

Siegel / Tetralog Round 1.

### The uneasy heirs of acquaintance\*

The writings we are each responding to focus on three aspects of perception:

**Perceptual relations:** the person-level relations between perceivers and external things, including external objects (such as ducks or shoes) and events (such as a tree's blowing in the wind), that constitute our perceiving those things.

**Phenomenal character:** the first-person perspective in perceptual experience.

**Epistemic contribution:** the contribution of perceptual experience to empirical knowledge.

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell proposed that the most basic building blocks of thought include a perceptual relation he called 'acquaintance'. The objects of Russellian acquaintance included sense-data, which were distinctive of perception and gave perceptual experience its phenomenal character. But according to Russell, the objects of acquaintance did not include external things like cups and shoes, and so a bridge had to be built from Russellian acquaintance to our knowledge of the external world.

Russell inspired an approach to the philosophy of perception that finds a close relationship between these three aspects of perception. A major strand of anglophone philosophy of perception in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has sought to vindicate Russell's idea that our knowledge of the external world is built up in part from acquaintance relations that determine phenomenal character, but with an important difference: acquaintance would be a relation to the external objects that we end up knowing about on the basis of perception. Led by Gareth Evans's discussion of singular thought in *The Varieties of Reference*, this strand of philosophy continues Evans's effort to refigure Russellian acquaintance, by developing theories on which the heir to perceptual acquaintance could constitute the phenomenal character of our experience and show us what perceptual experience contributes to empirical knowledge. On this approach, perceptual experience and perceptual relations delimit the specifically perceptual part of the mind, distinct from judgments formed in response to perception, and from all other non-perceptual capacities. The resulting theories belong to the Perception wing of a wider strand of philosophy inspired by Cook Wilson known as Oxford Realism.<sup>1</sup>

There is much to admire in this strand of philosophy. Our abilities to think about particular ordinary things in our environments constitute a fundamental form of intentionality, as Evans and P. F. Strawson emphasized. Subsequent work in the psychology of core object cognition and visual object tracking give us reason to think that many sophisticated forms

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of Oxford Realism see M. Marion (2010a and 2010b)

of thought depend on more primitive perceptual capacities.<sup>2</sup> Theories of perception that seek an heir to Russellian acquaintance respect the importance of singular reference in the mind, and they give perceptual experience a properly central role in it.

What features of perceptual experience enable it to play its role in anchoring demonstrative reference, and in providing us with empirical knowledge about the things we perceive? McDowell and Brewer both argue that these roles could not be explained other than by giving perceptual relations a constitutive role in both phenomenal character and epistemic contributions. In this way, both find an heir to Russellian acquaintance in perceptual experience.

For McDowell, the contents of experience are individuated in part by the objects one perceives in having experiences with those contents, and by the capacities to know how things are on the basis of perception. In recent work ((2008), (2013)), McDowell develops a view of these contents as intuitional as opposed to propositional. The internal structure of the intuitional contents is distinctive of perception, as opposed to judgment, and they characterize phenomenal aspects of experience. Brewer defines a perceptual relation that he calls “acquaintance with direct objects of perception”, and argues that this relation both constitutes phenomenal character and can make applying a concept ‘F’ to the object ‘evidently correct’ ((2001), 143). In both cases, perceptual experiences consist in a kind of perceptual relation, either entirely (Brewer) or in part (McDowell).<sup>3</sup>

These theses give a straightforward account of the role of perceptual experience in anchoring demonstrative thought. They entail that perceptual experience is fundamentally implicated in the object-dependent kind of intentionality that the heirs of acquaintance highlight. And once perceptual experience is construed as partly constituted by perceptual relations to external objects, any epistemic contributions of experiences will include perceptual relations. There is then no gap to be bridged between experiences and perceptual contact with the external world, as there was on Russell’s original picture, because experiences – when they are not total hallucinations – partly or entirely consist in perceptual relations to things seen. This constitutive link between phenomenal character and perceptual relations arguably adds significantly to the epistemic power of the phenomenal character of experience.<sup>4</sup>

Besides locating epistemic power of experience in phenomenal character and its constitutive perceptual relations, heirs to acquaintance purport to delimit the distinctively perceptual part of the mind, so that both perceptual experience and the routes by which they are formed become locuses of pure perception that explain how we come to have non-perceptual forms of intentionality that are supposed to rely on the purely perceptual kind. This explanatory priority is exactly the status that perceptual experience has according to Evans and others who seek an heir to acquaintance.

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<sup>2</sup> Carey (2009), Scholl et al., (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Similar positions are defended by Campbell (2002), Martin (2004), among others, and in much more epistemic detail, by Dickie (2015).

<sup>4</sup> A point emphasized by Sturgeon (1998), among others.

I think this picture is oversold. Heirs of acquaintance are recruited to play multiple roles at once, but these roles can be dissociated. Phenomenal character is not best analyzed using perceptual relations. And the distinctively perceptual part of the mind is not reflected in either perceptual relations or in phenomenal character, because those features of perception can in principle reflect the influence of non-perceptual person-level states, and quite possibly do so in fact. More generally, they do not enjoy an informationally unique relationship to external reality. The epistemic contributions of experience then have to be reconstructed in a more nuanced way than heirs of acquaintance suggest. The nuance is needed to capture the interactions between the phenomenal character of experience and the myriad elements that can shape it, and to explain the impact of these interactions on the epistemology of perception. I don't have space here to show that the reconstruction can be done, but I take my responses to McDowell and Brewer to undermine their routes to the idea that no such reconstruction could possibly succeed. *The Rationality of Perception* is my attempt at such a reconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

Although my approach to perception and Gupta's are quite different from one another, we both hold that the roles that the heirs to Russellian acquaintance are invoked to play come apart in ways that the perception wing of Oxford realism does not allow. For instance, we agree that perceptual relations and phenomenal character can be dissociated.<sup>6</sup> But Gupta thinks experience makes no categorical proprietary epistemic contribution to belief. I think it does. So here I agree with Brewer and McDowell. But they seek heirs of acquaintance relations that build in to perceptual experience features that would make it contribute all by itself much more to knowledge than I think perceptual experience can contribute.

