

Grain and Content

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It is widely held that entertaining a belief or forming a judgement involves the exercise of conceptual capacities; and to this extent the representational content of a belief or judgement is said to be “conceptual”. According to Gareth Evans (1980), not all psychological states have conceptual content in this sense. In particular, perceptual states have non-conceptual content; it is not until one forms a judgement on the basis of a perceptual experience that one touches the realm of conceptual content:

The informational states which a subject acquires through perception are *non-conceptual*, or *non-conceptualized*. Judgements *based upon* such states necessarily involve conceptualization: in moving from a perceptual experience to a judgement about the world (usually expressible in some verbal form), one will be exercising basic conceptual skills. . . . The process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from his being in one kind of state (with a content of a certain kind, namely non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content). (1980, p. 227)

Evans’s argumentation for the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience draws upon two facts he takes to be undeniable. First, the

operations of the informational system of which perceptual capacities are parts are “more primitive” than the conceptual operations that, amongst other things, play a role in mapping perceptual states into judgements and beliefs. Second, perceptual states may be more fine-grained than what we can call “central” states such as judgements and beliefs. For example, Evans claims that we do not have as many colour concepts as there are shades of colour that we can discriminate and that consequently perceptual experience involving colour discrimination cannot be conceptual.

Christopher Peacocke (1992) acknowledges the mismatch Evans postulates and concludes that perceptual experience is at least *partly* non-conceptual; John McDowell (1994) argues that both central and perceptual content are conceptual. Whatever the relative standings of the positions of Evans, Peacocke, and McDowell, the debate in which they are engaged is clear, and their disagreements take place against a background of shared assumptions and goals, inspired largely by Frege (and to some extent also by Strawson). Robert Stalnaker’s (1997) recent entry into the debate is hard to assess: the argumentation seems to be set against fundamentally different background assumptions about what suffices for psychological content at all and what suffices for individuating particular candidate contents. Indeed, Stalnaker’s professed unhappiness with the terms of the conceptual–nonconceptual debate and his overt claim that all content is nonconceptual, incline one to read his paper as exclusively an attempt to defend his own influential coarse-grained account of content from objections that might be engendered by taking a distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content seriously enough to debate. Stalnaker suggests there is something quite puzzling about the debate, that it involves slippage between talk of mental states as conceptual (nonconceptual) and talk of the contents of such states as conceptual (nonconceptual). If I am correct in my interpretation of Evans, Peacocke, and McDowell, Stalnaker has not fully appreciated the antecedently Fregean nature of the conceptual–nonconceptual debate in which they are engaged: an overarching disagreement between those of a neo-Fregean persuasion as far as semantics and psychology are concerned and those persuaded of the mere semantic sufficiency of Russellian propositions or truth-conditions (in the standard sense) makes it necessary for the non-Fregean semanticist to explain, at least in a rudimentary way, the relationship between semantics and psychology in order to obtain admission to the conceptual–nonconceptual debate — bald appeals to “dual aspects”, to distinctions between “wide” and “narrow” contents, to distinctions between characters/roles and objects referred to “directly”, and so

on are of little help. At times Stalnaker appears to be proposing a different position on the same field, for example when he suggests that McDowell is right in thinking that perceptual and central psychological states have the same kind of content but wrong to think it is conceptual. Representational content is, Stalnaker suggests “non-conceptual all the way up”. But the way Stalnaker goes about promoting this position indicates that he thinks the invocation of a distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual representational states is based on some sort of confusion. He begins by asking what it is people want when they seek to contrast conceptual and nonconceptual states, a question which he believes can best be answered by reflecting on what kinds of objects can serve as these different types of content, and on how such entities can be used to characterize perception and thought. The objects in question are taken to be propositions, and Stalnaker’s own position on the individuation of such entities has remained stable for many years: a strict truth-conditional account will suffice.

For common reasons, Stalnaker takes the contents of perceptual states to be environmentally dependent. Additionally, he takes our ascriptions of content to be external in the following sense: the concepts we employ in such ascriptions are not necessarily attributed to the ascriber by the sincere ascriber simply by virtue of making the ascription in question. We use our own concepts to describe the way the ascriber’s external circumstances are disposed to impinge upon him or her; however, the concepts we employ need not be ones that the ascriber shares with us. We use our conceptual resources to denote the contents of the ascriber’s central states, states of seeming, and primitive informational states; but we do not thereby refer to a kind of content that has the concepts we express as components.

On this account, there will be no important difference between ascriptions of central and perceptual content. Representational content is unitary, appropriate for descriptions of central or perceptual states—at least as long as we can provide a clear account of some sort of abstract entity that satisfies a set of conditions for being a kind of representational content. That it is correct to think of central and perceptual states as having the same type of content—whether conceptual or nonconceptual—is meant to be supported by the following consideration:

[W]hen something merely looks to me to be a certain way, even though I do not believe it is that way, then there is a perceptual state with a certain content that might have been but is not the content of any of my beliefs (p. 341).

