

Against an Inferentialist Dogma

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ABSTRACT: I consider the ‘inferentialist’ thesis that whenever a mental state rationally justifies a belief it is in virtue of inferential relations holding between the contents of the two states. I suggest that no good argument has yet been given for the thesis. I focus in particular on Williamson (2000) and Ginsborg (2011) and show that neither provides us with a reason to deny the plausible idea that experience can provide non-inferential justification for belief. I finish by pointing out some theoretical costs and tensions associated with endorsing inferentialism.

1. Introduction

“Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief”. (Davidson, 2001 [1983], p141)

I think its fair to say that most philosophers these days would want to allow, contra Davidson’s slogan¹, not only that our experiences can justify our beliefs but that they can be a subject’s *reason* for belief. In other words, they can provide *rational justification* as opposed to merely providing some kind of externalist, non-rational justification – e.g. in virtue of the experience being part of a reliable belief-forming process. Of course, this will be denied by some reliabilists – e.g. Lyons (2008) suggests that perceptual experiences only provide externalist, non-evidential justification. But I am just going to assume that this is a fairly drastic position to take². The idea that your conscious perceptual phenomenology, e.g. the way your surroundings are consciously presented to you in your visual field, can be your *reason* for forming a belief about those things, strikes me as immensely plausible and something we should only abandon with the greatest reluctance if all other options have been exhausted.

But even though few these days would endorse the strict letter of Davidson’s claim³, the *inferentialist* idea underlying Davidson’s slogan continues to be influential – viz. that only something with propositional content can rationally justify a propositional attitude, for only something with propositional content can stand in inferential/logical/rational relations to other propositional contents. As well as Davidson, other prominent advocates of something like this line of thought include: Popper (1959 [1935]), Sellars (1956, 1975), Unger (1975), Rorty (1981), Bonjour

¹ Compare Popper (1959 [1935]): ‘If we demand justification by reasoned argument, in the logical sense, then we are committed to the view that *statements can be justified only by statements*’ (p75, italics in the original). Popper approvingly cites the work of the 19th-century German philosopher J. F. Fries (1828-31) in connection with this claim.

² Of course, an experience might *also* confer externalist, non-evidential justification in virtue of being a reliable mechanism, as well as being a reason for belief.

³ Though see Gluer-Pagin, 2014, who holds that experiences *are* a kind of belief.

(1985), McDowell (1994), Brewer (1999), Williamson (2000), Huemer (2001), Thau (2002), Rosenberg (2002), Lyons (2008), Ginsborg (2011)⁴.

In the debate over conceptual vs. non-conceptual content for experience, some advocates of conceptual content (e.g. McDowell 1994, Brewer 1999) have wielded the inferentialist idea against non-conceptual theorists as being unable to provide an account of the justificatory role of experience. In response, advocates of non-conceptual content for experience (Byrne 1996, Peacocke 2001, Heck 2000, Vision 2009), rather than questioning the inferential view of justification, have tended to insist that non-conceptual contents can after all play the role of premises in inferences, by standing in deductive or probabilising relations to the contents of beliefs. The alleged non-conceptual content of experience is not, of course, structured into conceptual sub-components, nor is it meant to require that the subject deploys any concepts in having the experience, but it is still supposed to be a content *that* the world is some specific way (and not various other ways), a content that can be assessed for truth/correctness/accuracy. This sort of response then *denies* that only something with *conceptual* content can be a rational justifier, but *accepts* the underlying inferentialist model of rational justification as requiring inferential relations between the (propositional or at least accuracy-evaluable) contents of the justifier and the justified.

This paper's target will be the following inferentialist thesis:

- **INFERENCEALISM:** For the rationally-justifying (i.e. reason-giving) relation to hold between justificans and justificandum – so between an experience and a belief in particular – it must be in virtue of the former bearing logical/inferential relations (deductive or probabilising) to the latter⁵.

If we assume⁶ that inferential-logical relations (deductive or inductive) only hold between propositions (propositional contents), and by extension between the representational bearers of propositional content, then we get the following corollary of inferentialism:

- **REASONS REPRESENTATIONALISM:** Any mental state – so conscious experiences in particular – must have (propositional) representational content (whether 'conceptual' or not) in order to rationally justify a belief.

⁴ Both Bonjour and Brewer have since changed their minds on this issue – see Bonjour (2000) and Brewer (2011) respectively. McDowell's more recent work might also be seen as retreating from inferentialism – e.g. his (2013). And in section 3, below, I will argue that Williamson is in fact sympathetic to experience providing something like non-inferential rational justification.

⁵ Clarification: to say that justification is 'in virtue of' the inferential connection between contents of m_1 and m_2 , is not the same as saying that the subject gains justification via *performing* an inference. It may be that the subject forms a justified belief in response to the experience without performing any kind of mental action we would want to call a personal-level inference (conscious or unconscious), but the experience counts as a (good) reason for belief for the subject *in virtue of* the content of the experience entailing or making likely the content of the belief.

⁶ Though see Moser (1989) and Fales (1995), who are both prepared to question this linking assumption.

In what follows, I will use the term ‘representational’ to mean something with propositional, or at least accuracy-evaluable, content – and thus, in line with current usage, a ‘representational theory of experience’ is any theory according to which experiences possess contents with truth/accuracy conditions. But of course there is a wider sense of ‘representational’ on which something can be representational if it ‘stands for’, refers to or is about something else. E.g. the name ‘Napoleon’ represents a certain person (it ‘stands for’ him, it refers to him) but it is not a representation with a content *that* something is the case. And perhaps some mental states can likewise be representational in this more inclusive sense without having any propositional content – e.g. it is sometimes suggested that one can, say, fear dogs or love chocolate where these mental states are not propositional attitudes with contents about dogs or about chocolate, rather they are intentional but non-propositional attitudes towards a certain kind of object⁷.

Notice that even if one rejects inferentialism, one *might* still end up endorsing Reasons Representationalism for some other reason – e.g. if for independent reasons one thought that having (propositional) representational content is the ‘mark of the mental’, then trivially any mental state that can be a reason for belief would be bound to possess representational content. This would leave open that some of these representational mental states might play the role of providing rational justification for belief, but *not in virtue of* any inferential relation between the contents of the mental states.

I will try to show that no good argument has yet been given for an exclusively inferential view of rational justification and also that there are some significant costs and tensions for this inferentialist view.

To be clear: I will not be trying to establish the stronger claim that non-inferential justification plays a *foundational* role in the overall belief system, such that any empirical belief’s justification can ultimately be traced back to a non-inferential source. Nor am I committed to any general thesis concerning the *subject matter* of non-inferentially justified beliefs – perhaps these can be about the external world, but perhaps not. Nor am I committed (and we’ll come back to this) to the claim that a belief can receive *complete/outright justification* from purely non-inferential sources. I will only be concerned to show that there is no good argument against the very idea of non-inferential justification and that there are reasons to accept that such justification is both possible and actual.

2. Why be an Inferentialist?

Whilst the inferentialist view of rational justification has often been endorsed by prominent philosophers, it has much more rarely been *argued* for. The only support we are typically offered is the assertion that we simply have no other notion of rational support apart from the relation between premise and conclusion in an inference. For example:

⁷ I am very grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to distinguish between these different senses of ‘representational’.

