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THE ONTOLOGY OF PERCEPTION:
BIPOLARITY AND CONTENT

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THE ONTOLOGY OF PERCEPTION: BIPOLARITY AND CONTENT*

ABSTRACT. The notion of perceptual content is commonly introduced in the analysis of perception. It stems from an analogy between perception and propositional attitudes. Both kinds of mental states, it is thought, have conditions of satisfaction. I try to show that on the most plausible account of perceptual content, it does not determine the conditions under which perceptual experience is veridical. Moreover, perceptual content must be bipolar (capable of being correct and capable of being incorrect), whereas perception as a mental state is not (if it is veridical, it is essentially so). This has profound consequences for the epistemological view that perception is a source of knowledge. I sketch a two-level epistemology which is consistent with this view. I conclude that the analogy between perception and propositional attitudes, from which the notion of perceptual is born, may be more misleading than it is usually thought.

§1 The notion of perceptual content

Many philosophers of perception presently suppose that perceptual experience has a "representational content" which is distinct from the perceived scene itself.¹ The notion of perceptual content stems from an analogy between perception and propositional attitudes, like belief and desire. Both kinds of mental states, it seems, represent the world as being a certain way. Both have conditions of satisfaction (or conditions of correctness): they are true or false,

realised or not, veridical or illusory. Specifying the contents of these states means specifying the conditions under which they are satisfied. As the content of a belief determines the conditions under which it is true, the content of perceptual experience determines the conditions under which it is veridical. In other words, there is the following equivalence:

(E) A particular experience e is veridical if and only if the content of e is satisfied.²

On one interpretation, the content of experience is conceptual, and is the same as that of some (potential or actual) belief. Thus, McDowell writes: "Having things appear to one a certain way is already itself a mode of actual operation of conceptual capacities" (1994: 62). Although experience may have the same content as a perceptual judgement based on it, it is not itself a case of judgement or belief. On another interpretation, the content of experience is nonconceptual. The idea is still that the content of experience determines its conditions of satisfaction, but these conditions need not be known to the subject. The concepts we use in specifying such a content need not be in the subject's conceptual repertoire.³

I won't say much about nonconceptual content until the conclusion. I shall take as my target the view that the content of experience is conceptual. However, I am interested more generally in the analogy according to which perception is like a propositional attitude in having a content which determines its conditions of satisfaction. This analogy is particularly clear in Husserl, who generalises the notion of sense from linguistic acts to all mental acts. Dummett objected to Husserl that his notion of sense cannot be the same as Frege's, since "Frege's explanation [of sense] does not allow for any generalization" (1991: 281). Husserl, according to Dummett, "provided no clear alternative notion" (1991: 287).

In a sense, I want to take the objection further, and show that there is no interesting notion of conditions of satisfaction which covers both perception and belief (or judgement).

What I want to show is that the notion of perceptual content as conditions of satisfaction is in itself more problematic than it is usually thought. Indeed, there are grounds for rejecting it in the analysis of the perceptual relation.

§2 Quasi-veridical illusions

According to E, the content's conditions of satisfaction determine the conditions under which the experience is veridical. But what does it mean for a content to be satisfied? Conceptual content is best specified by means of a proposition. First, if experience involves the actual operation of conceptual capacities, and if such capacities are operated only in the context of a complete proposition, it seems that the content of experience has to be propositional.⁴ Second, the complete content of perception must surely be articulated as the perceived scene is always complex – looking at a uniform blue sky may be one of the few exceptions to this principle. We do not perceive just a thing; we perceive it as having a definite colour and shape, and against a less determinate background. We also perceive it as participating in events and states, as being spatially and causally related to other things, and so on. The use of propositions seems to be the most natural way of specifying the complexity of what we see.

