

Is Perceptual Experience a Kind of Perceptual Belief?

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Abstract: Every perceptual experience produces a corresponding belief state, which we identify as a perceptual belief state. Whenever we gain perceptual experience, it is gathered through acquiring perceptual beliefs. It is argued that they cannot be discriminated. The prime objective of this article is to point out some issues associated with perceptual experience and perceptual belief. We want to explore the nature and relation between perceptual experience and perceptual belief and point out the questions raised against their relationship.

Keywords: Perceptual experience, Perceptual belief, Causal relation, Justificatory relation, Constitutive relation, Illusion, Hallucination, Property representation, Appearance and face value, Concepts

When we perceive something, we believe the world is being represented in our perception in a specific way. We believe the world exists in the way we perceive the world. In fact, generally, we believe what we perceive. So, we believe we get information about the world through perception and we know the world in a certain way. In this way, we see that every perceptual experience produces a corresponding belief state, which we identify as a perceptual belief state. But, one may say that the perceptual state is actually a kind of perceptual belief state. We do not need to regard these two states as two separate entities. Whenever we gain perceptual experience, it is gathered through acquiring perceptual beliefs. It is argued that they cannot be discriminated. The prime objective of this article is to point out some issues associated with perceptual experience and perceptual belief. We want to explore first the nature and relation between perceptual experience and perceptual belief and point out the questions raised against their relationship.

We notice that every perceptual state consistently refers to something. What it is about is the object of that perceptual state. When I perceive a blue pen, my perceptual state is about that blue pen. The object of my perceptual state is that perceived blue pen. Subsequently, our perceptual state can represent the perceived object. The represented object as represented in my perceptual state is regarded as the content of my perceptual state or perceptual experience. What is conveyed to me by that perceptual experience becomes the content of my experience. When I perceive a

blue pen, it seems to me that I perceive a blue pen. That is, the content of that perceptual experience is that there is a blue pen. We can also notice that the content of my perceptual state comes to me in a certain way relative to other things. The perceived object has some particular perceivable properties, of which we can perceive the object in a definite way – like a blue pen. Maybe the pen is not blue but black. Then, the content of my experience is not correct. Even then, though erroneous, I have something like the content of my perceptual experience, i.e. something is conveyed to me by my experience.

In most cases, we believe what we see. We regard perception as a reliable source of our belief formation system. In this way, we may say that perception encourages us to form some beliefs. We have trust in our perceptual content. Sometimes we insist ourselves that, we should believe what we see; at least, at the moment of our perceiving, we do not doubt the perceived object. We are notified about the kinds of belief we have when we perceive something. Derrick Farnell states that we are always engaged in constructing some kind of beliefs. We are interacting with the world constantly. Consequently, by perception, we gather information and continuously develop perceptual beliefs.¹ Even now, as I am observing the words written on my monitor, this experience offers me a special kind of perceptual belief. I believe that the words are in black, and I believe this because of my perception of the words in a specific manner. According to Daniel O'Brien, we can have perceptual beliefs of those features of an object, which can be perceptible. So, it is evident that perceptual beliefs are based on perceptual experience.²

Josefa Toribio recommends that our perceptual beliefs be constructed according to the way objects appear to us in our perception.³ The words on my monitor appear to me as black; it raises the belief in me that the words written on the monitor are black. I think what I see is what actually is the case. Whenever we perceive something, we have perceptual beliefs. But, those beliefs are not about whatever thing, but only about that perceived object, i.e. of the particular something.

We perceive various objects and state of affairs, and these objects and their properties become the indirect cause of our perceptual beliefs. We believe the object we perceive, is the object to which perceivable properties belong. So, maybe it is proper to say that these perceivable objects are indirectly responsible for perceptual beliefs. The object is presented to us as having certain properties. Perceptual beliefs are about those particular properties to which beliefs are causally related and that makes the perception possible.

