

A TRILEMMA ABOUT MENTAL CONTENT

Susanna Schellenberg

There are good reasons to accept each of the following three claims:

- (C1) Nonrational animals and humans can be in mental states with the same kind of content when they are perceptually related to the very same environment.
- (C2) Nonrational animals do not possess concepts.
- (C3) Content is constituted by modes of presentations and is, thus, conceptually structured.

The three claims form a trilemma. I will discuss reasons for accepting and rejecting each of the three claims and will thereby explore ways to resolve the trilemma. I will suggest that the trilemma is best resolved by giving up (C3). I will argue that we can understand content as constituted by modes of presentations, without understanding content as conceptually structured. In doing so, I hope to shed some light on the nature of perceptual content and its relation to concepts and bodily skills. The larger aim is to address questions of what the very idea of perceptual content could possibly be, what we mean when we say that experience is conceptually or non-conceptually structured, and how basic bodily skills and conceptual capacities relate.

Rational capacities and perceptual content

The main reason for accepting (C1) of the trilemma is that perception is a cognitively basic capacity that we share with nonrational animals. If we share this capacity with nonrational animals, then it is plausible that the mental state we are in when we perceive bears at least some similarities to the mental states of nonrational animals when they perceive the very same environment. In what way are the mental states similar? One central way in which our perceptual states may be similar is with regard to their content.

Content is a theoretical term that we make use of to describe anything from basic informational states to cognitively rich belief states. It is a term we use to give an account of the mental states of beings to explain potential (mental) actions. There are few uncontroversial characteristics of content. The most uncontroversial one may be that there is a correspondence between content and accuracy conditions: content either determines accuracy conditions or is identified with accuracy conditions. Content may be understood as *determining* accuracy conditions insofar as one can ask with respect to any state, thought, or expression whether things are as they are represented to be. On a more coarse-grained understanding, content can be *identified* with accuracy conditions insofar as the accuracy conditions specify the possible conditions that must be realized for the state, thought, or expression with that content to be accurate. It can be considered a minimal condition on the notion of content that there is a tight connection between content and accuracy conditions. It is possible to question even this condition, but anyone who does so is arguably talking about something quite different than what is normally meant by content in philosophical discussions.

A second characteristic of content that is generally agreed on and which I will consider a minimal condition on the notion in play is that content can be distinguished from the attitude any given being takes towards that content. A content that is accurate if and only if, say, it is raining might be the object of a hope, a belief, a fear, or a perception. One can hope, believe, fear, or perceive that it is raining. More generally, one can have a range of different attitudes towards any given content C.

Over and above these two minimal conditions, there are few points of agreement. Points of disagreement range from how the structure and nature of content should be understood to the relationship between the subject and the content of her mental state. One point of controversy about the nature of perceptual content is whether it should be identified with the way the world seems to the perceiving subject or whether it should be identified with the information received by an informational system. The way the world seems to the perceiving subject and the information she receives differ, since the information received might be distorted at some point in the processing chain. Further points of disagreement include whether content is propositional or nonpropositional, whether it is object dependent or object independent, and whether or not it includes indexicals – to name just a few. For present purposes we do not need to take a stance on these issues. The minimal conditions specified make for a sufficiently determined notion of content to address the relation between perceptual content and rational capacities.

What is it about a perceptual state in virtue of which it has some particular representational content? One way of answering the question is to say that we use the term “content” to characterize internal information-bearing

states of beings, where this characterization may or may not involve taking into account the being's environment. This way of thinking about content leaves open just how cognitively rich the information-bearing states are and to what extent the being is conscious of the information that she represents.

