Is Representational Content Determinable? - A Conceptualist Response To Travis

De Yang

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IS REPRESENTATIONAL CONTENT DETERMINABLE?

—A CONCEPTUALIST RESPONSE TO TRAVIS

by

DE YANG

Under the Direction of Sebastian Rand, PhD

ABSTRACT

It has long been a common assumption that perceptual experience has representational content. Yet, in “The Silence of the Senses” (2004), Charles Travis challenges this widely-accepted assumption by arguing that perceptual experience cannot determine which content it represents and therefore cannot be representational. It constitutes a significant threat to conceptualism, which usually accepts the assumption. Challenged by Travis, John McDowell (2009b) reformulated his conceptualism by arguing that conceptualism is in fact compatible with perceptual experience being non-representational. However, I find this response of McDowell hardly satisfactory. Instead, I argue that McDowell’s reformulation of conceptualism is faced with great difficulties and doesn’t sufficiently addresses Travis’ argument. I then attempt to develop a different response to Travis. By referring to Siegel (2006), I argue that by regarding anticipation as constitutive of perceptual experience, conceptualists avoid Travis’ critique while retaining the idea of perceptual experience being representational.

INDEX WORDS: Travis, Indeterminacy, McDowell, Conceptualism, Perceptual Anticipation
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1 INTRODUCTION

It has long been a common assumption in philosophy of perception that perceptual experience has representational content, that is, that in perception, a perceiver represents things as being thus and so. Yet, in “The Silence of the Senses” (2004), Charles Travis challenges this widely-accepted assumption by arguing that perceptual experience cannot determine which content it represents and therefore cannot be representational. Travis’ argument constitutes a significant threat to conceptualism, which usually accepts the assumption. Challenged by Travis’ argument, John McDowell (2009b) reformulated his conceptualist view. In response to Travis’ critique, he argues that conceptualism is in fact compatible with perceptual experience being non-representational. However, I find this response of McDowell hardly satisfactory. In this paper, I argue that McDowell’s reformulation of conceptualism is faced with great difficulties and doesn’t sufficiently addresses Travis’ argument. I then attempt to develop a different conceptualist response by arguing against Travis’ assumption that the way things look doesn’t determine the content perceptual experience represents. By referring to Siegel’s discussion on perspectival connectedness (2006), I argue that by regarding anticipation as a constitutive element of perceptual experience, conceptualists could reasonably avoid Travis’ critique while retaining the idea of perceptual experience being representational.
2 TRAVIS’ CRITIQUE AND MCDOWELL’S REFORMULATION OF CONCEPTUALISM

Travis’ critique of McDowell is fully presented in his 2004 paper “The Silence of the Senses.” Broadly speaking, Travis’ paper is a contribution to the debate between the representational and relational (“naïve realist”) views of perception. The representational view, which used to be the dominant position in philosophy of perception, holds that perceptual experience is essentially constituted by the representation of objects in the world. Take for instance one’s experience of a tree. According to the representational view, one’s experience represents the object as being a tree. On the other hand, the relation view, motivated by the intuition that perceivers stand in an unmediated relation to the object, holds that in perception, one’s experience merely brings objects to her awareness. As Travis, a major advocate of the view, puts it, “in perception things are not presented, or represented to us as being thus and so. They are just presented to us, full stop” (2004: 65). According to the relational view, in perceiving a tree, one’s experience merely makes the tree available to her awareness. To defend the relational view of perception, Travis puts forward several ingenious arguments against representationalism across a number of his papers. But here I’ll only focus on one of them, namely the one McDowell’s response addresses.

According to representationalism, in perception, the perceiver’s experience represents things to her as being thus and so. One of the most important consequences of attributing representational content to experience is that it makes one’s experience accuracy-assessable. Suppose I have an experience of a tree. Then representationalists would say that I represent the thing in front of me

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1 Advocates of the representational view hold opposing opinions with respect to whether perceivers stand in unmediated relation to the objects. Some think that it’s possible for perception to be both representational and an unmediated relation between the perceivers and the objects.
as being a tree, in which case “a tree” or “that tree” is the content of my experience. The characteristic feature of such content is that it could be non-veridical, that is, the things represented to me may merely look like a tree, while in fact not being a tree. In this sense, we can say that the content can be veridical or non-veridical, true or false, accurate or inaccurate; its accuracy condition is determined by the representational content of my experience. My perceptual experience is veridical only if there is indeed a tree in the location where I perceive it to be. Otherwise, my experience is non-veridical, for instance, when I’m hallucinating or when before me is merely a façade of a tree.

Conceptualism in philosophy of perception, when taken to be a form of the representational view, also falls with the scope of Travis’ critique. A paradigmatic formulation of conceptualism can be found in McDowell’s *Mind and World*, where he contends that conceptual capacities are actualized in all perceptual experience. To support this claim, McDowell 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 judgment. (McDowell 1996: 26)

In this passage, McDowell’s claim is that perceptual experience and judgment have the same sort of content, i.e., conceptual content. Since conceptual content typically takes propositional form, and since propositional form is representational, it should be obvious that conceptualism fits Travis’ characterization of representationalism. If so, then Travis’ critique against conceptualism can be formulated as follows:

(1) If conceptualism holds, then perceptual experience must have representational content.