Since it is in virtue of its content that experience represents the world as being a certain way, it must be possible to capture the specificity of the perceived scene by means of a proper set of concepts. It has been claimed, rightly, that indexical concepts can do this.⁵ The indexical "that red", for instance, may be used to designate the specific shade of red of a perceived thing. But indexicals alone, outside a propositional context, cannot express the specificity of the whole scene. The complex indexical "that red rose", for instance, fails to

express the specific shade of red of the rose. A better indexical would be "That rose which is that red", but clearly we have re-introduced something like a propositional structure.⁶

Another strategy would be to individuate experiences more finely. When I see a red patch, it might be said, there are two atomic experiences: an experience of a patch and an experience of redness. These experiences can be fully specified by means of simple indexicals like "this" and "thus". However, we have to deal with the fact that the same thing is perceived as both this and thus. Apparently, we have to postulate the experience of some exemplified relation (for instance, compresence) between the patch and the colour. Now the problem is that this experience must be complex, for how could I perceive the relevant relation without perceiving its terms? And if it is already complex, what is the motivation for introducing the notion of an atomic experience?

If the content of experience is propositional, E can be read in a straightforward way: a particular experience e is veridical if and only if the conceptual content of e is true. For an experience to be veridical is for its content to be true; if the content is false, the experience is illusory. I shall now present a simple argument against E. If E does not hold, the distinction between a veridical experience and an illusion cannot be fully explained in terms of the truth-conditions of perceptual content. Later I will explore some consequences of this point for the account of perception.

One part of E is surely correct; if the experience is veridical, its content is satisfied. By contraposition, if the content is not satisfied, the experience is illusory. Suppose that it seems visually to me as if it is raining, and it is not raining. The content of my experience, "that it is raining", is false. So I must suffer from a visual illusion.

The other part of E – that if the content is satisfied, the experience is veridical – does not hold so easily. Consider what David Lewis (1983) calls a "veridical hallucination". Lewis's term is somewhat improper since an hallucination, which is an illusion, is by

definition non-veridical. For this reason, I shall use the phrase "quasi-veridical illusion" to express Lewis's concept.

The notion of a quasi-veridical illusion can be informally introduced as follows. Sometimes, an experience seems to present the world as being a certain way, the world is as the experience seems to present it, but intuitively, the subject is not perceptually open to the world as he should be – the experience does not disclose the relevant part of the world to him. For example, it visually seems to me as if there is a black cat in front of me, there is a black cat in front of me, but because I am not appropriately (causally) connected to the black cat, my visual experience is illusory.

When it visually seems to me as if there is a black cat in front of me, my experience has the content that there is a black cat in front of me. Lewis shows that such a content may be true even if experience is not veridical. The truth of the conceptual content does not guarantee the veridicity of the experience. So E is false.

This conclusion holds even if the propositional content of experience is fully composed of indexical concepts. Suppose that the content of experience is of the form "These roses are that colour", or simply "This is thus". On a convincing theory, singular indexical concepts like those expressed by "this" and "that" are object-dependent; they can be grasped only if their objects really exist.⁷ It is plausible that general indexical concepts like those expressed by "that colour" or "thus" are also object-dependent in some sense. In that case, the relevant objects are specific properties. However, there is a crucial difference between the two kinds of indexical concepts. Singular indexical concepts are not only object-dependent; they are also perception-dependent. They can be grasped only in the "perceived presence" of their objects (McDowell, 1984: 102). By contrast, it is far from obvious that general indexical concepts are perception-dependent in the sense that their grasp depends essentially on the perceived exemplification of the relevant properties. Consider the concept "that red", which

designates a specific shade of red. Arguably, it is experience-dependent in the sense that I can grasp it only if I am enjoying an experience of something as having the relevant shade of red. I can grasp this concept, though, even if my experience is illusory. The fact that my experience is of a certain kind is enough for me to grasp the concept of a specific property. Since "that red" does not designate a particular, it does not matter whether my present experience is veridical or not.⁸

In other words, an illusory experience can have the content "This is thus": it cannot be illusory with respect to "this", but it can be illusory with respect to "thus".⁹ Thus, it is always possible that such an experience is quasi-veridical: it is illusory even if its content is true. For instance, it visually seems to me as if a given patch has a specific shade of red. The content of my experience is of the form "This is that colour". In fact, I perceive the patch without perceiving its colour – I suffer from an illusion as far as the colour is concerned, but not as far as a particular patch is concerned. Now we can imagine that the content of my experience is true: coincidentally, the patch is the colour it seems to be. My experience is a quasi-veridical illusion. Contrary to what is asserted by E, the content's truth-conditions do not coincide with the experience's veridicity-conditions.