In at least one respect, Gupta's departure from the attempt to find heirs of acquaintance is more radical than mine. On my view of perceptual experience, which I call the Content View, perceptual experience (in the visual case – the only case my interlocutors discuss) is fundamentally implicated in intentionality, but not in the object-dependent kind. Partly as a result of this feature, it is a locus of epistemic power, though I hold that which powers it has depends on its relationships to other mental states and on its etiology. By contrast, Gupta denies that experiences manifest any epistemic powers on their own, and he sometimes seems to suggest that they are devoid of the kinds of intentional features that I think help bestow basic epistemic powers on experience. This denial puts Gupta at odds with all three of us.

Though I agree with Gupta about the need to analyze the epistemic impact on perceptual experience of non-perceptual mental states, I criticize his framework on the grounds that the range of interactions between experience and non-perceptual factors that it can express is too limited. My main differences with Gupta thus lie in the relationship between the phenomenal character of experience and intentionality, and in the type of epistemic contribution that experiences can make.

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<sup>5</sup> Siegel (2017)

<sup>6</sup> See Gupta's SubjIdentity relation in his (2018).

I frame my responses to my interlocutors around three relationships in which our main philosophical differences can be located: (i) between phenomenal character and perceptual relations, (ii) between perceptual experience and perceptual distinctiveness, and (iii) between phenomenal character and the epistemic role of experience.

## 2. Phenomenal character and perceptual relations

How are perceptual relations to external things related to the phenomenal character of experience? McDowell and Brewer's answer is that perceptual relations partly or entirely constitute experiences' phenomenal character. My first set of responses focuses on two routes to this position that I find in the writings of McDowell and Brewer.

Each of these routes addresses a more specific question: how does the fact that you're seeing a particular ordinary object (a cat, a shoe) constrain which phenomenal character your visual experience can have? Another way to put this question is: how does phenomenal character constrain the object-seeing relation? More generally, given an object *o*, what range of phenomenal characters are admissible ones for seeing *o*? These three formulations are all asking the same thing.

A first answer to this question is that phenomenal character is individuated in part by the objects one is seeing in having the experience with that phenomenal character. If phenomenal character is object-dependent in this sense, then two experiences with the same phenomenal character will have to be cases of seeing the same object. And if two experiences are cases of seeing different objects, then they have to differ in their phenomenal character, even if the experiences are or would be indiscriminable to the subject.

McDowell and Brewer both endorse this answer to the basic question of how perceptual relations constrain phenomenal character. I focus first on one of McDowell's routes to this answer, and then on a different and complementary route to it taken by Brewer. I take my responses to undermine their arguments for this position.

### 2.1 McDowell's appeal to Hume

McDowell characterizes perceptual experiences by saying that when you see an object such as a cat or a shoe, it is "directly presented to one's awareness" and is thereby "directly there for the thinker", for instance by being available for demonstrative reference. These quotes are from "The Content of Perceptual Experience" (1994, 343). Similar formulations occur in McDowell's writings on perception since then. For instance:

"If an experience is a seeing, we can say the representing it does is its *revealing* or *disclosing* a certain environmental reality: that is, its bringing that environmental reality into view for the subject. Experiential representing, the representing by experiences that consists in their having content in the way they do, comes in two

kinds: bringing environmental realities into view and merely seeming to do that. If an experience's representing is of the first kind, what is relevantly constitutive of its subjective character is that it brings a certain environmental reality into view for its subject." (2013, p. 147)<sup>7</sup>

One of McDowell's reasons for thinking that in the cases he regards as primary, experiences are intrinsically encounters with objects is that otherwise it would be impossible for us to be perceptually aware of external things at all. Here McDowell is formulating and endorsing a version of this idea, which he finds in both Kant and Hume:

"What Kant takes from Hume is that there is no rationally satisfactory route from such a predicament [in which experience is not intrinsically a relation with objects] to the epistemic position we are in (obviously in, we might say)" (344).

That epistemic position includes the fact that we can demonstratively refer to things we see, and go on to know facts about them on the basis of perceptual experience – at least if these things are 'glimpses of objective reality' (see next quote).

Starting from this idea, McDowell develops a line of reasoning he finds in Kant but not in Hume:

"....since there is no rationally satisfactory route from experiences, conceived as...less than encounters with objects – glimpses of objective reality – to the epistemic position we are manifestly in, experiences must be intrinsically encounters with objects."(344)

According to this line of thought, there is no way to see objects at all (if seeing is a way to 'encounter objects') unless experiences are object-dependent. In this way, perceptual relations are supposed to be explanatorily prior to phenomenal character.

But why do experiences have to be object-dependent in order for us to be perceptually aware of things? McDowell suggests if the phenomenal character of experiences is something less than a perceptual relation, then we are ignoring a point we should have learned from Hume. Humean ideas are not individuated by any external objects, and neither are Humean impressions. According to McDowell, Hume "inherits from his predecessors" these construals of the perceptual and post-perceptual elements of the mind, and then shows that given these construals, we could not be perceptually aware of objects.

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<sup>7</sup>In glossing McDowell's views and more generally the perception wing of Oxford realism, I've been focusing on what McDowell calls the first kind of experiential representing, ignoring cases such as hallucination. I'll continue to ignore the cases of hallucination in discussing Brewer and McDowell (except for the last two paragraphs of 2.1) since they do not regard it as putting constraints on the correct analysis of genuine perception, which by definition involves perceptual contact with external objects, and does not mislead as to the bit of reality that one is perceiving.