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2 To avoid possible confusion, I’ll use quotation marks whenever I refer to something as the content of perceptual experience, as opposed to the object of it.
(2) If perceptual experience has representational content, then the representational content of one’s experience is unambiguously determined by the way things look (to oneself).

(3) The way things look is incapable of unambiguously determining the content of one’s experience.

Therefore,

(4) Perceptual experience doesn’t have representational content and McDowell’s conceptualism doesn’t hold.

Given the argument, the plausibility of conceptualism is undermined, since it’s committed to the view that perceptual experience has representational content. Travis’ argument is perfectly valid. So any criticism must focus on the plausibility of its premises. Since (1) is already established above, what is at stake here is whether the other two premises are plausible.

Premise (2) is supported by what Travis calls the looks-indexed character of representational content. This principle says that “the representational content of an experience can be read off of the way, in it, things looked” (Travis 2004: 69). If one’s experience has representational content, then there has to be something about one’s experience that does the representing. Naturally, the most plausible candidate for that something is the way things look to the perceiver in her experience. In my perceptual experience of a tree, things look certain way to me. And the thing looking that way determines the representational content of my experience, that is, that there is a tree in front of me. Then presumably, if the thing looks another, different way to me, the content of my experience would also change accordingly.

Premise (3) can be illustrated by an example from Travis. Suppose I have an experience of something that looks like a pig. Then presumably representationalists would say that the content of my experience is expressed by the proposition “that is a pig,” because that’s the way in which
my experience determines the representational content according to premise (2). But according to Travis, my experience of something that looks like a pig cannot determine the representational content of “that is a pig,” because my experience may look exactly the same if that something is not a pig, but rather a wax imitation of a pig, merely a part of a pig, the hallucination of a pig, etc. There might be an indefinite number of things that would look exactly the same to me under certain conditions.³ In such a case, we need further criteria to single out only the correct one. At this point, there are two seemingly plausible options left for the advocates of the representational view. One is to accept that a given experience does contain an infinite number of different representational contents, and the other is to deny that the content of experience could be fixed by things looking as they do. If the advocates of the representational view accept the first option, they are committed to saying that one’s experience represents both “that is a pig” and “that is a wax imitation of a pig,” which renders the content of experience incoherent. This consequence is unacceptable because no object would satisfy the accuracy condition of her experience. Therefore, this option should be rejected, and only the second option remains. By *modus tollens* on (2), adopting this option means giving up the idea that perceptual experience has representational content. This is the strategy McDowell adopts in response to Travis’ challenge.

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³ One may respond to Travis by pointing out that the content of the correct disjunct can be pinned down by causal conditions. But note that the kind of representational view Travis talks about requires that the representing must be recognizable by the perceivers (62). So for this response to work, it has to allow the causal condition to be recognizable and hence enter into the content of the perceiver’s experience. This is a controversial view, but defended by John Searle (1983).
3 MCDOWELL’S REVISION OF CONCEPTUALISM

In “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” (2008), McDowell responds to Travis’ challenge by revising his initial formulation of conceptualism. In that paper, he gives up two assumptions he commits himself to in *Mind and World*. The first assumption is that “the content of an experience would need to include everything the experience enables its subject to know non-inferentially” (2009b: 258); the second is that “to conceive experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities, we would need to credit experience with propositional content, the sort of content judgments have” (258). By making these revisions, McDowell intends to deny premise (2) of Travis’ argument, namely, that conceptualism doesn’t have to be committed to the representational view of perception. In this section, I’ll argue that these revisions don’t constitute a satisfactory response to Travis’ challenge, mainly because McDowell fails to demonstrate how the content of perceptual experience can be both conceptual and non-representational.

I’ll start with the first revision McDowell makes, since it’s relatively straightforward and independent of the other one. To understand his motivation for making such a revision, McDowell invites us to consider cases like this: suppose there are two subjects, A and B, who possess different conceptual capacities. When A perceives an object, she recognizes it and says “That’s a cardinal.” B perceives the object under the exact same physical conditions but she has no concept of cardinal at all. Therefore, her experience doesn’t enable her to know the same thing it enables A to know, although according to McDowell, the object looks exactly the same to them.

This case is a variation of Travis’ critique, although it looks quite different from the kind of cases (the pig case for instance) Travis talks about. Suppose premise (2) of Travis’ critique is true, that is, suppose the representational content of perceptual experience is determined by the way things look to her. Then it follows that two experiences in which things look the same would
represent the same content. As a result, the cardinal case constitutes a counterexample to McDowell’s conceptualism, because person A and B represent the object differently although it looks the same to them.

