

Perceptual Justification and Assertively Representing the World*

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Abstract. This paper argues that there is a problem for the justificatory significance of perceptions that has been overlooked thus far. Assuming that perceptual experiences are propositional attitudes and that only propositional attitudes which *assertively represent the world* can function as justifiers, the problem consists in specifying what it means for a propositional attitude to *assertively represent the world* without losing the justificatory significance of perceptions—a challenge that is harder to meet than might first be thought. That there is such a problem can be seen by reconsidering and modifying a well-known argument to the conclusion that beliefs cannot be justified by perceptions but only by other beliefs. Nevertheless, the aim of the paper is not to conclude that perceptions are actually incapable of justifying our beliefs but rather to highlight an overlooked problem that needs to be solved in order to properly understand the justificatory relationship between perceptions and beliefs.

1 Introduction

There is an interesting and well-known argument to the conclusion that our beliefs cannot be justified by perceptions. The argument roughly states that all justification by evidence is inferential, and that inferential justification presup-

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poses that the justifying evidence has propositional content. Furthermore, it states that perceptual experiences lack propositional content and that therefore perceptual experiences are incapable to evidentially justify our beliefs. Let us call this argument the “incapability argument”.

Even though the incapability argument was highly influential in the latter decades of the 20th century, today many philosophers reject the argument by dismissing one of its premises, namely the premise that perceptual experiences lack propositional content. This paper argues that even if we accept this popular refutation of the argument, the incapability argument still poses a thus far overlooked problem with respect to the justificatory significance of perceptions.

Roughly speaking, the problem can be characterized in the following manner: Many philosophers hold that in order for something to play the role of a justifier it must not only have propositional content but also represent the world assertively, i.e., it must aim to represent the world as actually being a certain way. Unfortunately, as I will show, it is notoriously unclear what that means exactly. And as soon as we try to be more specific about it, it becomes surprisingly questionable whether perceptions ever really are assertive in that sense. Thus, even if we accept that perceptions have propositional content, it becomes questionable whether perceptions can function as evidence. The aim of the paper is to unveil this problem and to argue that it needs to be solved if we are to properly understand how beliefs may be justified by perceptions.

The paper is organized as follows: In section 2, I clarify and discuss the premises of the incapability argument. In section 3, I present the popular refutation of this argument, which is based on the idea that perceptions, like beliefs, have propositional content. I then turn to the above mentioned problem and try specify it to a certain extent. In section 4, I elaborate on the problem in more detail. In doing so I discuss various suggestions for a criterion of assertivity and argue that in the light of this discussion it becomes questionable whether perceptions really are assertive propositional attitudes. Given that it is widely agreed that in order for something to play the role of a justifier it must not only have propositional content but also *assertively* represent the world, this will lead to a modified version of the incapability argument that calls the justificatory significance of perceptions into doubt. In section 5, I point to possible directions in which a solution to the problem I am going to raise might go. I will end my discussion in section 6 with a short summary.

2 The incapability argument

It seems pretheoretically very plausible to assume that perceptions can function as justifiers with respect to our beliefs concerning the world around us. Why am I justified in believing that the door to my office is closed?—because I see it. Why am I justified in believing that there is sugar in my coffee?—because I taste it. More generally, why do we sometimes look, taste, listen, or sniff for a second or third time when a certain belief concerning the world around us, has come into doubt?—because we think that sense experiences can function as justifiers with respect to beliefs of this kind.

Nonetheless, there is a very influential argument to the conclusion that our beliefs cannot be justified by perceptual experiences. The following version of the argument summarizes the basic idea:¹

The incapability argument (hereafter, IA)

- (1) In order for some evidence to justify a belief concerning the world around us, it needs to *inferentially* justify that belief.
- (2) In order for some evidence to *inferentially* justify a belief concerning the world around us, it needs both to have propositional content and to represent the world assertively.
- (3) Perceptions have no propositional content.
- (4) Hence, perceptions cannot function as evidence capable of justifying our beliefs concerning the world around us.²

This argument is valid, but whether it is convincing depends on the plausibility of the premises. In order to discuss their plausibility we first have to elucidate what the premises actually claim.

Premises (1) and (2) speak about epistemic (here: doxastic) justification, which is distinguished from other forms of justification (e.g., moral, or pragmatic justification) by its truth-conduciveness. And the term evidence in the premises

¹Cf. Pryor (2005: 188) for a comparable argument. For an early version of the argument, cf. Davidson (1983).

²The feature of *assertively representing the world* mentioned in premise (2) might seem superfluous in the argument as it now stands. However, since this feature will become important later on, including this feature in the first exposition of the argument will help simplify the subsequent discussion.

refers to cognitive states or episodes of a subject S , which function as potential epistemic justifiers in that they speak in favour of the truth of at least one S 's beliefs.³

Such a piece of evidence for a belief might be too weak to actually justify the belief, but it needs to be somehow positively relevant with respect to the truth of the belief. Thus, a specific piece of evidence is not a justifier as such but merely a potential justifier.

The other term that needs explication in order to properly understand premise (1) is the term “inferential justification”, which is used differently in the literature. According to the way I am using it here, a belief B is inferentially justified by some evidence E if the justificatory relation between E and B involves at least some inferential relation between E and B , where inferential relations may be deductive, inductive, or abductive.

With these clarifications in mind, we can reformulate premise (1) in the following way: In order for some (internally construed) potential justifier to justify a belief concerning the world around us, the justificatory relation between the potential justifier and the belief needs to involve either a deductive, inductive, or abductive relation.