Any representations of objects we end up with would have to result from more than perception.<sup>8</sup>

Here McDowell reads Hume as holding that we can't be in the epistemic situation that McDowell says we're obviously in – in other words, as a type of skeptic. Even if one reads Hume in this way, why think he arrived at that position because experiences were not “de re impressions” constituted in part by external objects toward which they're directed? Impressions are perhaps the closest thing in Hume's writings to our notion of perceptual experience. If we read Hume as a skeptic, an at least equally good explanation for how he arrived at that diagnosis of our epistemic position is that impressions are not directed toward anything at all.<sup>9</sup> The idea that experiences lack any sort of intentionality would create the need for a bridge from experiences to rational beliefs about the external world, since on that picture, experiences would not even purport to present us with any ways that external things are. The blame would then fall on the more general point that experiences would lack any form of intentionality, rather than on the fact that they lack a specifically de re form of intentionality.<sup>10</sup>

On a slightly different reading, what McDowell thinks Hume showed is that a subject can have experiential representations, only if the subject has some object-dependent experiences. “The epistemic situation we're obviously in” would then consist only in having experiential representations, whether they are knowledge or not. On this picture, given that we have experiences with contents, the contents of experience cannot always be object-independent.

Hume's observations provide no leverage to rule out that experiences have object-independent contents by virtue of its object-independent phenomenal character. The Humean idea that impressions are intentionality-free is just a denial of the claim that experiences have contents. It isn't a way of showing that the contents would have to be object-dependent. To reject the position that the phenomenal character grounds object-independent contents, an argument would be needed for the explanatory priority that McDowell favors. Brewer gives just such an argument. So let's consider it next.

## 2.2 Brewer's argument from object-seeing

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<sup>8</sup> The full passage: “Hume inherits from his predecessors a conception according to which no experience is in its very nature, intrinsically, an encounter with objects. What Kant takes from Hume is that there is no rationally satisfactory route from such a predicament to the epistemic position that we are in (obviously in, we might say). Transcendental synthesis (or whatever) is not supposed to be such a route: the whole point of its being transcendental, in this context, is that it is not supposed to be something that we, our familiar empirical selves, go in for. It would be a mistake to think we can domesticate Kant's point by detranscendentalizing the idea of synthesis, so as to suggest that the idea of encountering objects is put in place by interpretation of data, perhaps by inference to the best explanation, with the interpretation being something we do... That would just be missing *Hume's* point.” ((1994), p. 192)).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., “Our senses...never give us the least intimation of a thing beyond” *Treatise*, 1.4.2.

<sup>10</sup> And in any case it might be an interpretive mistake to read Hume as denying that we can know on the basis of perception basic facts about the environment, such as that there's a cat ahead.

Since McDowell and Brewer think perceptual experience plays an indispensable role in anchoring demonstrative thought to its objects, let's define "object-seeing" as the cases of seeing external objects that put you in a position to demonstratively refer to them, and treat seeing as object-seeing.

For a particular object *o*, such as Ducko the duck, which phenomenal characters are admissible ones for an experience to have, if it is an experience of seeing Ducko? In the previous section (2.1) I discussed the answer, "only phenomenal characters that are individuated by Ducko". I now turn to a second, complementary answer to the original question about object-seeing that I find in Brewer.<sup>11</sup>

As I reconstruct it, Brewer's positive case for object-dependent experience has three steps. For each object *o*, there's a limited range of phenomenal characters our experiences can have, if the experiences are cases of seeing *o*. The limits on this range can best be explained by the fact that phenomenal character is constituted by object-seeing. So a constitutive role for perceptual relations helps explain how it is possible for us to see objects at all – a conclusion that echoes McDowell's claims about what Hume showed.

Are there limitations on which phenomenal character an experience can have, if it belongs to a case of object-seeing? I think so. If you cannot differentiate an object from its surroundings, for instance because it is an iguana blending in with a shrub, then you don't see it in a way that can anchor a *de re* thought to it, though you may see its surfaces. This observation suggests a Differentiation condition on object-seeing:

Differentiation condition: If *S* sees *o*, then *S*'s visual phenomenology differentiates *o* from its immediate surroundings.

The Differentiation condition is a phenomenal constraint on object-seeing. Which objects one sees cannot freely mix and match with which phenomenal character one has in seeing them. For instance, you cannot see a duck by having a phenomenal character of an undifferentiated blue expanse.<sup>12</sup>

Are there further phenomenal constraints on object-seeing, beyond the differentiation condition?

According to Brewer there are. When *S* sees object *o* in conditions *C* and the differentiation condition is met, there are only some ways that *o* can look to *S*. These constraints "govern the kind of perceptual error that is compatible with genuine presentation" (p. 74). For instance, if you see your house from far across a valley it might look like a dot, as J. L. Austin pointed out.<sup>13</sup> If you see the Müller-Lyer lines, they might look different in length. Both experiences might give rise to perceptual errors, but this role doesn't stop the subject from seeing the house or the lines in a way that anchors demonstrative reference to them.

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<sup>11</sup> All quotes are from *Perception and its Objects* (2011).

<sup>12</sup> A point developed in Siegel (2006), where I defend the Differentiation condition more fully.

<sup>13</sup> Austin (1962), p. 98.

Brewer's Object View of experience elevates these observations into a further phenomenal constraint on object-seeing beyond the Differentiation condition. The further phenomenal constraints are rooted in what he calls *o*'s visible similarities to paradigms of *F*. If an object *o* affects the visual system as a paradigm of *F* would, then *o* is visibly similar to *F*. Where *F* is a "perceptible kind" (74),

"*o* looks *F* to a subject *S*, in virtue of the fact that *S* is...acquainted with *o* from a point of view and circumstances...[in] which *o* has visually relevant similarities with paradigms of *F*." (118)

Given a paradigm of *F*, an object's visually relevant similarities are in turn supposed to be fully determined by the conditions in which the object is seen:

"...visually relevant similarities [to paradigms of *F*] are identities in such things as the ways in which light is reflected and transmitted from the objects in question, and the way in which stimuli are handled by the visual system, given its evolutionary history and our shared training and development" (p. 103).

The appeal to visually relevant similarities is meant to avoid the need to appeal to any level of representations on the part of the subject in the analysis of phenomenal character.<sup>14</sup> When a subject *S* sees *o* in conditions *C*, the only ways *F* that *o* can look to *S* are supposed to be determined by *o*: "The way things look are the ways *things* look...less crudely, the ways things look to us in vision are the ways certain specific things look that are presented to us in vision, given the circumstances of their particular presentation" (4).