There are a lot of things one’s experience enables her to know. In the case above, the experience enables one to know “that is a bird,” “that is a cardinal,” etc. According to McDowell’s formulation of conceptualism in *Mind and World*, all these contents are included in one’s experience. But by revising his conceptualism, now McDowell gives up this assumption. Nonetheless, he doesn’t give up the idea that perceptual experience has content altogether; as he says: “some concepts that figure in knowledge afforded by an experience can be excluded from the content of the experience itself, in the way I have illustrated with the concept of cardinal, but not all can” (2009b: 260). By making such claim, McDowell is drawing a distinction between categorial concepts which always figure in the content of one’s experience, and concepts which need not. McDowell doesn’t tell us what categorial concepts there are, but the basic idea is relatively clear: if X is a categorial concept, then it figures into the content of one’s experience whenever an instance of X is visually present. In some passages, perhaps for merely heuristic purposes, McDowell seems to suggest that “animal” is a categorial concept. So for instance, when a cat is presented to me, the concept “animal” is actualized and figures in the content of my experience of it. Yet, the concept “cat,” need not be part of the content of my experience, since it’s not categorial.

By making such revision, conceptualism doesn’t have to be bothered by the kind of cases shown in the above passage. When visually confronting the cardinal, only corresponding categorial concepts, which are shared by all competent perceivers, figure into A and B’s experience, whereas non-categorial concepts like bird, cardinal don’t. However, this revision is not capable of
addressing Travis’ original critique. Suppose $C$ is a categorial concept. Then there is still an indefinite number of things that are not $C$ but that look exactly the same as animals. So it’s indeterminate with respect to whether one’s representing is a representing of a $C$ or simply of things that look (sufficiently) like $C$. It’s just not clear how categorial concepts, whatever they are, avoid the problem of indeterminacy. This brings us to the second revision McDowell makes to conceptualism, that is, to substitute intuitional content for propositional content.

Before discussing McDowell’s revision, it’s important to note that for McDowell, the notion of intuitional content emerges from his works much earlier than, and independent of, Travis’ critique. The notion is first introduced in “The Logical Form of an Intuition,” initially presented in 1997 as part of his Woodbridge Lectures. In that lecture, McDowell follows Sellars by suggesting that “we can express the content of a Kantian intuition by a phrase such as ‘that red cube’” (2009a: 35). Expressed in this way, the content of an intuition is captured in an incomplete proposition. According to this account, in one’s perceptual experience of a tree, the content of her intuition is not expressed by “that is a tree,” rather, it’s expressed by the phrase “that tree.”

Yet, in “Avoiding the Myth of the Given,” McDowell adopts a radically different account of intuitional content, for the sake of addressing Travis’ challenge. This account of intuitional content diverges from the one suggested in the Woodbridge Lectures in two main ways. To begin with, in accordance with the first revision McDowell makes to his conceptualism, only categorial concepts play a role one’s perceptual experience. Hence, the intuitional content of perceptual experience includes only these concepts. Second, unlike the notion of intuitional content proposed in the Woodbridge Lectures, which takes intuitional content to be captured in an incomplete proposition, the one proposed in “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” denies that intuitional content is propositional in any sense. And once we put it in conjunction with McDowell’s claim that
“anything that represents things as so has propositional content” (2009b: 266-267), it becomes clear that McDowell is actually denying that intuitional content is representational. In my experience of a cardinal, for instance, my capacity to deploy the categorial concept “animal” is actualized. But it’s actualized not in the sense that I represent what I see as an “animal,” which can be accurate or inaccurate. Rather, it’s merely in the sense that it enables me to recognize a certain shape, size, patter of movement, etc., which cannot figure in my experience of inanimate objects (see 261).

The proposal that perceptual experience has non-representational intuitional content constitutes a denial of Travis’ premise (1). As McDowell says, “Travis urges that experiences do not represent things as so. If experiences are intuitions, he is strictly correct” (266). That is to say, if McDowell’s account of intuitional content is plausible, then conceptualism need not be committed to representationalism and hence can avoid Travis’ critique.

Therefore, the plausibility of McDowell’s strategy heavily relies on the plausibility of the claim that the intuitional content of perceptual experience is both conceptual and is non-representational. I’ll argue that McDowell fails to make a convincing case.

The key to understanding McDowell’s notion of intuitional content in perceptual experience is its continuity with propositional content in judgment. In “Avoiding the Myth of the Given,” McDowell repeatedly refers to Kant’s insight that (in McDowell’s words) “forms of intuitional unity correspond to forms of propositional unity” (2009b: 261). By this insight, McDowell suggests that there are some categorial concepts. Furthermore, these categorial concepts which unify the components of judgments also unify intuitional contents in experiences. Though rejecting Kant’s detailed elaboration of the inventory of categories, McDowell doesn’t provide a new inventory. Yet for heuristic purposes, McDowell alludes to Michael Thompson’s position that
'animal’ is (in McDowell’s terms) a categorial concept. According to McDowell’s adoption of Thompson’s view, our thought and talk about animals have a distinctive form not shared by our thought and talk about non-animal beings. When we think of an animal (whether it’s a cardinal, a pig or anything else), we are thinking of a being that has some particular shape, some distinctive pattern of movement, etc., which don’t figure in our thought about inanimate objects. All these ideas are unified by the categorial concept “animal” in one’s thought.