Regardless of how we think about the *nature* of content, we can agree that we *ascribe* the very same content to two beings if we are warranted to do so given the criteria we use to ascribe content. Again there are many criteria that can be deemed relevant in ascribing content. If the relevant criterion is simply that two beings are related to the very same environment, then we will ascribe the very same content if and only if two beings are related to the same environment. If the relevant criterion is that two beings are related to the same environment *in the same way*, then things are more complicated. After all, what it takes to be related to the same environment in the same way can be specified in a number of manners. We might say that we are warranted in ascribing the same content if and only if the causal source of the state is the same. Alternatively, one might say that we are warranted in ascribing the same content if and only if the causal source of the state is the same and processed in the same way. Finally, one might say that we are warranted in ascribing the same content if and only if the causal source of the state in fact results in the same mental state.

All responses leave open whether the beings to which we ascribe content are in fact in a mental state with the relevant content. It is one thing to ascribe content to a being's mental state and quite another thing to say that the being is in a mental state with that content. The fact that we make use of a theoretical notion of content to ascribe mental states does not entail that the being to which we ascribe content in fact is in a mental state with that very content. This point becomes particularly salient when we consider the nature of the ascribed content. When we ascribe content to a being we use concepts. So the ascribed content is conceptually structured. While we may typically use different concepts to ascribe content to humans and cats, the ascribed content is at least potentially the same. Certainly, we use concepts in both cases.

If ascribing content to a being would imply that the being is in a mental state with that very content, then the very fact that we use concepts to ascribe content would imply that the relevant beings are in mental states with conceptual content. However, the fact that we ascribe conceptually structured content to a subject does not imply that the subject is in a mental state with content that is so structured. Moreover, the fact that we at least potentially use the very same concepts to ascribe content to humans and cats does not imply that they are in mental states with the very same content.¹ More generally, while we use concepts to ascribe content to beings, this fact does not imply that the being to which we ascribe this content possesses the concepts that we used to make this ascription.

Taking this into account, we can make room for an alternative to (C1), which is compatible with the claims that animals do not possess concepts (C2) and that content by its very nature is conceptually structured (C3):

(C1') Nonrational animals and humans that are perceptually related to the very same environment can be *ascribed* the same content.

Now this first way of resolving the trilemma involves staying agnostic about when it is correct to say that a being is in a mental state with a certain content. (C1') only speaks to the question of content ascription. As such it leaves us unsatisfied. We do not simply want to say that content can be ascribed to perceivers. We want to say that perceivers are in mental states with content and say something about the nature of this content. After all, our cognitive lives and actions are determined at least in part by the content of our mental states. Insofar as the first way of resolving the trilemma speaks only to the question of content ascription, it leaves us wanting.

A second way of modifying the first claim is to argue that nonrational animals and humans share the same enabling conditions for concept possessions:

(C1'') Nonrational animals and humans that are perceptually related to the very same environment share the same enabling conditions for possessing the concepts that constitute the content of their mental states.

If one takes this approach, one refrains from making a claim about the content of mental states itself, by resorting to a claim about enabling conditions for the mental capacities that constitute content. By making a claim about the enabling conditions one is making a claim about the mental lives of humans and nonrational animals. As a consequence, the agnosticism of (C1') is avoided. However, by retreating to conditional aspects of mental states, we are not provided with any tangible element that subjects have in common when perceiving the very same environment.

A more satisfying way of resolving the trilemma is to modify (C1) by arguing that humans and nonrational animals have some aspect of content in common. In its original form, (C1) states that nonrational animals and humans are in mental states with the very same content. A weaker and arguably more plausible claim is to say that at least some part of the content of the mental states of beings that perceive the very same environment is the same:

(C1''') Nonrational animals and humans that are perceptually related to the very same environment are in mental states that share at least some content.

If we reformulate the third claim of the trilemma and allow that at least some content is nonconceptually structured, then the trilemma can be resolved with (C1''') in a way that does not require us to be agnostic about the nature of mental content.