‘...the concept of a *reason* seems so clearly tied to that of an *inference* or *argument* that the concept of non-inferential reasonableness seems to be a *contradiction in adjecto*.’
(Sellars, 1975, 337)

‘If experiences did not have propositional content, it would be difficult to understand how a perceptual experience could be the basis for a belief, which does have propositional content, for there would be no logical relations between them.’ (Huemer, 2001, 74)

‘The only normative paradigm of a belief, B, being ‘based on’ particular ‘grounds’, G, is the paradigm of inferential support, where G, like B, has the logical shape of a proposition, one whose truth implies or confirms the truth of B. Where the ‘grounds’, G, do not have the logical shape of a proposition, the belief B can be based on them only in the sense of being a *response* to them; that is, being (proximately) causally evoked... (Rosenberg, 2002, 121)

‘Many of our beliefs are based on our perceptions. If perception relates subjects to propositions, then this process is no more mysterious than the process of beliefs leading us to other beliefs. However, if perception isn’t a relation to a proposition, it is hard to see how there could be inferential relations between perception and belief.’ (Thau, 2002, 75)

‘An experiential state without propositional content would not be able to stand in logical, probabilistic, or any other evidential relations to beliefs, and thus stands outside ‘the logical space of reasons’. It cannot serve as a justifying ground for beliefs, any more than a rock or my dog can. At the very least, if such a state can evidentially justify beliefs, it is mysterious how, and the theorist who insists on the possibility owes us an explanation.’ (Lyons, 2008, 473)

The common thread is clear: we can *just make no sense* of rational justification that is not inferential in nature.

But whether or not inferentialism is ultimately correct, it is, I suggest, quite *plainly unsatisfactory* to rest content with the dogmatic assertion that we cannot conceive of any alternative as the only support for the thesis. For a start there is a long ‘foundationalist’ tradition in epistemology, which holds that there *must be* non-inferential justification if we are to avoid a vicious regress of inferential justifications⁸. And quite apart from regress-avoidance, the idea that experiences provide non-inferential justification for beliefs is actually pretty intuitive – as Pryor (2004) points out:

I feel tired – the feeling justifies my belief that I am tired

I have a headache – the sensation/experience justifies my belief that I have a headache.

I raise my arm in order to swat a fly – I’m thereby justified in believing that I raise my arm in order to swat a fly

I imagine my grandmother – the imaginative episode justifies my belief that I am imagining my grandmother. (Examples taken from Pryor 2004, p206)

In each case, the relation between the justifier and the justified belief does not *seem* to be inferential – or at least it is far from obvious that it is inferential. Moreover, as well

⁸ Clarification: not *all* versions of foundationalism need be committed to the existence of non-inferential justification. One possible kind of foundationalism holds that basic beliefs are *self-justifying*; and this justificatory relation that a basic belief allegedly bears to itself then perhaps could be held to be inferential.

as justified beliefs, we also naturally, pre-philosophically speak of actions being justified or rational – but actions do not (at least usually) have propositional content, and so *prima facie* their justification cannot be in virtue of an inferential relation between propositions.

Of course I am not suggesting (and nor was Pryor) that we *have* to take these apparently non-inferential cases at face value – perhaps there is in fact an inferential relation here, perhaps these are not really instances of rationally justified belief after all, perhaps actions are justified in a different non-epistemic sense to how beliefs can be justified etc⁹. But in view of these at least *prima facie* cases of non-inferential justification, it certainly won't do to just assert that we can make no sense of such a thing.

Now, one might have *independent* qualms about the possibility of non-representational mental states, or with the mind simply confronting some portion of reality, whether inner or outer. E.g. Tyler Burge (2010) thinks that vision science establishes that visual experience is representational. Siegel (2010) and Schellenberg (2011) have both argued that experience must be representational on broadly phenomenological grounds. But *given* some non-representational model for experience, there seems to be no *further* problem understanding how such a conscious episode could justify a belief about the objects of awareness – whether these are conceived of as 'inner' or 'outer'. A (non-propositional/non-representational) conscious acquaintance with the truth-makers for a belief, were such a mental state possible, would seem to be *ideally* suited to bestowing rational justification on that belief. I.e. the relation that holds between some portion of reality and an accurate judgement about that portion of reality, seems to provide an equally intelligible basis for rational justification as an alternative to the relation between premise and conclusion in an inference¹⁰. Of course, the *conscious* nature of the subject's (alleged) relation to the truth-maker of some belief is crucial here – after all, we all stand in indefinitely many *non-conscious*, or *non-mental* relations to indefinitely many things that are the truth-makers for indefinitely many potential beliefs all the time, without thereby gaining any justification for those beliefs. But then it is hardly implausible or far-fetched to think that consciousness, and in particular our conscious perceptual experience of the environment, plays some crucially important rational/epistemic role in our lives.

Given how unsatisfactory it is to just assert that the only intelligible model of justification is inferential, the fact that so many eminent philosophers have done exactly that is something which rather cries out for diagnosis. So let me now briefly

⁹ I consider the options/costs for resisting some of these sorts of apparent counter-examples to inferentialism in section 5, below.

¹⁰ Walter Hopp (2009) makes this point forcefully:

“There is no need to explain how non-conceptual states can stand in *inferential* or *logical* relations with beliefs. They don't and can't. This does not mean we are in the presence of a mystery, however. What, in the theory of knowledge, could be less mysterious than that my belief can become epistemically justified when I manage to perceive, to come into the direct presence of, its truth-maker?... Provided perceptual experiences actually manage to 'get at' a certain class of objects, they can provide warrant for belief about those objects. The fact that they can, moreover, is more obvious, by a long shot, than any theory according to which all reason-giving relations are inferential.” (Hopp, 2009, 191)

mention 3 possible assumptions that might be thought to explain how inferentialism could come to seem obvious or undeniable:

(i) Equating *having* a reason for belief, with being able to *express* one's reason in response to a challenge¹¹.

It is far from obvious that a subject must be able to correctly judge or express what their reason for believing that p is in order to count as having that reason for believing that p. But even if there *were* such a requirement, it would not establish that reasons are always propositional.

In order to express, or to think about, one's reason for believing that p, one must make a claim, or form a thought, with some propositional content about that reason. But a content *expressing* or *describing* one's reason for the belief that p is not necessarily identical to the original reason. That a claim or judgement about one's own reason is bound to be propositional, can hardly show that the original reason was also propositional in form – after all, a claim or judgement about *anything* is bound to be propositional.

(ii) The assumption that where there is a reason there must be reasoning.