Even though this claim is controversial, for the purposes of this paper I will accept it as plausible. It is simply very hard to understand how the relation between some evidence and a belief should bear any justificatory significance, if the relation does not involve any sort of inference. It is important to note that premise (1) is deliberately formulated in a weak way so as not to be in conflict with paradigmatic reliabilist or classical foundationalist views in epistemology (see also fn. 5). It is true that reliabilists think that some beliefs are justified non-inferentially, but usually they do not think that the form of justification where a belief is justified by evidence is non-inferential.⁴ Found-

³This notion of “evidence”, which restricts the term to cognitive states or episodes, does not fit a certain usage of the term, by which a bloody knife or fingerprints on a gun are considered to be evidence. But it is consistent with a wide range of philosophical understandings of the term. For instance, some philosophers think of evidence as sense-data, others maintain that evidence consists in the stimulation of one's sensory receptors (cf. Quine 1968: 75). Still others take evidence to be everything one knows (cf. Williamson 2000) or such diverse things as one's beliefs, feelings, and thoughts (cf. Conee and Feldman 2004: 2 & 219-241).

⁴Process-reliabilists, for instance, hold that if a belief is justified, then it has to be formed by a reliable belief-forming mechanism (cf. Goldman 1976). This belief-forming mechanism does not have to involve evidence, but as soon as it does, reliabilists typically agree that there

ationalists also hold that there are some non-inferentially justified beliefs, so called “basic beliefs”. However, they usually claim that the class of basic beliefs does not involve beliefs about the world around us, but is restricted to beliefs concerning our own mental states or episodes (cf. BonJour 1999; Fumerton 2001, 2010). So classical foundationalist views are also not in conflict with our formulation of premise (1).⁵

However, even though premise (1) is very plausible in this weak form, it is rejected by those philosophers who subscribe to certain forms of direct realism or disjunctivism (cf., for example, Putnam 1999; McDowell 1982). For now let me put these positions aside. In section 5 below, I will revisit these views and point to some of their most serious problems.

What about premise (2)? Premise (2) makes two claims that both can be easily motivated. The first claim is that evidence capable of inferentially justifying a belief needs to be propositional, and the second claim is that everything that functions as a potential justifier not only has to be propositional but additionally has to represent the world assertively.

The first claim can be motivated in the following way: We have already noted that inferential justification of a belief B by some evidence E presupposes an inferential relation between B and E that is either deductive, abductive, or inductive. Deductive relations are entailments, and entailments quite obviously can only hold between propositions or—in a derivative sense—between attitudes with propositional content. And as Timothy Williamson (2000: 194-196) has convincingly argued, the same is true for inductive and abductive inferences. Hence, all three variants of inferential relations seem to be relations between propositions or between attitudes with propositional content. Hence, evidence that is capable of inferentially justifying a belief needs to be propositional: the first claim of premise (2) is plausible.

With respect to the second claim of premise (2), there are obviously some propositional attitudes that cannot function as potential justifiers—take a wish for example. So we need an additional feature that enables a propositional attitude to be a potential justifier. And this additional feature is supposed to

is an inferential relation between the evidence and the belief.

⁵It is also interesting to note that in the way we have understood “inferential justification”, (1) alone does not preclude that there is something like immediate or direct justification. For a convincing explanation of this point, see Pryor (2005: 189-191).

be the property of assertively representing the world. The term “assertivity” is usually used with respect to utterances, so by transferring this term to propositional attitudes, the term is used in a somewhat metaphorical sense. If somebody utters “*p*” assertively, then this utterance purports to be saying how the world is; it aims to represent the world as actually being a certain way. In the same vein, if a propositional attitude of a person assertively represents the world, then this attitude aims to represent the world as actually being a certain way; it purports to be saying how the world is. Thus, a wish does not assertively represent the world—that is, it does not purport to be saying how the world is—and this is why a wish cannot function as evidence. The same is true for hopes, imaginings, mere assumptions, etc. These attitudes cannot inferentially justify a belief concerned with the world around us because none of them satisfies a necessary condition for a propositional attitude’s functioning as inferential evidence, namely that of representing the world assertively (cf. Pryor 2005, 187-188).

So far we have motivated premises (1) and (2) of IA. However, the most problematic step of the argument is premise (3). And it is this premise which is most often called into question by critics of IA.

3 A refutation of the argument

A lot of philosophers agree that perceptions or perceptual experiences have propositional content that represents the world around us to be a certain way.⁶ Let us call this view “representationalism”. By adopting (a certain version of) representationalism, one can easily accept premises (1) and (2) of IA, but block the argument by dismissing premise (3).⁷

⁶In this paper I use the terms “perception” and “perceptual experience” interchangeably. Thus, I consider the sentence “*S* perceives that *p*” as an abbreviation of the sentence “*S* has a perceptual experience with the content *p*”. The difference between these two sentences is usually drawn by pointing out that the first sentence has an obvious factive reading, whereas the second does not. For the purposes of this paper I want to use “*S* perceives that *p*” in a non-factive way.

⁷There are different versions of representationalism. The versions I am focusing on here are versions that accept premises (1) and (2) of IA. Since direct realism (as I understand the term) implies that premise (1) is false, I am focusing on versions of representationalism that are incompatible with direct or naïve realism. On my usage of the term, direct realism is characterized by a combination of claims. Direct realists claim (a) that a person who

The arguments in favour of the main thesis of representationalism vary. True to the motto, “One man’s modus tollens is another man’s modus ponens”, some philosophers who take the justificatory significance of perceptions for granted combine this assumption with slightly modified formulations of premises (1) and (2) to conclude that perceptions have propositional content (cf. Brewer 1999).⁸ Others who do not like sense-data point to the nice way representationalism handles the hallucination-argument for sense-data (cf. Huemer 2001: 127-128). And still others support representationalism by appeal to linguistic considerations concerning constructions like “it looks to be the case that p ”, “it tastes as if p ”, etc. In the face of these various motivations, it is widely agreed that the core thesis of representationalism stands on pretty solid ground.⁹

has a genuine perceptual experience stands in a direct relation to concrete things or facts in the world, where (b) that direct relation is somehow supposed to non-inferentially justify our beliefs about the world. Thus, direct realism implies that premise (1) is false. The reasons why I focus on versions of representationalism that are incompatible with direct realism are twofold. First, only these versions of representationalism are confronted with the problems surrounding the notion of assertivity that I am going to raise in this paper. As soon as one accepts a direct realist position, one has options to circumvent these problems. I discuss these options below in section 5. Second, there simply are not many versions of representationalism in the literature that seem compatible with direct realism. Since direct realists claim that in a perceptual experience one stands in direct relation to concrete things in the world, which constitute the content of the experience, if one wants to combine this view with representationalism—the view that perceptual experiences have propositional content—it seems that one has to claim that propositions are concrete things in the world. McDowell (1994) comes close to such a view. See Siegel (2010, sec. 2.6) for a discussion of the relation of representationalism (which she calls the “strong content view”) and direct realism (which she calls “naïve realism”). For another representationalist position that seems compatible with direct realism, which, however, employs a different understanding of the term, see Huemer (2001).

