

# Phenomenal Content and the Role of Concepts in Visual Perception

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**Abstract:** Along with representational or intentional character, we include phenomenal content of all the perceptual states. Phenomenal consciousness includes the feeling that what we perceive is there. But in the case of hallucination, there is no object to refer. Our phenomenal content of perceptual experience depends on the conceptual framework of the perceived object resides in the perceiver. To show the importance of phenomenal knowledge, we can take help of the 'knowledge argument'. We need the relevant experience to have relevant phenomenal concepts. If we do not apply concepts to our experience, we cannot grasp the full aspect of the phenomenal state. Qualia represent the world to the perceiver in a certain way, and so, perceiver perceives the world in a certain way.

**Keywords:** Phenomenal content, hallucination, conceptual framework, phenomenal concept, phenomenal knowledge, qualia.

There is more than one way to represent the worldly objects and to have a representational mental state. One of them is to perceive and represent the perceived object. The way the world is represented to the perceiver establishes the representational or intentional content of that perceptual experience. We recognize that the world exists accordingly because we believe that the way the world appears to us is the way, the world is.

Along with this representational or intentional character, we include phenomenal content of all the perceptual states. According to Nagel, it can be regarded as '... the subjective character of experience' and that this phenomenal state '... is not analyzable in terms of any explanatory system of functional states, or intentional states ....'<sup>1</sup> I perceive a red pen in my hand. I have an experience of a red pen. The experience represents a red object, a red pen. At the same time, I am experiencing something 'reddish.' There is something, which is like to see a red pen. I feel that I perceive a red pen. It is a unique kind of experience, which is felt only when I perceive a red pen. Maybe, whenever I perceive a red pen, I feel this way, or maybe the perception of 'this red pen' only gives me 'this' kind of feeling. If the latter is true, then, every perception gives us different kinds of feeling. If the earlier is true, then, only after recognizing the 'reddish-way-it-is-like'<sup>2</sup> experiential state, I can understand that I perceive a red pen.

My phenomenology of perceptual experience affects how I would acquaint with the red pen. We can explain the relationship between the physical object and phenomenology in two ways. One way is that, when we have phenomenal content of perceptual experience, we are

actually acquainted with the objects and their physical properties. The phenomenal content is structured by the object and its properties. The particular redness and the particular pen would dictate what kind of phenomenology of perceptual experience I could have.<sup>3</sup>

Another way is that, phenomenal consciousness includes the feeling that what we perceive is there. Perception gives us a satisfactory feeling – ‘something-obvious-like’ feeling. When I perceive the red pen, I have ‘direct accesses’ to that red pen.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing in between my perception and the red pen. What I perceive determine the phenomenal character of my perceptual experience. According to Jeff Speaks, the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience refers to the feeling the experience generates. The way the object appears to us depends on the point of view of a perceiver. Perceiver only understands what it is like to have that experience. Perceptual experience connects us directly with the visible objects and their properties. The phenomenology of perception can refer to the phenomenal content. After perceiving the red pen, what I feel determines the phenomenal character or phenomenology of my experience. In what mode I understand my experience is the architect of the judgment of our phenomenology. In this way, experiences are differentiated ‘on the basis of their phenomenology’.

One interesting observation we may find here. Later on, sometimes, we may find that some perceptual experiences are illusory or are a case of hallucination, but at that particular situation, we cannot realize that the experience is in fact an illusion or a hallucination. We may experience the pen as elliptical or brownish, though it would be something illusory. We may in a hurry do wrong counting.<sup>5</sup> But in the case of hallucination, there is no object to refer. If we consider the case of genuine perception and hallucination, we will understand the situation. We think when we perceive something we have perceptual experience of that thing. But there are cases where we do not perceive any object but we have the feeling as if we perceive something. In the case of hallucination, it happens. Then, though we state we have a content of our perceptual experience, actually the perceived object is not always the cause of that content, because there is no real object there. When we realise that we have dealt with hallucination, we confer this way, ‘at the time of hallucination, it appears that I perceive a red pen.’ But at that time of experience, I did not realize that it was not a genuine perception. It went on in the same way as a valid perception would be.

On the other hand, if we have some conceptual framework of the perceived object, after perceiving it, we are able to conscious of the content of perception; otherwise, we cannot recognise it or identify it. Intentional content of our perceptual experience and phenomenal content of our perceptual experience – both depend on the conceptual framework of that perceived object the way the perceiver has. So, perceptual content is always concept dependent.

Since, during perception, we may not recognise the object of perception or may not at all perceive something, and then, we have to understand that we do not have required conceptual framework to perceive the object or to recognise it.