‘Justifiers render beliefs *reasonable*; that is, justifiers function as *reasons* for believing something; that is, as reasons for someone *to* believe something. **Nothing can function as a reason unless it can play an appropriate role in the person's reasoning**; that is, has a logical shape which makes it available to serve as a premise or (mediate or ultimate) conclusion. Consequently, all justification is inferential.’ (Rosenberg, 2002, 122, emphasis added)

This is surely no sort of *argument* for inferentialism! Reasoning is a process which allows us to make transitions from a stock of *already justified* beliefs to further justified beliefs. (Of course, we can also make inferential transitions from unjustified beliefs!) But reasoning certainly does not *appear* to be a method for forming a stock of justified empirical beliefs in the first place. Prima facie, it is perceptual experience that provides such justified empirical beliefs. And experience often at least *seems* to be a non-inferential reason for belief, insofar as simple perceptual beliefs are not obviously formed via any process of reasoning. Now of course one might want to contest these appearances – coherentists may want to insist that enough inferential relations can *create* justification rather than just ‘spreading’ it about; others may want to insist that despite the apparent ‘immediacy’ of our perceptual belief formation, inference is after all essentially involved. But one cannot expect the mere play on words that Rosenberg makes from ‘reason’ to ‘reasoning’ to suffice for establishing that rational justification is always inferential.

¹¹ William Alston attributed this sort of mistake to Sellars:

‘It is tempting to suppose that Sellars has fallen victim to the pervasive confusion between the activity of *justifying* a belief – *showing* the belief to be reasonable, credible or justified – and a belief's *being* justified, where this is some kind of epistemic state or condition of the believer vis-a-vis the belief, rather than something he is or might be doing.

... if still in the coils of this confusion, he is likely to take it as obvious that at least S must be *capable* of justifying B in order to be justified in accepting B.’ (Alston, *Epistemic Justification*, 1989, p70-71)

(iii) Mistaking an argument that *complete* or *outright* justification requires some inferential component, for an argument that *any/all* contributions of justification must be inferential.

As an example of an argument that forming a *fully* justified belief is bound to involve reasoning, consider the following passage by Sosa:

‘...even when perceptual belief derives as directly as it ever does from sensory stimuli, it is still relevant that one has *not* perceived the signs of contrary testimony. A reason-endowed being automatically monitors his background information and his sensory input for contrary evidence and automatically opts for the most coherent hypothesis even when he responds most directly to stimuli. For even when response to stimuli is most direct, *if* one were also to hear or see the signs of credible contrary testimony, that would change one’s response. The beliefs of *rational* animal hence would seem never to issue from *unaided* introspection, memory or perception. For reason is always at least a silent partner on the watch for other relevant data, a silent partner whose very *silence* is a contributing cause of the belief outcome.’
(Sosa, 1991, 240)

Sosa then is claiming that in order to have a *fully* justified belief, one is always required to have some appreciation of one’s lack of defeaters for the belief. And perhaps it is plausible that this sort of contribution to outright justification would have to be an inferential matter – i.e. an inference from a justified belief that one has no relevant defeaters. Now whether Sosa’s position here is ultimately correct is a deep and difficult question – witness the flourishing recent literature on the debate between ‘Dogmatists’ and ‘Conservatives’ – but he is certainly raising an important and interesting issue concerning the absence of potential defeaters.

However, I suspect that there may be some danger of sliding from this sort of quite respectable argument that there must always be an inferential *contribution* to outright justification, to the claim that there *cannot* also be a non-inferential contribution¹². This latter claim is not obviously supported by Sosa’s line of thought – which only argues that reasoning about the absence of defeaters must be a ‘partner’, making a contribution to belief formation. It does not claim, as the quotations at the start of this section did, that we can ‘make no sense’ of the very idea of there also being a non-inferential contribution.

3. Williamson’s Argument that All Evidence is Propositional

Williamson (2000) gives a much-discussed argument for the claim that one’s evidence consists of the set of propositions one knows – i.e. that ‘E=K’. The first premise of this larger argument is the claim that ‘All evidence is propositional’. Williamson accepts that in everyday parlance, things which (plausibly) lack any propositional content – a physical object such as a bloodied knife, a sensation such as certain kind of ache – can be called ‘evidence’. But he argues that the *central theoretical functions* of what we call evidence can only be performed by something propositional.

¹² I am not suggesting that Sosa himself is making the sort of mistaken ‘slide’ in question – I mention him only to illustrate the respectable argument from which such sliding might begin.

The 3 'central theoretical functions' that Williamson identifies for evidence are that:

- (a) it can be best/better explained by one hypothesis rather than others,
- (b) it can probabilise and be probabilised by a hypothesis – as in the expressions $P(h/e)$ and $P(e/h)$, familiar from Bayesian theory,
- (c) it can rule out a hypothesis by being inconsistent with it.

In each case Williamson claims that:

- (a) The kind of thing that can be explained is propositional – i.e. what we explain is always *that* something is the case.
- (b) The kind of thing that has a probability is propositional – it is always a probability *that* p is the case.
- (c) The kinds of things that can be inconsistent are propositional – i.e. in the sense that one can only *deduce* the negation of the hypothesis in question from a proposition.

Although Williamson's argument is framed in terms of *evidence* being propositional, he states that: 'the argument below substantiates the familiar claim that only propositions can be reasons for belief' (194). Prima facie then, it looks like Williamson provides us with an argument for inferentialism.

Now it would certainly be worth considering whether it might be possible to challenge one or more of Williamson's three claims. Space does not permit anything like the full discussion that these claims deserve, but I will very briefly mention one possible doubt one might have here. Even supposing that it is always best/clearest to *describe* what we want to explain in propositional forms of speech – *that* the knife is bloodied, *that* I have a headache etc – it is not completely clear to me that this shows that *what is explained* is itself always a proposition/propositional. After all, on virtually any theory of what a proposition is, they are *abstracta* (even if they are, on a Russellian picture, somehow composed of concrete particulars), they do not have locations in space and time, nor can they do causal work. You might think then that propositions (propositional contents) are useful posits, or explanatory fictions, that help us to think about our own reasoning, thought and language, but it is not obvious that these abstracta *themselves* – as opposed to what the propositions are *about* – are what we are fundamentally interested in explaining. You might think, it is various hunks or tracts of concrete reality, their careers and histories, that we want in general to explain and predict; and whilst our forms of thought and language *about* such concreta may inevitably be propositional in structure, it is a further substantial metaphysical thesis that the concrete explananda out there share this structure.

For present purposes, however, we need not consider or evaluate this line of thought any further. For though the strict letter of Williamson's position denies that a non-propositional experience could literally *be* part of one's evidence, in fact he accepts that non-propositional experience plays an important rational role in our acquiring evidence/knowledge, a role which, as we'll see, looks very much like the provision of rational justification for belief. I will suggest then that concerning a role for experience as a provider of *non-inferential* justification Williamson's position is, despite the Davidsonian gloss he gives it, actually largely sympathetic.

The three functions that Williamson mentions are all instances of *reasoning* – i.e. making inferences, whether abductive, probabilistic or deductive. And of course it looks very plausible that inferential reasoning is a process that essentially involves transitions between propositional states. But, as mentioned in the previous section, by focusing only on inferential reasoning, we simply ignore the foundationalist's traditional concern that reasoning cannot explain how we come to have a stock of justified beliefs (or known propositions) to reason from in the first place. Prima facie, it is experience that plays this role, at least for empirical beliefs.