⁸Brewer (1999) does not actually argue that perceptions have propositional content but rather conceptual content. However, he can only draw this conclusion because he implicitly assumes that all propositional or representational contents are conceptually constituted—cf. Heck (2000) for an illuminating discussion of this point. In this paper I will stay neutral with regard to the question of whether there is a kind of propositional content that is non-conceptual.

⁹It is worth noticing here that representationalism seems to have a twofold epistemic payoff. Not only does it block IA, it also tears down the so-called “veil of perception” to which sense-data theories give rise. If the content of perceptions does not consist of sense-data which interpose themselves between perceivers and mind-independent objects, but instead consists of propositions, then there is no so-called “veil of perception” anymore, which is supposed to make our perceptual, cognitive and epistemic access to the world around us deeply problematic.

However, in order to solve the problem which IA raises, it is not enough to hold that perceptions have propositional content that represents the world. Additionally, perceptions have to be a specific kind of propositional attitude, namely one that *assertively represents the world*. Otherwise there is an easy way to reformulate IA in order to sidestep the representationalist attack. In the following formulation of the argument premise (3) is replaced by (3)*:

The incapability argument* (hereafter, IA*)

- (1) In order for some evidence to justify a belief concerning the world around us, it needs to *inferentially* justify that belief.
- (2) In order for some evidence to *inferentially* justify a belief concerning the world around us, it needs both to have propositional content and to represent the world assertively.
- (3)* Perceptions have no propositional content or they do not represent the world assertively.
- (4) Hence, perceptions cannot function as evidence capable of justifying our beliefs concerning the world around us.

Of course most representationalists hold that not only do perceptions have propositional content, they also represent the world assertively. Thus most representationalists would not only dismiss premise (3) of the original argument but premise (3)* of the modified argument as well.

Yet such a response might be too hasty. It is not really clear what it means to assertively represent the world in the first place. And it can be argued that as soon as we try to be more precise about it, it becomes questionable whether perceptions ever really do assertively represent the world. This is precisely the thus far overlooked problem of the representationalist's refutation of IA/IA* in which I am interested.

In more general terms, the really challenging problem the different versions of the incapability argument point to is the following: If we take perceptions to be propositional attitudes, then in order to hold on to the justificatory significance of perceptions, we have to identify at least one feature *X* that differentiates perceptions from other propositional attitudes that cannot serve as evidence, like wishes, hopes, imaginings, mere assumptions, etc. Here, the additional feature *X* is supposed to be the quality of assertively representing the world. Assertively representing the world is supposed to be a necessary condition for a

given propositional attitude’s inferentially justifying a belief.¹⁰ A wish, a hope, an imagining, or a mere assumption does not assertively represent the world, i.e., it does not purport to be saying how the world is, and that is why they cannot serve as evidence. How does it stand with perceptual experiences? What is the criterion for assertively representing the world, and do perceptions—assuming they do have propositional content—really satisfy this criterion?

4 Assertively representing the world

In this section, I will consider various suggestions for a criterion of assertivity. On closer inspection, each of these criteria will turn out to be unsatisfying. Some are unsatisfying because they classify as assertive attitudes that we pre-theoretically judge as being non-assertive. Others are unsatisfying because they eventually lead to problems concerning the justificatory significance of perceptions.

Here is the first and *prima facie* plausible suggestion:

- (A) *Direction of fit.* All propositional attitudes Ap (where p is a proposition concerned with the world around us) that stand in the same direction of fit as beliefs assertively represent the world.

Propositional attitudes can have different directions of fit. For example, it is often claimed that a desire is satisfied (comes true) just in case it effects change in the world, whereas a belief is satisfied (true) if it is in accordance with the facts of the world. On the basis of this observation it is argued that desires and beliefs have opposing directions of fit—desires are world-correcting, whereas beliefs are world-corrected. Even though this view might be problematic (cf. Zangwill 1998, Sobel & Copp 2001)—not at least because the notion of “direction of fit” itself is very hard to spell out in detail—I will, for the purpose of this paper, accept that all propositional attitudes can be distinguished via their direction of fit, where the satisfaction condition for the direction of fit relation is truth or correctness. If this is the case, the direction-of-fit-criterion looks promising at first. A belief is the paradigmatic attitude that assertively represents the world, so it is reasonable to think that every propositional attitude with the same direction of fit as a belief assertively represents the world as well. And

¹⁰I will discuss a few other possible candidates for X in section 5 of this paper.

since perceptions have the same direction of fit as beliefs, they are assertive attitudes.

Unfortunately, (A) cannot be correct. It is true that wishes or hopes have a different direction of fit than beliefs, so (A) might explain why hopes or wishes do not assertively represent the world. But (A) cannot explain why wild imaginings or mere assumptions cannot do so. My imagining that I am the strongest person alive and my corresponding belief have the same direction of fit. Both are satisfied (true) if they are in accordance with the facts of the world—both are in this sense world-corrected. But imaginings do not intuitively represent the world assertively, and that is why they cannot serve as evidence with regard to beliefs about the world. So (A) does not appear to give us the correct classification and thus cannot be the right criterion for being an assertive propositional attitude.

At this point it might be argued that we need a more precise notion of “direction of fit”. Michael Smith (1994) offers an interesting and very influential dispositional account. According to Smith, the different directions of fit of propositional attitudes should be understood via the functional role of these attitudes. If we understand the notion of “direction of fit” in this way, we might be able to use it to formulate a better criterion for differentiating assertive attitudes from non-assertive ones.

