The Relational View of Experience

1. The Explanatory Role of Experience

I have been arguing that experience of objects has an explanatory role to play: it explains our ability to think demonstratively about perceived objects. Experience of a perceived object is what provides you with knowledge of the reference of a demonstrative referring to it. In this chapter I want to look at the way in which we should characterize the phenomenal content of experience; that is, how we should give the most direct and explicit characterization of the qualitative nature of particular experiential states. I do not think we can expect there to be one uniform style of characterization that applies equally to all conscious states: to seeing a rainbow and to feeling anxious, to having a word on the tip of your tongue and to remembering an autumn afternoon from years ago. In this chapter, I want to focus on the characterization of our perceptual experience of objects. What is important about this case is that we have a way of telling when the characterization is correct. Whatever else is true of it, experience of objects has to explain our ability to think about those very objects. So a characterization of the phenomenal content of experience of objects has to show how it is that experience, so described, can be what makes it possible for us to think about those objects demonstratively.

Suppose, for example, you hold that experience of objects is a matter merely of having sensations, and that a characterization of the phenomenal content of experience is exhausted by a characterization of sensation. Then you leave it opaque how it is that experience of objects could make it possible to think about them. At best, the subject possessed of such sensations could formulate descriptions such as 'whatever is causing this sensation'. It is, on this view, opaque how experience of an object could constitute the kind of simple acquaintance with the object that provides knowledge of the reference of a simple demonstrative.

In this chapter, I will argue that if we are to acknowledge the explanatory role of experience of objects, we have to appeal to what I will call a Relational View of experience. On a Relational View, the qualitative character of the experience is constituted by the qualitative character of the scene perceived: object is a simple character in the Ki reference.

Of course, I might hold the content of perception is again at the forefront of explaining our perceptions. Sometimes I hear noises coming from somewhere. There's never a time when the noises are coming from another house. I could say: The following relational characterization of all the noises you might hear is ever catching.

Suppose now that you formed the hypothesis of an existence of an object, you might refer to the object. You could have hypothesized one way, but you postulated another way in the explanation of objects.

The contrary: look at the objects with pr...
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I will argue that only this view, on which experience of an object is a simple relation holding between perceiver and object, can characterize the kind of acquaintance with objects that provides knowledge of reference.

Of course, we have so far not begun to survey the various views you might hold here. In particular, I have not mentioned views on which the content of perception is one or another kind of representational state. But I postpone considering such views for a moment, in order to look once again at the basic point: that experience of objects has a role to play in explaining our knowledge of reference. Suppose that you live in one of a terraced row of houses, and you sometimes hear noises from the house next door. Being of an enquiring turn of mind, you formulate hypotheses about what objects are to be found next door. There's a couple, you conjecture, a man and a woman, though you never see them directly—there are two cars outside, you occasionally hear noises coming simultaneously from different parts of the house next door, and sometimes there are raised voices. You conjecture that there's a model railway next door—that's the only hypothesis you can think of to explain some of what you hear. And so on. Not all the objects you posit are postulated as noise-producers: for example, you might postulate a mirror at a certain place, in explaining the occasional sound of an electric razor. If you are of a formal turn of mind, you might write down your hypotheses. You could say: There are objects \( x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n \) which stand to one another in the following relations: \( \ldots \), and which stand in the following relations to the audible phenomena: \( \ldots \). You could, in effect, give a functional characterization of all the particular objects you postulate as being next door. And you might test and confirm your hypotheses over a long period, without ever catching sight of those things.

Suppose now that the day finally arrives when you do get a look inside the house. What does this add to your knowledge? Perhaps the hypotheses you formed had been amply confirmed long before your look inside, so the existence of objects with these particular functional roles does not get significant further confirmation from your observation. Nor is it that you can now refer to those particular objects but could not refer to them before. You could have referred to those particulars before. The functional roles you postulated were, so to speak, token functional roles postulated ultimately in the explanation of particular auditory phenomena. So you already had the conceptual materials to identify uniquely each of the relevant objects.

The contrast between the knowledge you have now, on the basis of a look at the objects, and the knowledge you had before of the existence of objects with particular functional roles, is that when you see the thing, you
are confronted by the individual substance itself. On seeing it, you no longer have knowledge of the object merely as the postulated occupant of a particular functional role. Your experience of the object, when you see it, provides you with knowledge of the categorical grounds of the collections of dispositions you had earlier postulated.

These remarks fill out something of the sense in which conscious attention to an object can provide you with knowledge of the reference of a demonstrative referring to it. Experience of the object can confront you with the individual substance itself, the categorical basis of the dispositional relations in which the object may stand to other things. The question to which I now turn is how to characterize the phenomenal content of experience, so that we can see how it can play this role.