By referring to Kant’s insight as mentioned above, McDowell claims that the categorial concept “animal” which accounts for the unity in judgment (since thought for McDowell takes the form of judgment) also accounts for the unity in intuition when the content of intuition is an animal. Yet, there is a problem with McDowell’s invocation of the notion of categorial concept. As I’ve mentioned above, it’s unclear what categorial forms there are. Furthermore, it seems even unclear whether it’s possible for one to identify categorial concepts, if there are any. From McDowell’s passages, we don’t know for sure if he employs the example of “animal” merely for heuristic purposes. If he does, then one might wonder what exactly categorial concepts are. If he doesn’t use the example for merely heuristic purposes but seriously takes “animal” to be categorial, then another problem arises. If “animal” is a concept of categorial form, then why isn’t “bird”? Or to put it in another way, what is the criterion for a concept being a categorial concept?

One answer might be the generality of the concepts. “Animal” is more general than “bird,” and therefore the former is a categorial concept, while the latter isn’t. However, this criterion seems arbitrary, since there are also concepts that are more general than “animal.” Indeed, Thompson, in the paper to which McDowell refers, focuses on living things as such, which is a broader class than that of the animal. Does the availability of that broader concept disqualify “animal” from being a categorial concept? Another answer is suggested by McDowell himself, as he says “in an intuition
unified by a form capturable by ‘animal’, we might recognize content…… that could not figure in intuitions of inanimate objects” (2009b; 261). This answer seems more promising, but there is also a problem with it. “Bird,” as a concept of a kind of object, may also capture the distinctive kind of unity an intuition has when it is the intuition of a bird, such as the distinctive way the object moves, the particular shape it has, etc. This kind of unity is not shared by non-bird animals and inanimate objects. If so, then “bird” could also be taken to be a categorial concept (as could almost all concepts). In this way, the distinction between categorial and non-categorial concepts collapses. Admittedly, at this point there is still enough room for McDowell to elaborate criteria for distinguishing categorial from non-categorial concepts, maybe by referring to Thompson, since Thompson provides a more elaborative analysis of the distinctiveness of our thought and talk about the living as such. But whether such an elaboration is successful or not, there is also another more serious problem with his account of intuitional content.

As I’ve mentioned in the above passage, intuitional content for McDowell is not representational. Hence in her perception of an animal, the perceiver doesn’t perceive it as an animal. Instead, she merely recognizes content unified by the categorial concept “animal.” The content might include common sensibles such as shape, size, postures and modes of locomotion which are unique to animals. In one’s experience, she recognizes these common sensibles, but she doesn’t recognize the object as an animal. Yet, McDowell insists that the categorial concept nonetheless plays a role in her experience, as her experience and her recognition of those common sensibles enables her to deploy the concept “animal” in her immediate judgments. This, for McDowell, is exactly because her capacity of deploying the concept “animal” is already actualized in her experience through the way of unifying the common sensibles she recognizes. Without the unifying function of the concept, one wouldn’t be able to differentiate those common sensibles
unique to animals from those found in inanimate objects. Given the role of the categorial concept “animal,” however, according to McDowell, it cannot be part of the content of one’s experience, since otherwise the intuitional content would be representational and thus subject to Travis’ critique.

Nevertheless, despite categorial concepts’ not figuring in the content of intuition like they do in the content of judgment, McDowell claims that “the content unified in intuitions is of the same kind as the content unified in judgment: that is, conceptual content” (2009b: 264). I take McDowell to claim that the contents of intuition and judgments, though in two different forms (one in intuitional form, and another in propositional form), are two species of the same genus conceptual content. And the reason for this claim, as McDowell suggests, is that “though they are not discursive, intuitions have content of a sort that embodies an immediate potential for exploiting that same content in knowledgeable judgments” (2009b: 267). The key word here is “potential.” For McDowell, the content in judgment is articulated, whereas intuitional content, although not articulated, is articulable and hence has the potential to be transformed into the content of a judgment, which is paradigmatically conceptual. In this sense, McDowell thinks the content of intuition can properly be called “conceptual.”

However, McDowell’s reasoning on this point is unconvincing. The sense in which the intuitional content of perceptual experience can be called “conceptual” is too weak, given that he takes judgment to be the paradigmatic form of exercising conceptual capacities. To see why, let’s consider a bilingual person who is competent in both English and Chinese. Whenever she reads Chinese, whether in the newspaper or on TV, she can easily translate what she reads into English if she wants to. In such case, we might say that whatever she reads in Chinese has the potential of being translated into English. However, does it make sense to say that what she reads has English
content? Probably not. Even if it does, this could only be in a very weak sense. Likewise, it’s also unclear how McDowell could make sense of the idea of intuitional content being conceptual. It seems that the only motivation to introduce that idea is to avoid the Myth of the Given, and hence the idea seems *ad hoc*. As Tim Crane correctly points out in a recent paper, the notion of intuitional content suggested by McDowell is at best characterized as its being conceptualizable, an idea even nonconceptualists accept, while the content of intuition itself is not yet conceptualized like propositional content in judgment is (see Crane 2013: 231). Thus McDowell fails to provide a satisfactory response to Travis’ critique.
4 ANTICIPATION IN PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE

As we have seen from the above section, McDowell’s failure results from his inability to make sense of the idea of intuitional content being conceptual while non-representational. Despite its failure, however, it may be premature to say that McDowell’s strategy is a dead-end. El Kassar, for instance, makes an attempt to further develop McDowell’s strategy in her recent work (2015). Yet it’s not my concern in this paper to optimize McDowell’s strategy. Instead, I’d like to pursue a different strategy in this section. And for that purpose, I’ll simply assume the truth of premise (1).