Smith writes:

“The difference between beliefs and desires in terms of direction of fit can be seen to amount to a difference in the functional roles of beliefs and desires [...] a belief that p tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception with the content that not p , whereas a desire that p tends to endure [...]” (Smith 1994: 115)

In order to make this idea useful with respect to a criterion for assertivity, we have to formulate it in more general terms. First, the belief that p does not only tend to go out of existence in the presence of a perception with the content $\neg p$, but more generally in the presence of what we take to be sufficiently strong evidence in favour of $\neg p$ —be it a perception, a recollection, some piece of testimony, or whatever. Second, since we at least want to be open to the idea that different propositional attitudes can have the same direction of fit as beliefs, we have to reformulate Smith’s idea so as not to restrict it to beliefs. These modifications lead to the following account: A propositional attitude Ap

is world-corrected (i.e., has the same direction of fit as beliefs) iff Ap tends to go out of existence in the presence of sufficiently strong evidence in favour of $\neg p$. If we combine this account with the idea that having the same direction of fit as beliefs is necessary and sufficient for being an assertive propositional attitude, we get the following criterion:

- (B) *Functional Role*. A propositional attitude Ap of a subject S (where p is a proposition concerned with the world around us) assertively represents the world iff Ap tends to go out of existence in the presence of S 's sufficiently strong evidence in favour of $\neg p$.

If we concentrate on criterion (B), we can solve the problem we encountered in the discussion of (A). Obviously, (B) does not classify wild imaginings, like my imagining that I am the strongest person alive, as being assertive. The imagining that p does not tend to go out of existence in the presence of sufficiently strong evidence in favour of $\neg p$. Hence, by the light of (B) wild imaginings are not assertive propositional attitudes and that is why wild imaginings cannot serve as evidence with respect to beliefs about the world around us.

However, we seem to get an analagous problem with recollections. Pretheoretically it is quite plausible to classify recollections as assertive attitudes, and that is why recollections can in principle serve as evidence—they at least satisfy a necessary condition to function as such, whereas wild imaginings do not. But it is at least questionable whether recollections automatically tend to go out of existence in the face of sufficiently strong counterevidence. For example, some recollections concerning our childhood seem to be pretty stubborn in this sense—I might remember scoring the most points in a kids basketball tournament many years ago, but this recollection does not simply vanish even in the light of strong counterevidence. Hence, it is questionable whether (B) leads to a more promising classification.

Additionally and more importantly, by focusing on (B) we encounter a serious problem concerning the justificatory significance of perceptions, since by the lights of criterion (B) perceptions do not assertively represent the world as well. This can be easily illustrated by the Müller-Lyer Illusion (Fig. 1):

One perceives that the two lines are of unequal length, and even though one has strong evidence that the two lines are actually equal in length, the

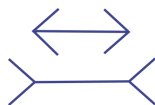


Figure 1: Müller-Lyer Illusion

perception does not tend to go out of existence.¹¹ Thus, by the lights of criterion (B) perceptions do not assertively represent the world. And if we hold on to the view that assertivity is a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's functioning as evidence, then by the lights of (B) perceptions cannot serve as evidence. This is an unhappy result. We have to look for a more adequate criterion of assertivity.

The idea that a criterion for assertivity must somehow be concerned with the functional role of propositional attitudes is a promising one. Perhaps we merely have to find a more promising functional role than that which Smith associates with the direction of fit of propositional attitudes, one more like that expressed in (C):

- (C) *Genesis*. A propositional attitude Ap of a subject S (where p is a proposition concerned with the world around us) assertively represents the world iff—in the absence of counterevidence with respect to p — Ap tends to be accompanied by S 's belief that p .

The idea behind criterion (C) is that the assertivity of an attitude does not depend on the fact that these attitudes tend to go out of existence in the light of counterevidence, but that they—in the *absence* of counterevidence—tend to bring beliefs *into* existence.

Does this criterion give us a satisfying classification of assertive propositional attitudes? That is, does it classify beliefs, perceptions, intuitions and recollections as assertive and mere assumptions, wishes, and imaginings as non-assertive? An imagining that p is clearly not (in the absence of counterevidence) automatically accompanied by a belief that p . What about perceptions, intuitions, or recollections? If we want these attitudes to meet criterion (C), we have to weaken the criterion in a specific sense. It is not true, for example, that in the absence of counterevidence the intuition or recollection that p tends to be accompanied by a full blown belief that p . But it is true that the intuition

¹¹See fn. 6.

or recollection that p tends to be accompanied by the disposition to judge p more likely to be true than $\neg p$. So in order to get a criterion that besides perceptions also covers other propositional attitudes we pretheoretically judge as being assertive—for example, intuitions, and recollections—we have to modify and weaken criterion (C):

(C)* *Genesis*.* A propositional attitude Ap of a subject S (where p is a proposition concerned with the world around us) assertively represents the world iff—in the absence of counterevidence with respect to p — Ap tends to be accompanied by the disposition of S to judge p more likely to be true than $\neg p$.

Unfortunately (C)* again fails to give us the classification we want. Various studies on motivational reasoning and the desirability bias, seem to suggest that if subjects do not have evidence that speaks in favour of p or $\neg p$, they tend to judge the proposition that is in accordance to their wishes to be more likely to be true than the proposition in conflict to their preferences.¹² So these studies seem to suggest that wishes and desires satisfy (C)* as well, but wishes and desires are obviously not assertive propositional attitudes. Hence, (C)* is not a convincing criterion for assertivity.

Of course it might be argued that S is not *epistemically rational*, if S 's wish that p is automatically accompanied by a disposition to judge p more likely to be true than $\neg p$, whereas S seems to be epistemically rational if S 's perception, recollection, or intuition that p is accompanied by such a disposition. So we only have to expand the right hand side of the biconditional in (C)* by “[...] and S is epistemically rational” in order to get the classification we want.