2. Relational vs. Representational Views: the Pane of Glass

We can draw a contrast between what I will call Relational and Representational Views of the phenomenal character of perception. On a Relational View, the phenomenal character of your experience, as you look around the room, is constituted by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as colour and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you. On this Relational View, two ordinary observers standing in roughly the same place, looking at the same scene, are bound to have experiences with the same phenomenal character. For the phenomenal character of the experiences is constituted by the layout and characteristics of the very same external objects. We have the ordinary notion of a 'view', as when you drag someone up a mountain trail, insisting that he will 'enjoy the view'. In this sense, thousands of people might visit the very same spot and enjoy the very same view. You characterize the experience they are having by saying which view they are enjoying. On the Relational picture, this is the same thing as describing the phenomenal character of their experiences.

On what I will call a Representational analysis, in contrast, perception involves being in representational states, and the phenomenal character of your experience is constituted not by the way your surroundings are, but by the contents of your representational states. One way to see the contrast between the two views is to consider the following cases. Suppose that a dagger is hanging in the air before you, and you are looking at it closely. You are visually attending to it. There is a dagger to which you are consciously attending. What can we say to compare and contrast this with the case in which you are having a vivid hallucination of a dagger, and this hallucination is occupying your attention? Just to be fully explicit, the case I have in mind matched as closely as possible by the ordinary dagger: you seem any more convinced of its existence - and of the fact that you are convincing yourself of its existence.

On the Representational view, the individual's experiential state is constituted by the representational content that you are enjoying. On this view, hallucination is replacing the sense that there is some constituent of the hallucination that the ordinary observer would not have in mind.

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have in mind is one in which the ordinary case of attention to a dagger is matched as closely as possible by the hallucinatory experience. That is, if the ordinary dagger seems heavy and substantial, so too does the hallucinatory dagger; the hallucination does not, for example, shimmer unduly, or seem any more bloodstained than daggers usually do.

On the Representational View, the representational content of your experience may be exactly the same in both cases, so the phenomenal character of your experience may be exactly the same in both cases. Of course, the individuation of representational contents may be thought to depend on factors concerning the environment. But given a single background environment, you could have representational contents relating to daggers and their characteristics whether or not there actually was a dagger in front of you. So the phenomenal character of your experience could be exactly the same in both cases.

All that is different between the two cases is the way in which the representational contents are caused on these occasions. In the veridical case, the representations are caused by a dagger. In the hallucinatory case, the representational contents are but images of the heat-pressed brain.

On the Relational View, in contrast, there is nothing intrinsic in common between the cases in which there is a dagger to which you are consciously attending, and the case in which you are just having a hallucination. In the case in which there is a dagger, the object itself is a constituent of your experience. The experience is quite different in the case of the hallucination, since there is no object to be a constituent of your experience.

This way of describing the Relational View recalls so-called 'disjunctive' theories of perception. As put forward by Paul Snowdon, the idea is that we can analyse what it is for someone, S, to have a visual experience as of something being F, by a disjunction. That is, there is no single type of state, 'having a visual experience as of something being F'. The notion of an experience as of something being F covers two quite different types of state. One is the case in which the object is there, and is a constituent of the experience. The other is the merely hallucinatory or illusory state. We are not to think of 'the experience itself' as something which could intrinsically be there, just the same, whether the external object existed or not. Snowdon's analysis of 'S has a visual experience as of something being F' was: either there is something which looks to S to be F, or it is to F as if there is something which looks to him (S) to be F (Snowdon 1980:1:185). The idea is that visual experiences are relational: the object perceived is a constituent of the conscious experience itself. It would not be unreasonable to call this view 'naive realism'. The point of calling it that is to say that on this view, the relation 'S perceives O' is taken as primitive: it is not
analysed in some such terms as ‘O causes S to have an experiential content as of something’s being F’.

Any such naive realism has a striking implication for the way in which we think of the relation between cognitive processing and experience of objects. Notice first that there is a sense in which cognitive processing is a ‘common factor’, an element found in both veridical and hallucinatory processing. Whether or not there is an external object being seen, the same features may be located on just the same feature maps, and they may be bound together in just the same way. Now those familiar with scientific work on vision sometimes assume that consciousness of the world is what happens when at some stage in the cognitive processing, the contents being processed acquire the extra dimension of ‘being subjectively available’. The tendency is to suppose that it is the very same contents that are cognitively processed as figure in the contents of consciousness (cf. Marr 1982: 73). This way of thinking of things carries with it an immediate commitment to the ‘common factor’ view of perception. Since the cognitive contents function as common factors, the experiential contents will be common factors too, exactly the same whether the external object exists or not. If, though, the Relational View is correct, we should not think of the experiential contents as common factors. We have to think of the external object, in cases of veridical perception, as a constituent of the experience.

On a Relational View of perception, we have to think of cognitive processing as ‘revealing’ the world to the subject; that is, as making it possible for the subject to experience particular external objects. Without the cognitive processing, there would be no experience of the objects; without a solution to the Binding Problem by the cognitive system, there would be no experience of objects. But without the objects, there would be no experience of objects either. On the Relational View of experience, we have to think of experience of objects as depending jointly on the cognitive processing and the environment. Experience, on this view, cannot be understood simply as a matter of cognitive contents becoming subjectively available.