According to Susanna Schellenberg, an experience of perception and hallucination of an identified object has the same phenomenology, because '... the same concepts are employed in the same sensory mode.'<sup>6</sup> Using the visual apparatus, I enjoy the genuine perceptual experience, i.e. I have a perceptual belief that I perceive a blue pen on the table. I have all the relevant concepts for having that content of visual experience that I perceive a blue pen on the table. I feel the way that I perceive a blue pen. The case is that there is really a blue pen in front of me on the table. Now, in the case of hallucination also, I feel that I perceive a blue pen lying on the table. I use the same visual apparatus, and I believe in the same manner that I perceive a blue pen. In that case, also, I have all the relevant concepts, so that I believe in particular content that I perceive a blue pen. But, in the case of hallucination, there is no blue pen lying on the table in front of me. We use the same sensory mode; have the same relevant concepts; have the same feeling; but with respect to the existence of the perceived object, we have two opposite situations. Both the contents are about some perceived object, where we believe that those objects exist because we feel in that way. At the moment of gaining both kinds of experience, we cannot differentiate them in terms of their phenomenal contents. So, the particular phenomenology of perceptual experience, as well as phenomenology of hallucination, depends, not on external objects but, on the impacts of our inner concepts. We use the same sensory mode and the same concepts in both cases. Concepts refer to something real in case of perceptual experience but do not refer to anything in case of hallucination. But, this ambiguity does not affect to have phenomenology in both kinds of experience.

So, the fact that phenomenology of the perceptual experience depends on concepts can be inside out proved by the incidence of hallucination.<sup>7</sup> If the external object is responsible for the creation of phenomenal content in every occasion, then at the time of hallucination when we feel that we perceive something, even though, we realize later that, we perceive nothing, there should be something in front of us as a perceived object. In fact, when we have perceived the same object before, we have gained the experience of what it is like to see that object. At the time of hallucination, the circumstances cause to see things, which are not present in front of us. But among all the important reasons, one is that we have the feeling of seeing that object because we have the concept of the feeling of seeing that object before; otherwise, as there is no such object in front of us, we cannot say that such kind of feeling originates from the perceived object. We would not be able to identify the felt aspects of our perceptual experience. Hence, '... concepts fulfil the role of connecting mental states with their object.'<sup>8</sup>

We may organize our example in accordance with the famous 'knowledge argument', to

show the importance of phenomenal knowledge. I feel that I know that I have a red pen in my hand. I may have heard about red colour, I may know about the scientific explanation of seeing red colour, I may know everything that I can know, but until I see the red colour in any object, I cannot conceive that what it is like to see a red colour. Until that happens, I cannot realize that I perceive a red coloured pen. I may have various kinds of belief states, which include 'red' as contents of those states. But when we are discussing perception, we need to recognise that the object is red, and for that, we need to have the concept of red unless we may identify the object as colourful but not as red coloured. So, in perception, until and unless we have the relevant phenomenal concept, we cannot have the content of our perceptual state as perceiving a red coloured something. After knowing that what we perceive is a red coloured object, we would know how it is like to see red colour, and only then we have gained the phenomenal concept of seeing the red colour. For that reason, afterward, we can recognise the colour because we have already conceptualised a particular fact. So, phenomenal concepts bridge the gap between knowledge and identification.<sup>9</sup>

Then, we need the relevant experience to have relevant phenomenal concepts. It is an entailed condition for the possession of phenomenal concepts. We have to undergo the relevant experience at least once. Some philosophers, though, slightly disagree with this view and claim that we need to go through the relevant experience if we want to concentrate on our own experience or if we want to specify the nature of our current experience properly. They also argue about the nature of phenomenal concepts but all agree that relevant experience is somehow important to form phenomenal concepts.<sup>10</sup> We all experience the world in our own way - from our own perspective and by this, phenomenal concepts are always 'perspectival'. Then, phenomenal concepts have no common characteristics. They are unique for everyone and they cannot be shared. So, the feeling of having any kind of experience is different for each person. I can realize only in my own way what it is like to go through any experience.

According to Terry Horgan and Uriah Kriegel, before we go through an experience of redness, we cannot even think about what it would be like to see a red colour.<sup>11</sup> So, we have to undergo the experience of red colour and at the same time we have to know that it is red, then only we can have the concept of 'redness'. We can have all the theoretical knowledge about redness, but it cannot provide us with the phenomenal aspect of the experience of seeing the red colour. So, we can say that only after going through the red-object seeing experience we can have the phenomenal concept of red colour.

Phenomenal concepts are then '... derived from our conscious experience which we access introspectively'.<sup>12</sup> We cannot say that it is the effect of the object we perceive, i.e. we perceive the object as red coloured because the object is red coloured. We cannot say in this way

because when we do not recognise the object as red coloured, it is still a red coloured object. Only after having the required concept we identify the object as something, which is red. So, this is a subjective and qualitative aspect of an experience.

