

Naive realism, representationalism, and the rationalizing role of visual perception

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Suppose that I'm charged with helping a child learn his colours. The child has a number of uniformly coloured cubes, and we play the 'which colour?' game. This involves him presenting me with a cube and me saying which colour it is, and then me presenting him with a cube and him saying which colour it is, and so on. He holds up a green cube, and says 'which colour?' I say: 'it's green'. I judge correctly. But is my judgement rational?

It depends on the scenario. Compare two. In the first, *Inattentive*, the game has been going on for what seems like *hours*, and I am losing the will to live. I go through the motions and just guess that the cube is green, without even looking. Though my judgement is correct, it is not rational. In the second scenario, *Perception*, I am playing the game properly and attentively. Based on what I can see, I judge that the cube is green. In *Perception*, my judgement is rational in the light of my visual perception.

This illustrates the phenomenon I want to focus on: the rationalizing role of visual perception. My interest is in whether reflecting upon this enables us to settle a dispute in the metaphysics of perceptual experience: that between representationalism and naive realism.¹

In §2 I clarify what it means to say that perceptions are rationalizing. In §3 I set out Ginsborg's (2011) argument which aims to show that reflecting upon the rationalizing role of perception supports representationalism.² In §4 I show how this argument can be extended so as to challenge naive realism. In §5 I explain why these arguments fail. I do not claim that reflecting upon the rationalizing role of visual perception supports naive realism over representationalism. Rather, I doubt that we can settle the dispute by reflecting on the rationalizing role of perception.

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2 | THE RATIONALIZING ROLE OF VISUAL PERCEPTION

What does it mean to say that perceptions rationalize beliefs? We can answer this by appealing to a conception of the rationalizing role of psychological states developed in Ginsborg (2006).

Ginsborg distinguishes between first-personal and third-personal senses of reasons for belief. In the first-personal sense, a subject's reason for belief is a 'fact which presents itself to the subject as favouring the belief', it is 'typically a consideration which she herself will cite in defending her beliefs' (pp. 289–290): e.g., the fact that the streets are wet is my reason to believe that it has rained (Stampe, 1987).

But it is the third-personal sense of reasons for belief that concerns us here. Such reasons are involved in third-person assessment of the rationality of someone else's beliefs:

...if I am assessing someone else's beliefs, then I need to determine how things present themselves as being from her point of view. As William Alston puts it, "when we ask whether S is justified in believing that *p*... we are... asking a question from the standpoint of an aim at truth; but we are not asking whether things are in fact as S believes. We are getting at something more 'internal' to S's 'perspective on the world'... we are asking whether the truth of *p* is strongly indicated by what S has to go on" (1985, p. 71). To give someone's reason for a belief by way of answering the kind of question Alston describes, is to specify a psychological state, typically another belief, in the light of which her original belief can be recognized, from a third-person perspective, as rational (Ginsborg, 2006, p. 290).

Part of what it is for *S* to have a reason for the belief that *p*, in the third-personal sense, then, is for *S* to be in a psychological state in light of which her belief that *p* can be recognized, from a third-person perspective, as rational. This is what it is for a psychological state to rationalize a belief.

In *Inattentive* there are no psychological states that I am in in light of which my judgement that the cube is green can be recognized, from a third-person perspective, to be rational. Nothing in my 'perspective on the world' indicates that the cube is green. But in *Perception* I am visually aware of a visibly green cube. In light of this perception, we can recognize my belief that the cube is green as rational. My perspective on the world, including, as it does my perception of the visibly green cube, strongly indicates that the cube is green. In this sense, my perception rationalizes my belief.³

3 | MINIMAL REPRESENTATIONALISM

In this section, I will consider how reflection on the rationalizing role of perception can ground an argument for a minimal form of representationalism—the view that the visual experiences involved in visual perceptions have worldly (i.e. world representing) representational contents.⁴

I present the argument in summary form and clarify the minimal form of representationalism it supports in §3.3 below (and there is more on representationalism in §4.3). The argument is based on Ginsborg's (2011) discussion. Ginsborg holds that explaining the rationalizing role of perception

seems to require that we ascribe some kind of representational content to perceptual experience. . . For on a certain natural line of thought, perception of an object cannot rationalize a belief, that is, make it rationally intelligible, unless it presents the object as being a certain way, that is, as having a certain general property or feature (p. 135).

Ginsborg endorses this natural line of thought, and thus her core claim is that we cannot account for the rationalizing role of perception unless we take perceptions to be representational: to be or involve mental states or events with worldly representational contents.

To see how this claim can be supported, it is useful to distinguish positive and negative claims in Ginsborg's discussion:

- Positive claim: a visual perception's being representational is explanatory of its rationalizing role⁵
- Negative claim: it is difficult to explain a visual perception's rationalizing role unless we take it to be representational

Together these claims support the core claim.⁶ Let's consider how these claims can be supported.

3.1 | The positive claim

I see the cube and form the belief that the cube is green. My perception of the cube rationalizes my belief. But why? What is it about my perception of the cube which means that in light of it *this particular belief* can be recognized, from a third-person perspective, to be rational? To account for the rationalizing role of my perception in this particular case, we need to explain this. And more generally, we need to explain what it is about particular episodes of perception which means that they rationalize the particular beliefs that they rationalize.

