

BOOK REVIEW

Showing, Sensing, and Seeming: Distinctively Sensory Representations and their Contents, by Dominic Gregory

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Reviewed by Giulia Martina

Consider a photograph of an apple, Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples and a Pot of Primroses*, your memory of a green apple with pink veins that you once saw, the apple you are prompted to imagine right now. Moving to other sensory modalities, we could also add the fresh apple smell you now recall, the mental image of the smooth texture of the apple's skin, which you would be able to sense if that fruit were in your hands, and an audio recording of the crunchy sound of an apple being bitten into.

Intuitively, all such pictures, mental images, memories, and records have something in common. On the one hand, they all are about either a particular apple or an object that is a fruit of a certain kind: this captures the intentionality of such representations. On the other hand, they all distinguish themselves from, say, linguistic representations, thoughts, and symbolic representations because of their special relationship with our sensory capacities and sensory mental states. They are, in Dominic Gregory's terms, *distinctively sensory representations (DSRs)*. Gregory's book tries to substantiate these intuitions with a general theory of DSRs, according to which their essential property—that which marks them out as a unified class—is the special content they have.



Figure 1: Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples and a Pot of Primroses*, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

As Gregory notes in Chapter 1, DSRs apparently have some common properties that constitute the *explananda* of the theory developed in Chapter 3. First, DSRs are *perspectival*, for they always show things as looking certain ways from a certain point of view. The nature of perspectives is later explored in Chapter 2, where Gregory argues for their objectivity. Perspectives need not be characterized by any mental or subjective property, for they are points in geometrical space which can well be empty, i.e., without any subject or sensation being there instantiated. That is, they might simply specify a certain layout of objects and properties in the world around a certain point. Nevertheless, DSRs can either be *objective* or *subjective*. Just as one who seems to see an apple does not necessarily seem to see

their subjective episode of seeing, a visualization of an apple does not need self-referential content that involves one's imagined seeing of the apple.¹ Yet while many DSRs are objective in this sense, others are modally different, for they represent sensations.² Furthermore, DSRs are only concerned with *sensibilia*, that is, objects and properties that can apparently be sensed. Moreover, their contents are rich and fine-grained; in particular, they are *more specific* than conceptual contents of propositional attitudes.³

Chapter 3 is at the core of the book. The main thesis is captured by two central points:

1. Distinctively sensory showing comes from subjective informativeness;
2. Scene-showing corresponds to seeming.

1. Distinctively sensory contents “single out” the “ways for things to stand sensorily,” which Gregory identifies with types of sensations, in *a subjectively informative way*, i.e., in terms of what it is like to have sensations of those types.⁴

In virtue of such a relation between the contents of DSRs and the phenomenology of the perceptual experiences they individuate, DSRs perform the sensory showing that distinguishes them from other kinds of representations. For example, if I grasp the content of Cézanne's painting I thereby appreciate how it visually shows things as standing, and I identify a way things look in terms of the phenomenology of the

¹Gregory 2013, p. 21. Where not otherwise specified, all references are to the book reviewed here.

²I cannot deal here with the distinction between objective and subjective DSRs, which is an admittedly thorny issue—and perhaps less intuitive than Gregory seems to think. The book discusses this issue at length, engaging with the relevant philosophical arguments against the author's view.

³Although this suggests that DSRs' contents are, instead, non-conceptual, Gregory does not want to commit himself to this position. The relation between DSRs and concepts is reconsidered in Chapter 4, where the author accepts the plausible line that, if perceptual experiences were constrained by the subject's conceptual resources, DSRs would have a conceptual content; but he also embraces the more controversial thesis that, if perceptual experiences have non-conceptual content, the content of DSRs would be analogously non-conceptual. cf. Gregory 2013, p. 92.

⁴Ibid., p. 48.

visual experience in which things look that way. A linguistic description of a table holding some apples and a pot of flowers does not by itself provide me with the same capacities.

2. A DSR represents (shows) an object *O* with the property *P* iff the way the representation shows things as standing sensorily (the sensation-type *S*) is such that anyone who enjoys an *S* sensation seems to sensorily encounter an *O* which is *P*.⁵

The second principle specifies how the modality-specific showing unique to DSRs is different from other kinds of representing in terms of the range of objects and properties it is limited to capturing. The further specification that DSRs can show things as standing sensorily in certain ways, either from perspectives or in the course of sensations, is meant to allow for the objective/subjective distinction.

The theory of DSRs just sketched is then applied to well-known philosophical problems. Chapter 5 is devoted to the imagery debate, i.e., the discussion started by Kosslyn and Pylyshyn about the nature of sensory mental images, such as those involved in visualization. Gregory offers a useful introduction to the most important arguments and shows their relation to the empirical evidence. Against the background of his theory of DSRs, it seems discussion should now focus on the content of mental images rather than their format (pictorial or otherwise), in order to better understand the similarities and differences between mental imagery and perceptual experience. This remains an open line for future research.

