

Philosophical Books Book Symposium

Summary of Perception and Reason¹

What is the role of conscious perceptual experience in the acquisition of empirical knowledge? My central claim is that a proper account of the way in which perceptual experiences contribute to our understanding of the most basic beliefs about particular things in the mind-independent world around us reveals how such experiences provide peculiarly fundamental reasons for such beliefs. There are, I claim, epistemic requirements upon the very possibility of empirical belief. The crucial epistemological role of experiences lies in their essential contribution to the subject's understanding of certain perceptual demonstrative contents, simply grasping which provides him with a reason to endorse them in belief. Part I of my book argues that this must be so; Part II explains in detail how it is so.

This is in stark contrast with the standard approach within analytic epistemology, on which a person's possession of beliefs about the mind-independent world, and especially his understanding of the contents of these beliefs, is taken entirely for granted; the project then being to offer an account of the further, independent, conditions which such beliefs must meet if they are to be cases of knowledge. My contention is that perceptual experiences must provide reasons for empirical beliefs if there are to be any determinate beliefs about particular objects in the world at all; and they do so.

The argument of Part I has two main premises. First, the most basic empirical beliefs have their contents only in virtue of standing in certain relations with perceptual experiences. Second, only reason-giving relations between experiences and beliefs are

¹References to Brewer, 1999, are indicated throughout simply by 'P&R'.

capable of playing this crucial content-determining role. Thus, given that we do have such beliefs, about particular things in the mind-independent world around us:

(R) Perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs.

Drawing upon the first chapter of Strawson's Individuals (1959), the Strawson Argument is intended to establish the first of these two premises. The epistemic possibility of the massive reduplication elsewhere in the universe of any sector of the physical world as purely qualitatively described, rules out knowledgeable reference to spatial particulars by description alone. Successful descriptive reference must be anchored by more direct demonstrative reference, which depends essentially upon an experiential presentation to the subject of the particular mind-independent thing in question. So the possibility of beliefs about mind-independent particulars depends upon the most basic such beliefs' standing in certain content-fixing relations with perceptual experiences of those very objects.

The Switching Argument is intended to establish the second main premise above. Non-reason-giving relations between perceptual experiences and such basic empirical beliefs could not possibly serve this content-determining role. For such relations would necessarily leave the subject quite ignorant of which mind-independent object his belief is supposed to be about, in a way which is incompatible with his having the understanding required for this to be a belief of his, about just that thing, at all. I consider three prominent attempts by proponents of non-reason-giving content-determining relations between perceptual experiences and empirical beliefs to avoid this objection. The first two aim to reinstate the subject's knowledge of the relevant worldly semantic values within this framework; and the third aims to illustrate the way in which no such knowledge is necessary for the understanding required for possession of perfectly determinate empirical beliefs. All three are found wanting.

Next, I draw out the fatal consequences of thesis (R) for any reliabilist account of perceptual knowledge. Classical foundationalism and classical coherentism at least attempt to elucidate how (R) might be true. They both offer what I call a second-order account, on which perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs only in virtue of the subject's second-order reflection upon the reliability of the first-order process by which such experiences produce such beliefs, where the first and second orders are independent of each other in the sense that he might equally have acquired the same beliefs by just the same first-order method yet not have had the second-order knowledge in question. I argue that they are both unsuccessful.

In order to give a satisfying elucidation of the truth of (R), then, as I believe we must, we should look to a first-order account, on which the truth of (R) emerges directly out of a correct account of a person's possession of certain beliefs about the mind-independent world around him, out of an elaboration of what is involved in his grasping their determinate empirical contents, rather than from any independent requirement upon his second-order reflection upon the process by which he acquires such beliefs.

Part II of the book contains my development of a specific such first-order account of (R). The key idea is that a person's most basic empirical beliefs have essentially experiential contents, as I argued in Part I, of a kind such that his mere grasp of these contents provides him with a reason to endorse them in belief. As an important preliminary, I argue, that reasons require conceptual contents. That is to say, a person has a reason for believing something only if he is in some mental state or other with a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself must possess and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument, or of an inference of some other kind (e.g. inductive or abductive). The Basic Argument for this claim turns upon the condition that something provides a reason for a person to endorse some content in belief only if he is in a position to recognize its status as a reason for that belief. Only so is its status as a

reason causally relevant in the right way to his acquisition or retention of that belief for this to constitute his reason for believing what he does. I discuss a number of important considerations in favour of the view that perceptual experiences have non-conceptual representational contents, in virtue of which they nevertheless provide reasons of the required kind for the subject's empirical beliefs to which they give rise. All are in my view wanting.

