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Perception, force, and content

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Abstract

Perceptual experiences have presentational phenomenology: we seem to encounter real situations in the course of visual experiences, for instance. The current paper articulates and defends the claim that the contents of at least some perceptual experiences are inherently presentational. On this view, perceptual contents are not always forceless in the way that, say, the propositional content that $2 + 2 = 4$ is generally taken to be, as a content that may be asserted or denied or merely supposed; rather, there are perceptual contents such that any mental state or episode which has the relevant content must be one in which things seem to the given subject to be a certain way. Intuitive motivation for the view is presented and an explanatory line of argument in support of it is developed: it is argued that the recognition of inherently presentational perceptual contents allows us to explain certain representational limitations to which ordinary visualizations and other forms of perceptual mental imagery are subject. Some potential objections to the position are explored, leading to further elaboration of it.

1 | A THESIS CONCERNING PERCEPTUAL CONTENT

Things look to us to be certain ways when we see things, just as things sound to us to be certain ways when we hear things.¹ Visual experiences—including illusions and hallucinations—are thus *perceptual*, as are auditory experiences. More generally, perceptual experiences are episodes in which things seem to their subjects to be certain ways, where the episodes have the broad, introspectively familiar, but philosophically quite elusive type of “sensory” subjective character that we take to be shared by our visual, auditory, tactile, somatosensory, ... experiences.² The *content* of a given perceptual experience is the total way that things thereby seem to be to the experience’s subject.³

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Perceptual experiences are not neutral with regard to their contents. My current visual experience has a content: things look to me to be a certain way. But things do look to me to *be* that way. One way of getting to that point cites “feelings of presence.” Matthen describes looking down at his hands while typing, for instance, saying that his visual state “makes it seem as if the keyboard is really there,” so that the keyboard has a “feeling of presence” in his visual experience.⁴ He contrasts the feeling of presence involved in his visual experience with the experience of merely visualizing a keyboard, as in the latter case a keyboard does not seem actually to be present. Other writers speak of the “presentational” nature of perceptual experiences.⁵

The distinction between “content” and “force” is also commonly invoked in the current context. Consider someone’s assertion that $2 + 2 = 4$. The content of the assertion is what is thereby presented as obtaining; namely, the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$. But that content could instead be presented as not obtaining, in a denial, or it could simply be entertained for the sake of argument, in a supposition. We can therefore tidily distinguish between the assertion’s content and the assertoric “force”—*the presentation of the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ as true*—that the speech act involves.⁶

Contents are “presented as obtaining” in perceptual episodes—things seem to us to be certain ways, anyway—just as they are presented as obtaining in assertions. Hence, it makes some sense to capture the distinctive non-neutrality of perceptual experiences by comparing them to assertions. Thus Heck speaks of the “assertoric force” of perceptual experiences, while Matthen writes that “[v]isual states produced by *looking* [rather than, say, by merely visualising] have an implied assertion operator.”⁷

The proposed analogy with assertion might lead one to a presumption that the contents of perceptual experiences can be cleanly separated from their assertoric force. Isn’t *the way that things look to you to be* right now—like *that!*—separable from *the presentation of things as being that way*, just as what you state to be the case in asserting that $2 + 2 = 4$ is separable from your presentation thereby of that proposition as true? A well-known philosophical view concerning the relationships between perceptual content and perceptual phenomenology nonetheless provides a resoundingly negative answer to that question.

“Pure intentionalists” about perceptual experience claim that the phenomenological characteristics of a given perceptual experience are determined by its content: any mental episode or state with the same content must have the same phenomenological features.⁸ Make the plausible assumption that the fact that things seem to be a certain overall way to the subject of a given perceptual experience—the fact that the experience “presents its content as obtaining”—forms an integral part of the experience’s phenomenology.⁹

Now consider a perceptual experience with a certain content, one to whose subject things seem to be a certain overall way: a visual experience in which things, say, look to be *thus*. Pure intentionalism implies that the experience’s standing as an episode in which things look to be *thus*—the way in which it positively decides in favor of the verdict that things are *thus*—flows from the fact that the experience has the particular content that it has. Pure intentionalism implies, that is, that the experience’s content is somehow *inherently presentational*: any mental episode or state with that same content must thereby be an episode or state to whose subject things seem to be *thus*.

This is an interesting thesis in its own right and it can be dissociated from the modal claims that are characteristic of pure intentionalism. For there is no evident reason why anyone who holds merely that, for any given perceptual experience, the identity of the experience’s content ensures that it possesses one particular phenomenological feature—namely, its presentational nature—must generalize that position to all of the other phenomenological features of perceptual experiences. Indeed, someone might wish to hold that *some* perceptual contents are inherently presentational without wanting to generalize the view to all of them. Either of those positions would still be interesting: each of them implies, for instance, that perceptual contents may be quite different to the content of my belief that Sheffield is hilly, as that belief’s content is not inherently assertoric.

More generally, it is standardly assumed that conceptual contents may serve as the contents of mental states with varying sorts of force. This is perhaps owed to a tendency to see the standing of a content as conceptual as linked to its ability to figure within appropriate passages of reasoning. The conceptual content that Sheffield is hilly may figure within a process of reasoning yielding a mental state that presents the proposition as obtaining, for instance; a powerful argument that might lead someone to be struck by that proposition’s truth. But the same

content can also occur inferentially in other ways: one might assume merely hypothetically that Sheffield is hilly, in assessing what that proposition entails.