Intuitively, the previous reasoning depends on the fact that concepts like "thus" and "that colour" designate general yet specific concepts, which can be exemplified in more than one object. At this point, one might try to save E by claiming that such indexical concepts designate not general properties, but particular properties or moments. A particular property cannot be shared with other objects at the same time (although it may be contingent that a given object has that property at a given time). Suppose that I perceive a red patch on the wall. The content of my experience can be specified by means of the proposition "This patch is that shade of red". As the concept "this" can only be grasped in the perceptual presence of the patch, the concept "that shade of red" can only be grasped in the perceptual presence of

the particular redness of the patch. It seems to follow that no illusory experience can have exactly the same content as my present experience. If the content is true, my experience must be veridical.

This proposal raises many metaphysical issues about the nature of properties, and about the coherence of the notion of a particular property. But even if we welcome particular properties in our ontology, and claim that they are in fact the immediate objects of perception (cf. Campbell, 1981: 481), it does not follow that concepts of such properties enter the content of ordinary experience. For one thing, the concept of a particular property is highly theoretical and sophisticated, and arguably, a child does not need concepts of particular properties to perceive, say, a red toy. Moreover, ordinary perception is categorical. Objects are seen as belonging to certain types, and the use of general concepts in our perceptual judgements naturally reflects this fundamental fact about perception.

§3 Searle's way out?

One could object that E fails only for simple propositional contents like "This is thus", but not for more complex ones. There is a notion of content whose satisfaction entails the veridicity of experience.

Consider John Searle's (1983) proposal that the content of experience, which corresponds to its conditions of satisfaction,¹⁰ is self-referential. I see a cup of coffee in front of me. My visual experience can be described as follows:

I have a visual experience (that there is a cup of coffee in front of me and that there is a cup of coffee in front of me is causing in the appropriate way this visual experience).

The content of my experience is self-referential because its canonical specification involves the concept "this visual experience" which refers to the very experience of which it is the content. The phrase "is causing in the appropriate way" can be so construed as to exclude the possibility that the content is true while the experience is illusory. Independently of the difficulty of giving a non-circular explanation of what is "the appropriate way" (non-circular in the sense that it does not rely on a prior conception of the conditions under which the experience is veridical), there are at least two potential worries with Searle's proposal.

The first worry is that it is implausible to suppose that a perceiver always draws into operation a higher-order concept like "this experience". In many cases, we simply do not reflect on our own experiences (cf. Burge, 1991). The second worry is that the proposal seems to entail that the grasp of the concept "this experience" is logically prior to that of the concept "this cup of coffee". Arguably, the ability to reflect on one's own experience depends on the possibility of making an indexical reference to external objects, and not the other way round (cf. McDowell, 1991: note 12).

Strangely enough, Searle replies to these worries by claiming that the complexity in the self-referential specification does not imply complexity in the experience itself. Thus, the concepts we use in specifying the content of experience need not be in the perceiver's conceptual repertoire (1991: 230). This reply, and the claim that "the visual experience itself functions self-referentially in fixing its conditions of satisfaction" (1991: 228), make Searle's proposal more obscure than it was. What is exactly the role played by the indexical "this experience" in the description of such a functioning? The metaphor that the self-referential specification makes explicit what the experience shows (1983: 49) does not contribute to shed light on the proposal.

Searle suggests that the self-referential specification is done from the third person point of view, in this case by a philosopher of perception (1991: 228). Thus, the indexical

"this experience" is used instead of, for example, "S's experience at time t " to deal from outside with the situation of the perceiver S. The relevant question, though, is whether the internal content of experience is self-referential, i.e. whether the self-referential specification describes essential properties of the experience.¹¹ Even if the experience did not have a self-referential internal content, it would still be possible to describe it self-referentially, by saying that the experience is veridical only if it is caused in the appropriate way by the fact represented by its internal content. In that case, the same difficulty can be raised again: the content itself could be satisfied, i.e. represent a real state of affairs, while the experience is illusory. The self-referential specification would be false, since the experience would not be caused in the appropriate way by the relevant state of affairs, but the internal content of experience would be true.

