

*Perception: Essays after Frege*, by Charles Travis.  
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In the essays collected in *Perception: Essays After Frege*, Charles Travis confronts one of the central questions of what is traditionally called ‘theoretical philosophy’, namely: how can the mind, in thinking about the world in ways that are fundamentally and necessarily *general*, properly grasp a world that is fundamentally and necessarily *particular*? To put it another way: how do concrete states of affairs, ‘things being as they are’ (as Travis puts it), bear on thoughts that could be appropriate in response to a variety of different cases? In confronting this problem, Travis devotes considerably more attention to the issue of how *not* to address it than to developing a positive account, and he focuses in particular on what he takes to be the failings of the dominant philosophical approach during the past several decades, *representationalism*, which holds that perception, like belief or memory, is fundamentally a representational state.

Travis’s attacks on this view, heavily inspired by Frege—as suggested by the subtitle to the collection—are vigorous and unrelenting, and take on some of the most prominent contemporary defenders of various forms of representationalism, including Tyler Burge, Jerry Fodor, John McDowell, and Christopher Peacocke. One might question Travis’s appropriation of and reliance on Frege’s ideas in light of how little context or support he provides for his interpretations of them, but I will not focus on this here. Travis’s arguments against representationalism deserve consideration in their own right, regardless of their sources, as does the alternative view that emerges in glimpses from the discussion. Although Travis could do more to convince the reader of the truth of some of the Frege-inspired premises of his arguments, it is instructive enough to see where these starting points lead, particularly when the conclusions run counter to an orthodoxy many would take to be descended at least in part from Frege.

One might also object to the density of Travis’s prose, especially given the inevitable repetition that arises in a collection of essays on a common topic. The effort invested in parsing the unusual syntax and complex anaphora is repaid, however, by the way in which the essays reveal as seriously problematic ideas that are for many unquestioned assumptions. Since mainstream theories of perception in philosophy have only recently begun to attract adequate critical attention, the discomfort with them that Travis endeavors to induce, aided by his distinctive style and picturesque examples, will hopefully motivate further scrutiny.

I should acknowledge that I am a partisan of the general outlook that Travis defends in this collection (one that is often called ‘naïve realism’, though Travis himself does not endorse this label). This is partly due to having been influenced by earlier versions of several of the essays it contains, some of which now appear in updated forms. Unlike Travis, however, I continue to feel the attraction of the views he criticizes, and think that there remain some considerable promissory notes regarding the alternative he sketches. My aims here will be to draw together what I take to be some of the main lines of argument that motivate his rejection of representationalist theories of perception, to mention a way in which I think he occasionally mischaracterizes such theories, and to highlight a significant difficulty facing Travis’s own preferred view. My hope is to distill the challenges to representationalism that Travis so forcefully presents, and also to indicate where I think Travis, and others (such as myself) who are sympathetic to his outlook, need to make further progress.

To begin with, here is Travis describing what he takes to be the bearing of perception on thought:

The pig before me, when I see it, is what allows me to see—recognize, register—that there is a pig before me. Perception need only bring the pig in view. The rest lies in my capacities for knowing what it is I see—when perception has brought a pig in view; when it thus makes that there is a pig before me the thing for me to judge. (p. 191)

This might seem a natural way of understanding how perception provides us with guidance regarding what to believe about the surrounding environment: perception delivers awareness of the world, cognition decides what to believe given what has been provided, as well as whatever else might be believed or known about the situation. According to Travis, however, representationalist approaches to perception must reject this view of the relation between perception and cognition, because they hold that perception not only provides awareness of the environment, but also informs us of how things are in it (see pp. 24-29 for a summary of what Travis takes representationalism to be committed to). This latter feature of perception, if it is one, introduces into perception the generality that Travis, following Frege, finds to be distinctive of thought. If, as representationalism claims, seeing a pig before me involves perceptually representing that there is a pig before me, then perception is the sort of state that is liable to error in just the way belief or memory can be.