Now, Williamson is happy to allow that experiences *provide* evidence (provide reasons for belief), but he denies that experiences can themselves *be* evidence (be reasons for belief). And so whilst this could strictly and literally be taken as a denial of the claim that experience can be a reason for belief, I think that in spirit Williamson is actually pretty close to accepting that experience provides something like non-inferential, rational justification for belief. For he holds that:

- Perceptual experience is not propositional (it has 'non-propositional, non-conceptual content'):

'Experiences provide evidence; they do not consist of propositions. So much is obvious. But to provide something is not to consist of it.' (p197)

- S's experience 'confers the status of evidence-for-S' on various propositions. It is only because I have this experience that I count as having these propositions as my evidence – i.e. count as knowing these propositions, so count as having a justified belief in these propositions.

So for Williamson *non*-propositional experience provides us with various propositions we know – i.e. confers the status of being known-by-me on the propositions in question. I think it is clear that when Williamson writes of experience as 'conferring the status of evidence on propositions', he does *not* mean, as Davidson did, that experiences are *mere causes* of our coming to believe/know some proposition. Rather, the role of 'providing evidence' is a *rational* role for experience; having the experience confers on a belief's content the status of being a known-by-me proposition. So even though Williamson wants to insist that my perceptual evidence is not literally the perceptual experience itself, reserving the term 'evidence' for the proposition on which my experience 'confers the status of being my evidence', this 'conferring on p the status of being evidence for me' sounds very much like the experience is providing rational justification for my believing/knowing that p.

Williamson's story then *accepts* that a non-propositional conscious state, which cannot bear any inferential relations to the contents of our beliefs, nevertheless plays a key *rational* role in our acquisition of knowledge. Having an experience can confer on some proposition p the status of being evidence for me, i.e. known by me – which, translated into less 'knowledge-first' terms, presumably means that it confers on the proposition p the status of being *justifiably believed* by me. And so, I suggest, any disagreement that exists between Williamson and those who want to insist that (non-propositional) experience can be a non-inferential reason for belief is largely *terminological*, concerning which bit of the justificatory story – the (non-propositional) experience itself or the propositional content that the experience allows

us to know – should get the label ‘reason’. But whichever terminology is preferred, the underlying justificatory story being told remains pretty similar either way – and is in fact very different from Davidson’s story, which allowed no rational role whatsoever to sensory experience, treating it as a *mere cause* of our beliefs.

4. Ginsborg’s Argument¹³

Having now set Williamson’s work to one side, examples of arguments in favour of an exclusively inferential account of rational justification, which go beyond the dogmatic assertion that it is ‘hard to make sense’ of any alternatives, are pretty thin on the ground. About the only example I have found is a recent paper by Hannah Ginsborg (2011). Ginsborg opposes naïve-realist views which deny that experience has representational content, in particular Brewer’s (2006, 2011) ‘Object View’ of experience; her conclusion is that this sort of naïve-realist, non-representational theory cannot account for how experience can provide a reason for belief. In the first instance then, Ginsborg is arguing for the thesis I called ‘reasons representationalism’. However, I think it is clear that she is also committed to, and is at points aiming to provide support for, inferentialism. I will argue that she fails in this task.

Ginsborg draws a useful distinction between two senses in which a subject could be said to have ‘a reason for belief’¹⁴. If we ask a subject why, say, she believes that it rained in the night, the subject might naturally reply by citing some (allegedly) objective evidence or (possible) state of affairs that (she believes) obtains – she might reply, for example, ‘the puddles’ or ‘the streets are wet’ – rather than citing her belief that there is this evidence or that this state of affairs obtains. But on the other hand there are contexts, more typically from a 3rd person perspective, in which it is perfectly natural to cite the subject’s *belief* that the streets are wet as her reason for believing that it has rained. (Most obviously if the belief is actually false.) Ginsborg labels these ‘reasons1’ and ‘reasons2’ respectively:

- A Reason1: is some *chunk of reality* that counts in favour of believing that p.

I am using the term ‘chunk of reality’ here (which is not, I should emphasise, a phrase Ginsborg uses!) so as not to pre-judge any metaphysical issues concerning the correct ontological category/categories for such chunks. E.g. perhaps the relevant chunk is a fact, perhaps it can be an object, perhaps an event, perhaps an object plus its properties, perhaps a proposition, perhaps any of these etc.

- A Reason2: is some part of the *subject’s psychological perspective* on things that apparently presents, or provides cognitive access to, a chunk of reality that counts in favour of believing that p – i.e. a reason1.

Again, I don’t want to take any stance on the precise mental category/categories for reasons2. So perhaps, if Davidson’s slogan turns out to be correct, reasons2 are

¹³ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for some very helpful suggestions as to how best to structure this section.

¹⁴ Ginsborg first draws this distinction in her Ginsborg, 2006.

always other beliefs. But then again perhaps a reason2 could also be a perceptual experience, perhaps an intellectual ‘seeming’, perhaps a ‘rational intuition’ etc.

And so in order for a subject to *have* a reason1 for believing that p, they must also have a reason2, a psychological state that provides access to this reason1. Otherwise the subject would just be oblivious to the potential reason1 – it would not be a reason *for her*. And though the subject’s having a reason2 for belief that p does not require that the subject has a *genuine* reason1 for belief that p, it does require that the subject *takes herself* to have a reason1, an apparent chunk of reality that the reason2 appears, from the subject’s perspective, to afford her access to. It is unfortunate that Ginsborg does not consider whether the one same thing might function as *both* as reason1 and reason2 for belief¹⁵. In the context of discussing Naïve-realism, which holds that an experience is partially constituted by mind-independent ‘chunks of reality’, this would seem to be an omission.

Having drawn this useful clarification, Ginsborg’s paper sometimes suffers, I think, from a lack of clarity as to which of the following two lines of thought she is advancing:

(A) It is just obvious that the only kinds of chunks of reality which are suited to be reasons1 are propositional in structure – i.e. the fact that p, the proposition that p. *And so* any mental state that provided subjective access to some other, unsuitable sort of chunk of reality, could not be a reason2 for belief.

(B) Even supposing that there can be non-propositional reasons1 – e.g. an object, an event etc – any mental state which provided subjective access to such a reason1 would (for reasons to be discussed below) *still* also have to possess a propositional content in order for it to play the role of a reason2 for belief¹⁶.

At times it seems clear that Ginsborg is simply assuming that only facts or propositions could be reasons1, and so is engaged in making the former argument (A). E.g.

‘However, according to the object view, your experience does not bring into view any facts about the package, but only the package itself. And the package itself cannot count in favour, either of the belief that it is a package, or of the belief that there is a package in front of you. **Not being a fact or proposition, it is simply not the right kind of thing to serve as a reason1 for a belief.**’ (p145, emphasis added)

Here it seems clear that she is seeking to advance argument (A).

Just after the above-quoted passage, Ginsborg turns to considering a ‘possible response’ which insists that objects and their properties can (together) amount to a reason1, and so an experience which provided a subjective perspective on such a non-

¹⁵ I further discuss this possibility in section 5, below.