So Brewer holds that there's a range of ways an object *o* can look in conditions *C*, relative to a subject *S*, defined in terms of visible similarities:

Similarity range (of *o* in *C*): the values of *F*, such that if *S* sees *o* in *C*, *o* looks *F* to *S* as a result of *o*'s visible similarities with paradigms of *F*.

And this range defines Brewer's proposed constraint on object-seeing, which is something Brewer thinks the Object View does very well at explaining.

Similarity constraint: The only ways *F* that *o* can look to *S* in *C* fall within *o*'s similarity range in *C*.

Some commentators have questioned whether there's a notion of paradigm *F*s that can play the role Brewer assigns to it in his theory.<sup>15</sup> I'll raise a related question in section 2.4. For now I'm going to grant there is such a notion so that we can focus on the rest of Brewer's argument from object-seeing.

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<sup>14</sup> "The nature of the experience itself is...elucidated by reference to those very things that are presented in perception" (141).

<sup>15</sup> Pautz (2010), Block (2019).



### 2.3 Brewer's negative case for the Object View

On its own, the similarity constraint entails nothing about what phenomenal character consists in, including whether experience is object-dependent. For all it says, phenomenal character could be explanatorily more fundamental than object-seeing, contrary to Brewer's Object View.

Brewer's key line of reasoning favoring the Object View is that it easily explains the similarity constraint on object-seeing. On its own, this positive case doesn't get very far, even if we assume that the similarity constraint should be met. For all it says, other theories could equally well or better respect the same constraint. Brewer seems sensitive to this fact, because much of his case for the Object View emerges from criticizing a position he calls the Content View, the chief opponent considered in his book and a foil that structures the discussion. The main criticism of the Content View is that it struggles to accommodate the supposed limits on the ways things can look (74).

The position Brewer criticizes here under the label "Content View" is suspiciously inflected with his own commitments. Philosophers since Anscombe who argue that it's useful to analyze perceptual experience in terms of contents standardly formulate their position in terms of phenomenal character, either as a supervenience thesis or a universal generalization. And many of us deny that phenomenal character is object-dependent by being analyzable in terms of perceptual relations, or remain neutral on this question. The position I call "The Content View" in *The Contents of Visual Experience* is that all visual perceptual experiences have contents.<sup>16</sup> More committal theses of representation claim at a minimum that phenomenal character supervenes on representational properties.<sup>17</sup> None of these theses say anything about perceptual relations.

By contrast, Brewer saddles the Content View with commitments shared by his own Object View, and more generally with the quest for an heir to Russellian acquaintance. He assumes that a single category analyzes both phenomenal character and perceptual relations, and his main disagreement with the Content View construed in his way then concerns whether that single category is the acquaintance relation, as per the Object View, or content. Here's a passage showing Brewer's assumption at work:

"According to (CV) [the Content View as Brewer defines it], the most fundamental account of our perceptual relation with the physical world is to be given in terms of the representational content of perceptual experience....[for example], it is o that looks F because o is presented in perception; and this is presumably due to the fact that the content of the perception in question in some way concerns o". (p. 71)

And again:

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<sup>16</sup> Siegel (2010), chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> Tye 1998, Byrne 2001, Chalmers 2004, Pautz 2009.

“If S sees a mind-independent physical object o, then there are certainly (perhaps infinitely) many true sentences of the form ‘o looks F’, but I would...deny that S’s seeing o itself consists in the truth of those sentences or can be fruitfully illuminated by listing the facts that o looks F1, o looks F2....o looks Fi, etc., or the fact that it visually seems to S that o is F1, o is F2...o is Fi, etc. S’s seeing o, her perceptual experiential relation with that particular mind-independent physical object is more basic than any such facts and is what grounds the truth of all those sentences...” (p. 63).

Brewer’s presupposition backgrounds any debate about whether phenomenal character and object-seeing are related in a way that would preclude a unified analysis in terms of either content or acquaintance. And the existence of such a unified analysis is a central bone of contention between the perception wing of Oxford realism and its opponents.

Even on its own terms, Brewer’s negative case seems not to succeed, because even the Brewer-defined Content View could respect the similarity constraint. So could a content view positing object-independent contents. The constraint can simply restrict which contentful experiences you can have when you see o. It is also compatible with such restrictions to treat the relation between contentful experiences and objects you see in having those experiences as admitting no further analysis, beyond the fact that this relation obtains when the subject sees o. In these ways, content views are not committed to taking contentful experiences as explanatorily prior to object-seeing.

None of these options figure in Brewer’s discussion. Their exclusion undermines the negative part of his case for the Object View, which leaves unaddressed a wide range of alternatives to the Object View that can do what the Object View is said to do best.

I’ve argued that Brewer’s positive case for the Object View needs support from a negative case, but his negative case ignores standard content views and avoids taking on his main bone of contention with them. I’ve also defended Brewer’s peculiarly construed Content View against Brewer’s objections, even though I don’t hold that view myself.

Dialectical points aside, the heart of Brewer’s route to the Object View is the notion of visual similarities to paradigms of Fs. So let’s consider how the Object View is supposed to meet the similarity constraint, and why Brewer thinks that meeting them would join phenomenal character to perceptual relations.

#### **2.4 How do visible similarities constrain object-seeing?**

According to Brewer’s Object View, acquaintance is a perceptual relation to objects that explains why those objects look the way they do. Perceptual experiences are 3-place acquaintance relations in which a subject (the first relatum) perceives an external thing (the second relatum), in a specific sensory modality, from a given point of view and in specific circumstances that can affect the character of perceptual experience “such as lighting conditions in the case of vision” (96). These last specifications (modality, point of

view, and circumstances) together form a multi-component third relatum.<sup>18</sup> In the visual case, which is the only case Brewer considers, the ways an object looks to you when you see it constitute the phenomenal character of your visual experience.

