

AGAINST ONE REASON FOR THINKING THAT VISUAL EXPERIENCES
HAVE REPRESENTATIONAL CONTENT

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According to a widespread view in the philosophy of perception, visual experiences have representational content, in something like the way that thoughts and beliefs do.

One reason that I sometimes hear in support of this view (at least in conversation) is the following:

- (1) When something looks a certain way, it makes sense to ask whether or not it is the way it looks.

I am going to argue that this is not a good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content.

The claim is not always formulated in this way – sometimes it is formulated as follows:

- (2) Visual experiences can be assessed as veridical or non-veridical, or as accurate or inaccurate, or as correct or incorrect.

When I ask what is meant by (2), I typically get (1) as a reply, so I take it that they express the same claim. I need to ask what is meant by (2), because (2) is not a natural way of talking. We do not naturally talk about visual experiences as being veridical or non-veridical, or accurate or inaccurate, or correct or incorrect. I very much doubt that the man in the street would understand what I mean, were I to ask whether his current visual experience is veridical or non-veridical, or accurate or inaccurate, or correct or incorrect, at least not without some guess work. A philosopher would understand, of course, at least a philosopher of perception. But that is not because philosophers of perception know some natural language that the rest of us don't; it is because they know some technical language that they were taught as diligent undergraduates. For a visual experience to be veridical (or accurate, or correct) is for things to be the way they look; for it to be non-veridical (or inaccurate, or incorrect) is for things to not be the way they look. Talk about an experience being veridical or non-veridical (or accurate or inaccurate, or correct or incorrect) is really just talk about whether or not things are the way they look.

Given a choice between working with the formulation in (1) and working with the formulation in (2), I think it is important that we work with the formulation in (1), for two reasons. First, I have no intuition about whether or not the claim is true when it is formulated as in (2), but I do when it is formulated as in (1) (and I suspect many have the same problem with (2)). So let's use the formulation in (1) so that we can effectively consult our intuitions. Second, I am suspicious that the terminology employed in (2) misleadingly suggests that it means this: that visual experiences can be assessed as true or false. I can see why anyone who understands (2) in this way might think that (2), if it is true, is a good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content. Plausibly, it is ultimately propositions that can be assessed as true or false, and anything

else that can be assessed as true or false (a belief, a thought, a sentence, and so on) can be so assessed in virtue of having a proposition as its representational content. If visual experiences are not themselves propositions but can be assessed as true or false, then visual experiences have propositions as representational content. In particular, visual experiences have representational content. That I can see. But to understand (2) in this way is to misunderstand (2). To help avoid this misunderstanding, it would be better to not use the formulation in (2). For these two reasons I think that we should work with the formulation in (1).

Now, I do have clear intuitions about (1): (1) is true. If John looks tired, then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he looks (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is tired). Perhaps we should add the qualification ‘at least sometimes’, because there seem to be cases in which something looks a certain way, but it does not make sense to ask whether or not it is the way it looks. If John looks the same as Mary looks, does it make sense to ask whether John is the way he looks? If John looks how Mary feels, does it make sense to ask whether John is the way he looks? Perhaps not. So let’s understand (1) with the added qualification, ‘at least sometimes’ – I assume that those who claim that (1) is a good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content will agree to this. So understood, I do not want to deny that (1) is true; in fact, I fully endorse it.

What I do want to deny is that (1) gives us good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content. To see why, let’s change the discussion from how things look to how things walk; in particular, to how people walk. If John walks proud (I mean: in a proud way), then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he walks (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is proud); if John walks tall (I mean: in a tall way), then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he walks (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is tall). So we have (3a) below. Alternatively, consider how people talk. If John talks American (I mean: in an American way), then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he talks (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is American); if John talks crazy (I mean: in a crazy way), then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he talks (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is crazy). So we have (3b). As a third example, consider how people drive. If John drives American (I mean: in an American way), then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he drives (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is American); if John drives angry (I mean: in an angry way), then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he drives (because it amounts to asking whether or not he is angry). So we have (3c).

- (3) a. When someone walks a certain way, it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he walks.
- b. When someone talks a certain way, it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he talks.
- c. When someone drives a certain way, it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he drives.

Again, we should probably add the qualification ‘at least sometimes’ in each case. If John walks quickly, does it make sense to ask whether or not he is the way he walks? Perhaps not (or perhaps it does, if the question is understood, with some distortion, as whether or not John is quick). If John talks clearly, does it make sense to ask whether or

not he is the way he talks? Perhaps not (or perhaps it does, with some distortion). If John drives dangerously, then does it make sense to ask whether or not he is the way he drives? Perhaps not (or perhaps it does, with some distortion). So let's again understand each of these claims with the added qualification, 'at least sometimes' – these weaker readings will still be strong enough to make my point.