But this reaction would be question-begging, in the sense that—given an influential understanding of epistemic rationality (on which a person is epistemically rational if she believes according to her evidence)—it would presuppose that perceptions can serve as evidence. And it is precisely this assumption that is in question in our current discussion.

Indeed, in the context of our current discussion, a criterion for assertivity that involves the concept of epistemic rationality is utterly uninformative.

¹²Some studies that directly support the desirability effect are: e.g., Irwin (1953); Crandall et al. (1955); Irwin & Metzger (1966). For work on the general topic of motivational-triggered biases, cf. Kunda (1990); Trope & Liberman (1996); Dawson et al. (2002); Roese & Olson (2007).

This can be be illustrated by the following dialogue. Question: “What is the necessary feature of a propositional attitude’s functioning as evidence that for example wishes or hopes lack?” Answer: “It is the feature of assertivity.” Question: “What is the criterion for assertivity?” Answer: “A propositional attitude is assertive iff it is *epistemically rational* to believe according to it, i.e., iff it is *epistemically rational* to treat the attitude as evidence.” Question: “So you are basically saying that a necessary feature for a propositional attitude’s functioning as evidence, is that it can function as evidence?—that is not very helpful.”

This dialogue illustrates that in our current dialectical situation a criterion for assertivity that makes use of the notion of epistemic rationality is doomed to be unsatisfactory. However, there is another notion of rationality that might be useful in formulating a promising criterion for assertivity. I will first formulate the criterion and then specify the notion of rationality/irrationality that is involved.

- (D) *Irrationality*. A propositional attitude Ap of a subject S (where p is a proposition concerned with the world around us) assertively represents the world iff it cannot be the case that S has Ap and simultaneously believes that $\neg p$ without being (structurally) irrational.¹³

In addition to straightforward epistemic irrationality, there is another form of irrationality that T.M. Scanlon calls “structural irrationality”. According to Scanlon, claims concerned with structural irrationality are

“[...] claims about the relations between an agents attitudes that must hold insofar as he or she is not irrational, and the kind of irrationality involved is a matter of conflict between these attitudes.”
(Scanlon 2007: 84-85)

In this sense, we sometimes claim that a person is irrational to have (or not to have) a certain attitude, because of some other attitude the person has.

¹³The criterion as formulated here presupposes a binary model of belief, but this is merely to simplify the discussion. It could be formulated for a non-binary model of belief as well: A propositional attitude Ap of a subject S assertively represents the world iff it cannot be the case that S has Ap and simultaneously assigns $\neg p$ a higher degree of belief than p without being irrational. But since nothing important in the discussion hinges on which formulation we choose, I will stick to the binary model in what follows.

If the attitudes in question are beliefs, then it may not be so easy to see the difference between structural and epistemic irrationality. Take, for example, the following: “Person M believes that p , and M believes that p implies q , so it is irrational of M to believe $\neg p$.” Here, the claim might be that M is epistemically irrational, since she does not believe according to her evidence. But it might also be a claim about structural irrationality, since M clearly holds conflicting propositional attitudes.

However, structural rationality is not restricted to beliefs. Take a look at the following example: “ M intends p and believes that q is a necessary means to p , so it is irrational of M to intend $\neg q$.” Or more simply: “ M wishes that p , so it is irrational of M to hope that $\neg p$.”

The last two sentences obviously do not claim that M is *epistemically irrational*, it is not the case that M does not believe according to her evidence. Rather, M exhibits *structural irrationality*, because M holds attitudes that are in a certain sense in conflict with each other—a conflict that rationality requires resolving.¹⁴ In criterion (D) and in the remainder of the paper “ S is rational/irrational” is supposed to mean that a person S exhibits some form of *structural* rationality/irrationality.¹⁵

As far as I can tell, the irrationality-criterion is the best criterion for assertivity suggested thus far. Why?

First, criterion (D) seems to track the right property. A belief is the paradigmatic attitude that assertively represents the world. So if a person has a propositional attitude A with content p and simultaneously believes that $\neg p$ without

¹⁴Not every conflict of propositional attitudes has to be of that sort. It might be that a person has a conflicting set of propositional attitudes that might lead to a certain form of cognitive dissonance but where rationality does not require one to resolve that conflict. I will discuss such a case later.

¹⁵Structural rationality (and the question if this form of rationality is normative) is the subject of interesting discussions in the (non-formal) theory of practical reasoning, cf. Broome (2007a), (2007b); Kolodny (2005); Scanlon (2007). Since this discussion is led in terms of requirements of rationality, criterion (D) could be formulated in a way that is closer to this discussion:

(D)* A propositional attitude Ap of a subject S (at time t) assertively represents the world iff rationality requires: If $A_s p$ (at t), then $\neg B_s \neg p$ (at t); or equivalently: $\neg[A_s p$ (at t) & $B_s \neg p$ (at t)].

In this formulation “ B ” is the belief-operator. The formulation makes it explicit that I want “rationality requires” to have wide scope in Broome’s sense, cf. Broome (2007a).

being irrational (without there being a conflict of attitudes), then this attitude Ap cannot be assertive—it cannot purport to be saying how the world is. This sounds quite plausible.

Second, criterion (D) seems to give us a more adequate classification than the other suggestions: Mere assumptions and imaginings, do not satisfy (D), and neither do desires, wishes or hopes, etc. I can wish, hope, merely assume, or imagine myself to be the strongest person alive and at the same time believe that I am not without being irrational (without there being a conflict of attitudes). This is why (D) is superior to criteria (A) and (C)*. In contrast, beliefs and recollections seem to satisfy (D). I cannot believe or recollect that p and at the same time believe that $\neg q$ without being irrational (without there being a conflict of attitudes). This is why (D) is superior to (B). With respect to (B), it was at least questionable whether recollections are to be classified as assertive. Thus, (D) is the best criterion we have to decide whether a propositional attitude assertively represents the world.