My next question is this: how exactly do perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs? My answer is that they furnish the subject with certain essentially experiential demonstrative contents - 'that (perceptually presented thing) is thus' (fully conceptual, as they must be) - his grasp of which (defeasibly) provides him with a reason to endorse them in belief. For a person's grasp of such contents, as referring to the mind-independent objects which they do, and predicating the mind-independent properties which they do, essentially involves his appreciation of them as the joint upshot of the way things are anyway, in the mind-independent world around him, and his current point of view upon them and other relevant circumstances of perception. That is to say, he necessarily understands that his current apprehension that things are thus and so is in part due to the very fact that they are. He therefore recognizes the relevant content as his apprehension of the facts, his epistemic openness to the way things mind-independently are out there.

I go on to clarify the epistemological outlook which arises from my positive elucidation of the truth of (R), and also to offer further defence against a number of key objections. First, I explain the position of my own views in the context of the standard opposition between foundationalist and coherentist theories of perceptual knowledge. This brings out precisely the sense in which I succeed in capturing the intuition that perception is a basic source of knowledge about the mind-independent spatial world. Second, I consider two broadly sceptical objections: (a) from the possibility of perceptual imagination; and (b) from the possibility of perceptual error. Third, I assess whether my

own position is in any way susceptible to objections parallel to those which I myself direct at its classical foundationalist opponents. Fourth, I discuss the way in which I am able to capture the intuitive phenomenon of an attentional foreground and background in perceptual consciousness.

Finally, I discuss a number of developments and consequences of my position. First, there is the very important issue of the relation between the basic, essentially experiential, perceptual demonstrative contents which I have been considering up to this point, and the more detached, linguistically articulated and categorized judgements which a person more standardly makes on the basis of perception, and which constitute the normal expression of his perceptual knowledge about the world around him. Second, I argue that my account entails a version of Russell's Principle of Acquaintance (1917, p. 159), which I elucidate, on which singular reference is possible only to objects about which the subject is in a position to acquire, or to express, non-inferential knowledge. This enables me to place my own position in the context, both of Russell's and what is probably the orthodox reaction to it. Finally, I exploit this version of the Principle of Acquaintance to sketch what seems to me to be a fully satisfying response to an important objection to the possibility of combining a so-called 'externalist' theory of empirical content, of the kind which I myself favour and draw on in my account of perceptual knowledge, with a plausible account of a person's knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs.

An overall message of the book is that the key to understanding perceptual knowledge lies in exploring the interconnections between the philosophical logic and epistemology of perceptual demonstrative thought. Much recent work, both on the nature of empirical concepts and on empirical knowledge, has in my view suffered, both by ignoring the central importance of demonstratives, and by focusing either upon epistemological issues to the exclusion of questions in philosophical logic (broadly construed), or vice versa. I hope to give some illustration at least of the benefits to both

areas of adopting a far more integrated approach, united by its focus upon the crucial level of perceptual demonstrative thought.

Reply to Ayers

Although there is a good deal of agreement between us about the correct approach to answering some of the most central questions concerning perception, Michael Ayers presents a sustained and detailed critique of my claim that reasons require conceptual contents. The critique is further sharpened by his accompanying sketch of what he regards as the natural and superior non-conceptualist alternative, which aims also to capture what we both regard as a central insight in avoiding the pitfalls of classical foundationalism and coherentism, reliabilism and scepticism. I am not persuaded by his critique; and I still fail to see how his non-conceptualist account is supposed to secure the reason-giving role of perceptual experiences in relation to empirical beliefs. I begin, though, with some brief comments about his disambiguation of my definition of the conceptual. I certainly said too little about these matters in the book; and they are of some importance in responding to Ayers' later comments.

He is right that I interpret my definition in such a way that animals' and infants' mental states are not conceptual, and that the kind of inarticulate 'inference' which animals may go in for is not really inference. As I am using the notions of belief and judgement, then, they do not have beliefs or make judgements. The contradiction between this claim and our ordinary way of thinking of animal and infant experience and mentality is less stark than Ayers suggests, though. For I grant that animals and infants may represent the world around them in certain ways, in virtue of their perceptual sensitivity to its salient features and the role this plays in the control and co-ordination of their behaviour. Nevertheless, the norm of correctness for such representations is simply their success in meeting the creature's needs, whereas the norm of correctness for belief and judgement, as these are the paradigms of conceptual states, is mind-independent truth, which may, of course, diverge quite radically from success. Valid inference preserves this norm of truth; and conceptual structure is what underwrites valid inference.

So the concern with truth is certainly present in my definition of the conceptual; but I should have been more explicit about the contrast with animal and infant representation.