¹⁶ I think this sort of position, allowing non-propositional reasons1, but insisting that reasons2 are always propositional, can be thought of as opposite to the view Williamson seems to endorse, which effectively holds that reasons1 are always propositions, but allows that some reasons2, e.g. sensory experiences, are non-propositional. See the discussion of Williamson in the previous section, 3, above.

propositional reason1 could be a reason2. Likewise she goes on to consider the position advanced by Mark Johnston (2006) that ‘perception presents us with states and events as well as objects and stuffs’ (p 146). And so it seems she is now no longer assuming that reasons1 must be propositional and so has turned to pursuing the second sort of argument, (B). However, a few pages later at the end of this discussion of Johnston’s proposal, Ginsborg apparently reverts to simply assuming that nothing but a fact/proposition could be a reason1 and that this is *why* an experience must possess propositional content in order to be a reason2:

‘The state of the package’s being brown, in contrast to the proposition that it is brown, cannot itself serve as a reason1, **so** the perception of that state cannot, simply as such, serve as a reason2.’ (p148, emphasis added)

It is unclear then which argument, (A) or (B), is Ginsborg’s real concern – are we meant to briefly entertain the possibility of non-propositional reasons1 only to dismiss it again as illusory on further reflection? Or are we meant to allow the possibility of non-propositional reasons1 in order to see that *even given* such non-propositional chunks as a reason1, experience would *still* have to possess propositional content in order to be a reason2?

As an argument for inferentialism, the former line of thought, (A), is much less interesting. Indeed it is not really any advance on the dogmatic assertions of Davidson, Sellars et al. Why should we accept that only facts/propositions could be a reason1 for belief? This is certainly not something that is just obvious or intuitive. There is a perfectly ordinary everyday sense in which objects, physical stuff lying around, can be evidence – i.e. can be a reason for believing something. Why must we accept that a physical object in all its full concrete specificity, such as Ginsborg’s example of a brown package, is not the sort of thing that, when experienced, could count in favour of believing that there is a package? Perhaps a philosophical argument can be provided, which does not simply assume the truth of inferentialism, as to why this sort of familiar, everyday chunk of reality is unsuited to be a reason1, but it is certainly not just obvious and Ginsborg does not supply us with any such argument. Whereas if/when Ginsborg is pursuing the second line of thought, (B), then we can read her, more interestingly, as providing a further supporting *argument* for inferentialism.

Ginsborg’s starting point for this argument is that we can be experientially presented with O and with (what is in fact) O’s property of F-ness, and yet the experience might not provide a reason for believing that O is F as it does not ‘seem’ to us that it is O that is instantiating the F-ness. The main example Ginsborg provides is that S sees a package and what is in fact the package’s brown colour, but S sees it through a semi-opaque screen door, such that it seems that the brown-ness belongs to the door rather than the package. So here a belief that the package is brown would not be justified by the experience despite the experience presenting both the package and the package’s brown colour.

‘...one’s being presented with an item and with a feature which it has does not yet add up to one’s being presented with the kind of connection between the item and the feature which would seem to be needed if the experience is to play this rationalizing₂ role. We can see this by thinking of cases in which you see an object and one of its features, but without seeing the feature as belonging to the object. If the package is behind a screen door, and you see its

brown colour as belonging to the door rather than the package, then there does not seem to be, in what you see -- the package, and its brownness -- any more of a reason₁ for believing the item to be a package than was provided by the package on its own.' (146)

Likewise an experience might present (what is in fact) the event of O's being F and yet we might be unable to grasp it as such and so it would not be a reason for belief that O is F.

'It is possible to perceive the event of a chiding of Socrates by Xanthippe without realising that Socrates is being chided by Xanthippe: one might at the time be capable of describing what one is hearing only as "a muffled voice coming from the next room," and find out only later, if at all, that one had heard Xanthippe chiding Socrates. If that is the way in which one hears Xanthippe chiding Socrates, then, even if one's perception causes one to form the belief that Xanthippe is chiding Socrates, the belief is not rationalized₂ by the perception.' (147)

Ginsborg then claims that the only (or perhaps just the best?) explanation for why some experiences of O and O's F-ness *do* provide a reason for believing O is F, whilst others do *not* provide such a reason, is that the former experiences *represent that* O is F whilst the latter do not (though perhaps they still represent O or represent the property of F-ness).

'What seems to be needed, in order for your perception to rationalize₂ that belief [that: *This* is a brown package], is that it present you not just with the package and the brownness, but with the package and the brownness in some kind of predicative or at least proto-predicative relation.' (146)

Assuming I have interpreted Ginsborg correctly, let me now point out two problems with this line of thought:

(I) Ginsborg seems to assume that an experiential *presentation* of O instantiating F (as opposed to merely presenting O and presenting what is in fact O's F-ness) must thereby amount to a representation *that* O is F. But why must a perceptual presentation of the instantiation relation – between a property and an object – amount to a representation *that* the object instantiates the property? An adherent of the relational theory might hold that the relation of instantiation can be simply perceptually presented without being represented – just as spatial relations can, just as objects and visual properties in general can.

To put this another way: predication is something that occurs in thoughts, judgements and other propositional attitudes, whereas the instantiation of properties is something that the concrete physical stuff in our environment gets up to all on its own. In order to be a reason for the belief that O is F, experience must present O instantiating F-ness. But it is a further leap to assume that in doing this, *experience* must be doing some *predicating*, so as to suitably 'connect' the property to the object. The object and the property are *already* connected out there in the mind independent environment. So long as experience manages to present us with this portion of the environment then, prima facie, perceptual experience could be a reason to believe that O is F without itself representing THAT O is F (i.e. without the experience doing any predicating).

And so one possible way to deal with Ginsborg's screen door example would be to hold that in this scenario the semi-opaque screen does not obscure the package nor the colour brown from the subject, but it does obscure the relation of instantiation holding between these 2, a relation that would not be obscured in normal viewing conditions. I am not sure that this is the best way for a relational theorist to go, but Ginsborg has given us no argument ruling it out.

(II) The presence or absence of representational content is *not* the only (nor the obviously best) explanation for the cases Ginsborg presents. When thinking about how experience can justify belief, theorists have commonly noted the need for the subject to be able to *recognize* what they are experiencing in order for the experience to justify beliefs. E.g. in the literature on 'The Problem of the Speckled Hen', appeal to our limited recognitional abilities is said to explain why an experience which in fact consciously presents us with 42 speckles can directly justify the belief that there are more than 5 speckles, but not a belief that there are exactly 42 speckles. We can just immediately recognize that the array of speckles has the property of numbering greater than 5, but we cannot so recognize the property of being precisely 42 in number.

This sort of recognitional ability need not (at least not until some further argument is supplied) be thought of as providing one's *reason* for the belief in question, as opposed to being just an *enabling* condition for forming the belief¹⁷. It is still, you might think, one's experience of all the speckles that provides one's reason for believing that there are more than 5 speckles; the ability to recognize this numerical property straight off (i.e. without counting) is just a background condition that enables the experience to play this reason-giving role. Nor is it obvious, at least not until further argument is supplied, that a subject must have any kind of belief *about* the reliability of her own recognitional abilities in order to form a justified belief that depends on the exercise of these abilities. And even if the subject's recognitional ability *did* provide a genuine *reason* for belief, distinct from the subject's experience – e.g. a recognitional mechanism outputted something like an 'intellectual seeming' with the content: There are more than 5 of these speckles – it is still not obvious why this should screen-off the experience itself from *also* contributing *some* rational justification for the belief.