Unfortunately, however, not only do desires, hopes, imaginings, etc. fail to meet (D), perceptual experiences do as well. Again this can be easily illustrated by the Müller-Lyer Illusion (Fig. 1). You can perceive that the two lines in Fig. 1 are of unequal length and at the same time believe that they are of equal length without being irrational. Even though there is some kind of cognitive dissonance involved in the Müller-Lyer Illusion, it does not rest on a conflict of propositional attitudes that rationality requires resolving. You are perfectly rational in perceiving that the two lines are of unequal length while at the same time believing that they are equal in length. Structural rationality does not require that you give up at least one of these attitudes. Hence, by the lights of (D), perceptions do not represent the world assertively.¹⁶

Thus, if (D) is the best criterion we have to decide whether a propositional attitude assertively represents the world, and we take having this feature to be

¹⁶It is also worth noticing that this is not restricted to the somewhat peculiar Müller-Lyer case. In fact, it seems to happen all the time that our perceptual experiences have the content p but we simultaneously believe that $\neg p$ without being irrational. For example, think of two coins of the same type in front of you, where one of these coins is standing on the edge (see Fig. 2). In such a situation you perceive that two coins have a different shape and yet you simultaneously believe that they have an identical shape without being irrational. An interesting difference to the Müller-Lyer case consists in the fact that in these everyday cases no cognitive dissonance seems to be involved.



Figure 2: Coins

a condition that has to be met by propositional attitudes capable of serving as potential justifiers, then the justificatory significance of our perceptions is in trouble.

The problem can be stated like this:

- (a) If a propositional attitude can serve as a potential justifier for our beliefs about the world around us, then it is an assertive attitude (a propositional attitude that assertively represents the world).
- (b) If a propositional attitude assertively represents the world, then it satisfies condition (D).
- (c) Perceptions do not satisfy (D).
- (d) Hence, perceptions do not serve as potential justifiers for our beliefs about the world around us.

We can also relate the problem to the reformulation of the incapability argument. The weakest premise of IA* is:

- (3)* Perceptions either have no propositional content or they do not represent the world assertively.

Even this weakest link of IA* seems plausible, if we accept (D), which is the best criterion we have to decide whether a propositional attitude is assertive or not.

It is important to realize that nothing important hinges on the question whether of the four discussed criteria, (D) is the best. We can summarize the problem I am interested in as a dilemma: Either we have a criterion that is obviously unsatisfying because it classifies propositional attitudes as assertive that are obviously not assertive. This is the problem of criteria (A) and (C)*. These criteria classify wild imaginings or desires as assertive, thus these criteria are obviously incorrect.

Or—and this is the second horn of the dilemma—we have a criterion by which imaginings and desires are not assertive, but neither are perceptions. This

is the problem of criteria (B) and (D). Thus, if (B) and (D) are more promising criteria for assertivity than (A) and (C)*, and if we take having the feature of assertivity to be a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's functioning as evidence, then the justificatory significance of perceptions is in trouble. The justificatory significance of perceptions is in trouble, because irrespective of whether we accept (B) or (D) as a more plausible criterion for assertivity, premise (3)* of the modified incapability argument IA* seems correct.

5 Possible solutions to the problem

If we want to hold on to the justificatory significance of perceptions—which I think we should—we have the following options:

- (I) We hold on to the view that assertivity is a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's functioning as evidence in inferential justification, but we try to find another plausible criterion for assertivity. A criterion that is not satisfied by desires, wishes, imaginings, etc. but satisfied by beliefs, recollections, intuitions, and perceptions. In this way we block IA* by dismissing premise (3)*.
- (II) We give up the idea that assertivity is a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's functioning as evidence. In choosing this option, we need to find another feature X that is independent of assertivity, can be considered to be a sufficient condition for a propositional attitude's functioning as evidence, and is shared by beliefs as much as by perceptions and other propositional attitudes we consider as evidence. In this way we are in position to block IA* by dismissing premise (2).
- (III) We block IA* by dismissing premise (1), thereby accepting that justification through evidence does not have to involve an inferential relation between the justifying evidence and the justified belief.

As far as I can see, none of these options is an obvious non-starter. But since each option has serious philosophical consequences, it will take some work to find the option with the best theoretical cost-benefit ratio. In the following, I do not intend to adjudicate between these options. Rather, my aim solely consists in clarifying the dialectical structure with regard to these possible solutions. Thus, I will point out some interesting connections to other debates, raise a few worries and sketch out some interesting consequences of the options (I)-(III).

5.1 Option (I)

With regard to option (I) I do not have anything interesting to say that goes beyond the previous discussion. In choosing option (I) we hold on to the idea that assertivity is a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's functioning as a potential justifier, but we try to find another plausible criterion for assertivity. Thus, in choosing option (I) we must try to find a convincing account of the following kind:

A propositional attitude Ap is capable of functioning as a potential justifier with respect to our beliefs concerning the world around us only if Ap is an assertive propositional attitude; and Ap is an assertive propositional attitude iff

What we are trying to find is a satisfying way to fill in the blank on the right hand side of the biconditional and thereby find a promising criterion for assertivity. In section 4 I discussed the four criteria for assertivity that seem most promising to me. However, the problem with these criteria was either that they eventually end up classifying some propositional attitudes as justifiers which we pretheoretically want to rule out—for example, hopes, mere assumptions or wild imaginings; or they end up classifying some propositional attitudes as not being justifiers which we pretheoretically want to include—for example, perceptions. Note that the same will be true if we fill in the right hand side of the aforementioned biconditional with any disjunctive combination of criteria for assertivity suggested thus far.

Maybe there is still some other criterion (or combination of criteria) that would serve our purpose in a more satisfactory way. But as the previous discussion of various promising candidates has illustrated, locating such a criterion (or for that matter, a combination of criteria) is no easy task. Thus, working out option (I) as a convincing solution to the problem I have raised will not only be hard work, it will surely have interesting consequences for our understanding of the justificatory relationship of perceptions and beliefs as well as of what it means to be an assertive propositional attitude.

5.2 Option (II)

In the light of the difficulties with respect to option (I), it might seem favourable to turn away from assertivity and find a different criterion that differentiates

propositional attitudes that can serve as potential justifiers from attitudes that cannot do so. Two criteria suggest themselves: truth and justification.