Now, it seems to me that if (1) gives us good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content, then (3a) gives us good reason to think that walking events have representational content (I take it that visual experiences are events – looking events – and that walking events correspond to looking events). So if we accept that visual experiences have representational content on the basis of (1), then we ought to accept that walking events have representational content on the basis of (3a). Similarly, we ought to accept that talking events have representational content on the basis of (3b), and that driving events have representational content on the basis of (3c). But it seems to me that these are not things that we ought to accept, and I take it that those who think that (1) is a good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content would agree. It seems implausible that walking events, talking events, and driving events have representational content. Granted, John might walk proud in order to represent himself as being proud (perhaps to pretend that he is proud), but then it would be John and not his walking that represents that he is proud. Moreover, such representation cannot be part of what it is to walk proud, because John might walk proud without representing himself as being proud (he might walk proud by accident, or because he actually is proud). So we ought not accept that visual experiences have representational content on the basis of (1), because it would oblige us to accept that walking events, talking events, and driving events all have representational content, when plausibly they do not (and by multiplying the examples we can see that it would oblige us to accept the same of all sorts of events – cooking events, sleeping events, falling events, and so on). The move from (1) to the claim that visual experiences have representational content is too strong to be a good one.

I can think of two objections to this argument. First, it might be objected that 'John walks proud', 'John walks tall', 'John talks American', 'John talks crazy', 'John drives American', and 'John drives angry' are all ungrammatical, and hence cannot be used to argue as I have done. I will grant that in some communities these sentences are ungrammatical. But ungrammaticality is in general not sufficient grounds on which to reject an argument: it is possible to express a perfectly good argument using ungrammatical sentences. Here is a perfectly good argument expressed using ungrammatical sentences: all men be mortal; Socrates be a man; therefore, Socrates be mortal. You know what I mean, and you know that what I mean is a perfectly good argument – it would be irresponsible of you to reject this argument on the grounds that I expressed it using ungrammatical sentences. So more needs to be said against the argument that I have given than just that it employs sentences that are ungrammatical. It might be added that these sentences are not interpretable. But that seems to be false. I find that people who judge it to be ungrammatical can still understand what I mean by 'John walks proud' and accept that if he does then it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he walks (and so too for the other five sentences). If these remarks do not allay concerns about grammaticality, then consider this. At least some people, including myself, find these sentences grammatical, and use them with the meanings with which I have used them above. It is possible that this use will become widespread, to such an extent that they are widely accepted as grammatical. Let's imagine my running this

argument in such a possible situation instead – if we would accept it in that situation, then we ought to accept it in the actual situation.

The second objection is that there is a disanalogy between the fact in (1) on the one hand, and the facts in (3) on the other. When something looks a certain way, the question of whether or not it is the way it looks very often naturally arises; in contrast to this, when someone walks a certain way, the question of whether or not he is the way he walks less naturally arises, and so too when someone talks or drives a certain way. I grant that there might be such a difference. But it seems to me that this is not a relevant difference. Here is a plausible explanation: something's looking a certain way is often evidence that it is that way, and very often when we claim that something looks a certain way we do so by way of giving evidence for what we are really interested in – whether or not it is that way. You ask me, 'Is John sick?'; I reply, 'Well, he *looks* sick'. I tell you how John looks to give you evidence about how John is, and in such (common) scenarios there is a close connection between the claim that John looks a certain way and the question of whether or not he is that way. If the question more naturally arises in the case of (1) than it does in the case of (3a), (3b), and (3c), it is because there is a stronger evidential link between looking a certain way and being that way, than there is between (i) walking a certain way and being that way, (ii) talking a certain way and being that way, and (iii) driving a certain way and being that way. Or, it is because we more often appeal to that link in our conversations. If this is what the difference amounts to, then it is a difference that is irrelevant to the point I am making about (1), (3a), (3b), and (3c).

Here is a slightly different way of expressing the argument that I have given. I take it that the move from (1) to the claim that visual experiences have representational content is supposed to be an inference to the best explanation: the fact that when something looks a certain way it makes sense to ask whether or not it is the way it looks (at least sometimes) is best explained on the assumption that visual experiences have representational content. The explanation goes as follows: when something looks a certain way, there is a visual experience with the content that it is that way; when we ask whether or not it is the way it looks, we are asking whether or not that content is correct – the question makes sense, because the visual experience has content that can be assessed for correctness. I have just argued that this inference is too strong to be a good one. The similarity in form between the fact in (1) and the facts in (3) suggests that they be given a uniform explanation. So if the explanation just given is the best explanation of the fact in (1), then corresponding explanations are the best explanations of the facts in (3). But the corresponding explanations of the facts in (3) are implausible: (3a) is true, the corresponding explanation goes, because when someone walks a certain way his walking event has the representational content that he is that way; when we ask whether or not he is the way he walks, we are asking whether or not that content is correct – the question makes sense, because walking events have content that can be assessed for correctness. Since it is not plausible that this explanation is even correct, it is not plausible that it is the best explanation; and if this is not the best explanation of (3a), then that visual experiences have representational content is not the best explanation of (1), and (1) is not a good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content. I could make the same point using (3b) or (3c).