§4 The non-bipolarity of perception

My claim has been that there is no plausible notion of content which determines the conditions under which the experience is veridical. I wish now to draw some epistemological consequences from this claim, especially for our understanding of how perception contributes to the acquisition of knowledge. But first, I would like to consider an objection to the view that perception is a source of knowledge, that it can put the subject in a position to know facts about the external world.

This objection is due to Davidson. Davidson (1986: 312) argues that if we picture experience as informing us about the external world, we have to realise that the information it delivers may be false. Hence, experience cannot be a source of knowledge because it cannot guarantee by itself that a judgement based on it will amount to knowledge. According to Davidson, the subject must have independent reasons to think that his experience does not

"lie" to him. At best, it is these reasons, and not experience, which justify the perceptual judgement and contribute to convert it to knowledge.

One response to Davidson's objection is to reject the picture of experience as an emissary, which is supposed to inform us about the world (cf. McDowell, 1994). We have to conceive experience as transparent, as openness to the world. When experience misleads us, there is a sense in which it intervenes between us and the world. However, "when we are not misled by experience, we are directly confronted by a worldly state of affairs itself, not waited on by an intermediary that happens to tell the truth" (1994: 143).

The notion of experience as an emissary is linked to a traditional conception of experience, according to which it is bipolar. The notion of bipolarity was first introduced by Wittgenstein who applied it to propositions. A bipolar proposition is capable of being true and capable of being false. The early Wittgenstein claimed that any genuine proposition is bipolar, but we can use the notion of bipolarity independently of this particular claim.¹² At least, the contingent propositions that we use to express the contents of experience are bipolar.

By analogy, we can speak of bipolar mental states. A bipolar mental state is one which is capable of being satisfied and capable of being non-satisfied. For instance, a judgement is bipolar only if it is capable of being correct and capable of being incorrect. As the property of being true is not essential to a true bipolar proposition (since it could have been false), the property of being satisfied is not essential to a satisfied bipolar mental state (since it could have been non-satisfied). If experience is bipolar, it is capable of being veridical and capable of being illusory. The property of being veridical is not essential to a veridical experience (since it could have been illusory).

A bipolar experience cannot be a source of knowledge since it cannot by itself convert a perceptual judgement to knowledge. As far as it is concerned, the world may not be as it represents it to be. Knowledge, though, cannot be based on an illusion. So if perception is to

be a source of knowledge, it cannot be bipolar, i.e. indifferently veridical or illusory. It must be essentially veridical – more precisely, it must be essentially dependent on the perceived fact.¹³ Veridical perception cannot lie since its nature is to tell always the truth.¹⁴

My previous attack on E is independent from the issue of whether perceptual experience is bipolar. First, it does not follow from E's truth that experience is bipolar. All that E says is that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the satisfaction-value of the experience (the fact that it is veridical or illusory) and the satisfaction-value of its content (the fact that it is true or false). It could still be there is an essential difference between a veridical experience and an illusion. A non-bipolar veridical experience has conditions of satisfaction even though it is essentially satisfied.¹⁵ Second, it does not follow from E's falsity that perception is non-bipolar. It could be that perceptual experience is capable of being veridical and capable of being illusory, but its satisfaction-conditions do not coincide with the truth-conditions of its content.

§5 The content-sensitive conception

So far, there are two independent claims: first, conceptual content does not fully determine the conditions under which experience is veridical and second, perception is non-bipolar. An important question is what conception of the rational relations between perception and judgement follows from this combination of claims. A related question is what need there is, in that conception, for a notion of content.

Davidson summarises his conception of the rational relations between mental states like this: "Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (1986: 310). It does not automatically follow that experience cannot justify a judgement or a belief; it could be that some experiences at least involve beliefs about perceived facts. What Davidson

has in mind is the more general conception that rational relations are sensitive only to the propositional contents of mental states. Rational relations between mental states must correspond to logical relations between their contents.¹⁶ Let us call this the content-sensitive conception of rational relations.

