

## Sensing, the senses, and attention

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What is the relationship between phenomenal and representational properties of conscious perceiving subjects? In *The Phenomenal and the Representational*, Jeff Speaks argues for a simple intentionalist thesis: Phenomenal features are identical with certain representational features.

Representational properties of perceiving subjects involve a content and a relation to that content. According to Speaks, the contents of perceptual episodes are as fine-grained as Russellian propositions. In addition, Speaks argues that there is a single, truth-sensitive phenomenal relation of *sensing* in which subjects stand to perceptual contents, and there is a further, distinct phenomenal relation of *attending*. Fixing what is sensed and what is attended thus fixes a subject's phenomenal properties.

Speaks thus takes a stance on three questions concerning the nature of the sensing relation. (1) Is sensing representational? (2) Is sensing a single relation? (3) Are sensing and attending distinct relations? I'll address each in turn.

### 1 Sensing

Consciously perceiving involves sensing. According to Speaks, sensing involves representing, or standing in a truth-sensitive relation to a content. Contents are akin to structured, Russellian propositions, whose constituents include particulars and features. A truth-sensitive relation obtains just in case a subject represents correctly or incorrectly depending on whether the corresponding proposition is true or false (p. 10). Many relationalists, such as naive realists, maintain that, fundamentally, sensing is a relation to particulars and their features that could hold only in the presence of such things and features. Thus, according to Speaks, sensing is not such a relation.

Speaks gives two arguments that conscious experiences involve truth-sensitive relations to contents (ch. 2). His first argument appeals to *the possibility of misrepresentation* (pp. 11–13). Speaks says that illusions involve misrepresentation. Therefore, subjects of illusions stand in truth-sensitive relations to false propositions.

In known illusions, that relation is not judgment or belief. And a mere inclination to judge is not itself truth-sensitive: just being inclined to believe something false does not involve misrepresenting, and being inclined to believe something true does not mean correctly representing. Thus, sensing itself involves truth-sensitive relations to contents.

In reply, however, a relationalist can respond that even if subjects of illusion typically misrepresent, sensing itself need not be the source. First, if appropriate normative assessment of a subject, as correct or incorrect, for a cognitive act or state

requires some element of control or endorsement by the subject, then subjects of illusion might not be assessable as correct or incorrect just in virtue of sensing, irrespective of their judgments and beliefs. It may be no strike against a subject just to have a given experience. We may strictly overascribe correctness and incorrectness to subjects of illusion in the light of their tendency to make correct and incorrect judgments.

Perhaps subjects blamelessly can be correct or incorrect in virtue of their experiences. Second, however, sensing, unlike believing, may not fix conditions in which subjects are correct or incorrect. For instance, sensing itself, in contrast with interpretative judgments, may fail to enable a subject to differentiate congruent lines at equal distance from incongruent lines at unequal distances based on the looks of each. If it does not, and does not commit one in this way, then sensing, as distinct from perceptual judgment, may not fix the right sorts of determinate correctness conditions.\*

\*[[Travis, C. (2004). The silence of the senses. *Mind*, 113: 57–94.]]

Third, perceiving involves sensitivity to the instantiation of attributes by particulars—to things' having or bearing features. But instantiation is not true or false. So, this sensitivity is not a truth-sensitive relation. If this perceptual sensitivity is not distinct from the sensing relation, then subjects stand in the sensing relation to instantiations, rather than to predications of features to particulars. Judgment, on the other hand, does involve predication, and thus has truth conditions. In illusion, subjects tend to be misled about that to which they are sensitive. If not, what has the subject gotten wrong?

So, the possibility of misrepresentation is not decisive in settling whether or not sensing is a representational relation to sensed contents, rather than the kind of sensitivity to objects and features that requires their presence.

Speaks's second argument concerns *the relationship between experience and belief* (pp. 15–16). He holds that a reason to ascribe content to belief also applies to sensing. The reason is that relations to other types of states are most easily understood in terms of content. For instance, my assertion that *p* is explained by my belief that *p*. The belief explains the assertion because there is a commonality between what I believe and what I assert. Belief and assertion are distinct relations to the same content.