Chapter 6 focuses on pictures and theories of distinctively visual picturing. Gregory inclines towards experienced-resemblance theories of depiction. Given a picture of an apple, I identify the type of perceptual experiences that occurs when an apple looks a certain way—presumably in virtue of my grasping the DSR's content—and thereby experience a resemblance between that type's phenomenology and the phenomenology I am presently enjoying, because the identification is based on the way the picture itself (i.e. the material object which is the depictive vehicle) looks to me.⁶ Such basic sensory grasp-

⁵See *ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

ing grounds our conceptual recognition of the picture's content. Gregory's intent is to explain distinctively visual pictures on the basis of their content, avoiding reference to our pictorial experiences of them as far as possible. However, pictures show things as looking a distinctive way because their contents allow us to identify phenomenologies of certain types of perceptual experiences. So one could doubt whether what distinctively visual pictures depict can be determined by the contents of such pictures without being dependent on our experiences of them.⁷ Gregory's theory of DSRs is applied in Chapter 7 to explain other pictorial properties, such as lifelikeness. Finally, Chapter 8 addresses distinctively sensory records such as photographs, audio recordings, and memories—in particular their epistemic status.

As a whole, the book purports to contribute to a number of lively philosophical and psychological debates, but it is guided first of all by a desire to provide a general theory of sensory representations. As such, I want to focus on the book's core theory, which I summarised above, to clarify some important points. As it is formulated in the book, Gregory's theory is open to different readings and would perhaps benefit from more precise and in-depth explanations.

Let me focus on objective DSRs and esteroceptive sensations or perceptual experiences, those that apparently put us in contact with the outside world.⁸ Gregory first states that the DSRs' contents "single out" "ways for things to stand sensorily." But what exactly do these two expressions mean?

Now, the author explicitly identifies the way that things look, smell, sound, or feel with different sensation-types. Even if it is not clear how types of sensation are individuated, here this is done in terms of the sensations' phenomenal character. One possible reading, thus, is that the content of a DSR singles out the phenomenal character of a possible perceptual experience. The question, then, is what this singling out consists in. Gregory writes about a "picking out" or "identification" in virtue of which distinctively sensory contents "involve" perceptual experiences when considered in terms of their phe-

⁷Cf. also Gregory 2010.

⁸In fact, Gregory's theory is more plausible with respect to these experiences.

nomenology.⁹ On a metaphysical interpretation, the singling out relation is an individuation: the DSR's content determines the individuation conditions of the phenomenal character of the related perceptual experience. If this is correct, then the author seems to be committed to a thesis according to which the content of a picture, mental image, or record is identical with, or at least is essentially dependent on, the phenomenal character of a possible sensation that is an instance of a certain sensation-type.

But let us suppose that, on a weaker interpretation, the singling out is an epistemic identification. Gregory would presumably endorse such an interpretation, for in his view the singling out is subjectively informative. In other words, the special feature of DSRs is that, once a subject grasps their content, she appreciates what it is like to undergo a sensation with a certain phenomenal character, and she is thereby able to epistemically identify sensations of that kind. To be sure, Gregory's remarks that DSRs' contents somehow "involve" perceptual experiences suggest that the epistemic relation is too weak. Yet even if the singling out is not meant to be a metaphysical relation between DSRs' contents and possible perceptual experiences, a thorough explanation is missing as to why the epistemic relation, with respect to the phenomenal character of those experiences, holds. How can the content of a picture tell me what it is like to enjoy a possible sensation? Or, focusing on the stronger reading, how can a content of a picture individuate, or be identical with, the phenomenology of a possible experience?

It seems that Gregory needs to say something more about the structure and nature of sensory mental states in order that the relation between such states and DSRs—on which his theory centres—does not remain inscrutable. More precisely, he should commit himself to a theory of the relation between the content of DSRs and the content of the perceptual experiences whose phenomenal character they individuate. Moreover, he also needs to endorse a thesis about the relation between the content of a perceptual experience and its phenomenology.

⁹See e.g. Gregory 2013, pp. 46-47.

The preliminary assumption is that perceptual experiences have an intentional content. This thesis is perhaps implicit in the book, since Gregory believes that sensations present things as being a certain way, and that they are accurate just in case the world really is how it appears to be, or how it is presented or shown to be.¹⁰ Such phenomenologically salient accuracy conditions are intentional contents of perceptual states.¹¹ Moreover, the book is at least compatible with a weak intentionalist thesis, according to which the phenomenology and the content of a perceptual state co-vary. A perceptual experience is of a particular type when things appear a certain way to its subject (say, *thus*), and the content of that experience captures the ways things would seem to be to any subject having an experience of that type, in terms of accuracy conditions any subject having an experience of that type sensorily appreciates (the content has the form: *things are thus*).