- (T) The feature that differentiates a propositional attitude functioning as a potential justifier from a propositional attitude that cannot function as a potential justifier is: truth. Every propositional attitude which has a true propositional content can, at least in principle, serve as evidence.

There are a few problematic consequences with this suggestion. First, mere assumptions, wild imaginings and wishes can have true propositional contents. So if we accept (T), we have to accept that some imaginings, wishes, etc., namely those with a true content, can serve as evidence. This is an unhappy result.

Second, it seems pretheoretically plausible that there are some propositional attitudes with a false content that can serve as evidence, which would not be allowed under (T). For example, by considering a version of the sorities paradox it seems plausible that even intuitions with a false content can serve as evidence.

- (i) A person with no hairs on his head is bald.
- (ii) For all natural numbers n , if a person with n hairs on his head is bald, then a person with $n+1$ hairs on his head is bald.
- (iii) A person with as much hair on his head as Frank Zappa (in 1970) is not bald.

Obviously, one of the claims (i)-(iii) must be false. Let us assume that by theorizing about vagueness we come to believe that (ii) is false and (ii) actually is false. Still, we have the intuition that (ii) is correct and this intuition is still some evidence with respect to (ii), it still speaks in favour of (ii). So it seems plausible—contra (T)—that even intuitions with a false content can serve as evidence.

Thus, if we accept (T), we have to include some propositional attitudes in the class of potential justifiers which we pretheoretically do not want to include. And at the same time, we have to exclude some attitudes from the class of potential justifiers which we pretheoretically do not want to exclude.

Let us move on to the second feature we mentioned, namely justification.

- (J) The feature that differentiates a propositional attitude functioning as a potential justifier from a propositional attitude that cannot function as a potential justifier is: justification. Every propositional attitude which has a justified content can, at least in principle, serve as evidence.

In order to understand (J) correctly, we have to distinguish between doxastic and propositional justification. Doxastic justification is the justification of a specific belief-instance of a subject S . Propositional justification, on the other hand, concerns a specific relation between a subject S and a proposition p that holds at a specific time t . These two forms of epistemic justification can come apart. Assume a person S has very good evidence in favour of p and she also holds the belief that p , but she believes that p not on the basis of her good evidence but rather on the basis of crude prejudices or other epistemically inferior sources. In such a case, we might say that S is propositionally but not doxastically justified in believing that p . Similarly, it could happen that S is propositionally justified in believing that p but does not believe that p at all. This can happen, because, as I said, propositional justification concerns the relation of a person S and a proposition p and not a specific belief-instance of S .

There are two reasons we have to understand “justification” in (J) as propositional and not as doxastic justification. First, if (J) spoke of doxastic justification, then it would be clear from the outset that only beliefs could serve as evidence. After all, only beliefs can be doxastically justified. Second, if (J) spoke of doxastic justification, it would not even make sense to talk of the content of a specific attitude to be justified. What it means for the propositional content of a specific attitude to be justified at time t is that at time t there is the relation of propositional justification between a subject S and the proposition p .

But if we understand “justification” in (J) as propositional justification, then (J) has the same problem as (T): it includes some attitudes in the class of potential justifiers that we pretheoretically do not want to include. Suppose I am propositionally justified in p , without believing that p . However, I do have the wish that p . By the lights of (J), this wish could serve as a potential justifier. Again, this is an unpleasant result.

Another interesting consequence of (J) concerns the foundational status of perceptions. Some philosophers hold that perceptions can serve as basic evidence, i.e., as evidence capable of justifying our beliefs without the need to be justified themselves. Jim Pryor (2000, 2005), for example, takes perceptions as propositional attitudes and argues for the view that they can serve as basic evidence for our beliefs. If (J) were correct, then such a view would be false.

An analogous point could be made with respect to intuitions. We regard intuitions as potential justifiers with respect to some of our beliefs. Some philosophers even think that intuitions can serve as basic evidence, in the sense that they are capable of justifying our beliefs without the need to be justified themselves. For a clear statement of the view that intuitions often play the foundational role of basic evidence in many philosophical projects, cf. Kornblith (2007: 28). If (J) were correct, then such a view about intuitions would be false as well.

Even this brief discussion of option (II) has illustrated that plausible ways to spell out option (II) will all have interesting and far-reaching epistemological consequences. This is why spelling out option (II) as a convincing solution to the problem I have raised will be a complex task that promises deep insights regarding the justificatory relationship between what we take to be evidence and the beliefs we entertain.

5.3 Option (III)

The last remaining option to solve the problem concerning the evidential significance of perceptions consists in calling the first premise of IA* into question:

- (1) In order for some evidence to justify a belief (concerning the world around us), it needs to inferentially justify that belief.

Even though I take this option to be very interesting, discussing this option in full detail goes well beyond the scope of the present inquiry. The main point of this paper is to raise a thus far overlooked problem with regard to the popular representationalist attack on the incapability argument. And since representationalists usually accept premise (1), discussing the option of dismissing (1) is not the concern of this paper.

Philosophers who dismiss premise (1) tend to be those who subscribe to certain forms of direct realism or disjunctivism. These philosophers think that perceptions are not so much representational but rather relational attitudes. They claim that in genuine cases of perceptual experience we stand in direct relation to chunks of reality (e.g., things or facts), where that direct relation is somehow supposed to non-inferentially justify some of our beliefs about the world (cf., for example, Putnam 1999; McDowell 1982, 1986). As soon as one adopts such a position, one has no problem explaining why perceptions can

function as evidence whereas propositional attitudes like desires, for example, cannot. In contrast to desires, perceptual states are characterized by the direct relation to things in the world, and it is this direct relation that is supposed to account for the justificatory significance of perceptual states.