If the contents of some perceptual experiences are inherently presentational, then, it is natural to characterize the relevant perceptual contents as non-conceptual, because they would lack the degree of ratiocinative mobility that we associate with conceptual contents. The resulting motive for distinguishing suitable perceptual contents from conceptual ones is different from the reasons generally supplied for treating some perceptual contents as non-conceptual, however, and it puts a distinctive gloss on the idea that some non-conceptual contents are wholly different in kind to conceptual ones.¹⁰

The distinctive mode of non-conceptualness that would be exhibited by inherently presentational perceptual contents fits nicely with some interesting claims that McDowell makes for his own conceptual treatment of perceptual contents. McDowell holds that perceptual experiences make available to us demonstrative concepts for, say, shades of color, where those concepts “from the standpoint of a dualism of concept and intuition ... would seem hybrids,” as “[t]here is an admixture of intuition in their very constitution.”¹¹ But any inherently presentational contents will indeed incorporate more than a pinch of Kantian intuition, by strong-arming any episode or state having that content into thereby presenting it as true. (The specific treatment of inherently presentational content provided in the next section in fact provides a particularly direct way of capturing McDowell's thought, as it builds presentational aspects of perceptual phenomenology into the very contents of perceptual experiences.)

But McDowell seems to regard his demonstrative concepts as merely being *individuated* by their links to prompting perceptual experiences¹²; and he apparently allows that they may feature in subsequent mental episodes or states which do not feature any characteristic seemings. (He writes, for instance, that “[t]his kind of memory-based capacity to embrace a shade in thought [as resulting from the deployment of a demonstrative visual concept for a shade of colour that has been made available by a prior visual experience] can also be exercised in thinking that is not geared to present experience”; there is no suggestion that the relevant thoughts must yet be episodes in which things seem to be a certain way to the thinker.¹³) McDowell's demonstrative perceptual conceptual contents therefore seem to be much more loosely bound to the “intuitive” presentational aspects of perceptual experiences than any inherently presentational perceptual contents would be.

The view that perceptual contents can be inherently presentational is thus interesting: it puts perceptual contents at some distance from standard examples of propositional content as expressed linguistically, it potentially lends itself to a distinctive perspective upon the idea that perceptual contents are non-conceptual, and it captures nicely certain aspects of the special features that people have been tempted to ascribe to perceptual contents. But examination of the position is largely absent from the literature, even though a resolution of the question of whether or not it is correct would help us to understand better the broad nature of perceptual contents and their relationships to contents of other sorts.¹⁴ Are there considerations that weigh for or against the view?

2 | REFINING THE THESIS

The propositional contents of many speech acts and mental states seem to be cleanly distinguishable from any forces with which those contents are associated within the relevant acts and states. But it is not immediately evident that what obtains here for “what someone believes” and the like also obtains for “what seems perceptually to someone to be the case.” It is easy enough to equate what one believes, in believing that all humans are mortal, with what someone else denies, in denying that all humans are mortal. Yet, while it does not seem hard to conceive of things looking to be like *this* to someone else, it seems to be more challenging to dissociate precisely what it is for things to be like *this* from the presentational phenomenology involved in one's visual experience.

For the status of that presentational phenomenology, relative to the way that things look to one to be, does not seem to mirror the status of the spoken words figuring in an assertion, relative to what has thereby been asserted.¹⁵ In the latter case, the sounds provide just one among various means—speech, writing, sign language, ...—for

articulating the given content. But, in the former instance, one's grip on the precise nature of the way that things look to one to be seems more closely wedded to the experience's presentational nature.

Consider, for example, the way that some single item now looks to you to be. What precise array of features does the item look to you to have? You might answer that question using indexicals, along with an indication of suitable aspects of your current visual experience: the item looks to be exactly like *that*. But is it not a philosopher's fantasy to suppose that the aspects of your current experience which you have thereby singled out can be factored into, first, an identification of a constellation of properties that is neutral on whether anything actually has them and, second, a supplementary characterization of those neutrally-identified features as in fact instantiated? At the very least, that supposition surely is not evidently correct.

Suppose, though, that the previous assumption is indeed wrong. Assume, that is, that there can be a visual experience which meets the following conditions:

1. Things look to be a certain way *W* to the experience's subject;
2. Any mental episode or state with content *W* must be one to whose subject things seem to be way *W*.

Given that there are many contents to which (2) *does not* apply—consider again the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ —it is natural to wonder how the property recorded in (2) could apply to some contents but not to others. What is meant to be distinctive about those “inherently presentational” contents that are subject to (2)?

Their distinctiveness presumably does not derive from the mere natures of those states of affairs that the relevant contents represent: it is hard to see how there could be some potential arrangement of objects, properties, relations, and so forth in the world that just cannot be represented without thereby also being presented as obtaining. Rather, the view that perceptual contents may be inherently presentational should appeal to something like Frege's modes of presentation. The inherent presentationality of a given perceptual content might then be treated as resulting from the distinctive way in which certain putative facts are represented, rather than from the ontological nature of the putative facts themselves.

As a point of comparison, consider that the authors Barbara Cartland and Marcus Belfrey were one and the same person; yet someone might believe that Barbara Cartland was an author without believing that Marcus Belfrey was an author. Frege suggested that the preceding observation is explicable once we allow that what someone believes is partly determined by how relevant aspects of what the belief is about are being singled out. We may then claim that the truth-values of “Effi believes that Barbara Cartland was an author” and “Effi believes that Marcus Belfrey was an author” are independent. For what Effi must believe for the first to be true is different from what Effi must believe for the second to hold, given that beliefs “about Barbara Cartland” and ones “about Marcus Belfrey” identify Cartland in different ways.

The force of that explanation depends upon the coherence of the following view: the identity of a belief's content depends partly upon how suitable items are identified within the relevant belief. The explanation's force depends, that is, upon a constitutive thesis concerning the contents of beliefs.