Now it can be asked to what extent we have to depart from the content-sensitive conception to accommodate the non-bipolarity of experience. According to a certain view, no departure is actually needed. McDowell, for example, tries to combine the claim that perception is non-bipolar with the content-sensitive conception.¹⁷ For McDowell, perception is entirely in the space of concepts, and I take him to mean that its rational relations to judgement are sensitive to no more than the conceptual contents of the mental states involved. How could such relations convert a true judgement to knowledge, then? The answer is that when experience does not mislead us, i.e. when it is veridical, we are open to a perceptible fact. On McDowell's understanding of openness, the content of experience is the same as the perceived fact:

That things are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject is not misled, that very same thing, that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world (1994: 26).

So when experience is transparent, our judgements are rationally answerable to the world itself. A perceptual judgement is grounded on an experience, but if the experience is veridical, the perceived fact itself justifies the judgement:

The thinkable contents that are ultimate in the order of justification are contents of experiences, and in enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts, facts that obtain anyway and impress themselves on one's sensibility (1994: 29).

McDowell's position seems to be this. There is a radical difference of mode between perception and judgement: perception is (normally) openness to the world, whereas judgement is not. But this difference does not mean that we should abandon the content-sensitive conception of rational relations. Rational relations between perception and judgement are sensitive only to the contents of the mental states involved, even though in the case of perception, which is transparent, these contents are identical with the perceived facts. The special mode of perception is relevant to epistemology, but once it has done its work (i.e. once experience has made itself transparent), the content-sensitive conception allows perception to convert a true perceptual judgement to knowledge.

One source of difficulty with McDowell's position is the dual role played by the content of experience. Content is supposed to be both propositional, since it can be the same as that of a judgement (cf. 1994: 26), and part of the layout of reality. Now there is a general argument which casts doubt on the hypothesis that content, or for that matter anything else, can play such a dual role. Propositional content is defined by its truth-conditions, and is essentially bipolar (at least when it is the content of an experience). But content as part of the world is neither bipolar nor non-bipolar; the notion of bipolarity simply does not apply in this case. So content as propositional cannot be the same as content as part of the world.

This general argument suggests that the logical form of a perceptual judgement is different from the ontological form of the perceived fact. This is consistent with there being an isomorphism between the propositional content of the judgement and the perceived scene: the elements of the relevant proposition correspond one-to-one to those of the perceived

scene. (More precisely, every material concept in the content corresponds to a perceived element in the world.) Still, they combine differently in each case. There is a propositional articulation in the former case, but there is a different kind of articulation in the latter case. We can leave open here what kind of articulation is at stake in the case of the perceived scene: maybe there is an ontological bound between substances and properties, or maybe a particular substance is really a compresence of particular properties (cf. Campbell, 1981).

The general argument is surely speculative as it stands. For one thing, the notion of an ontological form must be explicated further.¹⁸ But although this argument is independent from the claim that content does not determine conditions of satisfaction, there is an interesting convergence between them.

Quasi-veridical illusions are possible because the content of experience is not fully de re, where the relevant res is not the perceived thing, but the whole perceived scene. Content is not dependent from that scene. As conceptual, it can be grasped even when there is no such scene. Now if content is not fully de re, how can the perceptual judgement be rationally answerable to the perceived fact if its rational relations to experience are only content-sensitive? How can the same thing constitute the perceptible scene and be (at least partly) independent from it?

McDowell writes that "one can think, for instance, that spring has begun, and that the very same thing, that spring has begun, can be the case" (1994: 27). Of course, when we say what is the case, and that what is the case is precisely what we think, we already conceptualise the relevant state of affairs – which may or may not be given in perception as well. It does not follow that the conceptual content of our thought is the same as what is the case.¹⁹

This is really Davidson's point in a different guise: perception cannot be openness to the world in virtue of its content only. The content of experience is already a description or a specification of what is the case. This does not mean that judgement is an indirect cognitive

access to the world while perception is a direct one. A judgement may be the most direct specification of a state of affairs, for instance if it is entirely based on perception.²⁰