There are further facts of the same form as the facts in (1) and (3), for which corresponding versions of the proposed explanation are even less plausible. If John

loves chocolate, then it makes sense to ask whether or not he wants the thing he loves (because it amounts to asking whether or not he wants chocolate). So we have (4a) below. If John grows spinach, then it makes sense to ask whether or not he eats the thing he grows (because it amounts to asking whether or not he eats spinach). So we have (4b). If John works in Oxford, then it makes sense to ask whether or not he lives in the place he works (because it amounts to asking whether or not he lives in Oxford). So we have (4c).

- (4) a. When someone loves a certain thing, it makes sense to ask whether or not he wants the thing he loves (at least sometimes).
- b. When someone grows a certain thing, it makes sense to ask whether or not he eats the thing he grows (at least sometimes).
- c. When someone works in a certain location, it makes sense to ask whether or not he lives in the location he works (at least sometimes).

There is a pattern to the facts in (1), (3) and (4) that cries out for a unified explanation. Let's try extending the proposed explanation of (1) to an explanation of the facts in (4). (4a) is true, because when someone loves a certain thing his state of loving has the representational content that he wants that thing; when we ask whether or not he wants the thing he loves we are asking whether or not that content is correct – the question makes sense, because the state of loving has content that can be assessed for correctness. This is an even less plausible explanation than the proposed explanation of the facts in (3). First, it is implausible that his state of loving has representational content. Second, even if it does, it is implausible that the content of that state is that he *wants* that thing. Third, even if it is, it would not help explain why it would also make sense to ask whether or not he *owns* the thing he loves – to help explain this, it seems we have to suppose that in addition to having the content that he wants that thing, his loving state has the content that he owns that thing. It is not hard to see that we would need to postulate a lot more content in order to explain why many other questions would also make sense (whether or not he *makes* the thing he loves, whether or not he *buys* the thing he loves, and so on). The corresponding explanations of the facts in (4b) and (4c) are similarly implausible. The fact that the proposed explanation of (1) cannot be extended in a plausible way to the facts in (4) is another strike against it.

It would help my case against the proposed explanation of (1) to offer a better explanation in its place. I propose the following: (1) is true, because some ways that things can look are also ways that things can be: things can look tired; they can also be tired – that is why, if John looks tired, it makes sense to ask whether or not he is the way he looks. This explanation extends to a plausible explanation of all of the other facts. (3a) is true, because some ways that people can walk are also ways that people can be: people can walk proud; they can also be proud – that is why it makes sense to ask, if John walks proud, whether or not he is the way he walks. (3b) is true, because some ways that people can talk are also ways that people can be: people can talk crazy; they can also be crazy – that is why it makes sense to ask, if John talks crazy, whether or not he is the way he talks. (3c) is true, because some ways that people can drive are also ways that people can be: people can drive angry; they can also be angry – that is why it makes sense to ask, if John drives angry, whether or not he is the way he drives. (4a) is true, because some things that people can love are also things that people can want: people can love chocolate; they can also want chocolate – that is why it makes sense to ask, if John loves chocolate, whether or not he wants the thing he loves. (4b) is

true, because some things that people can grow are also things that people can eat: people can grow spinach; they can also eat spinach – that is why it makes sense to ask, if John grows spinach, whether or not he eats the thing he grows. (4c) is true, because some locations that people can work in are also locations that people can live in: people can work in Oxford; they can also live in Oxford – that is why it makes sense to ask, if John works in Oxford, whether or not he lives in the location he works. The facts in (1), (3) and (4) all have this form: when something F-s a certain G, it makes sense to ask whether or not it H-s the G it F-s (at least sometimes). The explanation of facts of this form, I am suggesting, is this: some G-s that things can F are also G-s that things can H. We thus have a unified (and plausible) explanation of the facts in (1), (3) and (4) – an explanation that is a better explanation of (1) than that visual experiences have representational content.

I should point out that this explanation of (1) is compatible with visual experiences having representational content. The explanation I have proposed is this: (1) is true, because some ways that things can look are also ways that things can be. The explanation assumes that there are such things as ways that things can look. It might be, for all I have said, that when something looks a certain way it does so because a certain visual experience has that way as its representational content. But the fact that some ways that things can look are also ways that things can be is by no means good enough reason to think that this is what is going on in visual experience. Just as the fact that some things that people can grow are also things that people can eat is by no means good enough reason to think that when someone grows something it is because a certain growing event has that thing as its representational content. I am not denying that visual experiences have representational content; I am just denying that (1) is a good reason to think that they do.

I conclude, then, that (1) is not a good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content.¹

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