While each of the three suggested modifications of (C1) provides a way to identify a common factor between the perceptual state of humans and nonrational animals without positing that they are in mental states with the very same content, they each leave us wanting. The first modification is unsatisfactory in that it requires staying agnostic about the content of mental states. The second modification avoids this agnosticism but only by refraining from making any claim about the content itself. The third modification is the most attractive, but it raises the question of just what aspect of content is the same between rational and nonrational animals and what the relationship is between the aspect of content that is the same and the aspect of content that is different. One might say that the aspect of content that rational and nonrational animals share is the aspect that represents basic perceptual properties of the environment, such as shape and size properties. Positing that there is such a shared content requires arguing either that perception does not represent higher-level properties or that representations of such properties do not cognitively penetrate the representation of basic properties. Both approaches are problematic.² The first requires making assumptions about what is represented in perceptual experience and what plays a role only on the level of judgments or beliefs formed on the basis of perceptual experience. The second requires positing that there is a core sensory aspect of perceptual experience that is unaffected by aspects that are not part of this core, be they representations of higher-level properties or background beliefs. I have not shown that these issues cannot be resolved, but the fact that there are these issues makes the search for an alternative worth the effort.

Concepts, bodily skills, and nonrational animals

Let's consider (C2) of the trilemma. Whether it is correct to say that nonhuman animals possess concepts is largely a question of what notion of concepts is in play. For any given understanding of concepts, it is a matter of empirical investigation to settle whether members of a species possess concepts so understood. On a sufficiently high-level cognitive understanding there is little reason to expect nonhuman animals to possess concepts. If possessing a concept is, for instance, a matter of grasping the inferences that the concept plays a role in, then few, if any, nonhuman animals are likely to turn out to possess concepts. However, if the benchmark for concept possession is lower, such as merely being able to act in a discriminating way, then it is more plausible that humans are not the only beings that can possess concepts.

Suppose concepts are understood in terms of collections of action-oriented abilities. Or suppose they are structured representations of features that allow us to sort and physically coordinate actions with regard to objects in the world.³ On either understanding of concepts there are good reasons to attribute at least some concepts to nonrational animals. Consider a dog. Let's call him Fido. Fido is able to track his bone. That makes a *prima facie* case for saying that Fido possesses the concept of being bone-shaped or the concept of smelling like a bone, possibly even the concept of a bone. He tracks the bone in virtue of perceiving the bone. When he perceives the bone, he is in a mental state that represents either the bone or one of its properties. In short, there is a *prima facie* case for saying that he represents what he is tracking in virtue of employing concepts.

One critical point on which views of concepts differ is what role if any the possession conditions for concepts play.⁴ On a practical understanding, the possession conditions for a concept are constituted at least in part by the ability to discriminate the things that the concept picks out from the things that it does not pick out. On an intellectualist understanding, the possession conditions for a concept involve the ability to think about the referent of the concept.

The practical understanding is more basic than the intellectualist understanding. After all, while a being may possess concepts understood in the first way without being able to have thoughts, the converse does not hold. Moreover, the intellectualist understanding cannot be understood independently of the practical understanding insofar as a being that has the ability to think about the referent of the concept, necessarily must have the ability to discriminate the referent from other things. As these considerations bring out, if one has a sufficiently nonintellectualized notion of concept possession, then it is less controversial to say that perception is conceptually structured.

Now, it has been argued that we can only make proper sense of conceptual abilities if we recognize that they are grounded in perception which in turn is grounded in bodily skills, abilities to act, and affordances, where perceptual content is nonconceptually structured.⁵ We can all agree that perceiving guides the actions and movements of situated and embodied beings. The claim in question is more controversial. The claim is that conceptual abilities are grounded in the actions and bodily skills involved in perception and that perceptual content is not itself conceptually structured.⁶

Let's assume for the sake of argument that conceptual abilities are grounded in perception and that perception in turn involves bodily skills. Even on this assumption, there is no need to say that conceptual abilities are not themselves constituted by bodily skills and the ability to act. At least for certain concepts, namely perceptual concepts, there are good reasons to think that possessing concepts is constituted in part by bodily skills

and the ability to act. If the possession conditions for a concept are constituted at least in part by the ability to discriminate the things that the concept picks out from other things, then perceptual concepts, such as shape and size concepts, arguably involve bodily skills insofar as the relevant discriminatory capacities are a matter of having certain dispositions to act.

