do not address this issue. They both accept the view that inferential relations normally hold between propositional attitudes and think that given that experiences are not propositional attitudes, it is hard to see how experiences can justify beliefs.

Now, if we are in the grip of this picture, it is no surprise that any solution to our problem will not seem satisfactory. But why think that this is the right picture? Why think that inferential relations can hold only between propositional attitudes?

Davidson must assume that inferential relations can hold only between propositional attitudes because only propositional attitudes have conceptual contents. So Davidson must think that experiences cannot enter inferential relations with beliefs because there cannot be any inferential relation between the nonconceptual content of experiences and the conceptual content of beliefs. But this second assumption is far from obvious. Why think that just because the content of experiences is nonconceptual, there can be no inferential relation between that content and the content of corresponding beliefs?

It seems to me that there is no good reason to be skeptical here once we realize that even though nonconceptual, the content of experiences is representational. Perceptual experiences represent the world as being a certain way and this is what they have in common with beliefs. So there is no good reason to think that there cannot be some sort of inference from one representational content, the content of experiences, to another representational content, the content of beliefs. The relation between these two kinds of content may not be like the inferential relation between contents that are conceptual. But, on the other hand, it does not seem to be merely causal, either.

The key point is that the idea of nonconceptual content should not be confused with the idea that perceptual experiences have a certain sensational component apart from the representational one. These are two independent ideas. Thus nonconceptual content is not identical with the alleged sensational component of perceptual experiences. Nonconceptual content is representational.⁷ What distinguishes it from conceptual content is only the way in which it is specified. Whereas conceptual content cannot be specified independently of concepts possessed by the subject of that content, nonconceptual content can be specified independently of such concepts.

Once we are clear about the representational character of the content of experiences, it is hard to see what could be meant by saying that the relation between the nonconceptual content of experiences and the conceptual content of beliefs could only be causal. Paradigmatically, causation is a relation between concrete objects, events and possibly agents. But representational contents, no matter whether conceptual or not, are, obviously, none of those. In particular, the content of experiences must be of the form of facts, such as „X is F”, otherwise it would not be representa-

⁷ For the distinction between sensational and representational properties of experience, see Ch. Peacocke, *Sense and Content*, Oxford 1983, Oxford University Press.

tional, as it has been pointed out by Sellars.⁸ But facts of this sort can hardly enter causal relations. So the view that perceptual experiences merely cause beliefs is utterly unjustified. Instead, the relation between experiences and beliefs must be inferential.

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⁸ See W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (ed. Robert Brandom), Cambridge, Mass. 1987, Harvard University Press, section 1.