To put the explanatory demand another way, if a perception rationalizes a certain belief, then there can't be an *arbitrary* association between the perception and the belief (Smithies, 2019, p. 95): there has to be something about the perception which means that it is fit to rationalize the particular belief in question.

Returning to the particular case in focus, we can meet this explanatory demand if we take my perception of the cube to have representational content in which the cube is represented as having a property: e.g., if we take it to involve visually representing the cube *as* a green cube, or *to be* a green cube (Ginsborg, 2011, p. 136). If my perception has such specific representational content we can make sense of why it is fit to rationalize my belief *that the cube is green*.

We can bring this out further by asking what it is about my perception which means that it rationalizes some beliefs *but not others*. My belief that the cube is green is rationally intelligible in light of my perception of the cube, but, all else being equal, it would not be rational for me to believe the following in the light of my perception: the cube is *red*; the *ball* is green; there is *merely a patch of light* there (etc) (Ginsborg, 2011, p. 136). We can make sense of this again on the assumption that my perception is one in which I visually represent the cube as green and not: the cube as red, or the ball as green, or a mere patch of light (etc).

We have support, then, for the positive claim. A second argument for the same conclusion is based on some of Ginsborg's more controversial assumptions about the rationalizing role of

perception. To outline this, let's switch to one of Ginsborg's examples: the belief that there is a package present.

What, then, of the assumptions? The first assumption is a conception of the rationalizing role of belief whereby beliefs are rationalizing when they bring reasons—in the first-personal sense—into view. The second is that we should model the rationalizing role of perception on this conception of the rationalizing role of belief. And third is a factualist or propositionalist conception of (first-personal) reasons for belief.

These assumptions are controversial, but the point is that if we make them then again we have support for the positive claim. Your perception of the package rationalizes your belief that a package is present. This means, according to the above, that it must bring into view a reason for you to believe that there is a package present—in the form of a suitable fact or proposition, e.g. *there's a brown rectangular thing there*. But what is it about your perception of the package which explains how it does this? Again, appealing to the idea that perception has representational, indeed *propositional*, content can help to meet this explanatory demand (2011, pp. 144–145).

The idea here, presumably, is that perceptions are belief-like in having contents of the sort that beliefs have, and this is part of how we can make sense of how perceptions, like beliefs, make propositional reasons available to their subjects. By representing that there's a brown rectangular thing there, your perception is able to make available to you the propositional reason that there is a brown rectangular thing there. Just as by representing that the streets are wet, your belief is able to make available to you the propositional reason that the streets are wet. If these psychological states didn't have such propositional contents, then it is not clear how they would make such propositional reasons available to their subjects. (I return to this in §5.2.)

3.2 | The negative claim

We can see the support for the negative claim as developing out of the above two arguments. First, then, is the claim that it is hard to see how we can explain what it is about particular perceptions which means that they rationalize the particular beliefs that they rationalize (and not others) unless we appeal to the idea that perception has representational content. And second is the idea that it is hard to see how we can explain how perceptions can make reasons available to subjects without appeal to the idea that they have representational contents. There are thus explanatory challenges for non-representational approaches.

Ginsborg supports these claims by carefully considering and finding fault with various non-representational options that might be invoked to meet these challenges.

Consider again, then, my perception of the cube which rationalizes my belief that the cube is green. Suppose that we understand my seeing the cube not in terms of representation, but in terms of the *mere presentation* of the cube (Ginsborg, 2011, p. 136).

Now, if all we know about my perception is that I am merely presented with a green cube, we don't know much at all about the perspective on the world I have in perceiving as I do. We don't know much about what my perception indicates to me about my environment. For all we know, my perception may be illusory or lacking in detail, or confused. We certainly don't know enough to know that 'the cube is green' is rationally applicable on the basis of my perception—rather than, say, 'the cube is red', or 'the ball is green' or 'it's a mere patch of light' etc (Ginsborg, 2011, p. 136). But then it is hard to see how my seeing the cube gives me a perspective on the world which indicates to me specifically that *the cube is green*. And it is therefore hard to see how my seeing the cube makes available to me a reason to believe that the cube is green.

Let's return now to Ginsborg's package example. An improvement on the mere presentation idea, is that in seeing the package, you have *experiential access* to some of the features which are relevant to the judgement that a package is present (e.g., its colour and shape, its being a package), and that's why seeing the package (a) gives you a perspective on the world which indicates specifically that *a package is present*, and (b) brings into view a reason to believe this.

But what is it for features to be experientially accessible? Here Ginsborg appeals to the notion developed in Brewer's discussion of the Müller-Lyer diagram (2004, p. 70), which applied to the present case yields the following: 'the colour, shape, and functional kind of the package are experientially accessible... if the package has [these features], and if we are capable of coming to see that it has them' (Ginsborg, 2011, p. 138).

The problem is that this doesn't explain what it is about your experiential access to the object's features which means that your perception indicates to you that it *has* those feature. And it therefore doesn't capture how your perception makes available to you a reason to believe that the object you see has the features in question (2011, p. 138).

So, a further option that Ginsborg considers, drawing on Brewer (2008), is the idea that 'in the straightforward case where you take the package to be a package, the visual similarity of the package to paradigm packages makes [rationally] intelligible your taking it to be a package' (p. 138).