Similarly, sensing *p* helps explain believing *p*. Speaks says the explanation involves a commonality between belief and experience. Sensing and believing are "distinct relations to a single proposition" (p. 16).

Relationalists also need an account of the relation between sensing and believing. If sensing and believing do not share content, then the explanation must accommodate a mismatch. Nonetheless, sensitivity to the instantiation of a feature by a particular does illuminate the relationship between experience and belief. A perceptual belief that *o* is *F* is correct just in case a subject is genuinely sensitive to *o*'s being *F*. This is slightly less neat than the shared content explanation.

However, if sensing is a truth-sensitive relation to contents of the sort explicated by Speaks, then the explanation is not so simple. According to the account Speaks develops in Chapter 15, sensing and believing are quite different sorts of truth-sensitive relations.

In Speaks's account, there is a mismatch between sensing and belief. Belief is a truth-sensitive relation to a proposition. Speaks holds that a proposition is a certain kind of property (ch. 14). In particular, the proposition, *o is F*, is the property, *being such that o is F*. The proposition is true just in case the property of being such that *o is F* is instantiated. So, believing that *o is F* is standing in the believing-to-be-instantiated relation to the property of being such that *o is F* (p. 108).

Sensing, however, is a different sort of truth-sensitive relation. Speaks says, ". . . sensing properties are not relations to propositions, but instead are self-ascriptions of non-propositional monadic properties" (p. 115). So, in experiencing that *o is F*, a subject does not stand in the sensing relation to the property of being such that *o is F*. Instead, sensing is a matter of self-ascribing a property such as *being such that x stands in perspectival relation p to o and o is F*. Thus, subjects do not stand in the sensing relation to propositions. Sensing subjects self-ascribe monadic properties that are not propositions.

Thus, sensing and believing are not just distinct relations to the same contents. In sensing and belief, both the nature of the relation and that to which a subject is related differ. Sensing and believing do not share a common factor.

Speaks appreciates this (p. 115), and he explains how to handle the relationship between sensing and belief, taken to be truth-sensitive relations of different sorts. Nevertheless, his account is substantive. It relies on a subject's capacity to make the transition between self-ascribing non-propositional features and believing propositions.

The initial reason to think sensing involves representing is that ascribing contents to experiences neatly accounts for the relationship between experience and belief by positing a common factor. However, Speaks's account entails that sensing differs from belief in a way that removes the common factor. This difference parallels one the relationalist embraces. Thus, the relation between experience and belief articulated by Speaks does not provide a clear reason to accept that sensing is representational rather than a relation to the instantiation of features by particulars.

Moreover, the explanatory demand as presented is puzzling. What explains the relation between experience and belief? This depends on the nature of the relation to be explained.

Suppose the relation between sensing and belief is causal. Shared content is not necessary to explain a causal relation involving at least one mental state. The causal dependence between, for instance, states of peripheral sensory stimulation and experience does not require shared content. And the same can hold of the relation between two mental states, such as pain and action. Why invoke shared content to explain the causal relation between sensing and belief?

Suppose the relation between sensing and belief is rational. Common contentfulness can help explain the rational relation between experience and belief. However, why insist that one can only have a rational response to something else with content? A belief can be a rational response to a fact, and a contentful experience might be a kind of rational response to a state of affairs that involves objects and properties. The same could hold among mental states. A belief can be a rational response to a pain. Accordingly, a judgment could be a more or less rational response to a contentless relational act of sensing.

Thus, whether it is causal or rational, explaining the relation between experience and belief does not require ascribing contents to experiences. So, it does not require that sensing is representing, rather than a relation to particulars that requires their presence.

## 2 The senses

Speaks argues that sensing is a single phenomenal relation, rather than distinct attitudes or relations corresponding to various perceptual modalities, such as vision, audition, olfaction, gustation, and haptic touch. His argument appeals to apparent intermodal feature binding and intermodal object perception, in which a single thing perceptibly bears features associated with distinct senses (ch. 25). Additional examples involving the perception of intermodal relations, such as causality, rhythm, or motion, strengthen the case for the claim that sense-specific features do not exhaust the representational or phenomenal features of conscious perceptual episodes. Such cases undermine the project of analyzing perceptual consciousness as a co-conscious sum or fusion of distinct modality-specific ingredients associated with each of the senses.\* Speaks, however, goes further. He suggests that differentiating the senses may be merely verbal or pragmatic (p. 173).