As we saw earlier, Brewer allows that the visible similarities an object has can vary with the “shared training and development” of the perceivers (104). Presumably, which things are paradigms of F can change with such variations as well. If you have only ever seen yellow bananas oriented downward from the stem, presumably these bananas will be paradigmatic for you, whereas if I have only ever seen green bananas on the tree growing upward from the stem, then visibly different bananas will be paradigmatic for me. What counts as a paradigm will then be relative to a perceiver, and so will the visible similarities that are defined in terms of those paradigms.<sup>19</sup>

Given that visible similarities can vary depending on the perceiver’s “training and development”, do those similarities put any limits on the ways an object can look when you see it? If they don’t, then windmills could be visibly similar to paradigms of giants, a 12 year-old boy on a playground could be visibly similar to a paradigm of a dangerous 20-year old person, or to whatever each viewer considers to be such paradigms. And if Brewer’s theory extends beyond vision (as Brewer suggests in footnote 4) then in the gustatory realm, water dyed red could taste sweeter than undyed water.

In short, if visible similarities place no limits on the ways an object can look when you see it, then the similarity constraint is trivial and there are no phenomenal constraints on object-seeing besides the Differentiation condition.<sup>20</sup> And since Brewer’s main criticism of the Contents View is that it fails to respect all the limits on ways things can appear (74), he seems to assume that visible similarities impose substantial constraints. There then have to be some limits on which visible similarities a subject’s overall mental state can help produce. What are these limits?

On the face of it, this question would seem answerable only by appealing to the nature of perceptual processing. The grounds for answering it would then seem to be a posteriori. But Brewer doesn’t discuss perceptual processing or the debate about which influences on perceptual experience by non-perceptual person-level states are possible.<sup>21</sup> In this way, Brewer’s meta-philosophy seems at odds with his defense of the Object View.

Summing up: Brewer argues for the Object View by arguing that it meets the similarity constraint, whereas the Content View cannot. But if visible similarities impose no substantial constraint beyond the Differentiation condition, then Brewer’s argumentative

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<sup>18</sup> Brewer’s Object View has the same structure as the position defended by Campbell (2002), which I discuss under the label “Object View” in Siegel (2010).

<sup>19</sup> Block 2019 argues that paradigms have to be relativized even further to specific conditions of attention.

<sup>20</sup> I’m assuming Brewer accepts the Differentiation condition because otherwise you’d be able to be acquainted with completely camouflaged object even though you’re in no position to demonstratively refer to it.

<sup>21</sup> He proposes that things can “thickly look F” when one has a concept of F and one’s experience makes it evidence that the object one sees is F, but cases of recognition do not exhaust the ways an object can look.

strategy cannot get off the ground. And if visible similarities impose substantial further constraints, then Brewer needs further argument to clarify what they are.

### **3. Perceptual distinctiveness**

What do we know a priori about perception? McDowell thinks there are distinctively perceptual capacities involved in having contentful experiences, and both McDowell and Gupta suggest in different ways an a priori constraint on distinctively perceptual relations that I'd like to probe further.

#### **3.1 McDowell's intuitional contents**

In (2013) McDowell suggests that the contents of experience comes in two versions, depending on whether the content is expressed by a sentence of the form "o is F" or by a noun phrase of the form "that F". He calls the first kind of content "propositional" and identifies it with the same kind of content as judgments have (2008, p. 3), whereas the second kind of content is "intuitional" (in (2013), "less than propositional" p. 145), and is distinctive to perceptual experience. Forming a judgment in response to a perceptual experience with intuitional content will involve a transition from being perceptually aware of the object and some of its properties to thinking about them, but the same objects and properties will figure both times. In addition, McDowell holds, concepts are involved both times. That's a major difference from Evans, an early proponent of the perception wing of Oxford realism, since he construed experience contents as non-conceptual.

Whether the contents of experience are intuitional or propositional, the idea that they help characterize subjective aspects of experience is incompatible with the construal of experience as a mere affectation of the mind devoid of any intentional features. I attributed this construal to Hume.

What is the difference between intuitional and propositional contents? A first possibility is that intuitional and propositional contents don't differ at all, as both are object-dependent accuracy conditions for experiences such as the condition that an object o is F if the experience is accurate; but a difference is found nearby, at the level of capacities used to attribute F to o by using the concept 'F'.

McDowell's account of the difference is compatible with this suggestion, since it focuses on capacities. Judgments by definition have propositional content, and they are made by "putting significances together" (2008, p. 9 typescript), where "significances" are correlated with objects and the properties attributed to them in the judgment. A perceptual experience with corresponding intuitional content, by contrast, results from exercising different capacities. Here is how McDowell describes the contrast:

"The unity of intuitional content is *given*, not a result of our putting significances together. Even if discursive exploitation of some content given in an intuition does not require one to acquire a new discursive capacity, one needs to carve out that content from the intuition's unarticulated content before one can put it together with other bits of content in discursive activity. Intuiting does not do this carving out for one." (ibid).

To entertain either intuitional and propositional content, the subject needs the capacity for predication. In both cases, the subject attributes a property to an object, using a concept of the property (and perhaps also a concept of the object – I’ll leave that issue aside). But there is a distinctively perceptual capacity for predication, and it differs from the capacities one needs to entertain propositional contents.

It would be productive to clarify the central notions here, since they characterize what’s supposed to be distinctive about perception. First, can intuitional and propositional contents produce equivalent accuracy conditions on experience?

Second, in what sense are significances separate in propositional content, but unanalyzed in intuitional content?

Compare a similar point made in the idiom of formats that are vehicles of representation. One might think that a propositional format uses two different vehicles to represent *o* and *F*, whereas an iconic format uses just one vehicle. By analogy, a single part of a picture represents both Ducko and its shape, where a sentence “Ducko is duck-shaped” has separate meaningful parts that refer to Ducko and denote the property of being duck-shaped. If you added that perceptual contents come in an iconic format, then there would be a unity to the perceptual representation not found in propositional formats.<sup>22</sup> And this conclusion sounds like McDowell’s conclusions about unity.

McDowell avoids the idiom of vehicles and formats, and perhaps thinks these notions only obscure things. But they allow us to express a point about perceptual distinctiveness seemingly similar to McDowell’s. So we’re back with the second question. In what does the unity of intuitional content consist, if not in the non-separateness of vehicle or representational format of the object and properties that are characterized by intuitional content?