The perspective I have about the experience depends on the concepts I have about seeing a red pen. Concepts play a vital role in understanding the feeling. If we do not apply concepts to our experience, we cannot grasp the full aspect of the phenomenal state. Fully understanding of seeing a red pen requires grasping how it feels its distinctive phenomenal character that what it is like to see a red pen. So, we must apply the concept of seeing a red pen to the experience and as a result, I am subjectively aware of the fact that I perceive a red pen. I feel that I perceive a red pen. The kind of concept I apply is to be considered as a phenomenal concept. If I do not have the phenomenal concept of seeing a red pen, I cannot understand that I perceive a red pen. Lacking a particular phenomenal concept can postpone the full grasping of the felt aspect. I may have the feeling that I perceive something and maybe I find some similarities with other known objects, but without the concept, I can never fully comprehend the phenomenal states. So, it will not be possible for me to know that I perceive a red pen. Consequently, Tye suggests that '... the perspectival subjectivity of phenomenal states goes hand in hand with the perspectival character of phenomenal concepts, where phenomenal concepts are the concepts that are utilized when a person introspects his or her phenomenal state and forms a conception of what it is like for him or her at that time'.<sup>13</sup> Perceptual experiences are such kind of mental states, which are phenomenally conscious states and always give us 'like something' feelings. We feel that we are experiencing the object in a particular way. They are something, which maybe does not occur at the next time we perceive the same object again. Phenomenal aspect of any experience maybe never repeats. Then, they are matchless every time.

If we think that the justification of perceptual experience is provided by the phenomenology of the particular perceptual experience, then the phenomenology stands for the reason giving condition of forming the belief of what is being perceived. My feeling becomes the reason for my holding the belief that I perceive a red pen. It appears that I perceive a red pen, and so, it is believed that I perceive a red pen. Then, the phenomenology of perception becomes the reason for maintaining that I perceive a red pen. That belief becomes the justification for the particular perceptual content. As a result, whatever my feelings render, is the last information for me, i.e. the phenomenology of my perceptual experience will be the ultimate confirmation for holding any belief of any property of an object.

But, certainly, it will create problems if we hold that the subject is the evaluative person who only can judge what is what, only on the basis of what seems to him correct. Then, we

cannot explain the hallucination cases. In these cases, we should rectify our perceptual content after realizing the erroneous situation. According to Magdalena Balcerak Jackson, '...in the suppositional case I am not in the relevant phenomenal mental state.'<sup>14</sup> Actually, we have to say that, sometimes the phenomenal content of our experience is not according to what it should be. If the belief that something appears to be red is the reason for holding the object as red, then, when we perceive the object, it should appear to be red. When we perceive a red object, only then, we can say that the raised perceptual belief can be the reason of our judgment. If the object only appears to me red, but it is not red in reality, then the phenomenal state is not appropriate to the fact. My supposition was wrong at that time. What I infer is going on in the wrong way. In that case, generated perceptual belief cannot be the proper reason for my judgment. If I do not have the appropriate phenomenal mental state, I cannot say that the pen is red, because it will not appear to be red then. Therefore, phenomenal mental states cannot be the ultimate judge of our experience to announce the experience as a valid one or not.

In visual perception, we are directly acquainted with the object around us. Then, if there are some changes in our known environment and we sense it, we believe that the perception of a red pen is not the same as the perception of black pen. We feel the change because seeing a red pen will create a different phenomenal character than seeing a black pen. My experiencing quality will not remain the same. The quality of the experience, which makes the difference, is called qualia, i.e. 'qualities that can be phenomenally present in experience'.<sup>15</sup> The particular experience of 'redness' is the experience of what-it-is-like to see a red colour. This is the phenomenal aspects of our perception of a reddish object and it is called 'quale' (plural 'qualia'). If there is a difference in respect to qualia, then the difference between the two experiences can be understood.

Qualia represent the world to the perceiver in a certain way, and so, perceiver perceives the world in a certain way. But, on occasions, her qualia may not follow her perception. We can separate qualia of experience from the way the world appears. When I believe that the stick is not bent but it appears to me as a bent object— the world appears to me in a way, which is different from the phenomenal aspect of my experience. It is because we know beforehand the way the world should be.<sup>16</sup>

As said by Julia Telles de Menezes, recognizing objects as well as assessing our own feelings can only be done if there is some degree of conceptualization of the perceived object. She says that 'Conceptualization is required for us to judge, recognize, discriminate things and thoughts.'<sup>17</sup> We cannot conceive the situation that there is a red pen in my hand if the appropriate formation of concepts and appropriate application of concepts never happen. Though according to Tye, not all phenomenal properties are determined by our conceptual content, we cannot ignore that '... in some cases, conceptualisation can causally influence phenomenal character.'

We can assume a situation where I have seen a pen or a red coloured object before I have learned what is called a pen or what it is like to see a red colour. When I saw it before, what my feelings were, should be different from seeing a red pen after knowing about the phenomenal aspects of a pen or experiencing red colour. There should be a phenomenal change in the second case because, then, we already have the concept of 'red' and 'pen'. Tye says that there are '... differences in emotional and imagistic responses, feelings of familiarity that weren't present before....'<sup>18</sup>

Then, we can conclude that whether perceptual experience has intentional aspect or phenomenal aspect or, as I conceive, have both the aspects, concepts must play some role in order to understand the nature of these perspectives. Without the involvement of their function, we cannot explain what we perceive and why.

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