Now, we see that we have some arguments in favour of the thesis that perception sometimes play the causal role for some beliefs and these beliefs can be called perceptual beliefs. If perception

is the prime cause of some belief construction, then, there must be some causal relation, which exists between them. Actually, we consider a belief as a perceptual belief, when it crops up from perception. Dretske claims that perception leads to belief without any inference.⁴ He says that when we perceive something, we cannot instantly perceive the appearance of the object unless there is another fact, i.e. beliefs of the properties present in an object, which would confirm what we perceive. We have to have some beliefs regarding the perceivable properties in an object beforehand, so that, after perceiving the object we can follow what the object looks like. The properties present in the object can help me to recognise that particular object as that particular object. Consequently, we believe the object, as we perceive it, without any involvement of any kind of inference, but only through perception. We do not infer any causal relation between perception and belief but only believe what we see. As Charles B. Daniels puts it, there is a perceptual belief, which is not influenced by any kind of inference; but may be we cannot believe anything only because of perception. I believe that the letter I perceive written on my monitor is black. Daniels insists that we cannot know the name of the colour only by seeing it, but what we have already learned by experiences help me to infer that the words are black coloured.⁵

Though we accept a direct connection between perceptual experience and perceptual belief, may be we have to accept that those beliefs, which are directly produced by perception, get some help from our reasoning. However, the acts of reasoning may happen so fast that we do not even notice it. There are views where the relation between perceptual experience and perceptual belief is considered not merely causal but also epistemic, i.e. perception justifies perceptual beliefs. Some people may express doubt about this very nature of perception,⁶ but we usually think that perceptual experience provides justification for our perceptual beliefs. Actually, perceptual experience is a mental state that plays the role of stimulation for the subject to believe in a particular matter. Perceptual experience is that sort of things, which must stand in a justificatory relation with perceptual beliefs.

In that case, we have to say that, there is a firm connection between perceptual belief and perceptual experience based on reason. If we derive a perceptual belief from some good reasoning or inference through perception, that perceptual belief would be considered as accurate and appropriate. It must follow a rational procedure to be considered as epistemically viable. That procedure should be perception because the function of experience is to produce beliefs about the subject's surroundings. Only through perception, the subject can have the content of the perceptual belief. When the content of that belief is being judged by the subject, then actually, we use our experience to judge it.⁷

So, we have some reasons to believe that when we perceive an object, we gain perceptual

beliefs about that perceived object. That perceptual belief is acquired by conscious valid reasoning and thus is assumed to be true. Whatever we perceive, we think we consciously believe them to be true. In that case, we may say that perceiving an object is a good reason to hold a perceptual belief about that object. We can also confidently assert we hold a true belief because it is achieved by perception. According to D.H. Mellor, we must consciously believe the content of our perceptual belief. We become aware of our own belief. I believe what I believe, and I do it by being conscious of the act of believing and the content of the perceptual belief. I have to recognise the mental act as a belief state, and I have to recognise what I believe.⁸ But, Mellor also maintains we do not have to be conscious of the content of our belief state separately, i.e. the content of any belief state always comes with the state. So, there is no bare state, which we can be aware of independently, i.e. without content. We are so certain about our perceptual belief and the content of our belief, that we do not generally express doubt of what we perceive. Perception gives us the assurance that we are experiencing something, and reasoning gives us the assurance that the content of that experience is true.

Eric Snider puts a valuable point here by asserting that, when we perceive something, maybe we do not consciously ascribe any importance to the process, but we just believe the perceived object.⁹ Maybe we do not have any conscious thought about the process or do not have a belief about the belief, but we just believe what we perceive. I believe the words written on the monitor are black because I see the words in black colour. I have a perceptual belief, and I believe that perception is a reliable process to have a reliable belief. But, the beliefs about the colour of the words are not due to my believing in the fact that I am conscious of my perception or I know that perception gives me a reliable belief. Usually, we do not think about all those things when we perceive something, although we uphold that perception is the source of this reliable belief. Snider also claims, we do not even think about the reliability of the process of perception when we believe in those, which are produced by perception. Actually, we do not even aware of the fact that we hold perception is a reliable source of perceptual beliefs, or maybe we actually do not even have that belief about the process of perception. Snider thinks the above conditions are not necessary for our acquiring perceptual belief.

We have to remember that sometimes we commit mistakes; we misperceive. If I perceive the colour which is being displayed on the screen of the monitor is blue, then, and on that basis, and with no reason to believe otherwise, I believe the letters on the screen are blue. It follows that, if I perceive the letters on the screen as blue and I have no reason to doubt my perception, I should believe what I perceive. We do not form judgments inconsistent with the content of our visual experiences unless we have suitable reasons for doing so, i.e. we require a reason for not

believing our eyes.