To think this of perception is, Travis argues, to confuse what he calls the *historical* (also: the non-conceptual, the particular, the environmental) with *conceptual* generalities under which particular cases fall. Perception does not provide us with such generalities—ways the environment might be whether or not it is in fact that way—but rather with ‘what instances them’ (see Essay 4, especially pp. 123-127). Put another way, the role of perception is to make available to the mind the concrete objects and states of affairs that make it apt to use one’s capacities to make judgments about particular cases on the basis of the concepts one possesses. Says Travis: ‘Conceptual capacities come into the picture only with our operations in thought on what perception has anyway provided’ (p. 241). Importantly, Travis’s notion of the conceptual does not just include propositional content structured by concepts, but any form of abstract representation, including what some philosophers have referred to as ‘non-conceptual content’ (see Essay 6, especially pp. 156-163).

Travis sees representationalists as motivated to reject the idea of perception as simply making us aware of concrete particulars and states of affairs by at least two kinds of considerations: the desire to provide a general account of sensory consciousness or sensory information processing (or both), and the idea that the possibility of perceptual justification and knowledge imposes a constraint on the way in which perception must provide awareness of the surrounding world. It is worth considering his attacks on these motivations more carefully.

One version of representationalism, frequently called *intentionalism*, holds that a general account of sensory consciousness, framed in terms of the notion of *phenomenal character* (‘what experience is like’) depends on the assignment of an explanatory common factor to ordinary cases of perceiving the surrounding environment, and experiences which, because illusory or hallucinatory, are indiscriminable from such cases (Travis calls these ‘ringers’). While not all representationalists endeavor to provide a reductive account of consciousness, nearly all share as a central theoretical commitment the idea that representational contents of perception are specified by assigning accuracy conditions to experience as part of a general account of the mind’s capacity for information processing. The idea is that in indiscriminable good (veridical) and bad (illusory or hallucinatory) cases of experience, the perceiver’s sensory system represents the world as being the very same way. In resisting this line of thinking, Travis allies himself with a family of views of perception known as *disjunctivism*. What disjunctivism denies is that there is a common explanatory element (i.e. the state’s representational content) that is fundamental both to cases of perceiving some aspect of the

surrounding environment and subjectively indiscriminable experiences which fail to deliver perceptual awareness of the relevant aspect.

Travis's argument against the representationalist's common explanatory element is that what is in common between good and bad cases is not something to which beliefs could be answerable with respect to their truth (see Essays 2 and 9). Travis cites Frege as the inspiration for this point: "The word 'red', if it does not indicate a property of things, but is meant to indicate marks of sense-impressions which are part of my consciousness, is applicable only in the domain of my consciousness" (Frege 1918: p. 67, quoted by Travis on p. 62 and 303). The idea is that if what is explanatorily fundamental to perception is only as much as is present in the case of say, a total hallucination, then the beliefs we form on the basis of perception will be beliefs that are about whatever is present to mind in the hallucinatory case. If that were so, then predicates such as 'red' would not be true or false of perceived objects, but rather only of what is common to both the good and bad case. Such a result would undermine our very conception of truth, Travis argues, for whatever account one provides of hallucination, the mind-independent environment will not be part of the explanation, and so will not be any part of what our application of predicates in judgment is answerable to. According to Travis, the effort to provide a general account of sensory consciousness, or of sensory information processing, 'cuts us off from the world in our visual experiencing—as we must be cut off for representation by, or in, experience to so much as gain a foothold' (p. 156).

In pressing this line of attack against representationalism, there is a frequent implication suggested (particularly in the Introduction and Essays 1, 2, and 3), that I think is mistaken, and which distracts from the persuasiveness of Travis's arguments. The implication is that by positing a common explanatory element in perception and hallucination, representationalists are committed to common object of perceptual *awareness*: 'Representation yields only mediated awareness of what it represents as so' (p. 34, see also pp. 9-10, 59, and 116). To attribute this view to representationalism is to verge on confusing its commitments with those of a sense-datum theory of perception, a mistake that, while he falls short of fully committing to it, Travis is clearly tempted by. This attribution does not do justice to what representationalists typically propose. Representationalism claims that perceptual experiences and indiscriminable hallucinations possess a common representational content, and this is meant to be an explanatory generalization, a shorthand that can account for the theoretically relevant similarities between the two states. In a case of ordinary perception, a representationalist will claim, what we are aware of is something in the surrounding environment that causes the experience; in the hallucinatory case we simply aren't aware of anything, despite the fact that we represent things as being the same way in both cases. The attribution of a common representational content is a way of trying to account for why things seem the same to the perceiver in both cases, and does not require a common object of perceptual awareness, as Travis is prone to suggest.