Reconsider the idea that your current visual experience's content is inherently presentational, in that there is no holding apart, first, the nature of the way that things look to you to be and, second, the manner in which things seem to you in fact to be that way. This may also be construed as a constitutive thesis, but one concerning constitutive links between *the way that things look to you to be* and *the manner in which the apparently visible situation is being given to you as actually present*. More fully, it may be claimed that the identity of your visual experience's content is partly determined by the manner in which aspects of the visually apparent scene are being given to you as actually present within the visual experience itself.

There is, of course, an obvious difference between the more familiar Fregean view, relating to beliefs and the rest, and the foregoing constitutive gloss on the inherent presentationality thesis concerning perceptual contents. For the Fregean claim relates to how suitable items are *singled out* within beliefs and the like, whereas the latter position relates to how suitable items are *given as actually present* within perceptual experiences. Is this contrast somehow enough to make the second position more problematic than the Fregean one?

It is hard to see that it is. The notion of a way in which, say, a visual experience gives something to us as actually present makes straightforward phenomenological sense; there is nothing in the idea that somehow makes it more

immediately suspect than the notion of a manner in which something is singled out within a belief. If one is happy enough with the coherence of the view that exactly what someone believes is partly determined by suitable modes of identification, it is accordingly difficult to see why one would regard as incoherent the claim that exactly what someone seems to perceive may be partly determined by modes-of-givenness-as-actually-present.

The Fregean approach to the contents of beliefs and the like is controversial, of course, but it is not a busted flush: the need for the above treatment of inherently presentational perceptual contents to appeal to an analogue of those Fregean ideas therefore does not count decisively against it. Coherence is one thing, though, and truth is another. Are there any reasonable arguments for the view that perceptual contents may be inherently presentational? To focus the discussion, the examination of that question in the next couple of sections will largely attend to the visual case.

Before proceeding, though, it is worth returning briefly to the relationships between pure intentionalism and the idea of inherently presentational content. It was noted above that pure intentionalism—where this is taken to be the modal claim that all of the phenomenological features of a given perceptual experience supervene upon its content—implies that perceptual experiences have inherently presentational contents, given that the presentational aspects of perceptual experiences count as part of perceptual phenomenology. By contrast, it was remarked that an acceptance of inherently presentational contents—which relates merely to the presentational aspects of perceptual phenomenology, rather than to the latter in its entirety—does not immediately commit one to pure intentionalism.

The specific development of inherent presentationality just provided looks in fact to be *incompatible* with the spirit of pure intentionalism, even if it is consistent with a standard modal articulation of that view in terms of supervenience. For, in taking the precise contents of some perceptual experiences to be constitutively parasitic upon aspects of their phenomenology, the present approach clashes with the motivating pure intentionalist thought that the nature of perceptual phenomenology is always itself grounded on the nature of perceptual content.¹⁶ Pure intentionalists will therefore need to find another way of accounting for the nature of the inherently presentational contents that their position requires perceptual experiences to possess.¹⁷

3 | ASSERTION, PERCEPTION, AND VISUALIZATION

Matthen's approach to "the *meaning* of the feeling of presence" treats perceptual experience as a type of "*content-directed*" attitude: it treats perceptual experiences as involving a subject's bearing a certain attitude toward a certain content.¹⁸ Matthen notes that some attitudes are "actuality-committing," in that they present their contents as true: belief is identified as actuality-committing, for instance. He observes that a belief and, say, a hope may have the same content, even though the belief alone is actuality-committing. In such cases, the attitude's actuality-commitment evidently cannot be determined by the shared content of the hope and the belief.

Matthen accepts that visual experiences have assertoric force; he says that "visual states purport to describe what is really there, and they are false or inaccurate if the description they offer is not actually the case." But he notes that "[e]qually, it is obvious that *visual imaging* is not committing: visual imaging does not purport actuality." Hence, he concludes, "this [i.e. the assertoric component present in visual experiences] is a difference of force pertaining to attitude."¹⁹

More fully, consider a visual experience with a certain content: suppose that the experience is one for whose subject things look to be *thus*. Suppose that it is possible for there to be an episode of *mere* visual mental imagery—that is, an episode of visual mental imagery in which things do not seem to the subject to be the way that the imagery represents things as being—in which a subject visualizes things as being *thus*. Then the content of our chosen visual experience can be prised apart from the assertoric component with which it happens to be combined within that experience. Hence the relevant content is not inherently presentational. Generalizing, we get that no visual contents are inherently presentational.

The potential Achilles heel in that line of reasoning is obvious: viz. the final extrapolatory step needs the assumption that, for *any* visual experience, there can be an episode of mere visual mental imagery that has the very same content as that visual experience. Should this assumption be accepted?²⁰

It seems clear that the contents of mere visual mental images can have elements in common with the contents of visual experiences. Visualize a table. There could surely be a visual experience in which things looked to you the way that your mere mental visual image shows things as looking; and, if you were to have a visual experience in which things looked that way to you, you would seem to see a table of the kind that is shown in your mental visual image. The content of your mental visual image thus overlaps with the content of a potential visual experience.²¹ Those points suggest that *some* aspects of visual contents—those elements that may be captured within mere mental visual images—are *not* inherently presentational. They hardly prove, however, that *no* aspects of visual contents are inherently presentational.

The contents of mere mental visual images generally differ from the contents of visual experiences proper in striking ways; they are, for instance, typically much less rich and fine-grained. If such differences are all merely contingent, none of the contents of visual experiences are inherently presentational. If some of them are non-contingent, though, the view that some visual contents are inherently presentational still has a chance. For it may be that some of the relevant non-contingent differences are associated with inherently presentational aspects of visual contents. Are all of the differences contingent, then, or are some of them necessary? The next section proposes some considerations in support of the “necessary” option.