But Ginsborg thinks this doesn't help either. She highlights how the package's similarity to a paradigm package is relevant to understanding how your perception can be rationalizing only if it figures in your perceptual experience in the right kind of way. The similarity needs to figure in your experience such that your perception indicates to you that there is a package-like thing there. If it doesn't figure in your experience in this way, then we can't understand how 'it's a package' is rationally applicable to what you see in light of your experience. However, Ginsborg suggests, it is hard to make sense of how the similarity could figure in your experience in the relevant way without appeal to representation. Theorists who deny representational content to experience can appeal to no more than that the package you see is in fact similar to paradigm packages (2011, p. 139).

To summarize, the argument for the negative claim is that if your perception of an object rationalizes your belief that *p*, then there has to be something in how the object is presented to you, or the way in which it is presented to you, which explains how your perception provides you with a perspective on the world which indicates that *p*. For otherwise we can't account for how your perception rationalizes the particular belief in question (as opposed to others), and we can't account for how it brings into view a reason for that particular belief. But various non-representational options fail to make sense of this. It is thus hard to make sense of unless we appeal to the idea that your perception has representational content.

3.3 | Summary

We can summarize the overall argument thus:

1. Visual perceptions cannot play a rationalizing role unless they are representational
 2. Visual perceptions can play a rationalizing role
- Therefore,
3. Visual perceptions are representational

To say that perceptions are representational is to say that they are or involve mental states or events with worldly representational contents. We'll understand this as the idea that such per-

ceptions are or involve visual *experiences* with worldly representational contents.⁷ Thus we can understand the conclusion here as equivalent to a restricted and minimal form of representationalism about visual experience: the view that the visual experiences involved in visual perceptions have worldly representational contents. This is restricted as it is limited to visual *perceptions* (and so does not concern non-perceptual hallucinations), and it is minimal in that it doesn't state (a) anything about the *nature* of experience, or (b) the *conscious character* of experience (more on these matters below). We can thus take this to be an argument for *minimal representationalism*, and we can call it the *Representationalism Argument*.

Premise (1) is supported by Ginsborg's core claim that in order to account for the rationalizing role of perception we need to take perception to be representational. This section has set out a case for this.

I have spent a lot of time discussing (1) rather than (2), because (a) I want to take issue with (1), and (b) Ginsborg doesn't say much to support (2) directly. But I do take it to be evident that visual perceptions can play the sort of rationalizing role highlighted here. And I think that this is plausible in light of the sorts of cases we began with. It is plausible to describe cases like *Perception* as cases in which visual perception plays a rationalizing role, for this makes sense of such cases, and how they differ from cases like *Inattentive*.

I understand the reference to 'visual perceptions' in this argument to be unrestricted. That is not to say that all visual perceptions *are* rationalizing—that all visual perceptions are linked to actual beliefs which they rationalize. That is clearly not the case, given that visual perception is belief-independent (Dretske, 1969). The point is rather that any visual perception has rationalizing potential.

4 | DOES NAIVE REALISM FAIL?

In contemporary philosophy of perception representational theories of experience are often pitted against naive realist theories (see the introductions to Nanay (2010) and Brogaard (2014)). It is natural to ask, then, whether the Representationalism Argument not only supports a representational theory but also refutes a naive realist theory. I'll explore this below, but first let's set out naive realism.

4.1 | Naive realism

Naive realists focus on the experiences we have in cases where we genuinely perceive aspects of mind-independent reality. Such perceptual experiences have conscious characters: for any given perceptual experience there is something it is like for its subject to undergo it. Naive realism is a theory of the *nature* of such experiences and their conscious characters. According to this theory, it is in the nature of perceptual experiences that they are basic non-representational perceptual relations to aspects of mind-independent reality. And what it is for a certain perceptual experience to have the conscious character it has just is for it to be a basic non-representational relation between a subject and certain aspects of mind-independent reality.

In light of this, the naive realist emphasizes that the conscious character of a perceptual experience is as it is, at least partly in virtue of the nature and character of the mind-independent objects we are perceptually related to. As Martin (2004, p. 64) puts it, the aspects of the

mind-independent world that we are perceptually related to constitutively ‘shape the contours of the subject’s conscious experience’.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that the conscious character of a perceptual experience is as it is *entirely* in virtue of the nature and character of perceived aspects of mind-independent reality. The naive realist holds that what it is for an experience to have the conscious character it has is for it to be a basic non-representational perceptual *relation* between a *subject* and certain aspects of mind-independent reality. Thus, naive realists can hold that as well as facts about perceived objects, facts about the subject of experience, and facts about the relation between the subject and the objects of experience are relevant to determining conscious character.⁸

The idea that the perceptual relation is ‘non-representational’ falls out of the idea that it is ‘basic’. What this means is that it is psychologically primitive:⁹ it cannot be analysed or understood in terms of more basic psychological notions, including *representation*.¹⁰

To illustrate, consider the visual experience I have when I see the green cube. I have an experience in which a cube-shaped object looks green to me. The naive realist holds that this experience is, in its nature, a basic non-representational perceptual relation to a suitable aspect of mind-independent reality: a green cube-shaped object. And what it is for this experience to have the conscious character it has just is for it to be so. In the case in question, this structure is realized by my being related to the particular green cube in question.¹¹

4.2 | The representationalism argument extended

Now, as noted, representational theories are often pitted against naive realist theories. This makes sense for, as we’ve seen, the naive realist holds that it is in the nature of perceptual experiences that they are basic non-representational perceptual relations to aspects of mind-independent reality. It is thus not in the nature of perceptual experiences that they are representations of such aspects of mind-independent reality, *contra* certain representational theories.

