

SIEGEL'S CONTENTS

The principal interest of Susanna Siegel's book, *The Contents of Visual Experience*, for its intended audience will be, I expect, its case for

the Rich Content View, according to which the contents of visual experience are richly complex, so are not limited to color, shape, and other properties standardly taken to be represented by visual experience. (7)

For example (she suggests) *someone's* visual experience might represent it as so (to him) that John Malkovich is walking by holding a small dog. To her credit, though, Siegel is among the few who actually bother to argue that perceptual experience does have representational content—in this case, that *it* is truth-evaluable—liable to be true or false. Before you can defend the rich content view, she recognises, you need to defend the 'content *überhaupt* view'. More often, for reasons which escape me, that view is merely taken to be obvious. And, I think, as opposed to some others, by 'perceptual experience' she really does mean *perceptual experience*, notably, an experience of *perceiving* (e.g., seeing) such-and-such, and not just some internal (presumably neural) state. If I *had* to take sides in this dispute, I might well feel a pull towards Siegel's view—if such distant counterfactuals are evaluable at all. But I debark from this boat a few ports sooner. These early legs of the journey will concern me here.

1. Perception's Objects: In introducing the Rich Content View Siegel puts things in what I think is a very revealing way:

Is it already part of your visual experience that John Malkovich is walking by, carrying a dog? Or do you just visually experience an array of colored shapes bouncing slightly at regular intervals, and subsequently judge that it is John Malkovich carrying a dog? More generally, we can ask: do you just visually experience arrays of colored shapes, variously illuminated, and sometimes moving? Or does visual experience involve more complex features, such as personal identity, causation, and kinds such as bicycle, keys, and cars? (p. 3)

Just this choice is offered repeatedly. (E.g., p. 78.) Already there are two telltale signs. One is the intrusion of 'that' into her first try at her preferred alternative: 'that John Malkovich is walking by'. Back to that in a moment. The other is the alternative she offers. Either perceptual experience has representational content, and moreover *rich* content in her sense; or what we experience is *merely* shapes, colours, movements (etc.). Whether perceptual experience has representational content or not, and if so, whether rich or not, is, from the start, a matter of

what its objects are—whether, e.g., John Malkovich or not. Or thus according to Siegel. There is no room from her perspective for a view on which what one sees if John Malkovich walks by holding a dog is: John Malkovich walking by holding a dog (unless one's attention was diverted at the crucial moment, or all went blurry, or there was excess of glare, or etc.); but representational content belongs only to the attitudes one forms in response to this. So, at least, for seeing (hallucinations being a different story). What I want to consider in this section is what might be wrong with a perspective that does not allow such things—one on which, *inter alia*, if Rich Content were wrong, then what one *saw* would *so-wie-so* be different than what we all know it to be.

That tell-tale 'that' makes a good beginning. It is a 'that' on which Frege commented at least twice. I cite:

But then do I not see that this flower has five petals? One can say that, but then does not use the word 'see' in the sense of mere light-perception, but means by this a thought or judgement connected with it. (1897: 149)

But do we not see that the sun has set? And do we not also see thereby that this is true? That the sun has set is no visible thing like the sun itself. That the sun has set is recognised as true on the basis of sense impressions. (1918: 61)

If 'see' starts life as a verb of perception, like related words it, seemingly ineluctably, acquires uses in recording thought, as in 'I see your point.' One *sees* (where this is something visual) what is apt for forming images, what is historical—datable, spatially locatable; for example, John before one, John walking, John's walking. The sun set over the Douro's *foz*. *That* it set is neither there nor on the sandbar separating sea from river (nor under the table on which I write this). It is not the sort of thing to form images. If Pia saw *that* John was walking, 'see' no longer speaks of the visual. It is what Pia might also have done in John's absence, noting the mud he tracked on her white rug.

To deny that *that John was walking* is a visual phenomenon is thus not to deny that what Pia saw was John, walking (and thus, of course, his walking). It is not as though once we subtract *that John was walking* from the objects of perception proper, what is left is just some *congeries* of colours and shapes. What one sees is what was *there*: John, walking (etc.). This comes out also in the fact that what Pia saw may be John walking whether she realises this or not. All could have been a fleeting blur to her. Unknowingly seeing John walking, she may fail to see that John was walking. (Or again, failed to appreciate it as walking: 'You call *that* walking?')