4 | AN ARGUMENT FOR THE THESIS

Consider the way that things currently look to you to be. Imagine that, at some point over the next few days, you were to try to recall the nature of the scene that now looks to be before you, by producing a suitable visual mental image. The experience of entertaining the resulting visual mental image would probably be, in phenomenological terms, quite different from the real visual experience upon which it was modeled. Many people have found it natural to gesture at those differences by describing the genuine visual experience as being more “vivid” than the resulting visualization.²²

Suppose that your memorial visual mental image would indeed be less vivid than the earlier visual experience. Now consider the nature of the scene that the image would represent. Would the total way that the image shows things as being exactly the same as the total way that things looked to you to be in your recent visual experience? Or would there be aspects of the earlier experience's content that would not be reflected within the content of the memorial image, on account of the latter's lesser degree of vividness?

My own inclination is to answer the first of those questions negatively and the second one affirmatively. A consideration of the phenomenological differences between mere visual images and visual experiences that are most naturally marked by saying that the latter are more “vivid” than the former leads to variations that do seem to bear upon the representational powers of the visual images in relation to the ways that things once looked to me to be.

Consider, for instance, the relatively unvivid phenomenology of color within much memorial visual mental imagery, or the relatively unvivid phenomenology of timbre within much memorial auditory mental imagery. It seems wrong to claim that, in memories featuring images of those sorts, the ways that the images show things as being are exact matches for the ways that things looked and sounded to us to be in the course of the relevant earlier visual and auditory experiences. The decreased vividness is instead accompanied by correlative limitations in the ways that things are characterized as being relative to the earlier perceptual episodes.

What might explain a more general link between, first, the relative lack of vividness generally manifested by visual mental images and, second, their representational limitations in relation to typical visual experiences?²³ The appropriate notion of vividness is doubtless somewhat messy. But it is tempting to hold that one important component of the observation that real visual experiences are usually more vivid than visual mental images is the fact that the former feature presentational phenomenology, whereas the latter standardly do not: to use the terminology introduced in the previous section, visual mental images are generally “mere” visual mental images.²⁴ If the contents of genuine visual experiences generally incorporate inherently presentational elements, though, one would then

expect the relative lack of vividness of normal visual mental imagery typically to result in a representational shortfall in relation to real visual experiences.

For consider a visual experience to whose subject things look to be *thus*. Suppose that the experience's content is inherently presentational; suppose, that is, that any mental episode involving that same content must be one to whose subject things seem to be *thus*. Now consider some visual mental imagery that is relatively unvivid, in that it does not incorporate any perceptual appearances. Then the relevant visual mental imagery cannot show things as being *thus*, for the visualization would then have an inherently presentational content, requiring the visualization to be an episode in which things seem to its subject to be *thus* after all.

More generally, suppose that visual experiences generally have inherently presentational contents. The absence of presentational phenomenology in relatively unvivid episodes of visual mental imagery will then entail the inability of the latter to reflect completely the contents of typical visual experiences. For the contents of the episodes of visual imagery will be unable to incorporate any of the inherently presentational materials that typical visual experiences include. The hypothesis that visual contents are standardly inherently presentational thus provides a nice explanation of why the relative lack of vividness generally associated with visual mental images tends to mean that their contents do not comprehensively mirror the contents that belong to typical real visual experiences.

5 | FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Earlier parts of this paper have put some flesh on the bones of the thought that perceptual contents cannot always be cleanly separated from the distinctive ways in which those contents are presented to us as obtaining within perceptual experiences. The previous section also proposed a line of argument in support of that view. The current section further elaborates the position, in response to some considerations that might be taken to bear against it.

1. Perceptual experiences provide us with plenty of putative information about the world while we undergo them; but their usefulness often outlasts their occurrence. Our memories preserve perceptual information, for instance, which is then channeled into further mental processes. Many of these mental processes are not perceptual: I can engage in reasoning about what things were like yesterday, by calling upon my recollections of the ways that things seemed perceptually to me to be, even though things no longer seem perceptually to me to be those same ways.

Suppose that the way that things now look to me to be—like *that*—is inherently presentational. Assume that someone is in a mental state which represents things as being that way. The arguments in Section 4 require that the person must be someone to whom things in fact seem to be like *that*. Yet it might be thought that reflection on, say, the workings of memory shows all that to be unacceptable.

I seem to recall that, at a specific time *t* yesterday, things looked to me to be a certain way. But things do not currently seem to me to be that way. The content involved in my apparent memory therefore is not inherently presentational; and this is entirely typical. But suppose that the content of my earlier visual experience—the overall way that things then looked to me to be—was inherently presentational. Then it appears to follow that the way that I now recall things as having looked at *t* (which is not inherently presentational) cannot be the way that things actually looked to me to be at *t* (which is inherently presentational, by assumption). So my apparent memory is inaccurate! More generally, if perceptual experiences with inherently presentational contents are at all common, will not we have to accept that our memories are wildly unreliable?

That line of reasoning is a bit quick. A few moments ago, things looked to me to be a certain overall way; when I now try to recapture just what things were then like, I produce a mere visual mental image that captures some but not all of that total content. But my powers of visual memory are not therefore playing me false; they are accurate as far as they go. For the way that my visual mental image shows things as being captures *some* of the total way that things looked to me to be in the course of my earlier visual experience, even if it does not reflect *all* of it.

If visual contents may have both inherently presentational aspects and ones that are not inherently presentational, then, our memories will be able correctly to capture the former even if they cannot capture the latter. Our memories will thus be subject to certain limitations but they will not also be necessarily inaccurate; rather, they will just inevitably be somewhat sketchy. Still, it might now be objected, is not that last supposed limitation itself bizarre? Suppose that one seems visually to encounter an instance of some specific shade of green: label it “G.” Surely one can deny in the future that G is the color of a given patch of grass, even though one is not then seeming to see anything that is G. But how is that going to be possible, if this aspect of the very way that things looked to one to be—namely, G—is inherently presentational?