Given that recognitional abilities will only function reliably in some perceptual contexts/circumstances but not others, a relational theorist about experience then can hold that what explains why only some experiences of O's being F, but not others, justify the belief that: O is F, is the presence or absence of the reliably functioning ability to recognize what experience presents (i.e. whatever chunk of reality is being consciously presented).

Ginsborg's examples complicate matters slightly by introducing the issue of perceptual relativity – i.e. the different *ways* that the one same thing or scene can appear relative to different viewing conditions. From one viewpoint, the experience provides a reason to believe that O is F, but from another viewpoint, although we can

¹⁷ Indeed you might think that having the ability to immediately recognize F-ness when you see it, in some range of circumstances, *just is* the ability to reliably form beliefs about F-ness on the basis of experiencing F-ness in those circumstances. I.e. the recognitional ability is not something distinct from the ability to form justified beliefs.

still see O and see the F-ness, the experience would not be a reason to believe that O is F. But, of course, relational theorists have their own, non-representational treatments¹⁸ of perceptual relativity – e.g. one standard approach appeals to a 3-place relation, one relata of which is the conditions, perspective etc. (see Campbell 2007, 2009, Kennedy 2007). It certainly cannot be *assumed*, in the context of arguing against non-representational theories, that different ‘ways of looking’ can *only* be understood in representational terms¹⁹. Subjects are able to recognize O being F when this is perceptually presented in some ways, and unable to recognize O being F when perceptually presented in some other manner. There is nothing in this familiar fact about perceptual relativity that should trouble a non-representational theorist of experience.

Following on from this second point, it is also worth mentioning that the need to include some kind of role for recognitional abilities would seem to be incumbent on *all* theorists, representational as well as relational. Even if it is granted that experiences do somehow or other possess propositional content, still there will apparently be a vital role for these sort of recognitional abilities. For it seems that whether an experience possesses some content that p is one thing, and whether the subject is able to *recognize* that her experience has this content is another. If the subject is not able to recognize the content that p that her own experience possesses then it would not be a reason *for her* to believe that p.

It is pretty natural to assume that the (alleged) content of a perceptual experience is somehow meant to be *embodied by* or *encoded in* the sensory phenomenology of the experience – i.e. what it is like *visually* for the subject to have the experience, the phenomenal look of things, is the basis upon which the subject forms her perceptual beliefs. But other views are possible; one might think the content is an extra, *non-sensory* component of the experience, something like an intellectual seeming that accompanies the strictly sensory phenomenology²⁰. Or one might think that the content of the experience is an entirely non-phenomenal matter²¹.

¹⁸ For simplicity I assume here, as is generally the case, that relational theories of experience are non-representational theories. However, there are some ‘hybrid’ views in the literature, e.g. Langsam (2011), Logue (forthcoming), which hold that experience is both relational and representational.

¹⁹ For arguments that ‘ways of looking’ do not *require* a representational understanding, see Breckenridge (2007), Raleigh (2014). For the stronger claim that ways of looking *cannot* be given a representational understanding see Travis (2004).

²⁰ See footnote 26, below, for examples of theorists who hold such a view.

²¹ E.g. One familiar kind of theory about mental content holds that a mental state has whatever content it has in virtue of the role of the relevant sub-personal mechanisms in promoting the historical evolutionary success of the species etc. And so you might think that the representational content is a property of the physical/neural structures/mechanisms that instantiate the mental state, structures/mechanisms which also happen to ground or give rise to the phenomenology, but that this content is *not* manifested in or embodied by the phenomenology itself. Such a position will perhaps seem more plausible for some mental states than others – e.g. whatever phenomenology an episode of consciously trying/willing to do X has is perhaps plausibly not such as to *display* whatever specific content this trying/willing state is held to possess. Whereas, I take it, most representational theorists of perception would want to hold that the phenomenology of a perceptual experience does

In any case, insofar as the (alleged) content of an experience is meant to provide a subject with *rational* justification, the content had better be somehow or other be the sort of thing that is, in principle, rationally *accessible*. Otherwise the experience's alleged content could not, presumably, be a reason *for* the subject – it would be a feature of the experience like, say, the experience's reliability or its causal etiology, that is blankly external to the subject's rational/reflective faculties.

But – to repeat – even assuming that the content is a feature or aspect of the experience that is, in principle, somehow *accessible*, it is a further question as to whether the subject is in fact able to recognise this content of the experience.

Susanna Siegel (2010) has claimed that *what it is* for an experience to be contentful is that it 'conveys' a content to the subject:

'The kind of content at issue in the Content View meets two constraints. Contents are true or false, and the contents of an experience are conveyed to the subject by her experience.'
(Siegel, 2010, 28)

'We can distinguish between three ways in which a content can be conveyed to the subject by her experience. First a content is conveyed by experience if it would be a content of explicit beliefs that are natural to form on the basis of visual experience. Second, a content is conveyed to the subject if it enables the experience to guide bodily actions... Finally, a content is conveyed to the subject by her experience if it is manifest to introspection that it is a content of experience.'
(Siegel, 2010, 51)

There seems to be a danger here that Siegel is tying an experience's possession of content too closely to the subject's *reactions* to experience. Prima facie, whether an experience possesses some representational content is a quite separate matter from whether the experiencing subject manages to *respond* to this content in any of the three ways Siegel mentions.

E.g. consider a conscious subject who not only has never had any kind of auditory experience, she has no idea that such experiences are even possible – she has no inkling that such a sensory modality exists. Now imagine that this subject, suddenly and without any warning or explanation, were to undergo the sort of auditory experience that occurs when an ambulance with its siren on full blast races past nearby, complete with Doppler shift effect. Even granting that this type of experience possesses representational content that, say, an object is moving noisily from left to right at high speed, it seems possible, indeed plausible, that our imagined subject might be unable to *recognise* that such a totally unfamiliar and unexpected experience possesses this content. Indeed she might not realise that this strange new experience represents anything whatever about her surrounding environment: she might not be able to form any rational beliefs about her surroundings on the basis of the experience, she might not be able to use the experience to guide her actions in any useful way, and she might not be able to introspectively read-off the content of the experience.

display or embody the content of that mental state. And of course this need not be an all or nothing distinction. It might be that *some aspects* of a state's phenomenology are content embodying/displaying whilst others are not (i.e. they are representationally idle).

Or, a different sort of example would be if an experience can have a more complicated content, with more phenomenological detail, than a subject is able to fully grasp. E.g. a short-lived but richly complex visual experience might have some highly complex representational content that is simply impossible for the subject to recognise in its entirety²². So here even though the experience may represent that *p* – where *p* is some highly complex content – the subject would not be rationally justified in believing that *p* on the basis of the experience as she is not able to recognise (all of) this content in the experience.

The moral here then is that appealing to the need for something like recognition on the part of the subject in response to conscious experience is not some extra piece of theoretical machinery that a relational/non-representational theorist alone has to bear the cost of in order to cling onto their preferred account of experience. Rather, it is something that *all* parties have to take into account when providing a story about perceptual justification, whether or not perceptual experience possesses propositional content.