I do not want to quarrel with this. But there is a feature of Stalnaker's proposal that I find problematic. Stalnaker wants to pull the rug out from under those who would view talk of the contents of any psychological states as involving a commitment to conceptual content. As if by default, we are meant to be left with nonconceptual content as the sole type of content because our ascriptions are external in the sense noted above: the concepts we employ in such ascriptions are not thereby attributed to the ascribee. Of course, we can saddle the ascribee with our concepts, it's just that in our standard psychological ascriptions we do not, so we need a notion of informational content that does not presuppose the employment of our conceptual abilities, but whose use in the attribution of psychological states does. And according to Stalnaker, if we retreat to a minimal truth-conditional account of content, steered by considerations of causal and counterfactual dependencies, we get exactly what we want.

I have two main points to make here. First, we do not seem to get exactly what we want. Second, if we do not get what we want, the assault on conceptual content fails.

Stalnaker points out that contents must have three important features: (i) they must be abstract, (ii) they must transcend particular languages; and (iii) they must have truth conditions. Broadly speaking, there are three approaches to content. In descending order of fineness of grain: the Fregean, the Russellian, and the (merely) truth-conditional. In short, contents must be propositions, under some construal.

According to the Fregean conception that Stalnaker sketches, a proposition takes the form of a structured object composed wholly of (sequences of) senses or "concepts". (Assuming a theory of sense-compositionality that mirrors Fregean theories of reference-compositionality and respects Fregean accounts of the relationship between sense and reference, I suspect we will not be in a position to view the sense of a sentence as a structured sequence of senses, but let us put this aside.) Stalnaker suggests that it makes sense to view this sort of content as conceptual. But this is not the sense of "conceptual" that is meant to be at issue: the representational content of a belief or judgement is said to be "conceptual", according to Evans, in the sense that entertaining a belief or forming a judgement involves the exercise of conceptual capacities. This claim is logically distinct from the claim that contents are modes of presentation and the claim that they have senses as components (if they do).

According to the Russellian conception, a content takes the form of a structured object composed wholly of (sequences of) objects.

Famously, Russellian propositions are more coarse-grained than Fregean propositions. (Utterances of ‘Hesperus is a planet’ and ‘Phosphorus is a planet’ express the same Russellian proposition but distinct Fregean propositions.) According to Stalnaker, the Russellian picture is “nonconceptual” because objects rather than senses (or “concepts” as Stalnaker sometimes puts it) are the building blocks. Again, it seems to me that Stalnaker has misconstrued the nature of the conceptual–nonconceptual debate.

Stalnaker’s preferred account of content is straightforwardly truth-conditional; he calls such content “informational”. On such an account, a proposition can be viewed as a function from possible worlds to truth-values (or possible circumstances to truth-values, if this is helpful), and of course Stalnaker has done as much as anyone to explain the merits of this idea in the context of his pioneering work on the semantics of natural language and on modality. In the present context, Stalnaker suggests the advantage of injecting this notion of content into the debate is that it is

[...] a kind of content that everyone should agree can be used to characterize mental and linguistic states, acts and events that can be said to have representational content of any kind (p. 343).

On the intended construal, this is correct: the Fregean and the Russellian agree that a proposition has truth conditions (and some, but by no means all, might even be prepared to view a function from possible worlds to truth values as an elegant way of capturing this fact). Truth-conditional (“informational”) content is nonconceptual for Stalnaker because

[...] although it can be used to characterize any kind of representational act or state, its use says nothing one way or the other about whether any kind of act or state essentially involves the exercise of conceptual capacities (whatever this might mean) (p. 343).

Has Stalnaker simply sidestepped the issue of the contents of mental states themselves? No. It is part of his picture that there is no more to be said about the contents of psychological states than is given by the truth-conditional contents of our ascriptive clauses, as long as these are not articulated in ways that display an obvious insensitivity to environmental dependence. We can get at the question “What is content?” Stalnaker believes, by asking how the abstract object referred to—or as I would prefer to put it *described by*—a complement clause of the form ‘that *p*’ determines the property ascribed by (e.g.) the verb phrase ‘believes that *p*’. We provide an account of the

abstract objects to which agents are relevantly related in terms of causal and counterfactual dependence, and we provide an account of the relation to the abstract object in terms of a property that can be determined as a function of the object, in much the same way that the property of weighing 75 kg can be determined as a function of the number 75.

One problem, of course, is that causal and counterfactual dependence is not enough to distinguish the belief that two plus two is four from, the belief that ten squared is a hundred, the belief that there is no largest prime, and so on. Similarly, one would like to be able to distinguish the belief that Hesperus is a planet and the belief that Phosphorus is a planet and thereby distinguish *in respect of truth conditions* utterances of 'John believes that Hesperus is a planet' and 'John believes that Phosphorus is a planet' whilst holding onto the truth that the embedded clauses do not differ truth-conditionally. And, of course, it is exactly this type of problem that the neo-Fregean armed with conceptual content claims to be able to solve. But without some systematic treatment of these old logical and psychological substitution issues, there is no reason to think the coarse-grained truth-conditional account of content that Stalnaker favours will do justice to the richness of propositional content, and so no reason to accept that we can make do with, or are left only with, nonconceptual content. All of this reinforces the familiar point that one's picture of psychological content and one's semantics cannot be entirely divorced (though of course, the possibility of a systematic semantics in no way compels us to posit entities for complement clauses of the form 'that *p*' to refer to or describe). Neo-Fregeans about semantic content are simply out of range of the type of argument Stalnaker is mounting against the conceptual content and thereby against the conceptual-nonconceptual debate in which they are engaged.

REFERENCES

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