The broadly Fregean ideas mobilized in Section 2 are needed here. Imagine that some item *a* looks to you to be the constant shade of green G, during a sequence of visual experiences in which changes in the ambient lighting mean that there are shifts in the way that *a*'s instantiation of G is being made visually apparent to you. Suppose that the visual contents of those chromatic experiences are inherently presentational. More fully, suppose that the ways that *a* is presented to you as being within the experiences cannot be excised from those aspects of the presentational phenomenology through which *a*'s actual constant color seems to you to be being made manifest.

The particular shade G whose instantiation by *a* seems to you to be being revealed throughout that series of evolving experiences is not therefore in itself inherently presentational, any more than Euler's number *e* is intrinsically thrilling just because it can be identified in various exciting ways. There is consequently nothing to stop us from, say, exploiting the causal factors that generated the envisaged visual experiences, by introducing a linguistic expression to refer to G. This will divorce our ability to refer to G from the visual experiences in which we first encountered that shade. We can then use the introduced linguistic device to pick out this aspect of the world on later occasions, and in particular within thoroughly non-perceptual mental processes.

An acceptance of inherently presentational perceptual contents thus will not imprison perceptual information within occurrent perceptual experiences. For one thing, we have just seen that those aspects of the world that are given to us perceptually in inherently presentational ways may nonetheless be identified in ways that are not inherently presentational, which allows them to feed into non-perceptual mental processes. In addition, for another, if we accept that some aspects of perceptual contents are not inherently presentational, we can allow those same elements may explicitly recur within non-perceptual mental processes. That second point raises an important question, though: which aspects of perceptual contents are meant to be inherently presentational?

2. The claim that some perceptual contents are inherently presentational is quite naturally motivated using intuitive reflections on apparent perceptual encounters with real scenes. But if, say, specific instantiations of shades of color are sometimes visually given to us in inherently presentational ways, will not something similar also hold for the instantiations of the specific shapes that things look to us to have? And also for the specific textures which their surfaces look to possess? Where is all this going to stop? Won't any putative distinction between the inherently presentational aspects of perceptual contents and the presentationally inert ones be wholly arbitrary? It is surely hard securely to base applications of the distinction on introspective assessments of the phenomenology of particular perceptual experiences.

The idea that some but not all aspects of perceptual contents are inherently presentational has appeared before now and that view should not easily be given up. Recall the earlier point that it will be impossible for any inherently presentational aspects of visual contents to be reflected within mere visual mental images. But suppose that *all* aspects of the contents of visual experiences are inherently presentational. That supposition combines with the earlier conclusion to imply that it is impossible for any aspects of the contents of genuine visual experiences to be reflected within mere visual mental images. Yet that consequence is bizarre. If ordinary visual mental images cannot capture any aspects of the ways that things look to us to be within visual experiences, in what sense is ordinary visual mental imagery really visual?²⁵

The question exactly which aspects of the contents of visual experiences are inherently presentational is a good one; and it is indeed one that is likely to be tough to answer. But the fact that it will be difficult to address does not suggest that the inherent presentationality thesis is somehow wrong-headed: philosophical views are not

undermined by their participation in tricky questions. In addition, there are anyway tools that promise to help us to assess individual cases. We have seen that it will not be possible to capture inherently presentational aspects of visual content within mere visual mental images. Yet this implication itself provides us with a potential way of identifying aspects of visual content that are not inherently presentational. For if some mere visual mental image can show things as being a certain way, the relevant way for things to be cannot be inherently presentational.

That test for inherent presentationality is hardly going to settle all of the hard questions about just when the notion is to be applied. It is, for one thing, a test whose use may require relatively subtle introspective assessments of just what is displayed by mere perceptual mental images. In addition, it cannot, in exploiting a merely sufficient condition for not being inherently presentational, be used positively to identify inherently presentational aspects of visual contents. But it at least gives the lie to any suggestion that there is no way of sensibly grounding applications of the distinction between the inherently presentational and the presentationally inert.

6 | CONCLUSION

Section 1 started by outlining a common idea that people have expressed in various ways: the thought that perceptual experiences have an element of assertoric force, in that they present things to us as being the case. A relatively neglected approach to perceptual presentation was identified, a view claiming that the contents of perceptual experiences are sometimes inherently presentational, as it is not always possible to tease apart, first, the ways that things are perceptually presented to us as being within perceptual experiences and, second, the perceptual presentation as actual of those ways for things to be. Some intuitive motivation for the position was provided; and it was suggested that the thesis that presentational aspects of perceptual phenomenology are sometimes baked into perceptual contents is, at the very least, no more obviously false than the opposing claim that perceptual contents are always inherently forceless.

Section 2 connected the notion of inherently presentational perceptual content to wider Fregean ideas, by articulating it as a constitutive thesis, one according to which ways that things seem to a subject to be in the course of a perceptual episode may partly be constituted by the manner in which aspects of the perceptually apparent scene are thereby being given to the subject as actually present. Section 3 then considered an argument owed to Matthen; the argument's conclusion directly contradicts the claim that some visual contents are inherently presentational. Section 4 used a gap in Matthen's reasoning as the starting point for an argument in support of the contention that some visual contents are in fact inherently presentational. More precisely, it was suggested that the assumption that typical visual experiences have inherently presentational contents provides a nice explanation of why the relatively unvivid nature of standard visual mental imagery apparently places it under certain representational constraints. Section 5 explored additional aspects of the view, in response to some potential objections.