Premise (2) also seems plausible. For there to be representation, there has to be something doing the representing. This much is trivially true. When Travis says that “that something can just be the perceptual experience itself, or else (the fact of) things looking as they did, or, again, things so looking.” (2004: 83), he suggests two things at once. The first is that perceptual experience does the representing; the second is that perceptual experience is simply things looking as they did. The first suggestion is apparently true. After all, what is at issue is the representational content of perceptual experience, not of anything else. The second, I think, should also be granted, since we’ve already restricted the current discussion to visual perception, which is concerned with the way things look to a perceiver.

So what’s left for us in Travis’ critique is premise (3). Note that this premise says that if the way things look doesn’t unambiguously determine the content perceptual experience represents. And as I’ve noted in the first section, the reason for this claim is that there is an indefinite number of things that look exactly the same to the perceiver. To employ Travis’ paradigmatic case, a pig, under certain circumstances, looks exactly the same as a wax statue of a pig, a peccary, a tapir, etc., and there is no non-arbitrary way to tell which one is the thing the perceiver represents on the
basis of the way it looks. I think conceptualists need not accept this claim. My basic idea is that anticipation is at least partly constitutive of perceptual experience and contributes to determining the content of that experience. If so, then there is a unique way a pig looks, which is different from the way a wax statue or a peccary looks.

The idea that anticipation plays a role in perceptual experience has its origin in Helmholtz, exemplified by his discussion of unconscious inferences in perception. Later, the idea was more fully developed by philosophers from the continental tradition, the most prominent among whom was Husserl, in his analysis of the threefold structure (retention-primal impression-protention) of perceptual experience. One of the most significant motivations for introducing the idea of anticipation was to explain how we can perceive spatially located objects *per se* (that is, as three-dimensional) given that at any given moment they are presented to us from only one perspective. And the claim is that through anticipation, our perceptual experience goes beyond what is only perspectivally presented, so as to perceive the objects in their entirety. It is beyond the scope of this paper to get into any real detail of such theories. Instead, for the purpose of responding to Travis’ challenge, I’ll restrict myself to a version of the idea of perceptual anticipation developed recently by Susanna Siegel. In “Subject and Object in the Contents of Visual Experience” (2006), Siegel provides a formal account of perceptual anticipation, formulated in terms of what she calls perspectival connectedness:

\[(PC): \text{ If } S \text{ substantially changes her perspective on } o, \text{ her visual phenomenology will change as a result of this change.} (358)\]

Suppose I’m looking at a pig from its rear side; according to (PC), I anticipate within that very looking that my visual phenomenology or what is visually presented to me would change if I substantially change my perspective on that pig.
To argue for (PC), Siegel employs what she calls the method of phenomenal contrast, inviting us to consider two contrasting cases of Good and Odd experience. In the case of Good experience, suppose that you look at a doll sitting on a shelf. Presumably, when you move towards the doll, it will appear larger. When you change your angle of view, other sides of the doll will be revealed to you. In a word, the doll is responsive to the change of your perspective.

But then suppose something odd (Odd) happens:

It [the doll] moves with movements of your head… [Or suppose that when] you close your eyes, you continue having a visual experience as of a doll. And when you try, with your eyes open, to put an opaque object right in front of the doll to block it from your view, your visual experience persists in being a visual experience as of a doll. (Siegel 2006: 369-370)

If this Odd experience were to continue for some time, the doll would presumably cease to appear as if it were an object existing independently of the subject. As a result, the doll would even begin to look different from the doll in Good experience, and “your experience of the doll [would come] to operate much like the experience of ‘seeing stars’ from being hit on the head or from standing up too quickly” (370).

Contrasting the two cases, Siegel tells us that in Odd experience it is due to its unresponsiveness to the change of your perspective that the doll loses its appearance of being a genuine external object. Based on this contrast, Siegel concludes that what differentiates the Good from the Odd experience is that (PC) shows up in the former, but not the latter.

Siegel’s argument, if successful, establishes that anticipation is at least partly constitutive of perceptual experience, or in another word, represented as part of the experience. But to make it fit my purpose, some revision needs to be made to her formulation of (PC). On Siegel’s formulation,
if a perceiver substantially changes her perspective on the object, her visual phenomenology also changes. Although she admits that “in many cases, the subjects of visual experience will have expectations with consequents that are more specific than those in (PC),” she leaves it an open question whether this kind of more specific anticipation can be generalized. But suppose it does. Then such an anticipation can be formulated in the following terms:

(SPC): If $S$ substantially changes her perspective on $o$, her visual phenomenology will change in such and such a way as a result of this change.

Given (SPC), when looking at a pig from its rear side I anticipate if my perspective changes substantially, my visual phenomenology will change in a specific way (for example, I will see the front side of the pig), rather than changing in general. Siegel considers this to be merely an open possibility, but I think there is indeed “some third argumentative strategy that can settle the matter” (380).