So at the very least denying perceptual experience representational content is not endorsing that all we see are *congeries* of shapes and colours, or that what we see is anything other than what is there—such things as John and his walking. Siegel presents us with a false choice. In the fourth of his 17 *Kernsätze zur Logik* Frege suggests the framework into which to fit this point:

A thought always contains something which reaches beyond the particular case, by means of which it presents this to consciousness as falling under some given generality. ((unknown): *Kernsatz* 4)

Two pieces are in play here: a thought; and a particular case. A thought represents the particular case as bearing a certain relation to a certain generality. If it represents correctly, the particular case *does* bear that relation to that generality. The idea of a thought (in Frege's sense) can be parsed as follows: the thought is *of* some particular way for things to be, which it presents as being *a* way things are. It is of, e.g., things being such that John is walking, and presents this as *one* way things are. That generality intrinsic to *all* thoughts, its 'reaching beyond the particular case', is found in this way for things to be, and *its* way of reaching beyond the particular case. In brief, if things are such that John is walking, they *could* have been that way had Pia been in Cleveland at the time instead of Boston, or if John had been wearing flip-flops instead of brogans—and so on ad inf. For the way for things in question to be the one it is is for it to reach as it thus does. Something about it thus determines *when* a particular case would fall under its generality—would bear that indicated relation to it.

What is the the particular case? What is things being such that John is walking? The simplest answer, and that which I will adopt here, is: it is things being as they are. Things being as they are *is* things being such that John is walking. It achieves this in one of the indefinitely many ways such might be achieved. (Cf. flip-flops.) I will say that it *instances* this way for things to be—my name for that relation of which I first spoke. What stands on one side of it—what has that generality intrinsic to any thought, what *gets* instanced—I will call '(the) conceptual'. What stands on the other side—what does the instancing—I will call '(the) nonconceptual'.

Frege's point now becomes: the objects of perception belong to the nonconceptual. One sees, e.g., John's being as he is. Seeing-*that*, on the other hand, is a relation to some bit of the conceptual. One bears it in recognising that bit as instanced—e.g., the way things are being a case of John walking.

Perceptual experience, at least where it is perceiving, is experiencing (witnessing) something nonconceptual (things being as they then are, or as much of that as one has in sight from his current perspective on the world). Why might one want to deny that *that* has (a) representational content? Consider words. Suppose Pia says, 'John is walking.' She might thus express some thought. For convenience, call it '*the* thought that John is walking'. Her act of saying this—an act of speaking some words—thus has a representational content in the meaning of the act. Such sounds *could* be, might have been, produced in expressing some other thought, or none at all. Something in her way of doing what she did selects this one, as opposed to the others, as the one expressed. For perceptual experience to have no representational content is just for it to lack the means for effecting the selecting of this sort that would need doing for it to have one.

What matters so far is just that one can perfectly well hold this without commitment to anything about the so-called (perceptual) 'phenomenology' of experience. Such phenomenology lies in what one witnesses, or might, thus in the *nonconceptual*. If what was witnessed is (instances), say, things being such that John is walking the dog, then one

witnesses no less than John walking the dog, which (normally) looks as John walking the dog would look.

So it is if John *is* walking the dog. But suppose one is illuded or hallucinating. Suppose it is for Pia just as though John were walking, though he is not. Then things look to her just as they thus would. (Watch John walk to see how this is.) Insofar as the illusion is visual, things *look* that way. They do not look to *be* that way. *Vision* takes no stands on whether that is how things are. Suppose that it is for Pia just as though John were walking, though he nor anyone is there at all. Then, perhaps, its being like this for her is itself no visual phenomenon, but a phenomenon of thought: it may lie in her taking John to be before her, walking, or in her taking just *this* to be the way things look. Now there is representing with truth-evaluable content. But the representer is her. She so represents things to herself. Still no signs of content of her (e.g., visual) experience.

The point here is grammatical, not phenomenological. There is an unbreachable divide between generalities, which are instanced, and history, which does the instancing. If perception lacks representational content, that is because generalities are thought's objects, while perception's are historical.

2. Accuracy: On Siegel's view, a perceptual experience represents things to be *so*—e.g., that there are peaches on the table. It is correct or incorrect according to whether things are as thus represented. She calls this 'The Content View'. She does not just assume this, but argues it. She offers two arguments. The first, the 'argument from accuracy', involves these steps:

1. Perceptual experiences can be more or less accurate.
2. So they have accuracy conditions.
3. These attach to them as a truth condition would.
4. So an experience has a condition on truth: that things be thus and so.
So it so represents things.

Siegel stresses that such representing, if it exists, must be accessible to the perceiver. I agree—if it exists. She does not actually think that this 'argument from accuracy' works. This leaves its purpose somewhat unclear. Still, it merits some comment.