And, as we’ve seen, the naive realist holds that what it is for a certain perceptual experience to have the conscious character it has just is for it to be a basic non-representational relation between a subject and certain aspects of mind-independent reality. It cannot be, then, that what it is for a certain perceptual experience to have the conscious character it has just is for it to be a perceptual representation in which aspects of mind-independent reality are represented to its subject, as certain representational or intentionalist theories hold.

There are different contrasts here.¹² In being a *relational* theory, naive realism opposes representational theories which appeal to object-independent representations to capture the nature of experience and experiential character.¹³ And in being a *non-representational* relational theory, naive realism opposes representational theories which, in capturing the nature of experience and experiential character, appeal to a perceptual relation, but one accounted for in terms of object-dependent representation (see McDowell (2008, 2013)).¹⁴

It is unsurprising, then, that some authors categorize naive realism as an *anti-representational* theory of experience: a theory which denies that perceptual experiences are representational, and so denies that they are mental states or events with representational contents. For instance, Nanay (2015) classifies naive realism as an ‘anti-representationalist’ view, where anti-representationalism ‘is the view that there are no perceptual representations’ (p. 154). And Burge (2005) says that naive realism ‘holds that in veridical perception, there is no *representational* content of the perceptual state. The only “content” is the entity or entities that are perceived’ (p. 40).

If this is right, then the Representationalism Argument can be straightforwardly extended to apply against naive realism by adding:

4. The denial that visual perceptions are representational is built into naive realism

To yield:

5. Naive realism is false.

4.3 | The extended representationalism argument rejected

However, naive realists should reject premise (4) and thus reject the extended Representationalism Argument. As Logue (2014) argues, we should be ‘compatibilists’ and hold that the denial that experiences are representational is not built into naive realism (p. 220).¹⁵

But how is this possible? What room is there for anything representational if experiences are just basic non-representational relations? Didn’t we already outline how this non-representational relational account excludes appeal to representation?

Not quite. What such an account excludes is an appeal to the idea that experiences and their characters are *in their nature* representational. But that is not the same as excluding representation *per se*. Compare: from the fact that it is not in the nature of this table that it has a book on it, it doesn’t follow that it doesn’t have a book on it; from the fact that it is not essential to this table’s being what it is that it has a book on it, it doesn’t follow that it doesn’t have a book on it.

The claim that experiences are representational is the minimal claim that they have representational contents (recall the above discussion of minimal representationalism). This view is weaker than the claim that experiences and their characters are *in their nature* representational. Call this ‘non-minimal representationalism’. The point, then, is that though *non-minimal* representationalism is incompatible with naive realism, minimal representationalism is not (c.f. Logue, 2014, p. 239). Given this, (4) fails.¹⁶

In light of this, the naive realist can hold that my perception of the cube rationalizes the belief that the cube is green, and what is explanatory of this is the fact that my perception involves a visual experience with representational content. It’s just that the naive realist will insist that it is not in the *nature* of my experience and its conscious character that it is representational. My experience and its conscious character is to be understood in terms of a basic non-representational relation to a green cube, and whatever representational features it has are somehow non-fundamental.¹⁷

This view maintains naive realism, but concedes that we need to appeal to the idea that experience is representational in order to to explain the rationalizing role of perception. Call this *concessive naive realism*.

4.4 | The representationalism argument modified

I’ll now argue that the Representationalism Argument can be modified so as to challenge the concessive approach.

To build up to this we need to introduce the idea that the conscious character of perception is explanatory of its rationalizing role.¹⁸

Consider, again, some of the explanatory questions we raised earlier: What is it about my perception of the green cube which explains why it provides me with a perspective on the world which indicates that the cube is green? What is it about my perception of the cube which means that my belief that the cube is green can be recognized, from a third-person perspective, to be rational in the light of my perception? What is it about my perception which means that my belief that *the cube is green* is rational, and certain other beliefs are not? What is it about my perception of the cube which brings into view a reason for me to believe that the cube is green? We can highlight the explanatory role of the conscious character of perception by highlighting how the fact that my perception has a certain conscious character, specifically one in which the cube looks green to me, helps to answer these questions.

The claim is that the conscious character of perception is explanatory of its rationalizing role at *precisely those points* where earlier we claimed that we needed to appeal to perceptual representation. This gives rise to a challenge. For, on the face of it, we have to choose between the current claim, and the earlier claim. What is explanatory of a perception's rationalizing role? The fact that it has a certain conscious character? Or the fact that it is representational in a certain way? We can make sense of one of these facts being explanatory, but it is hard to make sense of them *both* being. Call this the *Explanation Challenge*.

Now, a plausible response to this challenge is to maintain that there isn't the kind of separation between representational properties and conscious character that the challenge presupposes. We can hold that a perception has conscious character in that the experience it involves does. And we can add that an experience's having the conscious character it has *just is* for it to be a perceptual representation of a certain kind, as per non-minimal representationalism. For instance, my experience of the cube has a conscious character in which the cube looks green to me, and since it is in the nature of this experience that it is a perceptual representation of a cube as green, what it is for this experience to have the character it has just is for it to be a visual representation of a cube as green.