Siegel tends to think there is indeed such an argument, although she doesn’t specify it. Yet, such an argument can be found in Madary (2013). Let’s assume that (PC) is true while (SPC) is false, meaning that one anticipates that visual phenomenology changes in general but not in particular when she changes her perspective. Adapting an example from Siegel herself, suppose someone is looking at a flowerpot from a certain perspective. When she moves to view it from another angle, a bizarre scene occurs. She finds out that a miniature city is built on the back side of that pot. In such case, if she anticipates some but no specific change, then the miniature city she views would no doubt fulfil her anticipation. But that doesn’t seem true—at least, it doesn’t seem to get at the nature of the relevant anticipation. We would surely expect that she be surprised by what she sees, which suggests a violation of her anticipation. As Dennett once suggested, “surprise is a wonderful, dependent variable, and should be used more often in experiments; it is easy to
measure and is a telling betrayal of the subject’s having expected something else” (2001: 982). If so, then we have good reason to endorse (SPC).

With perceptual anticipation now formulated in terms of (SPC), the following four points should be noted. First, (SPC), like (PC), is stated as a counterfactual, which means that its consequent (i.e., the change of one’s visual phenomenology) do not always obtain. I may not see the front side of the pig in the end, but my anticipation still holds as long as its antecedent also doesn’t obtain, that is, as long as I don’t change my perspective.

Second, anticipation is accuracy assessable. This point should be obvious considered that it is formulated in terms of a conditional. When I perceive a lamp from the back, I would anticipate that if I go the front of it, I would see the light bulb. This anticipation can be accurate or inaccurate. The anticipation is accurate when it does have a light bulb in the front. And the anticipation is inaccurate when it doesn’t.

Third, in most cases, perceivers need not deliberately form anticipations about the hidden facades of an object. Instead, perceptual anticipations are usually implicit or unconscious mental acts which are partly constitutive of perceptual experience. Nonetheless, that doesn’t mean perceptual anticipation is merely a theoretical fiction. Siegel’s argument, if sound, indicates that we have good reason to think that we indeed represent anticipations in our perceptual experience.

Fourth, a perceiver’s anticipations have different degrees of specificity, depending on a variety of factors, including one’s past experience, background knowledge, attentiveness, and most importantly the one’s possession of concepts. The process of generating anticipation is a process of actualizing one’s conceptual capacities. Consider McDowell’s cardinal case. There is person A, who is an ornithologist, and person B, a layman who doesn’t possess the concept “cardinal,” but possesses the concept “bird.” Then suppose a cardinal is presented to them from the same
perspective, under the same physical condition. If anticipation is constitutive of perceptual experience, then the cardinal doesn’t look the same to them. And that’s because the same visual stimuli would generate different bundles of anticipations in their experience, given their different conceptual capacities. Person A, familiar with the object, may anticipate that if she turned to the back side of it, its tail would appear to her in some specific way (being of a particular color, shape, etc). Person B, on the other hand, lacking the concept “cardinal,” may merely anticipate that it has a tail (based on her possession of the more general concept “bird”).

Given such a notion of perceptual anticipation, it is hopefully clear how it can help conceptualists respond to Travis’ challenge. But let me now consider three types of cases which may support premise (3) of Travis’ argument, despite the addition of anticipation to the conceptualist picture.

First, let’s consider Travis’ paradigmatic case of deciding whether one is perceiving a pig or a peccary. The claim is that if anticipation is constitutive of one’s perceptual experience, then the way a pig looks would be different from the way a peccary looks when they are both perceived veridically. Suppose I’m looking at a pig from a certain perspective. Anticipations are generated in my experience immediately when I visually confront the object. But to perceive it as a pig, particular anticipations are needed. I would anticipate that if I change my perspective, it will appear to me in such and such way. In my perception of a peccary, however, different anticipations are needed to perceive it as a peccary. In such case, anticipations contribute to determining the content of experience.

Admittedly, under certain circumstances, a peccary may look just like a pig to me. But that’s because my visual confrontation with the peccary misleads me into generating anticipations that are needed to perceive something as “a pig” in my experience. This would be a case of misleading
perception. Nonetheless, in a case of misleading perception, the representational content of the experience is still determinable (and even determinate). In the above case, the content of my experience is “a pig,” though what I’m visually confronting is actually a peccary. It’s simply a misrepresentation brought about by inaccurate anticipation. But once I know it’s in fact a peccary, instead of a pig, different anticipations may be generated in my experience and the content of my experience determined by those anticipations would also change accordingly.

There is also another type of case the idea of perceptual anticipation is intended to address: cases with respect to determining whether one is representing an object per se (a pig) or merely a façade of that object (the given façade of a pig). The answer is that the way a pig looks is actually different from the way merely a façade of it looks to the perceiver, since the two ways of looking include different anticipations – due, say, to differences in terms of one’s attention. In representing a pig in her experience, a perceiver is attending to the pig itself and hence anticipates that if she changes her perspective, other façades of the pig will appear to her. Whereas in representing merely a façade of the pig, her attention is focused on the two-dimensional image presented to her. And as a result, she doesn’t have the same anticipation that is present in her representing it as a pig.