### **3.2 Is direct awareness purely perceptual?**

What do we know a priori about perceptual relations? We can approach this question by considering an epistemically best case of object-seeing. Suppose seeing Ducko enables you to know that he’s duck-shaped. We can leave it open exactly what role your visual experience plays in enabling you to know this.

McDowell sometimes describes this type of case as “direct access to environmental facts” (e.g., 2006), which I’ll abbreviate by “direct perceptual awareness”, leaving implicit that it’s direct awareness of facts rather than just of objects. Peacocke calls the same thing “genuine perception” in (2018), and I’ll talk this way as well.

What kind of psychological processes underlying perception are compatible with direct awareness as McDowell construes it? For example, when we see a yellow banana as yellow and banana-shaped, but the yellowness of that banana doesn’t explain the information

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<sup>22</sup> As per Block (forthcoming) and Quilty-Dunn (2016) among others.

processing that produces the experience, can that kind of process underlie direct awareness or not?<sup>23</sup>

A principle that rules out any such route to direct awareness is the factive explanatory constraint (FEC):

(FEC) S is directly perceptually aware that o is F only if o's being F explains why o looks F to S.<sup>24</sup>

I'd like to ask whether McDowell accepts (FEC) as a condition on direct perceptual awareness. Can disclosing reality, revealing it, encountering it, or bringing it into view happen only when the right-hand side of (FEC) is true?

Some commitments of McDowell seem to favor accepting (FEC). Direct awareness is factive, and (FEC) entails that it is. This parallelism makes (FEC) a natural bridge principle from the idiom of direct awareness to the psychological processing that underlies such awareness. In addition, McDowell characterizes the route to perceptual experience as "something on the lines of a computation of a representation of part of the environment from a pair of arrays of intensities and wavelengths" (1994, 191). If the "initial arrays and wavelengths" were in turn explained by o's F-ness, when one is directly aware of it, then the computations McDowell describes as underlying direct awareness would be compatible with (FEC).

Independently of McDowell's commitments, the (FEC) might seem compelling as a way to rule out a type of coincidence known as "veridical property-illusion". Suppose that by stimulating a subject Simone's brain area V1 while she looks at a green cube, you accidentally induced in her an experience as of seeing a green cube, when otherwise she would see the cube as yellow. The intervention does not correct Simone's systematic error. But on the basis of the experience that the intervention helps produce, it would be natural for Simone to form the true belief that there is a green cube before her. Here, Simone perceives the cube, and it looks green to her, but she does not perceive its greenness.<sup>25</sup>

But there are also potential pressures to reject (FEC) that arise by considering how perceptual processing might work. It doesn't matter if it actually does work this way. Psychology is a source of imagination rather than authority here.

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<sup>23</sup> This question does not conflate creature-level perception with representations by perceptual systems—a conflation McDowell rightly warns against. "At the level of internal machinery it is useful to talk of sensory systems as information-processing devices", McDowell points out, "but for the animal its sensory systems are modes of openness to features of its environment." I agree with McDowell that information processing explains creature-level perception. "Information-processing characterizations of the internal machinery figure in explanation of how it can be that animals are in touch with their environment".

<sup>24</sup> A claim close to this one is defended by Peacocke (2018) as a gloss on 'genuine perception'. I implicitly all but endorse (FEC) in Siegel (2010) chapter 2. But the considerations here suggest to me that it's false, and the putative counter-examples I offer in my reply to Peacocke would apply to (FEC) as well (Siegel 2018)).

<sup>25</sup> Johnston's (2006) case of the twins in the Ames room has a similar structure.

The (FEC) rules out that the route to genuine perception could be holistic in the following way. Suppose that when you see a yellow banana, the ‘arrays of intensities and wavelengths’ that start off the visual processing are explained by the banana’s shape and texture, but not by its color. Drawing on stored information that things with such a shape and texture tend to be yellow, the visual system generates a representation of yellowness. Had the banana been greyish, you would have ended up with the same representation. Bananas are rarely grey, though, so your yellow-banana experience could not easily have been mistaken. (And even if the banana’s yellowness did play a more direct causal role, the modal facts about how easily you could be mistaken could be the same).

Here, the sub-personal patterns of sensitivity fractionate in a way that relies on combining information from a particular banana about its shape and texture with generalizations about the color that things with those shapes and textures tend to have. In this case, shape and texture are represented by early sensory inputs, whereas color is not. You end up experiencing a yellow banana as yellow, but with no explanatory role for the yellowness of that particular banana.

The process is a schematic version of cue combination.<sup>26</sup> Processes fitting this general schema are posited by some Bayesian theories of perception, such as Andy Clark’s theory of predictive coding, according to which probabilistic generalizations (learned either by the subject, by their sub-personal systems, or both) are used to interpret and infer which low-level information is in the environment.<sup>27</sup>

The process I’ve described need not be the only type of perceptual processing in the mind.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps it’s a condition on genuinely perceiving yellowness (and so perceiving in the epistemically best way) that the stored information that bananas are yellow is derived from cases in which yellowness plays a role more like the role of texture and shape, for instance. And non-Bayesian theories can allow such cue combination as well.

But (FEC) is a local constraint on each experience, not a global constraint on a subject’s experiences as a whole. As such, it rules out a type of processing that one can easily imagine getting off the ground once a subject has a well-founded stored information about the color of bananas. The (FEC) insists that in every case of genuine perception that *o* is *F*, the route to experience is explanatorily atomistic with respect to the properties you’re aware of. Your perceptual contact of *o*’s *F*-ness cannot piggyback on your perceptual contact with other properties. For each *F*, *o*’s *F*-ness (or the fact that *o* is *F*) has to explain why you have the experience. By contrast, cue combination would make the route to experience explanatorily holistic with respect to properties presented in experience. You could end up being presenting with *o* as *F* in experience, when *o* is *F*, and other conditions for knowing are seemingly met, even without the fact that *o* is *F* playing a causal or explanatory role in

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<sup>26</sup> For a clear discussion of cue combination see Orlandi and Lee (2019). Thanks to Geoff Lee for helpful discussion.