But the concessive naive realist cannot respond in this way to the Explanation Challenge. For they are opposed to non-minimal representationalism. They draw a line between the non-representational relational conscious character of experience on the one hand, and its non-fundamental representational features on the other. It is difficult to see, then, how they can reconcile the fact that a perception's having a certain conscious character is explanatory of its rationalizing role with the fact that its being representational in a certain way is explanatory.

We can thus modify the Representationalism Argument as follows:

- (i) Visual perceptions cannot play a rationalizing role unless they have representational conscious characters
- (ii) Visual perceptions can play a rationalizing role

Therefore,

- (iii) Visual perceptions have representational conscious characters

The case for (i) is: (a) to account for certain facts about the rationalizing role of visual perceptions we need to take visual perceptions to be representational. But (b) appealing to the conscious character of visual perceptions accounts for those same facts. And (c) a plausible way of reconciling (a) and (b)—so as we don't get explanatory competition between representation and conscious character – is to take conscious character to be representational.

Not only does this argument deliver a much stronger representational theory than the original version of the Representationalism Argument, it can be extended so as to rule out even concessive naive realism:

(iv) If naive realism is true, visual perceptions don't have representational conscious characters

Therefore,

(v) Naive realism is false

5 | NAIVE REALISM SAVED

How should the naive realist respond?

One approach is to try to maintain concessive naive realism, and push back against some of the moves made above. For instance, the naive realist might suggest my experience of the cube is a representation of a cube as green *in virtue of* being an experience with a certain conscious character: in particular, in virtue of being an experience in which a cube looks green to me.¹⁹ And with this they can suggest that the fact that my experience is one in which a cube looks green to me, and the fact that it is one in which I represent a cube as green don't compete to explain the rationalizing role of my perception of the cube. If, that is, they can argue that thanks to the fact that the latter depends upon the former, they share explanatory powers such that there aren't two sets of powers competing to explain the perception's rationalizing role.²⁰

Though it might be possible to develop such an approach, it raises difficult questions. Is this a *better* option than the one proposed by the non-minimal representationalist? What are the details of the proposed dependence of representational properties on conscious character? How are we to understand the idea of shared explanatory powers?

If these questions can be satisfactorily answered, then that is good news for the naive realist. But I don't want to defend naive realism by attempting to answer these questions. Instead, I will develop a response that takes a step back and questions something at the heart of the pro-representationalist and anti-naive realist arguments we've been considering: whether we really *do* need to appeal to the idea that perception is representational in order to explain its rationalizing role.

5.1 | The character argument

The crux of this response is that once we have the idea that the conscious character of perception explains its rationalizing role in play, we can see our way to rejecting the idea that we need to appeal to the idea that perception is representational in order to explain its rationalizing role, and we can see our way to undermining the argument in §3.

But are we so sure that the conscious character of experience is explanatory of its rationalizing role? Perhaps the representationalist could push back on this and suggest that representation and *not* conscious character is explanatory of experience's rationalizing role.

This isn't plausible. To see this, let's return to some of the ideas considered earlier about the rationalizing role of perception. My perception of the green cube rationalizes my belief that the cube is green. Thanks to my visually perceiving as I do, there is, in Alston's terms, something

'internal' to my 'perspective on the world' which indicates the truth of my belief. Thanks to my perception, the truth of this belief is 'strongly indicated by what [I have] to go on' (Alston, 1985, p. 71).

Let's label whatever it is about my perception which means that it gives me such a perspective, *F*. Suppose, then, that *F* has nothing to do with *what it is like for me* to perceive as I do: *F* is not the conscious character of my experience, nor is it an aspect of the conscious character of my experience. But then it is very hard to see how *F* can be an aspect of my perception which means that *I* have a perspective on the world, a perspective in which the world is some way *for me*, let alone one in which it indicates to me, specifically, *that the cube is green*. And it is thus very hard to see how *F* could be explanatory of my experience's bringing into view a reason *for me* to believe anything.

The point is that unless *F* is or is an aspect of the conscious character of my experience it is very hard to see how it can make *any* difference to how things are 'internally' with me, or to 'what I have to go on'.

So it would be implausible for the representationalist to suggest that representation and *not* conscious character is explanatory of perception's rationalizing role. This doesn't mean that representation is not explanatory. Just that if it is, it is not *instead* of conscious character being explanatory.

However, having highlighted this explanatory role for conscious character we can begin to question whether we need to appeal to representation at all. Consider again the argument we extracted from Ginsborg's discussion which suggested that it is hard to see how we are to explain the rationalizing role of perception without appeal to representation. The argument is that for my perception of the cube to rationalize my belief that the cube is green, there has to be something about *how* the cube is presented to me, about the *way in which* it is presented, which explains how my perception provides me with a perspective on the world which indicates specifically that *the cube is green*, and makes available to me a reason to believe this. But various non-representational options fail to make sense of this.