Thus, it is understandable that Davidson concludes from the content-sensitive conception that perception cannot be a source of knowledge. For either perception is outside the space of reasons, or it is not. In the first case, it does not play any epistemic role, so a fortiori it cannot put the subject in a position to know the external world. (This is Davidson's own position). In the second case, it has an epistemic content, which is bipolar. However, an experience with a bipolar content is more like a belief than like an experience per se, and no empirical belief alone can be a source of knowledge (as we have learnt from the pitfalls of classical foundationalism). It does not matter, in this case, whether perception itself is non-bipolar, since the content-sensitive conception implies (pace McDowell) that the question of whether perception is bipolar or not is epistemologically irrelevant.

So if we are persuaded that perception can put the subject in a position to know the external world, we must depart more substantially than McDowell from the content-sensitive conception. Rational relations between experience and judgement must be sensitive to more than just the contents of the mental states involved.

My attack on E brings to view something that the general argument above does not: that there is an intuitive distinction between a veridical experience and an illusion which is not captured by the distinction between a true and a false bipolar content. If such a distinction did not exist, quasi-veridical illusions could not be recognised as what they are, i.e. illusions. When someone has a quasi-veridical illusion, the content of his experience is true but he is not acquainted or en rapport with all the relevant aspects of the perceived scene. These aspects are nonetheless represented by the content. This strongly suggests, at least to me, that the way perception is related to reality should not be understood on the model of a proposition being

true to the facts. The intentionality of perception is radically different from the intentionality of propositional attitudes.

Genuine perception has a nonconceptual feature which is essentially responsible for its veridicity and is missing in cases of quasi-veridical illusions. If perception is to be a source of knowledge, this distinction must be epistemologically relevant. A judgement based on an illusion, even if it is true, cannot amount to knowledge. So rational relations between experience and judgement must be sensitive to the veridicity of the experience, which is (at least partly) a nonconceptual matter.

To sum up, there is a tension between the claim that some perceptual experiences are sources of knowledge and the view that they belong to the "space of concepts". Perception can be a source of knowledge only if its rational relations to judgement are sensitive to more than propositional contents. In that sense, perception is not entirely in the space of concepts.

§6 A two-level epistemology

Pace Davidson and McDowell, the space of reasons extends beyond the space of concepts, and encompasses experience. Some may think that by rejecting the content-sensitive conception of rational relations, I have lapsed into a hopeless epistemological externalism. The issue between internalism and externalism in epistemology is formidably complex, and I cannot reasonably go into the details here. But perhaps I should at least sketch a possible strategy for answering the accusation of externalism.

In its standard form, externalism is the view that "some relationship to the external world accounting for the truth of our belief suffices to convert true belief to knowledge [...]." (Lehrer, 1990: 153). For instance, my belief that it is raining may count as knowledge because it is causally sustained by a reliable belief-forming process.

The standard form of externalism may be tempered by the (to my mind, convincing) internalist requirement that only objective relations between mental states should be mentioned as what converts a true belief to knowledge. The fact that a subject knows something about the external world must be fully determined by cognitive facts, including relational ones. When the subject knows that p, a precise and adequate description of his whole cognitive situation logically entails that he knows that p.²¹

Although the internalist requirement puts a substantial limitation to externalism, the resulting epistemology is still vulnerable to the main objection to that stance: the appropriate relationship between belief and the external world may obtain even if the subject has no idea that it does. That subject may have no recognition whether and how his judgement is justified. Externalism blurs the manifest epistemological contrast between perceptual knowledge and reliable hunches, which the subject can have without any conception of how or whether there are correct (cf. Lehrer, 1990 and Brewer, ms.).

This is a very powerful objection. It could be that perception bears the appropriate relation to judgement even if the subject has no idea of that relation. The mere fact that the terms of the relation are mental states does not seem to be of much help to deal with the objection.

One possible way out of this objection is to draw a distinction between having cognitive access to a fact and knowing that fact.²² When I perceive the rain outside, I have cognitive access to a part of the external world; I am in a position to know that it is raining. For me to actually know this fact, I must be able to give some kind of reflective explanation of the relations between my perceptual experience and the judgement that it is raining. In other words, there is the following requirement:

Understanding requirement. To attain full knowledge, the subject must have a minimal but coherent reflective understanding of how his judgements are justified, and in particular of the way in which he attains knowledge.