First, 'represent' may stand for many notions. Here two are notable. One is of a two-term relation, the other of a three-term one. The two term relation is between historical episodes or circumstances. Those bags under Pia's eyes represent years of living with Sid's snoring. On this notion a bit of history represents whatever is to blame for it. That club need be neither exclusive nor fixed univocally. Those bags may represent the snoring, but also a youthful *coup de foudre* gone all wrong. Call such a link within the historical 'effect (or e-)

representing. Generalisations may be licensed. Teetering rocks e-represent wind erosion (as a rule, except, e.g., in theme parks, where they do not).

The three-term relation, *representing-as*, involves a representer, that which is represented *as* such-and-such, and *what* it is represented as being. In familiar cases an author fits into the first place. So might his vehicle—that by which he makes his representing recognisable (some words, say). In general, the second place is occupied by what Frege calls ‘the particular case’—things being as they are. It may also be occupied by an object (or sequence of them) whose being as it is is represented as a case of *a* thing being thus and so. The problem for representing-as, not arising for e-representing, is selecting an item to occupy this third place. *This* is what is fit to be the truth-evaluable content of a representing. So representing-as is what must concern Siegel. While causal relations will do to identify the represented in e-representing, the sorts of things which fill the third place here, as Frege notes, do not participate in causal relations at all. They are the wrong sort for that. What identifies the represented in e-representing thus does not so much as begin on that task for representing-as. Siegel’s problem is thus to identify some way that perceptual experience may stand towards *such* things by which it does approach this.

Now for Siegel’s first step. Her aim here is to show that, in general, perceptual experiences are, or are liable to be, more or less accurate. The next step will be: there are conditions on such accuracy. Preparatory to the step following, these conditions are going to be that what is experienced be thus and so. So, the idea is, these will be conditions on the experience’s accuracy *of* what it is of. So, to continue, *if* the experience represented what it was of *as* such-and-such, they could be, and naturally would be, conditions on its accuracy, *in such representing*, of what it represented (as something). Now the last idea can be: since the experience is anyway held accountable for what it would be *if* it represented, we can forget the conditional If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, So it does represent.

There are various notions of accuracy. Some are obviously of no use in this sort of case. Others *may* seem more promising. So it is strange that Siegel approaches her first step as she does. Her method is: she gives (roughly) three examples of (pairs of) perceptual experiences, asks us to admit that we have intuitions as to these being more, or less, accurate relative to each other, and then asks us, using our intuitions, to go on in the same way. Thus is *her* notion of accuracy fixed. It is hard to see how such methodology could work. Suppose we *do* have the intuitions she asks us to have about her examples (as I do not). About *what* notion of accuracy would they be intuitions? So when we got to a novel case of a perceptual experience (as we do as we start every day), what should we look for to judge its accuracy?

Here are three notions of accuracy not to her purpose. First, one historical circumstance (or type) may be a more or less accurate indicator of another. The *millesime* of the banker’s champagne may be a more or less accurate indicator of how good his day was. The relative popularity of duvet ratings may be a more or less accurate indicator of energy prices. The level of popcorn consumption at midweek movies may be a more or less accurate indicator of unemployment rates. Second, one thing or another may give a more or less accurate impression of something. Those photos Sid shot of the service entrance of the Grand Krasnapolsky may give an inaccurate impression of the hotel. Pia’s description of Sid as blonde and tanned may give an inaccurate impression of him if it is only his two remaining hairs that are blond, and his tan covers wrinkles and a paunch. Vic’s hemming and hawing may give the (false) impression that there is something he is reluctant to disclose, where, in fact, he is only

trying to remember where he is and why. Third, a lens, or an amplifier, and so on, may be more or less accurate transmitters or reproducers.

Perhaps some of these notions fit some perceptual experiences. But none suit Siegel's purpose. The accuracy of A as an indicator of B depends on the reliability and fineness of grain of their co-occurrence, or co-variation. The level of mercury in a tube, for example, may indicate, more or less accurately, that the temperature is 20°, if it *means* that, and (more or less) exactly that. It can just as well indicate that the temperature is 7° if it means (more or less) exactly *that*. It might just as well indicate that the average piglet litter in Zafra is 6 if it reliably co-occurs with *that*. And if *this* mercury is now at *this* height in *this* tube and it is *not* 20°, then *this* does not so indicate, though perhaps things of its type as a rule do. What we have here is effect-representing, with that question about truth-evaluable representing which it leaves unaddressed: *what* way is that which is represented represented *as* being? What is the third term in the relation? As for giving accurate impressions, *if* what did this—Vic's hemming and hawing, e.g.—determined just what impression *it, per se*, gave—just how things were according to *it*—then perhaps we could get started. But the impression Vic gives you all depends on what you know of him, what you have in mind at the moment, and so on. There is no definite way for things to be—again the third term in that relation—determined by Vic's doings as such. As for lenses and amplifiers, for them to be accurate in the sense they are is for them not to distort, in some sense of distortion proper to them. If it is the *amplifier* which is to be accurate, there is no saying how the *world* must be for it to be this. Input has a role. And if it fails to reproduce Hendrix accurately—that is, distorts him—it is not as though it presents him as having done other than he did. It just does not reproduce sound very well.