But an option that Ginsborg doesn't consider is what we can call the *character option*. We can agree with Ginsborg that in order to make sense of how my perception of the cube rationalizes my belief that the cube is green we need to consider the way in which the cube is presented to me, or how the cube is presented to me. But we can capture this in terms of the kind of experience I have of the cube in seeing it, where this is understood in terms of conscious character: in terms of what it is like for me to experience as I do. The thought is that highlighting that my perception is one in which the cube looks green to me is to highlight something about the way in which it is presented to me, or how it is presented to me, which *does* make sense of why 'the cube is green' is rationally applicable in the light of my perception.

Ginsborg argues that we need to correct for the shortcomings of the non-representational options she considers by appealing to representational content, whereas my suggestion is that this neglects appealing instead to conscious character. Now, Ginsborg might not worry about this if she assumes that conscious character is representational, in the manner of non-minimal representationalism. In which case highlighting this option doesn't help us in defending naive realism.

The question, though, is what would entitle Ginsborg to make this assumption? So far, the case for a representational view of conscious character comes from the supposed need to appeal to representation in explaining the rationalizing role of perception. But invoking the above option undermines this case. As conscious character is invoked as explanatory *whether or not* it is representational.

Appealing to a representational account of conscious character does not do any explanatory work *when it comes to explaining the rationalizing role of perception*. Though appeal to

representation may do explanatory work in the metaphysics of experience, it doesn't add anything to the explanation of the rationalizing role of perception that we haven't already captured by appealing to conscious character.

The point, then, is that the character option is, in a certain sense, a non-representational option. And it is a better option than the ones that Ginsborg considers. For unlike those other options, it does enable us to make sense of how perceptions are rationalizing without an appeal to representation.

To be clear, I am not assuming here, with naive realists, that conscious character is non-representational. The character option is not a non-representational option in *that* sense. The character option is a non-representational option in this sense: it explains the rationalizing role of perception without appeal to representation, that is, without appeal to representation *in the explanation*. This is consistent with the idea that conscious character is representational after all—but that would be a point outside of the scope of the explanation of the rationalizing role of perception.

To put it another way, the character option highlights that what is explanatory of the rationalizing role of perception is something theory-neutral (at least when it comes to the theories we are considering). Conscious character—the cube's looking green to me—is invoked as explanatory, not any metaphysical account of conscious character. Regardless of which metaphysical account of conscious character we opt for, it is the conscious character of my perception which explains its rationalizing role.

This, then, is what we can call the *character argument*: the argument that we do not need to appeal to the idea that perception is representational in order to explain its rationalizing role, for we can appeal instead to perception's conscious character, quite apart from any metaphysical account of conscious character. Such character is explanatory, and its being so doesn't require any representational account of it.

How does this help us to save naive realism? It doesn't entail naive realism or embed a naive realist conception of conscious character. But it does help us to defend naive realism from the anti-naive realist arguments we've been considering: since these arguments rely on the claim that we need to appeal to the idea that perception is representational in order to explain its rationalizing role.

5.2 | The character argument defended

One reply to the character argument pushes back on the claim that we do not need to invoke a representational account of conscious character in securing its rationalizing role.

In §3 we distinguished two strands of argument. One is to do with what it is about my perception of the cube which means that it provides me with a perspective on the world which indicates, specifically, that the cube is green. Here it makes sense to appeal to my perception's involving an experience in which the cube looks green to me. Plausibly, for my perception to give me such a perspective just is for it have such a conscious character. But it doesn't matter to this what the *nature* of conscious character is.

However, another strand invoked Ginsborg's more substantive commitments about the rationalizing role of perception. Accordingly, modelling the rationalizing role of perception on that of belief (as Ginsborg conceives of that), my perception of the cube rationalizes my belief that the cube is green only if it brings into view a reason, in the form of a fact or proposition, to believe that the cube is green (e.g., the fact that the cube is green).²¹

Now, the reply is that if the cube's looking green to me is just a matter of me visually representing that the cube is green, then we can explain how it makes the fact that the cube is green available to me. But it is hard to see how it makes this fact available to me if it doesn't have this propositional structure. So, even if appeal to the conscious character of experience is explanatory of the rationalizing role of experience, we are mistaken if we think that this appeal does not also need to invoke a representational, and more specifically propositional, understanding of perception and conscious character.

There are a number of ways the naive realist can respond to this worry.

First, they can query why we have to understand the rationalizing role of perception in terms of experience's bringing reasons into view. Even if this is the deep explanation of how *beliefs* are rationalizing, why should we invoke it to explain how *perceptions* are rationalizing? Though there must be *something* in common to the way perceptions and beliefs rationalize, why must there be a shared *deep explanation* of this?

This question is especially pressing if such deep explanations force us to make commitments about the nature and structure of the psychological states in question (beliefs and perceptions). If we already think that perceptions are belief-like in involving propositional representation and thus in having contents of the sort that beliefs have, then we might be happy with a shared deep explanation. But what if one's starting point is that perception and belief are radically different? Then one might question why we should model the deep explanation of how perception is rationalizing on that of belief.