Let us return briefly to the constitutive account of inherently presentational content outlined in Section 2, and to the earlier suggestion that the relevant approach clashes with the spirit of pure intentionalism about perceptual experience, by grounding the nature of at least some perceptual content upon perceptual phenomenology rather than the other way around. How does that constitutive account then relate to other views within the philosophy of perception that clash with pure intentionalism? How does it relate to the opposing "naïve realist" view of perceptual experience, for instance, on which "veridical perceptual experiences have a phenomenal character that consists of relations to mind-independent objects and features"?²⁶

Naïve realists "need not deny that, in some sense, experiences have content,"²⁷ although they oppose the claim that the nature of perceptual phenomenology is grounded in facts about perceptual content. They claim, instead, that a perceptual episode's phenomenological character is to be explained in terms of the episode's indiscernibility from an actual or possible experience whose subject really is perceptually related to a suitable portion of the world. In particular, then, naïve realists hold that the presentational nature of a given perceptual experience is explicable in that last fashion.

Now, that account of the presentational nature of perceptual experiences does not seem in itself to be *inconsistent* with the earlier constitutive account of inherently presentational content. For it does not appear to imply that

the very nature of the overall way that things seem to be, to the subject of a given perceptual experience, can always cleanly be pulled apart from the presentational phenomenology that the experience involves. Nor, though, does an acceptance of the possibility of inherently presentational contents—even as articulated in the constitutive manner offered in Section 2—appear to imply the *correctness* of naïve realism. All of the current ideas about inherently presentational contents thus seem to be neutral on whether or not naïve realism is correct, even though some of them join with naïve realists in opposing the bold explanatory claims for perceptual content that are associated with pure intentionalism.

Looking beyond perception, the everyday notion of “experience” is a capacious one, extending beyond perceptual experiences to encompass, say, emotional, intellectual, and moral episodes. It is tempting to see some other forms of experience as having significant features in common with the perceptual case. For some of them seem also to involve forms of “appearance” that have similarities to ways that things seem to us to be in the course of perceptual experiences. I can use perceptual mental imagery to recall some of the things that happened to me yesterday, for instance; and, in the course of those episodes of imagistic recollection, it seems to me that things once were the ways that the resulting images explicitly show them as being.

The case of imagistic memory is striking, though, as a memorial analogue of the view that perceptual contents are inherently presentational is implausible. The ways that things seem to me once to have been, in the course of my imagistic recollections of yesterday’s events, are the ways that things are shown as being by certain perceptual mental images. But those ways for things to be are not wedded to any “assertoric force”: someone could produce imagi-native perceptual mental imagery that shows things as being those very same ways, without its thereby seeming to the relevant person that things really once were as the images show them as being.

Yet the notion of inherently presentational content may fit better with conceptions of some other forms of non-perceptual experience. Inherently presentational contents would be ones that could not be faithfully and exhaustively captured within episodes in which things do not thereby seem to their subjects to be those very ways. Forms of experience having inherently presentational contents would accordingly provide their subjects with ways of framing apparent facts that could not be reconstructed outside of suitable experiential episodes themselves.

The idea of inherently presentational content might thus be taken to illuminate part of the rather obscure but quite common thought that some forms of experience—*aesthetic* and *mystical* ones, for instance, but also ordinary perceptual experiences—can seem to reveal “ineffable” truths to their subjects, by apparently manifesting facts that one can only fully grasp in the course of experiential episodes of those very types. More generally, it seems to be worth exploring further whether the ascription of inherently presentational contents to the members of a broad class of actual and merely possible forms of experience, as exemplified by ordinary perception, might shed light on what is distinctive about a range of cases whose members do seem to be interestingly different from all those mental states and episodes whose contents are presentationally inert.²⁸

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ These sensory seemings are not beliefs, I shall assume, nor are they inclinations to believe: perceptual illusions provide examples of situations in which things seem sensorily to be certain ways to suitable subjects although there are no corresponding beliefs or inclinations to believe. (Some philosophers have denied that vision and other forms of sensory experience ever intrinsically present things as being one way rather than another—see, for example, Travis (2004)—but I will not engage with those views here.) Note that I am not assuming that all of the phenomenological aspects of visual experiences contribute to the ways that things seem visually to us to be; nor will the paper take a stance on precisely which aspects of visual experiences do contribute to their contents (on whether, for instance, phosphenes and the like count).
- ² This characterization obviously raises the further question what, if anything, is really distinctive about “sensory” phenomenology: the current paper does not offer a complete answer to that question, instead just trusting that there is an answer to it, although the ideas about perceptual content developed below might be claimed to identify one feature that

is characteristic of sensory seemings. Another important question concerns the extent to which sensory aspects of the phenomenology of perceptual experiences are actually integral to the ways that things seem sensorily to us to be in the course of those experiences: to what extent, for instance, is the way that things look to you to be right now essentially a way that things look to you to be, rather than a way that things seem to you to be in some other manner, say auditorily? My own suspicion is that the presentational aspects of perceptual experiences are bound to specific modalities; but this is not an issue on which the current paper takes an official stand, as the arguments provided below do not settle the question either way. The later discussion thus merely assumes that it is essential to the phenomenology of a given perceptual experience that its content seems to the experience's subject to obtain, without assuming that the relevant "presentation as true" is indissolubly bound to some pattern of perceptual phenomenology that is exclusive to a single modality.