<sup>27</sup> Clark (2016)

<sup>28</sup> Contrary to Clark, who has globalist aspirations for his theory.

producing the experience. This situation would be a failure of the explanatory atomism on the right-hand side of (FEC).

Once we identify the schema that puts pressure on explanatory atomism, we can vary the types of stored information that might interact with initial sensory inputs. For instance, instead of information stored in the visual system that links color to shape and texture, the stored information could take the form of person-level states such as beliefs. The resulting question would then be whether it could count as an epistemically best case experience. If we found out the processing frequently worked in a way that was explanatorily holistic, and therefore at odds with the right-hand side of (FEC), would it necessarily compromise our epistemic situation? Should we conclude that we are in those cases veridically illuding o's F-ness, rather than genuinely perceiving that o is F?

My answer is that it wouldn't. I'd like to ask how each of my interlocutors answer this question.

If they deny the (FEC) by allowing that explanatorily holistic processing can lead to genuine perception (aka McDowell's direct perceptual awareness), then those experiences may no longer delimit the purely perceptual part of the mind. They will therefore be unsuited to play a role in grounding other forms of intentionality and so will not be heirs of acquaintance. Perceptual experience and perceptual distinctiveness will be dissociated, leaving open the idea that if there is a distinctively perceptual part of the mind, its boundaries may be sub-personal.

These mismatches mark a major difference from Russellian acquaintance and its heirs. Since the (FEC) would rule them out by ruling out explanatorily holistic processing, there is indirect pressure for those who seek heirs of acquaintance to accept it.

Summing up and zooming out: if McDowell, Brewer, or Gupta accept the (FEC), then the scope of genuine perception could turn out to be much smaller than they each seem sometimes to suggest, if it turns out that some perceptual processing is explanatorily holistic. If any of my interlocutors think we know a priori that the scope of genuine perception is extensive, they would have to rule out a priori that perceptual processing could be explanatorily holistic as matter of course.

By contrast, if any of them reject (FEC), the appealingly extensive scope of genuine perception can be preserved. But rejecting (FEC) means allowing that that perceptual experience may not reflect purely perceptual capacities.

I've highlighted aspects of Brewer and McDowell's thought that aim at the idea that perceptual experience is an exercise of distinctively perceptual capacities, and the routes to perceptual experience engage purely perceptual parts of the mind, unaffected by non-perceptual person-level mental states. I conclude that their theories and methods create competing pressures for them both to accept (FEC) and to reject it. This instability makes their construals of perceptual experience uneasy heirs of acquaintance.



#### **4. Phenomenal character and epistemic contributions**

All of our approaches to the epistemic role of experience draw on our other commitments about the structure of phenomenal character and perceptual relations. So far I've focused primarily on those structures. "Appearances" for Gupta constitute phenomenal character, and appearances are defined in relation to presentational complexes, which in turn are things that manifest appearances.<sup>29</sup>

Guptarian appearances do not consist in perceptual relations, but such relations play an indispensable role in the analysis of phenomenal character, as they do according to McDowell and Brewer. My first question about Guptarian appearances concerns their structure.

##### **4.1 Are Guptarian appearances predicatively structured?**

In Gupta's framework, object-seeing is a relation between two parts of perceptual experience: a presentational complex, which contains things presented to the subject in experience, and the appearances which are manifested by those things. If you see Ducko, then Ducko belongs to the presentational complex, and he appears to you a certain way. So in Gupta's terms, when you see Ducko and he looks a specific way to you, Ducko manifests an appearance to you. This manifestation relation is a perceptual relation, and object-seeing is constituted by an instance of it.<sup>30</sup>

The Guptarian manifestation relation is contingent. A presentational complex does not determine how any of the things in it appear to a subject. "Manifestation" is a label for the etiology of appearances, and Gupta defines appearances as dimensions of similarity between experiences, which is captured in his "SubjIdentity" relation (as he puts it: "appearances capture identities along a ...subjective dimension." (p. 49)). But neither the manifestation relation nor the SubjIdentity relation specifies the internal structure of appearances. What internal structure do they have, according to Gupta?

When Gupta describes appearances by saying "the cube 'looks smaller'" (p. 49), smallness is attributed to the cube, and one can undergo such an experience whether cube really is small or not. Appearances, then, seem to be structured predicatively.

But Gupta also allows that appearances can "mirror the structure of a presentational complex". Since presentational complexes contain multiple elements, their structure would seem to reflect the relationships between the elements. And Gupta holds that items of any category can belong to the presentational complex.<sup>31</sup> Which relationships are these? How could appearances both be structured predicatively, and isomorphic to the structure of the presentational complex?

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<sup>29</sup> All page numbers in this section refer to Gupta (2018) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>30</sup> More exactly, object-seeing and the manifestation relation both have Ducko as a relatum, but object-seeing has a subject on the other end whereas the manifestation relation has appearances. Since you can't see an object (in the sense we've been discussing) without it appearing to you some way, according to Gupta, S's object-seeing *o* is constituted in part by the relation between *o* and the appearances *o* manifests.

<sup>31</sup> Gupta (2019), p. 130.

#### **4.2. Guptarian views and appearances**

According to Gupta, perceptual experiences contribute to rationality only by contributing to the transitions between experiences and judgments, where these transitions are from experiences together with non-perceptual ingredients in the mind that he calls “views”. Views include beliefs, conjectures, hypothetical commitments, ostensive definitions and even states of aporia (fn 3, 2018, CE ch. 10), and in his (2006) book *Empiricism and Experience*, views are “the totality of that person’s concepts, conceptions, and beliefs”. As Gupta puts it, experiences “render rational transitions from views to judgments”, as opposed to “bestowing a rational status” on those judgments, such as the status of being knowledge. Gupta calls this role for experiences “the hypothetical given” and compares that role to a “valid argument schema” (p. 37).

Let’s return to explanatorily holistic processing (from section 3.2). It allows that you could see an object *o* when it’s *F*, and when you experience *o* as *F*, but *o*’s *F*-ness does not explain why you have that experience. Instead, you sub-personally represent a set of properties *G*, and then you or your perceptual system infer that *o* has *F* given that something (possibly *o*, or possibly the scene surrounding it) has *G*. Such inferences draw on stored information that *G*’s are likely to be or to be near *F*’s.