Now, even if we do understand the rationalizing role of perception in terms of perception's bringing reasons into view, another thing that can be questioned is why we should go along with a propositionalist or factualist conception of reasons.²² This might make sense if, again, one thinks of perceptions as very similar to beliefs. But if our starting point is that perception is very different to belief then one might start instead by asking what is made available to us in perception, and then build a conception of the reasons perception provides from there. This will only lead to a propositionalist or factualist assumption about reasons if propositionally structured entities are made available to us in perception. But many deny this. And thus we find authors who claim, for instance, that perception makes property instances available to us, and that these can serve as reasons (Kalderon (2011)²³ or that perception makes available physical objects, and that these can serve as reasons (Brewer, 2011, 2018).²⁴

Finally, the naive realist might offer the following more concessive reply. Suppose we accept that perceptions are rationalizing only if they make propositional reasons available to their subjects. Still, we can question why we should assume that the only way perceptions can do this is by being propositionally structured themselves, or having propositionally structured conscious character.

It might be, instead, that an *upshot* of having a perception of an object with an appropriate conscious character, for a subject with appropriate cognitive capacities, is that an appropriate propositional reason is available to them. And that this can be so even if the propositional reason in question is not a content of their perceptual experience, or constitutive of the character of their perception.²⁵

We can make sense of this on an understanding of what it is for a fact to be available to one as a reason, where this is a matter of being in a position to cite the relevant fact as a reason for belief (Ginsborg, 2011, p. 144–145).²⁶

Consider now my perception of the cube. Let's suppose that in virtue of having this perception, I am in a position to cite the fact that the cube is green in my thinking about the cube. But this is not because my perception already involves this fact as a content. It is rather because my experience

presents the cube to me in such a way that I can recognize it to be a green cube. Insofar as I am in a position to recognize it to be a green cube, I am in a position to cite the fact that the cube is green as a reason to believe that the cube is green.

But if my perception of the cube and its conscious character is non-propositional how does *anything* propositional get into the picture at all—why should my perception have any *propositional* upshot? And why should it have the *specific* propositional upshot it has—wherein I am in a position to cite the specific fact that *the cube is green*?

In response to the first question we can appeal to cognitive capacities which are capacities for generating propositional representations. For instance, recognitional capacities, capacities for generating states of recognition: recognising that such-and-such is the case.²⁷ The idea, then, is that non-propositional perceptions can have propositional upshots, for subjects with such capacities, as they *feed* the exercise of such capacities. They provide inputs to propositional representation generating operations. In seeing the green cube, the green cube is brought into the scope of my cognitive life so that, by exercising my recognitional capacities, I am able to recognize it as what it is. And this is to propositionally represent it in a certain way.

Thus even if my perception of the cube doesn't itself have propositional structure, propositional structure gets into the picture at the level of propositional representation generating capacities and what they generate. Given that I have such capacities, my perceiving the cube has the propositional upshot of my being in a position to recognize it to be such-and-such a way, and thus to cite the fact that it is such-and-such a way as a reason to believe that it is such-and-such a way.

But why should those capacities generate the *specific* upshots they generate? If my perception of the cube is non-propositional, and so doesn't propositionally represent that the cube *is green*, why should I come to recognize that the cube *is green*? The cube *is green*, and this green cube is perceptually presented and made available in my cognitive life, but why is that aspect of the cube picked up, as it were, in my cognitive engagement with it, when other aspects of the cube aren't? Here we can, again, appeal to the conscious character of my experience: the cube looks *green* to me. This, we can suppose, means that the cube's green character is manifest to me. Thus, the cube is perceptually presented to me in *such a way* that I am enabled, in my cognitive engagement with it, to recognize that it is green.

Thus, a naive realist can hold that even if my perception of the cube is non-representational, it puts me in a position to cite the fact that the cube is green as a reason to believe that the cube is green. Being in such a position is an upshot of my perception, given that it presents an object to me, and is of a certain experiential kind, with a certain conscious character (one in which the cube looks green to me), and given that I have certain cognitive capacities (given that I can recognize green cubes).

6 | CONCLUSION

Though it is tempting to suppose that we need to invoke representation in order to explain the rationalizing role of perception, I've argued that we can resist this by highlighting that the conscious character of perception is explanatory of its rationalizing role, and that this is so whether or not we take conscious character to be representational.

If what I've argued is correct, then with respect to the extended Representationalism Argument the naive realist can reject premise (1) (that visual perceptions cannot play a rationalizing role unless they are representational). And thus with respect to the modified Representationalism Argument, they can reject premise (i) (that visual perceptions cannot play a rationalizing role

unless they have representational conscious characters). Therefore, naive realists can reject the anti-naive realist arguments considered here, and they can do so without conceding that we need to invoke a non-fundamental layer of representation.