Ayers presents my Basic Argument (P&R, ch. 5, esp. 5.1-2) for the thesis that reasons require conceptual contents quite fairly. He then suggests that this is more plausibly taken as a reductio of its premise that giving reasons for belief always involves reference to a valid backing inference with that belief's content as conclusion. For I myself claim that perceptual beliefs are both rationally well grounded and non-inferential. Perceptual beliefs are indeed non-inferential, on my view, in the sense that the subject's reasons for holding them do not consist in her recognizing that their contents follow from premises, already endorsed in belief, and for which she has prior and independent justification. Nevertheless, the existence of a backing inference is relevant to their rational grounding, since it is crucial that the beliefs in question share their content with perceptual experience. Although the latter is unendorsed, the former follows from it; and the beliefs in question would not be reasonable otherwise. This combination, of a genuine dependence on the validity of a simple backing inference, with the absence of any need for prior and independent justification for its premises, is possible in this case, because it is essential to the subject's grasp of the content in question in experience that she should recognize that this is the joint upshot of things being just that way in the world, and her point of view upon them and other relevant circumstances of perception. This is the analogy with the a priori: simply entertaining these basic perceptual demonstrative contents gives her reason to endorse them in belief.

Ayers develops his central arguments against my conceptualism in the context of a 'common sense' comparison between pictures and (linguistic) descriptions. As I understand the discussion, the key premise is that descriptions and pictures are incommensurable in the following sense: "there are, in principle, indefinitely many ways of illustrating any description [quite faithfully], and the content of any picture is inexhaustible by a finite set of propositions" (p. *). His first argument concludes from the

close relation between pictorial content and perceptual content that perceptual content is likewise incommensurable with descriptive content, and is therefore non-conceptual. A second, corollary line of argument builds upon this, moving from the initial thought that description cannot exhaust the reality described to the claim that description cannot exhaust reality as it is perceived, and then, via the idea that reality as it is perceived is precisely what is supposed to be captured by the content of perceptual experience, to the conclusion that this perceptual content is therefore non-conceptual. I take these two arguments in reverse order.

I agree entirely that there is no limit to the number of true descriptions of any object or scene in the world. It is simply question begging, though, to conclude that reality as it is perceived is equally inaccessible to conceptual encoding, if this means, as it must if the second line of argument is to be valid, that perceptual content is therefore not conceptual. Of course it follows from the fact that description cannot exhaust the reality described that the reality which we perceive cannot be exhausted by finite description. The desired conclusion, that the way in which that reality is perceived by us to be is to be captured non-conceptually, clearly does not follow, just as it would be absurd to conclude from the fact that the reality described by a given description cannot be exhausted by description, that the way in which it is represented by that description is therefore non-conceptual. So Ayers' 'corollary' is a non sequitur.

Since a picture is itself a part of mind-independent reality, which depicts its objects by real resemblance - that is, by its elements' actually sharing the relevant properties with these objects - it simply follows from the fact that description cannot exhaust the reality described, that the way a picture depicts its objects is inexhaustible by any finite set of propositions. That is, the depicting elements of the picture themselves may be described in indefinitely many different ways. The crucial issue, though, is what follows from this about the nature of perceptual content; and it is essential to recall at this point that my own discussion is regulated to a large extent by my focal concern with the

way in which perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs. So this must be our guide here too.

Suppose that I am presented with a picture of Janet giving some money to John. This is clearly not sufficient for me to have any reason whatsoever to believe that Janet is giving, or at any time gave, some money to John. To begin with, I must have some reason to believe that the picture is a faithful record of events. Yet this is still not enough. For I must also appreciate that what is being represented is that Janet is giving some money to John - it is no good, for example, if I am preoccupied with the question of whether the man in the picture has socks the same colour as my study walls, or of whether both pictured figures are of the same height. It is only the picture, insofar as I grasp it as a representation of Janet giving some money to John, which provides me with any reason to believe that Janet is giving, or gave, some money to John. Devoid of this conceptual content, the picture gives me no more reason to believe this than to believe that John is wearing socks of a certain colour, or that Janet and John are very close in height.