In my opinion, the most pressing problem of these accounts is to explain how the supposedly direct relation between some particular perceptual experience and things in the world should bear any justificatory significance with respect to our beliefs. Earl Conee (2007) and Berit Brogaard (2011, 56-63) both offer very interesting arguments to the conclusion that merely being in direct contact to chunks of reality does not have the positive epistemic consequences that proponents of direct realism or disjunctivism want them to have. So the difficulty of explaining how evidential justification that is neither deductive, inductive, nor abductive is possible seems to be the most pressing problem for versions of direct realism or disjunctivism, which try to draw epistemological profit from their general views on perception.

However since options (I) and (II) are hard to spell out as well, the considerations in this paper might also be taken as motivation to reconsider these attempts and to try to spell out in detail how non-inferential relations between perceptual evidence and beliefs are supposed to bear justificatory significance. But this task obviously deserves a detailed inquiry that cannot be undertaken within the limited scope of this paper.

6 Summary

The so-called “incapability argument” concludes that perceptions cannot function as evidence for our beliefs. A popular refutation of this argument is based on the representationalist insight, that perceptions have propositional content, i.e., that perceptions are propositional attitudes. By slight modifications of the incapability argument a thus far overlooked problem of this popular attack has been raised.

In a nutshell, the problem can be characterized like this: If we think of perceptions as propositional attitudes, then it is a fair question to ask whether perceptions are members of the class of propositional attitudes that can serve as potential justifiers. (Wishes, for example, are propositional attitudes as well, but they do not appear to be able to serve as justifiers.) What is the distinctive

feature X that differentiates propositional attitudes that can serve as potential justifiers from attitudes that cannot do so? And do perceptions have this feature X ?

It is often assumed that X is the feature of assertively representing the world. Assertively representing the world is taken as a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's serving as evidence, and it is assumed that perceptions are, like beliefs, assertive attitudes, whereas desires, wishes, wild imaginings, etc. are not. Unfortunately, it is woefully unclear what it means to assertively represent the world. And I have argued that as soon as we try to be more specific about it, i.e., as soon as we try to spell out a precise criterion for assertivity, it becomes questionable whether perceptions ever really do assertively represent the world.

Additionally, I argued that each possible solution to the problem I raised has interesting and far-reaching consequences, which makes finding the solution with the best theoretical cost-benefit-ratio a serious philosophical task—one which has not yet received the attention it deserves.

At this stage, it might be argued that rather than trying to solve the problem I have raised here, we should try to circumvent it from the outset. In closing, I want to mention three ways one might attempt to do so.

First, one could simply accept the conclusion of the incapability argument and thereby claim that perceptions cannot serve as potential justifiers. Since the present inquiry is mainly concerned with raising a thus-far overlooked problem of the popular representationalist refutation of the incapability argument, considering this option is simply beyond the scope of this paper. But it is worth noting here that accepting the conclusion of the incapability argument and thereby holding that perceptions cannot function as justifiers does not necessarily amount to the claim that perceptual experiences lack any epistemic significance whatsoever. Even if one claims that perceptions do not function as justifiers for our beliefs, one could try to give an alternative explanation of the epistemic role perceptions play in our lives. For a few interesting attempts at such explanations, see Millar (2008); Roessler (2009).

Second, one might circumvent the problem I have raised by accepting a doxastic account of perceptions and thereby claiming that perceptions are nothing but beliefs. Since we suppose that beliefs can be justified by other beliefs, by accepting a doxastic account of perception, the question of whether perceptions

are members of the class of propositional attitudes that can serve as potential justifiers would not even arise. Even though the doxastic view of perception is not particularly popular these days, it has been recently defended against its detractors by Kathrin Glüer (2009). However, Glüer’s defense of the view has far-reaching consequences with respect to the kind of propositional content perceptual experiences can have—consequences that few philosophers would be willing to accept.¹⁷

Third, one could take the notion of assertivity as a primitive notion, i.e., a notion we understand well enough even in the absence of a precise criterion for it. In this vein, a representationalist might hold on to the view that perceptions are assertive propositional attitudes (which can therefore serve as justifiers) while claiming that no satisfying criterion for assertivity can be given. However, as far as I can see, this would be an unsatisfying position to take. First, I think that criterion (D) is to a certain extent a satisfying criterion for assertivity: it seems to track the right property, and it gives us a fairly good classification—except for the classification of perceptions. Second, I think it is simply wrong to claim that “assertivity”—at least when applied to propositional attitudes—is really something we understand well enough even in the absence of a criterion. Of course, we easily understand sentences of the form “*S* asserts that *p*”, “*S* makes the assertion that *p*”, or “*S* utters that *p* assertively”. If we apply the notion of assertivity to utterances of persons, then this usage is well entrenched in our everyday talk, so that in this context we do not need a precise criterion of assertivity in order to understand that notion. But what does it mean to claim that a certain propositional attitude represents its content assertively? This is still extremely unclear. The only explanation we can find in the literature is that a propositional attitude is assertive iff it purports to be saying how the world is (cf. Pryor 2005, 187). Obviously, this explanation is to a certain

¹⁷On Glüer’s view, perceptions have only phenomenal content. Assume I am looking at a red tomato in front of me. Representationalists claim that in this case, I have a perceptual experience with a certain propositional content; furthermore they claim that the content of my perceptual experience is: The tomato is red. According to Glüer, however, the content of my perceptual experience in this case is: The tomato looks red (to me). Thus, on this view perceptions do not ascribe sensible properties to material objects, but rather only phenomenal ones (cf., Glüer 2009: 24). Interestingly, if we were to accept this view regarding the propositional content of perceptions, then perceptions would presumably satisfy criterion (D) for assertivity.

extent metaphorical. What exactly does it mean for a propositional attitude to purport to be saying how the world is? At the beginning of the paper we said that it means that the propositional attitude aims at representing the world as it actually is? But, of course, that is a metaphorical expression as well. What exactly does it mean for a propositional attitude to aim at representing the world as actually being a certain way? As long as we do not unpack these metaphors, i.e., as long as we do not give a more precise criterion for assertivity, it seems unclear what we mean by saying that a propositional attitude *Ap* assertively represents the world. Thus, simply claiming that assertivity is a primitive notion for which no criterion has to be given does not seem to be a satisfactory way to get around the problem I have raised.

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