\*[[O'Callaghan, C. (2015). The multisensory character of perception. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 112: 551–69.]]

In response, even if sense perception involves a single phenomenal relation of sensing, we should not abandon distinguishing distinct senses nor ascribing sensory modalities to experiences.

Consider *differentiating senses*. Saying that experience cannot exhaustively be analyzed as a mereological fusion of sense specific experiences does not require being a skeptic about the existence of distinct modalities of sensory perception. Suppose the senses are faculties rather than phenomenal relations. Then it is natural to understand them as collections of perceptual capacities. For instance, vision is a collection of capacities geared towards detecting and differentiating specific things and features in the environment.

What differentiates these collections of capacities? Perceptual capacities are exercised in some way or another. In vision, human perceivers deploy the eyes to detect and differentiate objects and their features, thereby taking advantage

of information extracted from light. Audition involves using ears to detect and differentiate sounds, events, and audible qualities, taking advantage of responsiveness to information in sound waves. Accordingly, senses are collections of capacities individuated in terms of these differing sorts of manners in which perceptual capacities are exercised.

Distinct capacities, such as the capacity to perceive shape and the capacity to perceive color, can be exercised in the same sensory manner. And the same capacity can be exercised in multiple manners, as with the capacity to perceive shape. So, these collections of capacities may overlap. The senses need not be exclusive. Thus, even in the face of multisensory perception, sensory modalities may be distinct, well-described psychological kinds.

What about *experience*? Do experiences belong to distinct senses, or are we wrong to think experiences come in distinct modalities? Is there just the one mode of sensing?

Experiences are conscious episodes in which perceptual capacities are exercised in one or another manner. Modality can be ascribed to such episodes accordingly. However, a conscious episode can belong to multiple senses. For instance, it can be both visual and auditory. So, experiential modalities determine non-exclusive categories to which conscious perceptual episodes belong.

Beyond differences in what is perceived and in the manner in which it is perceived, *phenomenal properties* themselves play no role in differentiating the senses or in attributing experiences to distinct modalities. Phenomenology imperfectly helps subjects to associate conscious episodes with sensory modalities. Perceiving red indicates seeing. It is imperfect because common sensibles lack distinctive, sense-specific phenomenology, and because multisensory phenomena show that the phenomenal features of a conscious episode need not be exhausted by those that are associated with each of the respective senses.

Therefore, differentiating the senses is not a merely verbal or pragmatic issue, and there exist distinct experiential modalities of sensory perception, such as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Nonetheless, distinct phenomenal relations corresponding to the senses do not ground such distinctions. Sensory modality itself is not a fundamental factor that determines the phenomenal properties of a perceptual episode. Senses do not correspond to fundamentally distinct phenomenal relations. So, we can retain distinct senses while rejecting that experience ought to be analyzed in terms of the various senses.

This echoes Speaks's important insight:

Visually sensing is to auditorially sensing as traveling by foot is to traveling by car; the first two are different ways of sensing, just as the latter two are different ways of traveling. But, just as one would never try to analyze traveling as a disjunction of the various ways in which one could travel, so we should not analyze sensing as a disjunction of the various ways in which one could sense. (p. 185)

### 3 Attention

Speaks maintains that sensing and attending are distinct phenomenal relations. He argues that the phenomenal relation of sensing does not suffice to capture the representational properties on which a subject's phenomenal properties supervene. That is because differences in attention can occur without differences in sensing, and such attentional differences can suffice for a phenomenal difference (ch. 27).

For example, in looking at the figure, —|—|—|—, you can foveate on the middle intersection and shift your attention to the left intersection without any change in the properties you sense, and this can make a phenomenal difference. Let's just grant that intuition.