There are some analogies that might help in dispelling the idea that the existence of cognitive processing in vision establishes the correctness of a Representationalist View of experience (for an unusually explicit statement of that idea, see Smythies 1999). One analogy is that the Relational View thinks of perception as like viewing the world through a pane of glass. It would plainly be a mistake to hold a Representationalist View of panes of glass: to hold that the only way in which it can happen that you see a dagger through a pane of glass is by having a representation of a dagger appear on the glass itself. (This representation on the glass would be a ‘common factor’ which could be there whether or not there really was an external dagger.) So the analogue of a Relational View for seeing through the glass is the idea that processing is looking through a window. Representations of images in vision are that in vision of the world: you abandon the television set, information implicitly appears through the glass, or on the screen. But processing in vision may be helpful, which, like glass, highly volatile, remain transparent and require viewing. The construction of a snapshot of the world might be a visualization. You might think the brain is a complex, characteristically innately complex, kind of computer in order that you can see the world.

If we think of vision as an experience, you might think of your visual experience as like the experience this point does not require: consistent with seeing through a pane of glass will be seeing through a pane of glass. That does not mean you are just a mist. You see the fact that there is a content.

You might
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windows is surely correct. But, the intuition runs, the existence of cognitive processing is incompatible with the 'glass' model: the whole point about looking through a window is that the window does not have to construct a representation of the world outside. But what the study of the brain tells us is that in vision, the brain is actively involved in constructing a representation of the world. Therefore, following this line of thought, we have to abandon the 'pane of glass' model. The obvious alternative model is the television set, which does indeed laboriously construct an image from the information input to it. Now both these models are homuncular—they implicitly appeal to the perceiver who is looking at the scene through the glass, or on the screen. So neither of these models should be taken too seriously. But if you are caught by the idea that the existence of brain processing in vision means that a Representationalist View must be correct, it may be helpful to consider another analogy. Suppose we have a medium which, like glass, can be transparent. But suppose that, unlike glass, it is highly volatile, and needs constant adjustment and recalibration if it is to remain transparent in different contexts. Suppose, in fact, that the adjustment required is always sensitive to the finest details of the scene being viewed. The upshot of the adjustment, in each case, is still not the construction of a representation on the medium of the scene being viewed; the upshot of the adjustment is simply that the medium becomes transparent. You might think of visual processing as a bit like that. It is not that the brain is constructing a conscious inner representation whose intrinsic character is independent of the environment. It is, rather, that there is a kind of complex adjustment that the brain has to undergo, in each context, in order that you can be visually related to the things around you; so that you can see them, in other words.

If we think of visual processing in this way, we can, of course, acknowledge that the adjustment and recalibration may not always yield full transparency. You may, for example, be looking at the world with a jaundiced eye, so that everything you see seems to have a yellowish cast. In that case your visual experience would not have exactly the same content as the visual experience of an ordinary observer looking at the same scene. But this point does not tell in favour of a Representational view; it is entirely consistent with the Relational View. The scene through a pane of yellowish glass will be different to the scene through a pane of purely transparent glass. That does not show that in either case the transparency should be understood as a matter of a representation being inscribed on the glass. It is just a mistake to suppose that the Relational View is undermined by the fact that the idiosyncracies of the perceiver may affect phenomenal content.

You might wonder whether the idea of an egocentric frame of reference
for conscious vision is consistent with the Relational View. But the Relational View says only that the qualitative character of conscious experience is constituted by the characteristics and layout of the objects one is seeing. It is consistent with that to say that only certain of their characteristics constitute one’s experience of them. For example, hidden characteristics of the objects will play no role in constituting one’s experience of them. Hence, the egocentric spatial layout of the scene may play a role in constituting the qualitative character of one’s experience of the scene. So long as the ordinary notion of a ‘view’ is coherent, it is coherent to suppose that the egocentric layout of the scene could constitute the content of someone’s experience of it.

Consequently, we can maintain a Relational View of experience but still hold that conscious attention singles out its targets in a way that is commensurable with the underlying information-processing used in verifying and acting on the basis of propositions about a demonstrated object.

3. The Argument from the Explanatory Role of Experience

Since both the Relational and Representational Views of the phenomenal character of experience have to be taken seriously, and since they cannot both be correct, how are we to decide between them? Both views will say that they give immediately recognizable descriptions of ordinary experience. Neither view is likely to generate a direct contradiction with some fact of ordinary experience. So how are we to decide? I think that the only way to proceed is to ask why we need the notion of the phenomenal character of experience. We have to look at the role that the notion plays in our reflective thinking, we have to ask what the point is of the notion. I have been arguing that experience is what explains our grasp of substantial objects. Something like this view is implicit in recent arguments for a disjunctivistic view of experience. As we saw, on a disjunctivistic view of experience, there is no experiential factor in common between the case in which you see an object, and the case in which you have a hallucination of such an object. When you see an object, the object itself is a constituent of your experience. The argument for this view is given by John McDowell in these words (he refers to the common factor view as the ‘Cartesian’ view):

The threat that the Cartesian picture poses to our hold on the world comes out most dramatically in this: that within the Cartesian picture there is a serious question about how it can be that experience, conceived from its own point of view, is not blank or blind, but purports to be revelatory of the world we live in. (McDowell 1986: 152)