- ³ Compare, for example, Byrne (2001, p. 201). The view that the notion of content is properly applicable to perceptual experiences has been rejected by some—again see, for instance, Travis (2004)—but the rest of what follows just assumes that talk of perceptual content is acceptable.
- ⁴ See Matthen (2010, pp. 107–108), where the same section contains the contrast with visualization; see also Matthen (2005). Other writers who talk of a "feeling of presence" include Dokic and Martin (2017), Riccardi (2019); Farkas (2014) speaks relatedly of a "sense of reality." Dokic and Martin (2017, section 2) identify a different "feeling of presence" that may be involved in perceptual experience, whereby "we may have the sense that we are *acquainted* with the object itself rather than with a surrogate or representation of that object."
- ⁵ See Heck (2000), p. 508) on the "presentational aspect" of perception; Foster (2000, p. 112) talks of "the *presentational* feel of phenomenal experience...the subjective impression that an instance of the relevant type of environmental situation is directly presented." Martin (2001, p. 272) says that "[w]here sensory experience is *presentational*, it is as if its object must exist and be present."
- ⁶ Hanks (2015) argues that the distinction between "force" and "content" ought to be rejected in relation to propositional contents. Hanks distinguishes two notions of "force": a "taxonomic" one, which is irrelevant for our purposes, and a "constitutive" one, which is relevant. Hanks's arguments concerning propositional contents are very different to the ones relating specifically to perception developed below and I am not myself convinced that the notion of force is at all problematic in relation to propositional contents.
- ⁷ Heck (2000), p. 508); Matthen (2005, p. 306).
- ⁸ Crane (2009), for instance, identifies "pure intentionalism" (which he himself rejects, in favor of a less pure position) with the view that "the conscious character of a state of mind is determined by its intentional content alone." Pure intentionalism has been widely discussed; but the specific consequence noted in the text has not itself received much attention, to my knowledge. Chudnoff (2012) contains an interesting discussion of aspects of "presentational phenomenology" as a more general phenomenon, along with brief examinations of this notion as it is developed by some other philosophers, such as Husserl; again, though, the idea that presentational phenomenology is sometimes inseparable from content does not seem to be present within either Chudnoff's paper or the other authors there considered.
- ⁹ This claim has been questioned. Dokic and Martin (2017), for instance, cite individuals who suffer from "derealization disorder" in support of their contention that assertoric force is extrinsic to perceptual phenomenology proper, claiming that "[d]erealized patients experience an affective detachment from the world in the sense that the world does not feel actual anymore" (see section 3.1 of their paper). They quote a source Shorvon et al. (1946) featuring one derealized patient who says that "[i]n fact, the people and things around you seem as unreal to you as if you were only dreaming about them"; another says that "[t]hrough the eyes I look out at a world that might be a picture of the world" (Dokic & Martin, 2017, section 3.1). But the cited phenomenological descriptions are more naturally read as reports of experiences in which some reality is apparently being encountered, although one whose apparent features are disturbingly unfamiliar. This is borne out when one considers further descriptions of derealizational phenomenology. An overview of the phenomena summarizes relevant data as follows, for instance: "External reality may also be strangely altered: it may appear somehow artificial—as if "painted, not natural," or "two-dimensional" or "as if everyone is acting out a role on a stage, and I'm just a spectator." Even though the world does not necessarily look unreal, it is nevertheless experienced as "less interesting and less alive than formerly." A reduction in, or complete absence of, bodily feelings is often described ("as if I were a phantom body," "my hands seem not to belong to me"), as are reduced intensity in the experience of thirst, hunger and physical pain" (Medford et al., 2005, p. 93). (Many thanks to Sofia Ortiz-Hinojosa for initially alerting me to the existence of empirical work that might be relevant here.)
- ¹⁰ One understanding of the claim that a content is non-conceptual equates it with a condition relating to the cognitive resources possessed by those subjects who are able to have mental states with the given content: a content C is non-conceptual just in case a subject may have a mental state with content C even though the subject does not possess various appropriate concepts. Another understanding equates it with a constitutive condition: content C is non-conceptual just in case it is not entirely "composed of" concepts (see (Crowther, 2006) for some discussion of the relationships

between this compositional construal of talk of “non-conceptual” contents and the previous “possessional” one). The second interpretation is less clear than the first but it is also in some ways more interesting, because it points to a supposedly intrinsic distinction; the second interpretation is the one that is most relevant to the main text.