One possible way of developing this idea is with regard to perceiving the locations of objects and property instances. In perception, one sees objects as located in certain relations to one's body. What are crucial for determining the coordinates of perception are the spatial locations from which possible movements originate and the directions of the relevant movements. The axes of our egocentric frame of reference are determined by our *dispositions to act* that bring about a *practical* understanding of basic spatial directions.⁷ The idea of a practical understanding of basic spatial directions is related to Evans's thought that an understanding of spatial directions is not simply related to the place we occupy, but rather to the possibilities for action that one has by virtue of the way one occupies that location.⁸ When I tilt my head, I do not see objects on the verge of sliding off the surface of the earth. The reference of "up" is not determined by the direction of my head, but rather by how I would move, given the position of my body.

It is unproblematic to think of the practical understanding of basic spatial directions in terms of spatial concepts as long as one is willing to ascribe these concepts to any creature capable of object-directed movement. It is unproblematic, since the spatial concepts are not what enable spatially oriented movement and actions. The direction of explanation goes the other way. Dispositions to act bring about the spatial orientation that allows subjects to locate objects in their visual field. This means that one has spatial concepts only insofar as these concepts are grounded in one's dispositions to act. These dispositions to act allow one to have the practical understanding of basic spatial directions that can be expressed with spatial concepts.⁹

I have suggested one way in which one can think of basic concepts as constituted by bodily skills and dispositions to act. If concepts are understood in this way, then it is at least conceivable that nonrational animals possess such concepts. If nonrational animals possess such concepts, then we can resolve the trilemma for at least those perceptual experiences the content of which is constituted solely by such concepts.

However, resolving the trilemma in this way requires adopting a number of controversial ideas about concepts. It requires arguing that basic spatial concepts are constituted solely by bodily skills and dispositions to act. So it requires rejecting the claim that any rational capacities are involved in possessing such concepts. Moreover, while basic spatial concepts may be understood as constituted by bodily skills and dispositions to act, cognitively higher-level concepts surely cannot be understood in this way. So

adopting the approach sketched in this section would require relinquishing a unified account of concepts. One would have to argue that while the concepts that are constituted by bodily skills and dispositions to act are the kinds of concepts that nonrational animals can possess, the possession of other concepts requires rational capacities. In short, while understanding certain concepts as constituted by bodily skills and dispositions to act allows for a way to resolve the trilemma for a limited range of cases, it does so only if one adopts controversial views about concepts.

Perceptual experience and nonconceptual content

A third way of resolving the trilemma is to reject (C3) by arguing that perceptual content is nonconceptually structured. How should one understand the idea that content is nonconceptually structured? One standard response is to argue that content is nonconceptual in that it is constituted by the properties and perhaps the objects to which we are perceptually related. If one holds that content is constituted by Fregean modes of presentations, this response is not an option.¹⁰ After all, modes of presentation are ways of singling out the objects and properties to which we are perceptually related, not the objects and properties themselves. One might argue that on a Fregean understanding of content, it is part of the very idea of content that it is conceptually structured.

How can we understand content to be constituted by modes of presentation in a way that does not imply that it is constituted by concepts? One option is to understand the modes of presentation employed in perception in terms of discriminatory, selective capacities by means of which we differentiate and single out particulars in our environment. The relevant particulars are external and mind-independent objects, events, property instances, and instances of relations. In virtue of employing such discriminatory, selective capacities we represent particulars in our environment in a certain way.

Say we perceive a lush forest. We employ our perceptual capacity to discriminate shades of green from other colors and to single out the various shades of green in our environment. Similarly we employ our capacity to differentiate and single out leaf shapes from, say, flower shapes and tree shapes. It is not clear what it would be to single out an object in our environment without employing capacities of this kind.