With the idea of perceptual anticipation in hand, we can also turn back to examine a third type of case, exemplified by McDowell’s cardinal case. As I’ve mentioned in the previous passage, in the light of the notion of perceptual anticipation, person A and person B need not have the same perceptual experience in this case, let alone the same perceptual content. Indeed, the stimuli bringing about their experiences are the same. Yet, due to their different conceptual capacities, their visual confrontation with the cardinal generates different anticipations as part of their experiences. Since anticipations are constitutive of perceptual experience itself, it follows that
person A and B don’t have the same experience. There may be something they have in common in their experiences, but the overall visual phenomenology is different and the cardinal in fact looks different to them. And the consequence is that the contents they represent in their experiences are also different.

If my analysis above is correct, then none of the three types of cases support Travis’ claim that the content perceptual experience represents is indeterminable. If so, then Travis’ challenge to conceptualism fails.

In response to my argument, Travis may claim that anticipations are not strictly speaking a constitutive component of perceptual experience. Rather, they are beliefs generated by one’s perceptual encounter with the world. And perceptual experience brings into one’s view merely what is perspectivally given. So the issue boils down to the question of whether anticipation is perceptual in nature, that is, whether it can be considered as a proper part of one’s perceptual phenomenology. Siegel’s phenomenal contrast between the Good and Odd experiences intends to give an affirmative answer to the question. Yet, Travis might not share Siegel’s intuition that there is a phenomenological difference between the two experiences.

One worry about Travis’ potential response is that it leads to the implausible consequence of over-inellectualization. If anticipations show up at the level of belief, then each moment a perceiver is visually confronted with the world, she would have to continuously form a multitude of beliefs about the world that lies beyond her current perspective. This consequence is unacceptable because it is cognitively too burdensome for the perceiver.

This worry might not constitute a knock-down argument against Travis’ potential response of anticipations showing up at the level of belief. However, even if it doesn’t, Travis also doesn’t have any independent reason to reject the possibility of anticipation being constitutive of
perceptual experience. To deny the possibility, Travis would need another substantial argument. But until such an argument is made, my strategy built upon Siegel’s view of perceptual anticipation is not unjustified.

Nonetheless, at this point, some may worry that my strategy of taking anticipation to be constitutive of perceptual experience is ad hoc, merely for the purpose of responding to Travis’ challenge. For this reason, even philosophers endorsing the representational view of perception may be reluctant to endorse my strategy. So in the next section, I’ll make two attempts to dissolve this worry. First, I’ll show that perceptual anticipation does more than responding to Travis’ challenge and one does have independent and deeper motivations to endorse the idea of perceptual anticipation. Second, I’ll address a representationalist argument against the possibility of anticipation being a constitutive element of perceptual experience. If my attempts are successful, then conceptualists endorsing the representational view are provided with good reason to endorse my strategy in response to Travis.
5 WHY ADOPTING THE IDEA OF PERCEPTUAL ANTICIPATION?

To understand the deeper motivation of endorsing the idea of perceptual anticipation, consider one’s perception of a coin. It is often alleged that the coin looks round when viewed head on. But people also tend to think that there is a sense in which it looks round when viewed from an angle. How is it possible for the coin to look the same, given that one’s experience undergoes an apparent variation when the coin is tilted? This is the problem known as “perceptual constancy” or what Charles Siewert calls “the problem of contradictory visual appearance.” Mutatis mutandis, the same problem applies to other fundamental properties like color, size etc. Furthermore, the problem even applies to high-level factual properties like “being an apple,” since an apple is viewable from multiple perspectives whereas there is an ordinary sense in which one is perceiving the same apple when she changes her perspectives, during which process her experience undergoes radical variations and reveals the hidden façades of the apple. It’s philosophically puzzling how the object looks to be the same apple in and through all the variations.

In the light of the problem, a satisfactory account of perception is supposed to satisfy two theoretical constraints, namely, to explain both the continuity and variation of perceptual experience. The once dominant paradigm of representationalism, which focuses on the viewing of 2D images rather than 3D objects, largely ignore the problem or dismiss it as an unnecessary complication in the philosophical analysis of perception. The mindset is also epitomized in McDowell’s approving discussion of Sellars’ frequent uses of the example of a translucent ice cube, which allows its hidden façades to be visually present to the perceiver (see 2009b: 262).

Traditionally, two solutions are proposed to solve the problem of perceptual constancy. However, each of them satisfies only one of the two constraints at the cost of the other. Sense data theorists, who hold that our perception is mediated by some kind of non-3D entity, deny that a
tilted coin looks round. According to them, a coin, when viewed from head on and from a certain angle, doesn’t look the same. When the coin is viewed from a certain angle, it looks merely elliptical. We only infer from the elliptical look that the actual shape of the coin is round and it is the same coin that we see from head on. This view, however, seems epistemologically problematic. Given the sense data theorists’ view, it’s unclear how our experience could provide rational justification for our belief about the coin. If the coin looks elliptical, then how could the perceiver be prompted to form the belief that the coin is round on the basis of his experience? Besides, the view is also phenomenologically inaccurate. Consider a tilted coin in a picture. I know for sure that there is nothing round in the picture and what is drawn is merely an ellipse. Nonetheless, the depicted coin doesn’t look merely elliptical to me. Rather, it looks round, although its being round cannot be inferred from what I know about it.