Abstracting from this unfortunate implication, however, Travis's arguments remain effective: the presence of a common fundamental explanatory element to perception and hallucination is sufficient to press the claim that representationalism blocks perception from playing its epistemic role in our mental lives, and this argument is made quite forcefully without invoking common objects of perceptual awareness in Essays 5, 7, 9, and 10.

The second motivation for representationalism that Travis criticizes is the idea that perceptual experiences must have representational content in order to provide us with epistemic justification and knowledge (see especially Essays 4, 6, and 8). This idea is usually associated with Sellars's attack on the 'Myth of the Given' (Sellars 1956), but as Travis points out, a concern with constraints on how perception can provide us with epistemic justification goes back at least to Kant, and Travis's own target in his discussion of this topic is the work of John McDowell (e.g. McDowell 1994), who

has argued that rational relations can only hold between states that stand in inferential relations in virtue of possessing propositional contents.

Travis argues that it is mistaken to think that without perceptual representation, there can be no rational relations between perception and belief. He proposes that perception can provide the basis for beliefs about the surrounding world, without itself being a truth evaluable state, insofar as one can ‘appreciate’ or ‘recognize’ the truth of some proposition to be believed or known in what one is perceptually aware of: ‘The non-conceptual—things being as they are, or a thing being as it is—can settle *our* questions what to think only if we can appreciate, grasp, its bearing on what is so’ (p. 128, see also Essay 8, especially pp. 242-250). This capacity for recognizing truths by becoming perceptually aware of their instances requires *expertise* (pp. 128-130), which is what grasp of concepts at least partly consists in. Understanding the relation between concepts and the particular cases that fall under them is precisely to grasp the rational relations between perception and belief that perceptual judgment requires (p. 247).

Broadly speaking, the conception of perceptual judgment that Travis offers here is compelling. What so many have complained about when it comes to internalist and externalist accounts of perceptual justification and knowledge is that they leave out an epistemic role either for facts about the mind-independent world or for our cognitive capacities for basing our beliefs on reasons. Travis’s approach to these issues makes both factors constitutive of justified perceptual belief and knowledge. Moreover, his view is distinctive in that it suggests that a theory need not require that perception is representational in order to accommodate both internalist and externalist motivations, contrary to what others have claimed. The positive details of his proposal, however, are strikingly lacking. In particular, Travis provides no explanation of exactly what it means to ‘appreciate’ or ‘recognize’ what bearing things being as they are has on which propositions to believe. The lack of a framework for explaining how perceptual awareness of the environment produces justified belief in some propositions rather than others constitutes a lacuna in his approach to the relation between perception and thought.

Travis is not alone in facing this difficulty. Naïve realists and other defenders of non-inferential perceptual justification have done little to explain what makes transitions between perception and belief rationally justified, particularly when perception is understood as non-conceptual or non-representational. Jim Pryor (2005) helpfully suggests that such transitions must be non-arbitrary and normatively evaluable, but much more work needs to be done to specify what specific requirements these and other constraints might impose. While the fact that no proposal for addressing this problem has so far been forthcoming does not show the impossibility of providing one, the burden of proof would seem to lie on the side of those who wish to defend the outlook on the relationship between perception and belief that Travis recommends.

In focusing on some of the main arguments that Travis presses against representationalist theories of perception, as well as indicating where further progress needs to be made, I have left unmentioned many fascinating topics that are discussed in this collection, including introspection (Essay 3), the nature of intentionality (Essay 7), the publicity of thought (throughout), and many others. Suffice it to say that the reader who ventures to follow Travis along the lines of argument contained in these essays will be rewarded with rich reflections on some of the most central topics in epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

## References

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