Other notions of accuracy may fit some cases of perceiving. Perspective can make it hard, or impossible, to see—tell—accurately the relative height of tall buildings in a cityscape. In one or another sense of 'look', things may look other than they are. If one building looked taller than another only when it was, that might count as seeing accurately. But does any notion fit which meets Siegel's (or her argument's) needs? Here is a reason to think not. For a perceptual experience to have a truth condition would be for a third term to be provided, for it, for that relation, representing-as, discussed above, to which something—the experience, the 'perceptual system' which generated it, or something else in the experience—may stand as a first term. It would be for a generality—some item within the conceptual—to be selected as the one under which that experience presents (or brings) the particular case—the nonconceptual, here *what* is seen—as falling. But perception's role is offering awareness of the nonconceptual—a role it may fill, or (sometimes) fail at. Perceptual awareness is of (or, where all goes wrong, as though of) *just* this. It is *not* awareness of relations between the conceptual and the nonconceptual, so not of instancing. As Frege noted more than once, such awareness is to be sought in another place. So nothing in *perceptual* experience so much as begins on selecting some item from the conceptual to be the way in it things are represented being. Here, perceptual experience and e-representing stand on equal footing. Which is instanced, *for example*, in the fact that if, as in one of Siegel's examples, the fish in the fishbowl looks as though to the right of the castle, while in fact directly over it, there is nothing to decide whether this is to be a case of things being other than as the experience represents them. After all, the way things are, in this case, is precisely such as so to look when so viewed. Why is this *not* a case of things falling under that generality to whose falling under that experience commits?

A final note on intuition. Of course, neither fishbowls, nor their appearance, represent. Nor does Siegel think so. What is to represent, on her view, is my experience, or experiencing, of them. Not how things *look*, but how they look *to me*, is what is meant to matter. Which is a difference which is meant to matter. I have just offered a reason to think it does not. I will return to this at the end. It is perhaps with such things in mind that Siegel chooses as a substantial portion of her limited collection of examples cases of illusion. For example, Pia hallucinates an airport (or Logan). In one case she does this in the airport, in another at home. We are asked to share the intuition that in the first case the hallucination is more accurate than in the last. If intuition is what matters here, this suggestion strikes me as bizarre. Waiting, bored, in the bar for Pia, Sid doodles on cocktail napkins. He draws a picture of a tall man in a top hat, carrying a tomcat under his arm. Amazingly, just then a tall man in a top hat, etc., walks by. He looks *exactly* like the drawing. The drawing certainly does not depict that man *accurately*. It does not depict him at all. Time passes. One mezcal too many, Sid begins to hallucinate: a horned toad jumping onto his knee. By coincidence, a horned toad does then so jump. This is not for the hallucination to be accurate. It is of a horned toad jumping, true enough. But it is not *of*, does not depict, that bit of history, the surroundings of Sid's knee being as they then were. In a different use of 'representation', the hallucination makes no representations in that regard. It is on a par here with Sid's cocktail napkin. In the hallucination, no particular case is brought under any generality. Such is another face of failure to effect representing-as.

3. The Import of Appearing: In the end Siegel agrees (I think) that the facts about accuracy do not quite show what she wants. So she offers a second argument, an 'Argument from Appearing'. It begins with this premise:

All visual perceptual experiences present clusters of properties as being instantiated. (p. 45)

It ends with this conclusion:

All visual perceptual experiences have content. (Ibid)

The filler *may* make for a sort of validity. But this first premise clearly will not do.

The point of section 1 returns here. Visual experiences, at least where they are seeing, are awareness (so far as it extends) of the nonconceptual, things being as they are—that which instances generalities, and is not itself a generality to be instanced. Such is the function of perception, more generally of perceptual (e.g., visual) capacities. Its evolutionary value, such as it is lies *here*. Things being as they are *instances*, is a case of, all sorts of generalities—of something, or some things, having whatever properties it, or they, have. Things being as they *visibly* are is (*inter alia*) their instancing whatever such generalities are visibly instanced by their being as they are. The function of perception is to allow the perceiver, by drawing on his conceptual capacities, to *recognise* such instancing where it occurs, so far as these capacities

extend.