Gupta allows that views can influence appearances which are manifested by a presentational complex (p. 157, CE), so if stored information counts as belonging to a Guptarian view, then Gupta allows explanatorily holistic processing leading to appearances. And in general, when a subject combines with appearances with an “appropriate” view, she can know that things are the ways they appear (p. 152, CE).

To test the ways in which Gupta allows views to influence appearances, compare two appearances that can combine with an appropriate view to yield knowledge that a bird is in a bush. In both cases, the subject draws on the same capacity to recognize birds, but the role of this expertise is different each time. In the first route to experience, the subject’s expertise helps determine the appearance, not by directing attention to the bird, but by helping to generate the subjective character of the experience through a computation of the sort described earlier. In the second route to the experience, the appearances are generated independently of the subject’s expertise, and subsequently combine with the expertise when the subject forms a judgment that a bird is in the bush. Does Gupta recognize any epistemic difference between the status of the judgment in these two cases?

#### **4.3. Gupta’s analogy with modus ponens**

A consequence of Gupta’s framework is that what it’s rational to believe in response to a perceptual experience can be sensitive to other things you believed antecedently. This much seems correct. When I see the person across from me on the subway, it can be rational for me to suspect that they play the piano or sculpt clay by the look of their hands, but only if some part of my Guptarian view connects the way the hands look with sculpting or piano-playing.

Another consequence concerns the analysis of rational dynamics. How should the mind as it was at 5 o’clock change in response to a perceptual experience had at 5:01? Gupta writes,

“rational dynamics are best understood in terms of shifting views” (fn 12, p. 40). I find a tension between this approach to analyzing rational dynamics and Gupta’s analogy between the rational role of experience and modus ponens.

Let’s start with Gupta’s analogy, according to which experiences and modus ponens show how conclusions of some sort depend on premises or views. As Gupta sees it, one can reason from experience in accordance with modus ponens, and the thing analogous to a conclusion is a perceptual judgment made in response to the experience. Gupta draws this analogy by identifying judgments that are supposed to be made rational by an experience, given a view.

The analogy with modus ponens suggests that there are always other rational options. Modus ponens puts constraints on the combinations of mental states we may legitimately be in, and there are multiple ways to meet these constraints. If you start out believing P, and then come to think that P entails Q, rationality leaves you with several options besides concluding Q.

When we consider the full panoply of options, not all of them involve changing your beliefs. If Q’s extraordinariness makes it rational for you to rethink your commitment to P, part of rational dynamics could be to remain in inquiry. Here, no shift in your view regarding Q need have occurred – you might never have considered Q before coming to think that P entails it. How can this kind of rational dynamic be expressed in Gupta’s framework?

Gupta allows that the transitions rendered rational by experience include (besides judgment) hypothetical commitments and “aporetic” states in which “a problem is recognized but not yet resolved” (p. 100, 326-28 CE). Since rational dynamics are shifts in view, views can include aporetic states, and changes in views include transitions into an out of aporia.<sup>32</sup>

But aporia, construed as a state in which a “problem is recognized but not yet resolved” does not account for all the things besides judgment and hypothetical commitments that could be outputs of rational transitions. Suppose you see a segment of something grey, crinkly and oblong beneath a row of shrubs. Because of your beliefs about what elephant trunks look like, when you see the grey thing “Wow, an elephant!” immediately passes through your mind. So now you have entertained the hypothesis that it’s an elephant trunk.

I think such a case could include an experience with the content “it’s an elephant”. Gupta would disagree, on the grounds that the concept ‘elephant’ is an element of a view and so “wow, an elephant!” can’t characterize experience on its own. It can only be a response to experience.

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<sup>32</sup> Since aporetic states are a form of suspended judgment, here Gupta differs from analyses of suspended judgment that see it as a negative condition rather than its own type of mental state, siding with Friedman (2013).

It is rational in this case for the elephant hypothesis to become salient in your mind, but its mere salience is not yet a state of aporia, and it isn't a hypothetical commitment either. So what element of a Guptarian view could constitute the becoming-salient of the elephant hypothesis? If there is no such element, then either entertaining the hypothesis is not a rational response to experience, or else rational dynamics are not always changes in Guptarian view.

Once the elephant hypothesis is salient, other ways of changing your mind seem rational as well. It could be rational to reconsider your belief about what elephant trunks look like, or about what experience you just had (or are still having) when you seemed to see the crinkly grey thing. It could be rational to look more closely to see whether it really is crinkled in the way an elephant trunk would be (according to your view). Here, you'd be seeking out more information. Any of these responses could belong to rational dynamics, but none of them seem to constitute aporia, or hypothetical commitments, or judgments.

Thoughts like these and our responses to them are an integral part of rational dynamics because they belong to rational inquiry. In Gupta's framework, rational dynamics are changes in view, and so analyzing the rational transitions into inquiry, the framework forces us to decompose inquiry into distinct elements of views. Gupta seems to construe views as static features of the mind that can change, whereas some rational responses fall instead into the category of mental actions, including reconsiderations, paying closer attention, or seeking more information.

Another potential challenge for Gupta's framework concerns how best to analyze the resilience of antecedent views in light of new inputs from experience.<sup>33</sup> How easy or hard should be to adjust your antecedent belief that an elephant is unlikely to be in the bushes, in light of your experience?

A natural way for resilience to be reflected in Gupta's framework would be to include a measure of how powerful experience is, relative to an element of a view. For instance, suppose one's Guptarian view includes a rational belief that elephants are unlikely to be nearby (element (i)), and knowledge of how elephants look (element (ii)). One way to express the idea that these views should not be resilient in response to experience would allow experiences to carry different weights, depending on what other commitments you combine with them. For instance, experience-plus-element-(ii) could have the power to override element (i). This approach would not have to regard experiences as a minimal unit of epistemic power. But in order to interact epistemically with elements like (i) and (ii), experiences would have to attribute various properties to the things you see, and thereby have a predicative structure.

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<sup>33</sup> On resilience of belief see Lawlor, Joyce, Skyrms

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