- ¹¹ Many thanks to an anonymous referee for the current journal, for emphasizing the potential relevance of McDowell's ideas at this juncture (McDowell 1996, p. 59).
- ¹² “There is no saying which capacity it is in abstraction from the activating experience itself”: again on page 59 of McDowell (1996). A different, but nonetheless somewhat McDowellian, view would see the demonstrative contents as bound *constitutively* to their “activating experiences,” perhaps on account of their association with modes of presentation that essentially incorporate presentational aspects of the experiences' phenomenology: this would amount to a treatment of the relevant contents as inherently presentational (see the next section of the main text) but it would naturally be taken to undermine their classification as conceptual, by restricting the resulting contents to mental episodes or states in which things seem to be suitable ways to the relevant subjects.
- ¹³ McDowell (1996, p. 172): the potential occurrence of McDowell's demonstrative perceptual contents within mental states that have non-assertoric force is presumably part of what is meant to ensure their conceptual status, by allowing them to participate in the inferential liaisons that McDowell takes to be needed for entry into the concept-constituting “space of reasons.”
- ¹⁴ The relative lack of discussion of the position within the literature is perhaps surprising, given the amount of work that there has been which discusses the general question whether perceptions have contents. Dokic and Martin identify the position as an option; they note that one way of “fleshing out this idea (i.e., that the assertoric force of perceptual experience is an integral part of its phenomenology) is to argue that the sense of presence is inherent to perceptual content itself” (Dokic & Martin, 2017, p. 300). But their main concern is to develop an alternative view that rejects the more general position that they identify the view as elaborating, so their focus understandably moves swiftly elsewhere. Matthen (2010) argues that assertoric force is separate from perceptual content—the argument is considered in section 3 below—but he does not explore the opposing view.
- ¹⁵ Note that this is merely a claim about how it is natural to take things as being: Millar (2017) argues, on the contrary, that “sensory phenomenology [functions] in the way that linguistic symbols function in thought” (p. 134).
- ¹⁶ In the light of this point, it is natural to wonder how the approach to inherent presentationality just outlined relates to other approaches to perceptual experiences that clash with pure intentionalism, such as naïve realism: the paper's concluding section briefly discusses that particular issue.
- ¹⁷ Many thanks to the anonymous referee, whose comments helped me to clarify these issues.
- ¹⁸ Matthen (2010, p. 108).
- ¹⁹ All quotations in this paragraph from (Matthen, 2010, p. 109).
- ²⁰ The discussion of visual mental imagery here and below focuses exclusively upon those aspects of the contents of visual mental images that pertain to the imagistic representation of worldly scenes, rather than on any representation of visual experiences “from the inside” that is involved within the relevant visualizations; I have consequently spoken as though the contents of visualizations are exhausted by the former aspects of their contents, although this is not essential to the ensuing argument. (Martin and Peacocke, for instance, claim that perceptual mental images represent perceptual experiences: “[i]magination and memory relate to perception not through replicating the sensational or imagistic component of perception, but through being a form of representing such experiential encounter with the world” (Martin, 2001, p. 274); see also Peacocke (1985). Martin uses this thesis to provide a naïve realist account of why presentational phenomenology is present within perceptual experiences proper while being absent from episodes of perceptual mental imagery. My own view is that, while some episodes of visual mental imagery represent visual experiences from the inside, others do merely represent worldly scenes: see Gregory (2013) for a detailed account of the contents of perceptual mental images and of related “distinctively sensory” forms of representation, such as many pictures.)
- ²¹ See Gregory (2013) for a theoretical account of what these relationships of “overlap” involve.
- ²² The classic references here are various sections of Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, such as section 3 of Part I and section 5 of Part III, in which Hume compares the imagination, memory, and sensory experiences proper with regards to their “force,” “liveliness,” “strength,” and “vivacity.” Kind (2017) contains some skeptical discussion of imaginative vividness: I share some of Kind's doubts about the theoretical utility of the notion in general, and also about the usefulness of the various attempts to elucidate it that she considers; but I think (see below) that some elements in the idea of imaginative vividness can nevertheless sensibly be linked to a fundamental difference between genuine perceptual experiences and many episodes of mere perceptual mental imagery.
- ²³ Bourget (2017) provides an interesting defense of “representationalism” about the phenomenal character of experiences, by arguing that mental images never have the same contents as experiences proper; he tentatively suggests that they in

fact *cannot* have the very same contents. That last suggestion is based upon the—again, tentative—proposal that differences in “vividness” are to be explained as follows: “a content is vivid when it involves a concrete combination of properties (a combination whose instantiation would fill a space–time region in a certain way)” (p. 283). But that account of vividness may be questioned: the representation of, say, shape within visual mental imagery is not generally vivid; but it seems that it may involve concrete combinations of properties in the sense just defined, unless the qualification “in a certain way” in the preceding account is worked very hard. The ideas shortly outlined in the text provide an alternative way of buttressing Bourget’s view that aspects of the lack of “vividness” commonly manifested by perceptual mental imagery link up with representational limitations.

- ²⁴ Those comments are *not* proposing anything as grand as “an account of vividness” on which a mental episode is vivid if and only things thereby seem sensorily to be a certain way to the episode’s subject. (Episodes featuring, say, mental pain imagery are not generally vivid in the way that real pains are, yet it is not clear that pains have contents: it is therefore also unclear that the propriety of talk of “vividness” always requires the presence of appropriate sensory appearances.)
- ²⁵ It might be retorted that the distinctively visual nature of mere visual mental imagery does not require any overlap between the precise ways that we may visualize things as being and the precise ways that things may look to us to be. Isn’t Martin and Peacocke’s claim (see footnote 20) that visual mental imagery always represents visual experiences enough to ensure that mere visual mental imagery is distinctively visual, for instance? I myself think that the core claim there—the “dependency thesis” that episodes of perceptual mental imagery must represent perceptual experiences, rather than merely representing scenes in a perceptual manner—is wrong (see Gregory (2010) and Gregory (2013) for a lot more discussion of the issues hereabouts) but it anyway does not get to the heart of the matter. If we are to preserve our sense that visual mental imagery has a distinctive connection to vision itself, the “form of representing” involved here must be somewhat special; there are many ways of representing visual experiences that are non-imagistic. But it is very hard to see how some form of representing will have the right connection to vision, if it cannot be used to capture faithfully any of the aspects of the ways that things look to us to be within visual experiences.
- ²⁶ Very many thanks again here to the anonymous referee, both for raising this issue and for very helpful comments in relation to it. The passage quoted in the text is from Nudds (2009, p. 335).
- ²⁷ Nudds (2009, p. 336).
- ²⁸ Many thanks indeed to the audiences and commentators at a number of workshops at which I presented more or less distantly-related ancestors of the current paper: in particular, I gained a great deal from the comments presented by Bethany Ansell, at a workshop in Manchester organized by Catharine Abell and Joel Smith, and from those presented (separately) by Luke Roelofs and Sofia Ortiz-Hinojosa, at the First Annual COVID Gathering organized by Amy Kind. Thanks also to the audience at a meeting of the Northern Imagination Forum organized by Andrea Blomkvist, and to the audience at a session of Glasgow’s Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience seminar, organized by Adriana Alcaraz and Derek Brown. Many thanks, too, to Rosanna Keefe, for very helpful discussion of numerous aspects of the material in the paper. And I owe a major debt of gratitude to an anonymous referee for the current journal, for providing me with a wide range of extremely useful and insightful comments.

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