Experiencing things being as they are is, *ipso facto*, experiencing their having whatever properties their being as they are is a case of having. It is thus to experience the historical instantiating of whatever properties are thus instantiated. Whether there is some determinate cluster of such properties is an issue we can leave aside. We can say, if we like, that experience presents (better confronts) us with particular instantiatings of properties, if this just means that it consists in witnessing some bits of history which are such instantiatings. It does not present us with those properties as instantiated, at least if that means presenting (identifying) them as (among) those which *are* instantiated by things being as they are. It does not present what does the instancing *as* that which would instance this or that such generality. It merely presents what does the instancing. It makes no representations, nor presentations, as to what would instance what.

Siegel moves from her first premise to the conclusion that, for an experience E, there is a cluster of properties, F, such that “Necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property cluster F is instantiated.” But, in the case of perception, things are as an experience presents them just in case they are as they are (or, again, visibly are). For any cluster F, this requires F to be instantiated only if things are as they are only if F, and F being instantiated ensures that things are as presented only if for F to be instantiated is for things to be as they are. But we cannot suppose (nor would Siegel, for that matter) that, while perception has representational content, the way it represents things as being is always (no other than) just the way things are (or visibly are). We may leave the second argument at this point.

4. Illusions: Siegel thus leaves us with the usual question about the ‘content view’. Why would anyone ever think such a thing? Ignoring the distinction between generalities and what instances them, or between representing-as and e-representing, perhaps. Or perhaps just in catching something going around. If, like Locke, one thought that perception was never of things in our surrounding, he might then, with Locke, posit sensed objects which represent these. But such brings us only to e-representing. And, in any case, presumably Siegel does not mean to be like Locke in these respects.

Still, unworldly objects, Lockean or not, have some role to play in Siegel’s story. No one thinks a goldfish, or its bowl, represents anything as so. Nor does refraction. Nor does the bowl’s appearance. Representing-as enters the picture, if at all, in the experiencing of such things. So there must be something in the experiencing, other than those things themselves, which makes this representing recognisable. Such an ingredient shows up, for Siegel, where what we experience is *not* what surrounds us, or *its* looks, but merely how things look *to us*—e.g. (as she conceives things) in hallucinations, or in experiencing other phenomena, such as phosphenes, or, perhaps, afterimages. (Cf. p. 62)

Such things might serve as vehicles of representing-as, were there but some representer whose vehicle they might be. But why think they *do* bring with them representing-as? Well, in one class of cases we speak of hallucinations as *of* such-and-such—e.g. of an *empregada* bearing a pastrami sandwich. Since it is an hallucination, there is no pastrami-bearing *empregada* for it to be of. So how could it be *of* such a thing? Compare pictures (of the wall-hanging sort). Frege asked whether a picture, as bare visible object, could be true, and a leaf or a stone not true. (See 1918: ??.) His answer was: a picture could be true only if an intention

attached to it. ‘Intention’ is, perhaps, not quite *le mot juste*. But there is what an intention might accomplish: to make the picture bear a certain understanding; be to be understood as relating to a certain way there is for things to be—e.g., such that Cologne Cathedral has three flying buttresses. The picture would relate to that way for things to be in this way: it would depict things as being that way (what it *would* be for things so to be). Here, then, we would find representing-as (though this need not be representing truly or falsely—representing the cathedral to *be* a certain way—and if it were, that it depicted the cathedral as *with* three flying buttresses would not yet decide how things must be for it to have depicted truly. (It *might*, e.g., just depict a proposed change.)

One *might* see some hallucinations as following pictures here. The hallucination would be *of* a pastrami-bearing *empragada* in relating to a way *for* things to be—such that an *empragada* is bearing pastrami. And it would do that, in the absence of any such *empragada*, in things being represented *being* that way in the relevant experiencing, whether by its object, or, perhaps, by its sufferer). As with pictures, this would not *per se* involve hallucinations in being true or false, accurate, or not. I have already given reasons not to see them so involved.

If experiences are involved in such a way with ways for things to be, then just possibly some representing-a is going on. It would not follow automatically that it is the *experience* that is doing the representing; nor that its sufferer is being represented *to*. There are other candidates. But such issues I will not pursue further here.

Perhaps some hallucinations do work like that. If so, one might point out, with the disjunctivist, that what relates experience to a way for things to be where, as in such cases, things are *not* that way (or their being so is not experienced) is not needed for so relating them where things *are* that way; so that, in such cases—ones of *perception*—there is no reason to take it to be present. But disjunctivism is, I think, a view with which Siegel has little sympathy.

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