The reflective understanding may be quite straightforward, as when I justify my claim that I know that it is raining by saying that I perceive that it is raining. This simple explanation does not entail that my perceptual experience has an intrinsic content in virtue of which I am open to the external world. What I try to say spontaneously may be more theoretically formulated as follows. My perceptual experience, as openness to the world, is ontologically dependent on the rain outside. I have cognitive access to the rain. That is precisely why it is rational to base on it the judgement that it is raining. This objective relation between my experience and my judgement suffices to convert the latter to knowledge in the context of my reflective understanding.

Of course, much more has to be said about what counts as an appropriate reflective understanding.²³ My point is merely that by adopting a two-level epistemology, in which knowledge is based on cognitive access and coherent reflective understanding, it may be possible to give the beginning of an answer to the objection that experience cannot be in the space of reasons if it is outside the space of concepts. The fact that there is an objective relation between experience and judgement plus the subject's conception of that fact are jointly sufficient to convert the judgement to knowledge.

§7 Conclusion

An important notion of perceptual content, as determining the experience's conditions of satisfaction, has been criticised. The way perception intentionally relates the subject to the

world cannot be fully explained in terms of a bipolar content, and no non-bipolar content can capture the specificity of the perceived scene.

Of course, there may be other notions of content, which experiences possess in some sense but which do not determine their conditions of satisfaction. My objection to the content-sensitive conception leaves open an intermediary position according to which content plays some epistemic role along with other aspects of the experience. However, such a position is unstable. Once we concede to the externalist that the rational relations between perception and judgement are sensitive to more than the content of the experience, the epistemic role of such a content is not obvious. On an externalist understanding of knowledge-conferring relations, what is crucial is not content itself, but the objective fact that perception depends ontologically on the perceived scene.²⁴

As promised, I shall end this paper with a few remarks on nonconceptual content. It seems to me, although I cannot prove it here, that the foregoing considerations bear equally against nonconceptual content if it is supposed to determine the conditions under which experience is veridical. There is no plausible notion of content – conceptual or not – which fully explains these conditions. This is epistemologically disastrous if the content-sensitive conception is extended to cover rational linkages between conceptual and nonconceptual contents.²⁵

As before, one may reject the extended conception but insist that nonconceptual content plays a limited epistemic role. But once again, it is unclear what epistemological need there is for such a content. Perhaps a reference to the modal aspects of the experience suffices to explain why it is rational to move, in some contexts, from perception to judgement.

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¹ For my purposes here I can take vision as the paradigm of perception.

² Cf. Martin (1994: 464): "Perceptual experiences are [...] counted as illusory or veridical depending on whether the content is correct and the world is as represented". What Martin has in mind is, presumably, something like E.

³ Cf. Crane (1990) and Peacocke (1992: 63).

⁴ Cf. Dummett (1991: 279-80).

⁵ Cf. McDowell (1994: ch. 3), Peacocke (1992: 83-4) and Sedivy (1996: note 10).

⁶ Actually, what matters for the purpose of this section is that the content of experience admits of correctness or incorrectness, whether or not it is strictly speaking true or false. Quasi-veridical illusions, in the sense introduced below, trade on the fact that such a content is capable of being correct and capable of being incorrect. Now it is arguable that the concept expressed by "that F", where "F" is a sortal predicate, cannot be incorrect, because it cannot even be grasped if the perceived object is not really F (cf. Evans, 1982: 196-7). However, the concept expressed by "That rose which is that red" can be grasped even if the relevant rose is white, so there is a sense in which it can be incorrect. This point is consistent with Davies's (1982) semantic view that the thought expressed by "That F is G" is neither true nor false if the demonstrated (perceived) object is not really F – whether or not "F" is a sortal predicate. (Another good discussion of this view is Corazza, 1995: 53-56.) If Davies is right, the truth-conditions of "That F is G" presuppose the correctness of "that F". It does not follow that any concept of the form "that F" cannot be grasped if the perceived object is not really F.