A commitment to the theses that perceptual experiences have an intentional content and that this content matches the experiences' sensory phenomenal character is fruitful for the book's overall argument. Above all, the content of perceptual experiences plays a key role in determining the contents of DSRs, which, we have seen, is their essential property. Pictures, visual mental images, and memories, for instance, have *distinctively sensory* contents—distinctively visual ones, in this case—in virtue of the fact that they individuate types of perceptual experiences in terms of their phenomenology. But such a phenomenology characterizes the way things appear to be, i.e. it is reflected in the perceptual intentional content of the experience. A subject grasping a DSR's content (say, the content of the photograph of a green apple) thereby grasps in a phenomenally conscious way a possible state of affairs (e. g. one when there is an apple with certain visible properties, such as the property of being green, apparently being in front of the subject, and so on). Such characterization of a possible layout of worldly objects and their perceivable properties, around an objective point of view, can be naturally identified with an expe-

¹⁰Cf. Gregory 2013, pp. 28–31.

¹¹At least in the sense argued for by Siegel 2010.

rience's perceptual content—without necessarily committing us to a specific theory about the nature of this content.

In this respect, it is worth pointing to an alternative reading of Gregory's formula of "a way for things to stand sensorily," which contrasts the author's declared reading—i.e., a sensation-type. "A way for things to stand sensorily" is used in the book to mean the phenomenally-relevant intentional content of a perceptual experience, which also corresponds to a common use of the expression in the philosophy of mind.¹²

With such a framework in mind, Gregory's first slogan can be understood along the lines I propose. The relation between a DSRs' contents and the phenomenally salient contents of perceptual experiences promises to explain why DSRs are the special kind of representations they are. The crucial relation of individuation between a DSR and a perceptual experience can thus be explained as follows: a DSR singles out a sensation with a certain phenomenology in virtue of sharing at least a component of its own phenomenologically relevant *content* with the relevant sensation.

What is more, Gregory's second point also seems to go in this direction. Point 2, above, explains the distinctively sensory nature of content that pictures, memories, mental images, and records have, in terms of the kind of objects and properties they represent. Now, perceptual experiences themselves have precisely this kind of content: they *prima facie* seem to have the properties Gregory ascribes to DSRs and cites as *explananda* for his theory, and they seem to have them in virtue of their perceptual content. First, they are perspectival. The perspectivalness of a DSR, as Gregory acknowledges, mirrors the perspectivalness of the sensation in the sensory modality to which the DSR relates: a picture is perspectival in the same way that vision is. Since it is in virtue of its content that a DSR such as a picture is related to a certain type of perceptual experience, one may well think that the content of the perceptual experience in the relevant modality thus singled out is perspectival. Second, perceptual experiences are

¹²In fact, Gregory seems to accept that an experience's perceptual content is constituted by objects, perceivable properties, and a Fregean mode of presentation. Cf. Gregory 2013, pp. 30–31; 49.

only concerned with representing *sensibilia*—objects and properties that sensorily appear to be instantiated—almost by definition. Third, they have content that is more fine-grained than content specified in terms of concepts—such as that of propositional attitudes. Finally, the content of a perceptual experience in a certain sensory modality is phenomenologically relevant just in the same way the content of a DSR bound to that modality would be. In conclusion, perceptual experiences satisfy Gregory’s two points: they individuate contents—the way things appear to be—in a subjectively informative manner, and they perform a scene-showing such that they show an object *O* having the property *P* iff anyone enjoying those experiences seems to perceptually encounter an *O* which is *P*.

If this is correct, it could be objected that perceptual experiences themselves actually count as DSRs. It is true that this might be a threat to the book’s argument. If Gregory’s aim is to explain why DSRs form a unified, distinctive class and to trace this back to the relation between their contents and (the content of) perceptual experiences, then nothing explanatory is gained if perceptual experiences simply are DSRs. If my second interpretation of the book’s theory is correct, photographs, pictures, and mental images on the one hand, and perceptual experiences on the other, cannot differ substantially with respect to their content, for what explains the special relation between the former and the phenomenology of the latter is a common component of their distinctively sensory contents. However, we are not forced to conflate DSRs and perceptual experiences provided that one specifies some further properties that distinguish them, over and above the common kind of content. Sure enough, experiences, unlike pictures, mental images, and records, are *mental states*, so they can differ from DSRs because they have a phenomenal character, an intentional mode, or functional role, or they lack a representational vehicle such as the material that constitutes a picture or an audio recording.

Perhaps Gregory would have preferred to remain neutral on the issues I have raised here, but he needs to clarify some basic theses and argue for them in greater detail in order for the theory to be a good explanation of the intuitive, appealing idea we started with.

Gregory's book shows how fruitful it can be to approach well-known discussions—such as those involving depiction, mental imagery, and picture perception—from a wider perspective. Familiar problems can be seen under a new light once we recognize they are grounded in the common nature that representations share. Yet we see that the more these debates engage with different areas of research, such as philosophy of perception, cognitive science, philosophy of language, and metaphysics, the more philosophically interesting and profound they become. A theory of distinctively sensory representations thoroughly developed along such lines cannot be as neutral as its proponent may claim, but it is surely a precious and novel research project worth pursuing.

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