

Content and Constancy: Issues in the Philosophy and Science of Perception

The seminar is organized around one of the fault-lines in contemporary philosophy of perception: the issue over the nature of perceptual content.

The central question, for our purposes, is whether perceptual content is, at least in part, *representational*. More precisely, the question is whether it is a matter of the nature of perceptual states themselves that there are conditions under which they are veridical or not, as the case may be. (If so, then perceptual states are, in part, *individuated* in terms of their representational content.)

We will be considering two different approaches to this issue:

(1) Any philosophical theory of perception must – at least – be consistent with perceptual psychology. What's distinctive of the first approach, however, is that it looks to science to provide real traction on the issue. The key reason why it *might* do so, is that notions of representation figure prominently in the explanations provided by perceptual psychology. What needs to be studied, however, is just *which* notions of representation are employed, and, in particular, whether the truth-conditional notion is among them.

Pursuing this approach involves considering *what* it is that perceptual psychologists are trying to explain, and *what form* their explanations take. This is where the notion of a *perceptual constancy* comes into play: for perceptual psychology is much – though not wholly – concerned with explaining and understanding a variety of perceptual constancies. (Such as *size constancy*, the ability to perceive the intrinsic size of an object despite its variable retinal size due to differences in the distance from which it is viewed - see, Palmer, p. 315.) It's a live question, however, what a perceptual constancy, in general, is. And it's a reasonable hypothesis that the answer to it, will go hand in hand with the answer to the question what notions of representation the perceptual sciences need to invoke in order to explain them.

(2) The other approach can be stated more briefly, as it is arguably dominant in contemporary philosophy: it enjoins us to take conscious sensory experiences as our starting point, and to reflect on it with a view seeing how it is best characterized if we are to do proper justice to the *phenomenology* of our experience, as well as perception's *epistemological* role as the primary source of our knowledge of the world.

To take the course for credit, students will have to write an essay. The field is huge, and there are many important and interesting issues to be thought about. If agreed upon in advance, students may pick a topic not directly covered in the seminar.

Literature: Tyler Burge, *The Origins of Objectivity*, Chapters 1-3 and 8-10.

Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience*, Chapters 1-3 and 6.

Gary Hatfield, *Perception and Cognition: Essays in the Philosophy of Cognition*, OUP 2009, Chapter 6.

Gary Hatfield and Sarah Allred, *Sensation, Cognition and Constancy*, OUP 2012. (Several papers are relevant, but we can most likely only discuss one.)

Steven Palmer, *Vision Science: Photons to Phenomenology*, MIT 1999, Chapters 1, 2 and 7.

Irving Rock, *An Introduction to Perception*, 1975, Chapter 2.

Paul Snowdon, 'How to interpret "direct perception"', in T. Crane (ed), *The Contents of experience*, CUP 1992.

William Fish, *Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge 2010. (This book provides an excellent overview of recent philosophical theories of perception.)

If I can find a way of selecting a manageable excerpt, I am tempted to include something from Brian O'Shaughnessy's magisterial and under-appreciated last work, *Consciousness and the World*.

A good deal of the material is available on-line, through the University Library. The rest will be made available in the form of master copies.