Now how should we understand the capacities in play? A discriminatory, selective capacity functions to differentiate and single out, where singling out a particular is a protoconceptual analogy of referring to a particular.¹¹ So if we possess the discriminatory, selective capacity that functions to differentiate and single out green, we are in a position to differentiate instances of green from other colors in our environment and to single out instances of green. More generally, to possess a discriminatory, selective capacity

is to be in a position to differentiate and single out the type of particulars that the capacity concerns, were one related to such a particular. So if we possess such a capacity, then – assuming no finking, masking, or other exotic case is involved – the following counterfactual should hold: if we *were* perceptually related to a particular that the capacity functions to single out, then we *would* be in a position to single out such a particular. There are further analogies between discriminatory, selective capacities and concepts. Like concepts, the capacities in play can be employed in different environments and in this sense are repeatable.

What happens in hallucination? Although such capacities are necessarily determined by functional connections between perceivers and their environment, arguably they can be employed even if one is misperceiving or hallucinating. After all, one could be prompted to employ the capacities due to nonstandard circumstances, such as unusual brain stimulation or misleading distal input. If this is right, then we can employ a discriminatory, selective capacity even if a relevant particular is not present – where a relevant particular is of the type that the capacity functions to single out.

So discriminatory, selective capacities can be employed such that a particular is successfully singled out, or they can be employed without successfully singling out any particular. In this sense, employing discriminatory, selective capacities constitutes accuracy conditions. So employing discriminatory, selective capacities has all the hallmarks of content insofar as it yields something that is entertainable and that can be accurate or inaccurate. So if *S* is employing discriminatory, selective capacities that constitute the way her environment sensorily seems to her, then *S* is representing her environment in virtue of employing discriminatory, selective capacities. Indeed, insofar as the content is yielded by employing discriminatory, selective capacities and the discriminatory, selective capacities constitute the experience, the content is a proper part of experience rather than merely ascribed to the experience as on (C1'). So if *S* is representing her environment in virtue of employing discriminatory, selective capacities, then *S* has a perceptual experience that is fundamentally a matter of representing her environment as being a certain way.

On this way of understanding content we can acknowledge that perception is a cognitively primitive skill that we share with nonrational animals and moreover explain how to think of the content of perceptual states of animals that do not possess concepts. So thinking of content in this way provides for a good reason to resolve the trilemma by rejecting (C3).

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of this set of issues, see Stalnaker, "What Might Nonconceptuality Be?" p. 351ff.
- 2 For a discussion of this set of issues, see Siegel, "Which Properties Are Represented in Perception?," and Macpherson, "Cognitive Penetration and Color Experience."

- 3 For these ways of understanding concepts, see Prinz and Clark, "Putting Concepts to Work."
- 4 Any such notion of concepts must be distinguished from notions on which they are mental representations (e.g. Fodor, *Language of Thought*, and Concepts; Jackendoff, *Computation and Cognition*; Laurence and Margolis, "Concepts and Cognitive Science"; Carruthers, *Phenomenal Consciousness*; Prinz, *Furnishing the Mind*) or prototypes (e.g. Rosch, "Principles of Categorization"; Smith and Medin, *Categories and Concepts*).
- 5 See, for instance, Dreyfus, "Return of the Myth of the Mental," and "Response to McDowell." For a radically different approach, see McDowell, "What Myth?," and "Response to Dreyfus."
- 6 Dreyfus (in "Return of the Myth of the Mental" and "Response to McDowell") argues moreover that the actions and bodily skills themselves have nonconceptual content.
- 7 When I speak of action I mean something that involves at least potentially bodily movement. Thinking may be understood as a mental action. I am however using the notion of action in a more restricted sense. For a discussion of dispositions to act, see Mumford, *Dispositions*, and "Intentionality and the Physical."
- 8 Evans, *Varieties of Reference*.
- 9 For a detailed development of this approach, see my "Action and Self-Location in Perception."
- 10 I will not argue here that perceptual content is best understood in terms of Fregean senses. I have done so in "Particularity and Phenomenology of Perceptual Experience," and "Perceptual Content Defended."
- 11 In some cases, a discriminatory capacity may also function to type the kind of particulars that the capacity concerns, but this is not an essential feature of the capacities in play.

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