5. Inferentialism's commitments about experience

In this section, I want to briefly consider a range of cases where an experience rationally justifies a belief for which it is at least *not obvious* that the justification is inferential. The aim of this section will be modest: I only want to show that in order to deal with these cases, an inferentialist must take on substantial commitments about the nature of experience that are not uncontroversial.

As illustrated by Pryor's head-ache example, one class of potential examples of non-inferential justification would be based on conscious states that are (entirely) non-representational. E.g. sensations, mere brute feelings, perhaps perceptual experience according to some naïve-realists. And the obvious inferentialist response then would be to deny that such states really are non-representational²³. This sort of disagreement then swiftly becomes a question about the metaphysics of the mental states in question – I will not consider this sort of potential counter-example to inferentialism any further.

Instead, I want to focus on cases where the mental state apparently playing the role of justifier *is*, lets just assume, possessed of representational content, but where the justification it confers is *not obviously* in virtue of any inferential links between its content and the content of the belief.

We have already considered a case where a subject has an experience which – we're now assuming – has some representational content that the environment is some way, *p*, but where the subject fails to understand or recognise this content. E.g. When *S*

²² Some philosophers, e.g. Dennett (1991), will want to deny that conscious experience can really have such a richly determinate nature that can outstrip the subject's ability to make judgements about it in this way – it merely *introspectively seems* (an introspective illusion) to be richly determinate and detailed in this way.

²³ Representational theorists about pain sensations include: Dretske (1995), Tye (1997), Byrne (2001).

suddenly and unexpectedly undergoes her first ever auditory experience, this experience might not be, so far as she can tell, a reason for her to believe anything much about her environment. And yet it might still be a reason for her to believe various things about the experience itself or about her own state of mind:

This is a vivid experience
I am currently conscious
This strange new experience is still continuing
This strange new experience is/is not changing
This strange new experience is not an olfactory experience
Aha! That strange type of experience again
That element of this strange new experience is more similar to *this* element than to *that* element.

And even in cases where the subject has no trouble recognising that a conscious state has some content about the external environment, *p*, it still seems that the experience might *also* be a reason for various beliefs whose contents are *not* inferentially related to *p*. E.g. consider some conscious judgement that *p*. As well as providing rational justification for the range of beliefs whose contents are inferentially related to *p*, the conscious judgement-state also seems to rationally justify such beliefs as:

I'm currently thinking about *p*
That is a mental state with the content that *p*
That is a judgement about *p*
I believe that *p*
That is not a thought about *q*
I am currently enjoying a conscious thought
That is not a fear or a hope that *p*.
That mental act/state/event is occurring now
I am not currently unconscious

Or consider a visual experience, which we are assuming has some content about the environment, *p*, which the subject is perfectly able to recognise as such. As well as the range of beliefs whose contents are inferentially related to *p*, it seems that the experience might also justify such beliefs as:

That is a complicated visual experience
My visual experience has lots of fine detail
This visual experience is changing rapidly
This visual experience has a representational content that *p*.
This visual experience does not have the content that *q*.

The point, of course, of all these examples is that as well as forming a belief in rational response to whatever content an experience may possess about the external environment, we can also apparently form a belief in rational response to many other aspects of such a conscious state – its complexity, its duration, its vividness, that it is changing or that it is not changing, its sensory modality, the type of mental state or attitude it is, the very fact that it possesses such content, that it does not possess some other content, that it is novel, that it is a conscious state.

It seems clear that when we have a perceptual experience we are not only conscious of our external surroundings, we are also conscious of that very experience – e.g. when we see something we are conscious of seeing, when we hear something we are conscious of hearing etc. And it then seems very plausible that it must somehow be in virtue of this self-consciousness that we can be rationally justified in forming the aforementioned sorts of beliefs about those various aspects of our own conscious states. This consciousness of our own conscious experience is either provided by that very conscious experience itself, or it is due to some other conscious state. I.e. one's consciousness of one's own experience, E, is supplied by some conscious state, S, that either is or is not identical to E²⁴.

A supporter of inferentialism has 3 broad options here.

- An inferentialist could simply insist (a la Davidson) that, despite any intuitions we might have, S (whether or not it is identical to E) does *not* provide any rational justification for such beliefs about the conscious nature of E.

I take it that, unless some plausible story can be told which explains away the highly intuitive appearance that S *does* provide (some) justification for such beliefs, this Davidsonian option will be a significant theoretical cost²⁵.

Assuming they have discarded this first option, inferentialists who allow that S *does* provide rational justification for the sorts of beliefs listed above about the nature of one's own experience then must maintain that there is an inferential relation between S and such beliefs. This is, I suggest, at least not *obviously* true.

- An inferentialist who thinks that S is identical to E – i.e. that an experience somehow provides or constitutes conscious awareness of itself – must maintain that the representational content of E, as well as representing the external environment to be some way, also possesses lots of further representational content about itself – e.g. that it is a visual experience, that it has a particular content about the external environment, that it is detailed, that it is a conscious state etc.

This second general approach would presumably be a natural fit with self-representational or higher-order theories of consciousness²⁶. In terms of Ginsborg's distinction: if E is identical to S, then the experience would be *both* a reason1 and a reason2 for a belief about these features of itself – as it would play the roles both of being the chunk of (mental) reality that the belief is about and providing the subject's mental access to that chunk of (mental) reality.

Now, self-representational and higher-order theories are perfectly respectable positions to hold but they are certainly not uncontroversial. In some circles it may be

²⁴ Once more, I am indebted to an anonymous referee for suggesting this way of framing the issues here.

²⁵ Notice (to repeat): the issue here is whether experience itself can provide even a *measure* of non-inferential justification, not whether it can, all by itself, provide complete/outright justification for belief.

²⁶ E.g. Kriegel (2006, 2009), Carruthers (2005), Van Gulick (2004).

something like an orthodox consensus that perceptual visual experiences represent that one's immediate environment is some way, but even granting this is correct it is not likewise a point of representational orthodoxy that a visual experience also represents of itself that it is visual. An alternative possible view is that the experience just *is* visual – i.e. the experience has a distinctively *visual* phenomenal character. This distinctive visual nature is something that normal subjects can just recognise when they enjoy a visual experience – the distinctively visual phenomenal character need not also represent that the experience is visual. Likewise when an experience is richly detailed or complex. Even granting that such an experience represents some detailed and complex content about the environment, it is not obvious that such an experience also represents *of itself* that it is richly detailed and complex. It might be that the experience just *is* richly detailed and complex, where this is something we can immediately recognise about such an experience when we have one.

I am not here trying to provide any arguments *against* self-representational or higher-order approaches to consciousness and self-consciousness. I am just pointing out that an inferentialist who goes down this route – accepting that S is identical to E and that it provides rational justification for many beliefs about the conscious nature of E itself – will be committed to claims about the representational content of E that are substantial theoretical commitments which are at least far from obvious.

- Alternatively, an inferentialist who thinks that S is *not* identical to E – i.e. that we are conscious of our own experience in virtue of some other distinct conscious state – must maintain that the various conscious aspects of E that we can form justified beliefs about are represented by this distinct conscious mental state. Perhaps this state is an introspective 'seeming', perhaps some other kind of distinct higher-order state – and it is this further representational state that provides rational justification for the beliefs in virtue of inferential connections between contents.