Accounts modelled on just this situation have been given, of the epistemological role of perceptual experiences. Accordingly, it may be said that the direct objects of visual perception, say, are mind-dependent patches of colour, arranged as a determinate mosaic in the visual field. These are then conceptualized as a representation that Janet is giving some money to John, which, given certain background beliefs, or in the absence of specific reasons for doubt, provides the subject with a reason to believe that Janet is indeed giving some money to John. Any such account is in my view doomed to failure. Nothing can be made of the spatial organization of mind-dependent colour patches in advance of the idea that it visually seems to the subject that there are various coloured objects standing in such and spatial relations out there, in the real world around him; and, as I argue in my extended critique of classical foundationalism (P&R, 4.2), both the subject's knowledge that things are being represented to him as thus and so, and his knowledge that this representation is a reliable guide to how things mind-independently

are, are deeply problematic. My own account dispenses entirely with mind-dependent intermediaries, and therefore avoids these difficulties; but it shares the crucial recognition above, that only conceptualized contents provide reasons. I claim that it is a person's perceptual demonstrative relations with things in the mind-independent world themselves which provide his reasons for empirical belief. In perception, he poses questions of the world, in the service of his various practical and theoretical purposes. This attention to specific concerns yields up the required, conceptual, answers: that that (perceptually presented thing) is thus, say. As I try to explain in detail (P&R, ch. 6), it is then his grasp of these as answers about how specific mind-independent things objectively are which provides his reasons for belief, in this case, that that thing is indeed thus. In any case, as I say, it is only conceptual contents which are suited to provide reasons in this way; and nothing in Ayers' comparison of pictures with descriptions persuades me otherwise.

He goes on to give further objections to this use of perceptual demonstrative attention as the source of conceptual content. There are again two related lines of argument. First, demonstration depends upon prior presence in perception, so cannot be what constitutes it. Second, conceptualization cannot be what explains the distinction between what is merely open to perception and what actually figures in the content of perception, or the related distinction between the background and the foreground in perceptual consciousness, since both these distinctions apply to the experience of animals and infants without concepts. This time I take his points in turn. I should admit at the outset, though, that this material is indeed presented only briefly in the book (P&R, 5.3.1 and 7.4.3), and certainly not developed in the detail which I now see is required.

It is certainly true that constituents of the world have to be there to be demonstrated. Ayers' further claim is that they must also be presented to us in sense experience. If this means that they must already show up in the reason-giving content of experience, I deny it. I do acknowledge, quite explicitly, that some information about such worldly constituents must be available, to direct the subject's attention to them,

should this be appropriate; but if the answer to the question which such attention poses to the world were already available to the subject, then there would be no point going on to ask it. The conceptual answers to such directed attentional interrogation of the environment are, in my view, the reason-giving perceptual demonstrative contents of experience.

This may seem to play into the hands of Ayers' second objection. For, as he points out, a good deal of weight is to be taken by this notion of the attentional selection of information which is thereby conceptualized in perceptual demonstrative contents. Yet the correlative distinctions, between what is focally perceived and what is merely available for perceptual investigation, and between the foreground and the background of perceptual consciousness, which I attempt to explain by invoking the conceptualizing role of selective attention in adult humans, seem equally to apply to the perception of animals and infants without conceptual capacities. He offers me precisely the reply which I adopt. Distinctions of this general type do indeed apply in the domain of animal and infant perception; and they cannot be explained in that context by appeal to the central involvement of conceptual capacities. For there are no such capacities. Nevertheless, attentional phenomena are still present; and it is to these again that I would turn in illuminating the target distinctions. There is in animals and infants a continuum between earlier and later perceptual processing. Attention selects which information proceeds along this, for further processing, in line with the creature's needs and purposes. Of course, this never yields the conceptual perceptual demonstrative contents which provide the reason-giving foreground of adult human experience, and which I argue are essential to the possibility of full blown belief about particular mind-independent objects and their properties in the world around the perceiver. Still, it does provide a dimension along which the crucial distinctions can be drawn, between representations which are active in the control of behaviour, and those which are simply available for further processing and behavioural control should it become necessary, and correlatively between the foreground and the background of animal and infant perception. Thus, again, I see

nothing in Ayers' discussion to change my mind about the conceptual nature of our own perceptual content.

Furthermore, although I share Ayers' conviction of the crucial importance of the point which he himself puts in terms of the distinction between primary and secondary knowledge, I remain convinced by my own Basic Argument, and the further supporting arguments given above, that this point cannot properly be accommodated within any non-conceptualist framework. Clearly, certain creatures without conceptual capacities have a perceptual point of view upon the world around them; but, for the reasons which I give, this is not sufficient for their perceptual experiences to provide them with reasons for empirical beliefs about that world.²

²Many thanks to both commentators for their powerful, challenging, and constructively critical contributions, which I have found extremely helpful and illuminating. Thanks also to Steve Butterfill, Imogen Dickie and Naomi Eilan for their comments on, and discussion of, the issues raised by my own contributions to this symposium.

Reply to Braddon-Mitchell

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