If we consider that what we believe indicates what our content of experience is, then, according to Susanna Siegel, there are many ways to show the constitutive link between perceptual content and belief content.¹⁰ One of them is that, whenever I perceive the words written on the monitor as black, I believe that the colour of the word written on the monitor is black. The content of my perceptual belief is the same as the content of my experience. The content of the experiential state becomes the content of the belief state. This constitutive link between experience and belief can be called 'experiences are acquisition of beliefs'. Hence, perceptual experiences can justify perceptual beliefs, because the content of experience becomes identical with the content of perceptual belief.

Another option is that, when we perceive something, it raises a capacity in us to have certain beliefs about the object. As the perceived object appears to us, it would have a strong effect on the disposition to form that belief accordingly. If it appears to me that the words on the screen are blue rather than black, then the disposition to form the belief about the words would be blue, and I will experience blue coloured words, even if, in reality, the colour of the words are black. So, we may say that experience is only the dispositional part of our belief state. What will be the content of a belief state depends on how the object appears to us, i.e. what kind of disposition we have. This view may be indicated as the experiences 'are dispositions to form beliefs'.

Another possibility is to show the constitutive link between perceptual content and belief content is that - when we get an experience of an object by perceiving it, we believe that the object is like the way we perceive it. Then, both the contents identify '... experiences with beliefs about how things look.' Charles B. Daniels considers that the 'basic object' we perceive is identical with the 'basic object' we believe, i.e. perceptual belief has identical objects with that of perceptual experience. Thus, we may admit that belief arises from perception.¹¹

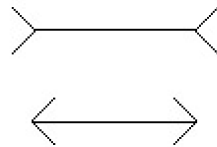
Now, conventionally we believe what we perceive. But, we can state some cases where we can differentiate perceptual experience and perceptual belief with respect to some of their aspects. We can establish the view that perception is belief-independent; belief is not an essential constitutional part of the perceptual experience. Though we want to believe what we experience, the existence of the cases, like illusions, hallucinations, etc. provide us with the impression that frequently we misperceive objects or perceive them inaccurately.

At first, I want to address the peculiarity of illusion. When we perceive some object directly, we perceive the object as it appears to me. But, the object may exist in a different way in the world. So, this is an illusory perception and we cannot regard it as a valid perception. Two

famous examples of illusions are –

- i) Müller-Lyer illusion and
- ii) A straight stick perceived as curved under water.

Consider the famous example of Muller-Lyer illusion.¹² In the case of the Müller-Lyer arrows, as shown below, there are two horizontal lines.



The two horizontal lines look like as if they are of different lengths; the upper line seems longer than the lower one. We may measure the lines beforehand and have knowledge that the lines are in the same length, but we cannot stop observing the lines having different lengths. If we have seen the illusion before, then, we do not believe our eyes. Instead, we believe the lines are of the same length. Even though we continue seeing the illusion as a diagram of two unequal lines, we believe the two lines are of equal length.

After knowing the fact, I have a true belief about the real situation of the object. Then, it is a ‘known illusion’. Known illusions are the cases where perceptual appearances say something else, while we confidently believe them in another way.¹³ I believe that what I perceive is not the real position of the object, i.e. in case of known illusion; I do not believe what I perceive. This typical argument upholds that perceptual experience must be distinct from perceptual beliefs. We do not even have any reason to believe the lines as unequal. Even knowing the fact that we are undergoing an illusion, still, we cannot resist ourselves to perceive it. A true belief cannot stop us from continuing to have the illusory perception.¹⁴ So, what I believe and what I perceive create different mental states and perceptual beliefs and perceptual experiences are distinct mental states.

The other example of illusory perception that we can consider here is about a straight stick, which looks curved under water. It is an example of an illusory perception because in other circumstances, i.e. when not immersed in water, we notice that the stick is straight. As a result, we believe the stick is straight but it cannot help me to not to perceive the stick as a curved one when it is under water. We cannot modify our perception. We cannot hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time or we cannot hold a belief against which I have some pieces of evidence.