Though one of my aims here is to defend naive realism, I do not claim that reflecting upon the rationalizing role of visual perception enables us to settle the dispute between representationalism and naive realism in favour of naive realism. Rather, I doubt that we can establish or reject either theory by reflecting on the rationalizing role of perception.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Though I won't always mark it, I'm focused on only *visual* perception throughout. I don't assume that the discussion here applies to non-visual perception.
- ² For arguments in a similar vein see McDowell (1994), and Brewer (1999), and c.f., Martin (1992).
- ³ Some will want to frame these ideas in terms of perception providing *evidence* or *justification* for belief. I think there are ways of understanding these notions on which saying that perception provides evidence, or justification, is just another way of talking about the rationalizing role of perception that I am talking about here. On these ways of understanding these notions I have no problem with such a re-framing. However, these are not the only ways of understanding these notions. Because I don't want to get bogged down in discussion of these notions, and I because I want to be as faithful as possible to the arguments of Ginsborg which are in focus here, I stick to talk of the rationalizing role of perception and the way of understanding this drawn from Ginsborg that I have outlined in the main body of the text.
- ⁴ A note on terminology: representationalism is sometimes also called 'the content view'. I understand *intentionalism* about perceptual experience as not equivalent to representationalism, but to be a specific, more committed version of representationalism. As I understand intentionalists, they hold that conscious character is explained, at least in part, by representational content. And in the context of the Problem of Perception they accept the common kind claim (Crane & French, 2015). I take neither of these commitments to be built into representationalism. For an excellent overview discussion of intentionalism, see Crane (2009).
- ⁵ This is no stronger than: a visual perception's being representational *at least partially explains* its rationalizing role.
- ⁶ To echo Ginsborg's wording (2011, p. 144), I have formulated the negative claim as the claim that it is *difficult* to explain a visual perception's rationalizing role unless we take it to be representational, even though the core claim is that we *cannot* account for the rationalizing role of perceptions unless we take perceptions to be representational. Accordingly, I take it that the negative and positive claims *support*, rather than *entail*, the core claim. The thought is that the core claim looks very plausible in light of the negative and positive claims.
- ⁷ Ginsborg frames her discussion both in terms of perception and perceptual experience.
- ⁸ For further discussion see Logue (2012) and French (2018). Logue (2012) highlights a role for facts about the subject. When it comes to facts about the relation, some highlight a role for the *manner* or *way* in which subjects are related to mind-independent objects (French, 2014; French & Phillips, 2020; Martin, 1998; Soteriou, 2013), and others claim that we need to highlight a role for a third-relatum encompassing circumstances of perception. (Brewer, 2011; Campbell, 2009). These ideas are not necessarily exclusive. Indeed, one might attempt to understand facts about the *way* in which one perceives mind-independent objects in terms of the third-relatum.
- ⁹ The claim is only that the relation is *psychologically* primitive, not primitive *simpliciter*.
- ¹⁰ Sturgeon (2000, p. 10), Brewer (2011, p. 94), Kalderon (2011, p. 220) and Soteriou (2013, p. 87).
- ¹¹ Naive realists usually offer a more qualified statement of their view. They hold that perceptual experiences are *at least in part* relations to aspects of mind-independent reality (Martin, 2004, and Soteriou, 2013). This means that

naive realism is consistent with there being aspects of the nature of experience which are *not* to be understood in terms of perceptual relations. For ease of discussion, I don't invoke this qualification here because it won't figure in the discussion below. But I do think that the qualification is important, and I don't see why naive realists should go beyond the weaker qualified claim.

- ¹² The more qualified naive realism mentioned previously holds that these contrasts hold *for those aspects of experience* where naive realism applies, even if not for experience in its entirety.
- ¹³ This is typical of *intentionalist* versions of representationalism. See fn. 4 above.
- ¹⁴ Similarly, in being a non-representational relational theory naive realism opposes a theory of the sort defended by Schellenberg (2011) which invokes 'inherently relational' representational content (p. 740) in accounting for the nature of experience.
- ¹⁵ See also Martin (1998), Bengson, Grube, and Korman (2011), Siegel (2011), Soteriou (2013), Gomes (2017), and 'reconciliatory' views in Part Three of Brogaard (2014).
- ¹⁶ (4) is in even worse shape if the naive realist opts for the qualification mentioned in fn. 9 above.
- ¹⁷ This isn't to say that such features are not *necessary* features of my experience. Something can be a necessary feature of my experience even if it is not an aspect of the nature or essence of my experience, and so what is fundamental to it in that sense (c.f. Fine, 1994).
- ¹⁸ In different ways, various authors emphasize the epistemic power of conscious character, e.g., Campbell (2002), Schellenberg (2018), and Smithies (2014, 2019). C.f. Lyons (2009).
- ¹⁹ Compare here versions of naive realism which hold that experiences have their representational properties in virtue of their relational, character-determining natures, see e.g., Logue (2013), and Gomes (2017).
- ²⁰ Compare here what Robb and Heil (2019) call 'inheritance solutions' to the exclusion problem in the mental causation debate.
- ²¹ If one is uncomfortable with the fact that the cube is green serving as a first-personal reason to believe that the cube is green, we could modify the example to: the fact that the cube is green looking.
- ²² Ginsborg drops this assumption at one point. For critical discussion see French (2019, pp. 186–189).
- ²³ See also Johnston (2006) on the epistemic significance of perception making property instances available to us, though he doesn't speak of reasons.
- ²⁴ For critical discussion of such approaches see Cunningham (2018).
- ²⁵ Note that this sort of picture will be shared by the many representationalists who think of the content of perception as non-conceptual and non-propositional, but think that this content somehow gets transformed into a propositional content in post-perceptual cognition. See also Reiland (2015) who remains neutral between naive realist and representationalist theories (fn 23), but who appeals to recognition infused 'seemings' as '*interface* states which mediate between [non-conceptual] sensation/perception on the one hand and central cognition on the other by putting sensory or perceptual data into a conceptual format usable by the cognitive system.' (p. 512).
- ²⁶ See also McDowell (1994).
- ²⁷ For a detailed defence of the importance of recognitional capacities in the epistemology of perception, and an account of such capacities see Millar (2019).

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