Another solution is proposed by a certain version of direct realist view, according to which perceivers stand in an unmediated relation to the object. No matter how one’s experience about the coin changes as it tilts, the direct relation between the perceiver and the coin guarantees that there is a continuity of object, in spite of all the variations. On this view, there is no sense in which a tilted coin looks elliptical to the perceiver. According to A. D. Smith, an advocate of this view, that is because normal perceivers don’t experience the change of shape as a coin tilts. Indeed, Smith acknowledges that in perceiving a tilted coin, one does have an experience of an ellipse. Yet, the coin doesn’t look elliptical to her, i.e., she doesn’t experience that ellipse as a property of that coin. Instead, that ellipse is merely a property of her experience or as Smith claims, a sensation (2000). Smith’s suggestion seems plausible to me at this point. However, he fails to explain the role of the elliptical sensation in one’s perceiving the coin as round and hence fails to satisfy the
variation constraint. The idea of perceptual anticipation, on the other hand, provides such an explanation.

If anticipation is constitutive of perceptual experience, then we can see how the content of one’s perceptual experience is continuous across variations. Visually confronting a tilted coin generates an experience of an ellipse. That experience of ellipse, in turn, generates a variety of anticipations in the perceiver’s mind. Those anticipations dictate the way in which her experience would change if she is to change her relative position to the coin. She might anticipate that if she views the coin from head on, she would have an experience of roundness. As a result, she is able to perceive the coin as round even if her visual confrontation with it generates an experience of ellipse. As perceivers moves around the coin, what varies is her sensation, whereas the content of her perceptual experience is continuous. In such case, both the variation and continuity constraints are satisfied. Hence, we have independent motivation to endorse the idea of perceptual anticipation, in addition to responding to Travis’ critique.

At this point, however, against my strategy, one may refer to Colin McGinn’s influential argument against the possibility of counterfactuals being represented by perceptual experience. I take this argument to be a serious challenge because perceptual anticipation is defined in the above passage in term of the counterfactual of (SPC).

It is a received view that belief represents a broader variety of properties than perception. And many philosophers think that counterfactuals belong to the category of properties that can be represented by belief, but not to the category of possible contents of perceptual experience. If the received view is true, then it is likely that anticipation is represented in the form of belief, instead of perceptual experience. Below is a passage standardly cited in support of the view:
You do not see what would obtain in certain counterfactual situations; you see only what actually obtains..... Your eyes do not respond to woulds and might have been. The possible-worlds analysis of counterfactuals makes this point vivid: I certainly do not see what is going on in those nearby possible worlds in which the object is appearing red to perceivers. (1994: 540-541)

In this passage, McGinn seems to suggest two different arguments. First, he seems to suggest that it is because we only represent what is actual in perceptual experience that we cannot represent dispositions, which are defined in terms of counterfactuals. But this argument is fallacious. The premise sounds right. Indeed, in perceptual experience, we only represent the actual. However, granted the premise, the conclusion doesn’t follow, because dispositions are indeed part of “what actually obtains.” Take the brittleness of glass for example. Brittleness, as a disposition, may be defined as a counterfactual like “if the glass were crushed, it would shatter.” Indeed, the antecedent and consequent of the counterfactual describe situations that don’t occur. Yet that doesn’t mean the brittleness itself is not an actual property of glass. In fact, it seems weird to say that glass is only potentially brittle. It is an advantage of my view that all these dispositional properties are allowed to figure into the content of perceptual experience.

But McGinn also seems to suggest another argument in the quoted passage. His argument basically is: because we don’t perceive the nearby possible worlds, we don’t perceive counterfactuals. This argument seems more plausible than the first one. Indeed, it seems extremely implausible to say that one perceives the happenings in nearby possible worlds in her experience. Nevertheless, I don’t think it constitutes a decisive objection against the possibility of representing counterfactuals.
I take this to be uncontroversially true: to represent something in perceptual experience, one need not represent what makes it so. For instance, one may perceive something as being water, but she need not perceive it as H2O in the meantime, even though it is H2O that makes water the thing it is. In the case of counterfactuals, what makes them so are the happenings in the nearby possible worlds. So just as one need not represent H2O to represent water, one also need not represent the occurrences in the nearby possible worlds to represent counterfactuals. If this analysis is correct, then it’s at least possible for some counterfactuals to enter into the content of perceptual experience. And there is no prima facie reason why perceptual anticipation isn’t one of them.
6 CONCLUSION

Controversial as it may seem at first sight, by referring to Siegel’s doll-view thought experiment and contrasting the two competing accounts of perceptual anticipation, I have argued that we have some good reasons to regard anticipation as a constitutive element of perceptual experience. This understanding of perceptual experience provides conceptualists with a strategy, alternative to McDowell’s strategy of denying that perceptual experience is representational at all, to respond to Travis’ argument of indeterminacy. If perceptual experience, strictly speaking, simply consists in what is perspectivally present to the perceiver minus all anticipations, then Travis is surely right about perceptual experience being not representational. But once anticipation is regarded as constitutive of perceptual experience, the kind of concern that bothers Travis simply disappears. And in such case, Travis would have no independent motivation to reject representational content in perception.
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