To put this third approach in terms of Ginsborg's distinction: the aforementioned features or aspects of the conscious nature of an experience – e.g. that it is visual, that it is complex, that it is changing etc. – are here being conceived of as *non-propositional/non-representational* reasons¹ for belief, but they can be reasons¹ for the subject only because there is a distinct²⁷ representational state, S, with content *about* these non-representational features, which provides a reason² for the belief²⁸.

²⁷ An intermediate position, somewhere in between the second and third approaches, might be a version of recent 'disunified' theories of experience, which hold that a perceptual experience consists of both a sensory and a cognitive component – see Bengson, Grube & Korman (2011), Reiland (2014). If the cognitive component possessed content not only about the environment but also about the sensory component then, depending on the precise relation between these two components, this might be thought of either as a version of the second approach or the third.

²⁸ Or to put it in terms of our recognitional abilities: this third approach could be understood as holding that our ability to recognise these various further aspects of our conscious experience – both that it has the content it does and also any non-representational features/aspects it might have – is mediated by a *further* representational state or component whose content concerns these aspects of the original experience.

Notice, of course, that this distinct state, S, had better not simply be another *belief* or a *judgement* – for then we would just face the question of how *this* belief or judgement was justified. So this extra state, S, must be some kind of *non-doxastic* state, something like an introspective ‘seeming’²⁹.

There has been much talk of these sorts of seeming states in the recent literature³⁰. Evidently many philosophers have found no implausibility with assigning various important cognitive roles to such ‘seemings’ – and I do not wish to rule out that they might, on occasion, play some kind of important rationally justifying role. But I confess that when I attend to my own conscious experience and form, say, a belief that: I’m having an auditory experience, or that: this visual experience is changing rapidly, I can find the experience on the one hand, my introspective *judgement* on the other, but I cannot discover any further non-doxastic state rationally mediating between these two – such as an introspective seeming, presentiment or hunch *that* my experience is auditory or is changing rapidly.

Having said all that, these sorts of appeals to phenomenology are dialectically pretty weak – and disagreements concerning what introspection does or does not reveal about our phenomenology are almost invariably futile. To repeat: my aim here is modest. I’m merely pointing out that in order to deal with the range of potential cases of non-inferential rational justification listed above, an inferentialist will end up being committed to substantial theses about the nature of conscious experience and self-conscious awareness that are at least not obvious or uncontroversial.

6. Double-Standards

To finish, I want to point out a problematic tension that exists for any view which combines inferentialism about rational justification with the very plausible idea that experiences can rationally justify beliefs. Any such position accepts that there can be a *non-doxastic* mental state – a conscious experience – that is formed in response to some non-representational or non-propositional inputs which can *introduce* fresh rational justification into the system. The conscious state, being non-doxastic, is not *itself* the kind of thing that can have (or lack) rational justification, but it is supposed to be the kind of thing that can then *confer* rational justification on a belief. The experience in question could either simply be a perceptual experience; or it could be the sort of introspective ‘seeming’, concerning some feature of some other experience, as discussed in the previous section. In both cases we would have a justificatory story with the same general shape:

²⁹ The term ‘seeming’ is a philosophical term of art that has been understood in a variety of ways. For example: as Michael Huemer (2001, 2007, 2013) uses the term, perception, introspection, memory, rational intuitions can all count as different kinds of ‘seemings’ that can provide *non-inferential* justification, whilst Berit Brogaard (2013) holds that ‘epistemic seemings’ *just are* beliefs. For present purposes I am using ‘seeming’ to mean some kind of putative representational state that is neither a perceptual experience nor a belief.

³⁰ E.g. Tollhurst (1998), Sosa (2007), Bengson (forthcoming). For a whole volume of essays devoted to the topic of ‘seemings’ see (ed.) Tucker (2013).

Non-Propositional/non-representational stuff	Intervening representational state that is not apt to be justified.	Belief or judgement that is apt to be justified
External feature perceived	Perceptual experience with content about the external feature	Perceptual Belief about the external feature
Non-contentful feature or aspect of a conscious state	Introspective or higher-order, non-doxastic ‘seeming’ state with content about the feature in question of the conscious state	Introspective Belief about the feature in question of the conscious state.

According to inferentialism, our belief forming faculties cannot respond to non-representational/non-propositional inputs so as to yield *rationally justified* representations as outputs. But, assuming that sensory experiences *can* provide rational justification, our sensory systems must be able to respond to the non-representational/non-propositional environment so as to yield propositionally ‘formatted’ contents that the belief forming faculties can then in turn rationally respond to. (And likewise for introspective systems responding to the non-propositional aspects of experience.)

The image that this sort of model always conjures in my mind is of new-born birds in the nest who cannot digest their food, the worms and insects, in the raw form in which these are found in the wild. So the mother bird has to pre-chew the food so as to put it in a digestible form that can nourish the chicks. Likewise, the justificatory model we are now considering holds that a subject’s belief/judgement forming faculties cannot respond directly to non-representational, non-propositional chunks of input in such a way as to yield rationally-justified beliefs – the stuff is too raw to provide reason-giving nourishment. So the senses must play the role of the mother bird; they must first respond to the environment in such a way as to process and re-structure it into *propositional* format – for only when presented in this more digestible form can the faculty of judgement form *reasonable* (as opposed to merely reliable) beliefs about the environment.

But if this is the story, then the inferentialist claim that we can ‘make no sense’ of non-inferential rational justification for beliefs looks very much like double-standards. Why should it be impossible to make sense of the belief forming faculties pulling off a very similar trick to that which it is allowed the sensory systems can perform? The visual system would seem to provide an example of a transition that is at least very *similar* to that which was supposed to be so hard to understand – viz. a systematic transition from non-propositional stuff to propositional contents *about* that stuff, which are not only reliable but are fit to play the role of rational justifier.

If, according to the inferentialist’s own story, we can make sense of the visual system doing this, then why should it be so hard to make sense of the doxastic system responding to non-propositional inputs in a very similar fashion – i.e. by outputting

propositional contents that are not just reliable but are rationally justified? To revert to the avian metaphor: it is as if we are being told not just that baby birds cannot in fact digest raw worms and insects, but that ‘it is hard to understand’ the very idea of a baby bird digesting worms and insects in their raw form. And yet as part of the same story we are also being told that a mother bird is perfectly able to pre-digest worms and insects in the raw.

Relying on the existence of a transition made by our perceptual systems from non-propositional inputs to a propositional state that can *bestow* rational justification, tends to undermine any claim that it is ‘hard to understand’ a transition from non-propositional inputs to a propositional state that *possesses* rational justification.

Of course it remains open, for all that’s been said, that some further argument or explanation might be supplied as to why the former transition is readily comprehensible but the latter is some kind of a priori conceptual impossibility. But then for any inferentialist who also wants to allow that experience can rationally justify belief, there are now *two* outstanding argumentative debts. Not only do we need a persuasive argument as to why inference is the only model for rational justification, we also need some explanation as to why a move from non-propositional inputs to a propositional justification provider is importantly *different* to (i.e. *more comprehensible* than) a move from non-propositional inputs to a propositional justification possessor³¹.

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