Hallucination takes place when there is actually no object in front of us, but it appears that there is one, and it seems that, that apparent object is the cause of our perception.¹⁵ We cannot say that the content of perceptual experience is false. We have to say that, what is going wrong is the judgment concerning the content of the perception. If belief is a constituent part of perception, then, our judgment cannot be wrong in this way. For Gerald Vision, having a perceptual experience does not guarantee that we perceive the real situation: one might be the victim of hallucination or illusion or of hypnosis, or even dreaming. Daniel O'Brien points out that the person, who often faces hallucinations, expresses doubt to every nature of her perception. If she perceives the world as it is, she cannot believe the way she perceives the world. Thus, a victim's perception should be different from normal perception because generally, we believe what we perceive. Though she cannot believe her own eyes, there is always some kind of ascription over perception. Then, it can be considered as a proof for discriminating perceptual experience and perceptual belief.

Though both perceptual states and belief states can represent properties of objects, there are differences in nature and scope of their representations. Whereas, it is conceived that, belief can represent any kind of properties, perceptual states do not. A perceptual state can represent only some specific group of perceivable properties, like – the object's shape, its size, the colour of the object, its spatial position, etc. There are, then, limitations in the ability to represent perceptual properties. Though perceptual beliefs are formed under perceptual experiences, the capacity to represent properties is much more powerful for perceptual beliefs than perceptual experiences. We generally think that we perceive the object by virtue of what we know or believe. Now, we have some points to believe that, perception cannot represent all the properties we believe.¹⁶ Belief states can represent different kinds of properties which perception cannot. In this way, we can say that perceptual states and belief states should be considered as different mental states.

Sometimes we believe more than what our content of perception reveals. We merely perceive a new and recognised company's blue pen, but the perceptual belief can be about the good writing quality of that blue pen. These demonstrate that we can distinguish 'the mere appearance of things in perception and the taking at face value of that appearance in perceptual belief.' In the case of known illusion, because we know that perception deceives us, what we perceive, we do not believe, or we believe more than the mere appearance. Thus, in this situation, because we know what the real situation is, we can distinguish between the appearances of objects and perceptual beliefs that are produced.

When we perceive something, we have content of that perceptual experience. That content

cannot be changed later by the influence of our background beliefs or by previously gained knowledge. The content of a perceptual experience is not a subject of revision. We have already considered some areas where, if the appropriate conditions are not present, the information provided by perception can be misleading. We can revise the information we have gained by perception, but we cannot revise our perceptual states.¹⁷ 'If science, for example, reliably demonstrates that the sun does not in reality move across the sky, does this change one's belief in how the sun is moving throughout the day? It may do so (based on a faith in science), but such change in belief does nothing to alter perception....one's subjective perception of the sun's movement is what is real and is the only view that matters to normal functioning.'¹⁸

But in case of belief state, the content of belief state can be altered or revised according to the newly acquired information. To get our belief more accurate, we have to revise our beliefs rationally. As rational beings, it is our inherent tendency to perform in this way. No belief is fixed for us, and by the process of belief revision, we always keep change in our belief system whenever we realise we have to. The information we gathered by perception may convey us vague or false belief; but after we come to know the fact, we can revise our beliefs by the information which we consider more accurate.¹⁹ Then, in all these senses, we can differentiate the perceptual state and belief state.

We cannot have any belief state without having conceptual content of that state. Without acquiring relevant concepts, we cannot have a belief in anything. So, it is essential for any belief state that it has conceptual content. If this is the case, and if we think that, the perceptual state is nothing but a kind of belief state, then it is obvious that the perceptual state has conceptual content. One may say that perceptual experience does not need any support of conceptual framework, i.e. to be in an experiential state, we do not require the support of concepts of the perceived object. We can have perceptual content, which is a kind of nonconceptual content.²⁰ We have perceptual content, but no conceptual outline is essential to have it. Then, we cannot say that the role of concepts is essential in perceptual experience.

Now, after the discussion of all the issues, I think that we should regard the perceptual experiential state as a separate state from perceptual belief state. But there is a strong possibility that concepts play a vital role in understanding the nature of perceptual experiences. It seems that, when we perceive something, if we do not possess concepts about the perceived object and its properties, we will not be actually able to perceive the object. Having exact conceptual structure helps us to generate accurate perceptual belief, to judge any experience in the right way, and more importantly, to represent, and recognise the object of perception. That means that perceptual

experience always have conceptual content and a valid perception is almost impossible without acquiring the relevant conceptual framework of the perceived object. We are here just overlooking the existence of relevant conceptual structure we apply.

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