⁷ Cf. Evans (1982) and McDowell (1984). It does not follow from that theory that the subject knows infallibly that he has really grasped the relevant concepts.

⁸ Maybe some past experiences of the property must have been veridical, but that is a different point.

⁹ There may be cases in which an experience is quasi-veridical even with respect to a particular. Suppose that I have the experience as of being in front of Lionel Jospin. My experience may be quasi-veridical – I am in front of Lionel Jospin, but there is a deviant causal chain between him and my experience which does not allow for genuine recognition of Lionel Jospin. An alternative view would be that recognitional concepts enter the contents of experience only when the perceived objects are genuinely recognised.

¹⁰ Searle's actual view (1983; 1991: 230) is that the content of experience does not fully determine its conditions of satisfaction. We must also take into account what he calls the "holistic Network of Intentionality" and the "nonintentional Background". These aspects of Searle's proposal are not substantially relevant to my discussion here.

¹¹ Cf. (1983: 40) for the claim that the self-referential content is internal to the experience.

¹² Cf. Wittgenstein ([1913]: 196): "Every proposition is essentially true-false. [...] Thus a proposition has two poles, corresponding to the case of its truth and the case of its falsehood." For the sake of simplicity, I shall suppose that every entity which is called here "bipolar" has at least and at most two poles.

¹³ Similarly, a non-bipolar illusory experience is essentially illusory. I leave open here the adequate account of illusions. The view of this paper is even consistent with the (implausible) claim that they are dependent on the being of Meinongian objects.

¹⁴ Given the view eventually defended in this paper, a better formulation would be that veridical experience cannot lie since it cannot speak. The metaphor of experience speaking and lying is linked with the view that it has a content. Of course, one might try to define a non-bipolar veridical experience as a conjunction of two independent aspects: a bipolar experience and the obtaining of an appropriate causal relation. I have two brief remarks about this move. First, it is not clear that such a non-bipolar experience can be said to be essentially veridical in a genuinely ontological sense; after all, it is simply stipulated that the obtaining of an appropriate causal relation is essential to the whole conjunction. Second, it may be that once the notion of an appropriate causal relation is properly explicated, there is no need to postulate a bipolar experience as a separate term of this relation. For a criticism of similar moves in the philosophy of mind, cf. Williamson (1998).

¹⁵ Perhaps it is a derivative use of the term "conditions of satisfaction", though.

¹⁶ Examples of logical relations between propositions are implication, probabilification, and of course identity (for instance, when the content of perception is the same as the content of the perceptual judgement).

¹⁷ Cf. also Child (1994: 143-53) who, like McDowell, both defends the so-called "disjunctive conception of experience" (see the references in Child's book), which entails the non-bipolarity of perception, and claims that experience has a conceptual content.

¹⁸ On the distinction between logical and ontological form, cf. Mulligan, Simons and Smith (1984).

¹⁹ Note that in the case of propositional attitudes, the phrase "what we think" is ambiguous between truth-maker and truth-conditions. So what we think in the sense of truth-maker is identical with an external state of affairs. But of course, one does not save the content-sensitive conception by trading on this ambiguity.

²⁰ I do not think that this point is weakened by McDowell's (1994: 10) insistence that the conceptual capacities constitutive of the content of experience are not literally exercised, but rather "drawn into operation". Whether exercised or drawn into operation, that content remains propositional and bipolar.

²¹ Cf. McDowell (1982).

²² Cf. Lehrer (1990: 162), who makes a similar distinction between the possession of information and the attainment of knowledge.

²³ Compare Sosa (1997)'s account of reflective knowledge as opposed to mere animal knowledge.

²⁴ The rejection of perceptual content is compatible with the view that conscious perception depends on systematic relations with proper conceptual capacities; cf. Evans (1982: 158). The requirement that perception, although itself nonconceptual, must be linked to concepts is not the same as the understanding requirement on

knowledge proposed earlier. The former requirement is that cognitive access, and not attainment of knowledge, is possible only in the context of at least some conceptual capacities.

²⁵ For such an extension of the content-sensitive conception, cf. Peacocke (1992: 80).