Attending and sensing therefore satisfy a sufficient condition for being distinct phenomenal relations:

If  $R, R^*$  are phenomenal relations, then  $R \neq R^*$  if possibly, there are a pair of subjects,  $A$  and  $B$ , which are such that: (a) the only representational difference between  $A$  and  $B$  is that there are one or more contents to which  $A$  is  $R$ -related and which  $B$  is  $R^*$ -related, and (b) the phenomenal property instantiated by  $A \neq$  the phenomenal property instantiated by  $B$ . (p. 175)

Thus, subjects stand in the phenomenal relation of attending to a subset of what they sense. Differences in attentional representational properties account for phenomenal differences that are due to attention in terms that are friendly to intentionalists. Speaks expands the representational base for phenomenal properties to include not just sensing but also attending.

In response, there are reasons for skepticism about the claim that attending and sensing are distinct phenomenal relations.

First, there are *no Frege cases*. It is plausible that standing in distinct phenomenal relations to a single aspect of content can make a phenomenal difference. So, sensing and attending to the same feature ought to be able to make a phenomenal difference. In turn, given this phenomenal difference, it ought to be possible to stand in these distinct phenomenal relations to the same content without recognizing that you do. Thus, you might reasonably wonder whether the feature you sense is the one to which you attend. However, this does not seem possible in the case of sensing and attending. It is not possible to sense a given feature, to attend to it, and to leave room reasonably to wonder whether or not the feature you are sensing is identical to the feature you are attending.

According to Speaks, sensing and attending are distinct phenomenal relations, distinguished by phenomenal differences in the face of matched representational contents. So, the relevant phenomenal differences are difficult to avoid. Differences in the overall contents of sensing and attending cannot account for the phenomenal difference, since then clause (a) of the sufficient condition is not satisfied.

Standing in distinct phenomenal relations to the same

thing—for instance, an object or feature both sensed and attended—therefore ought to be able to affect phenomenal properties in a way that makes it reasonable to wonder if what you sense is what you attend. But that does not seem possible. This is a reason to doubt that sensing and attending are distinct phenomenal relations.

Second, Speaks faces a dilemma. *Does consciousness require attention?*

Suppose consciousness does not require attention. If so, then some phenomenal properties of subjects are determined by what is sensed outside attention. In what way, according to Speaks, do such sensed features contribute to phenomenal character?

Answering seems pressing. That is because subjects cannot introspectively discriminate any unnoticed phenomenal differences. Nonetheless, Speaks does allow indiscriminable phenomenal differences. But, his central argument that indiscriminable features figure in distinct sensed contents, determining distinct phenomenal features, depends on his *Availability/Difference* principle:

Necessarily, if two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to their subjects (holding fixed the background beliefs and cognitive abilities of the subjects), then the subjects of the two experiences are sensing different contents. (p. 122)

However, if attention is required for demonstrative thought, then what is sensed outside attention cannot affect which thoughts a subject can have on the basis of experience. So, we need another kind of reason to think such features are sensed and thus make a difference to what it's like to be a subject.

Suppose instead that attention is required for consciousness. If so, then only sensed features that are attended impact phenomenal properties. In that case, why recognize sensing as a distinct phenomenal relation? What is attended exhausts the phenomenal properties of perceptual episodes. That is, what is attended suffices to fix phenomenal properties, and what is sensed is inert.

Thus, to maintain that sensing and attending are distinct phenomenal relations, Speaks is committed to phenomenal overflow. But what reason supports thinking wholly unattended features impact a subject's phenomenal properties?

These considerations challenge whether sensing and attending are distinct phenomenal relations. Sensing and attending nonetheless may be distinct. Indeed, it is attractive to characterize attention without appealing to phenomenal features. Speaks, however, requires that attention impacts phenomenal properties of experiencing subjects. Is there an alternative for an intentionalist such as Speaks? I'll end with a friendly proposal.

Suppose that attention is graded. It is not all or nothing. Some things we attend to focally, and others we attend to less intensively. If so, conscious attention is like a landscape or a gradient. It can come in degrees. Thus, attention is more

like a credence function defined over what is sensed than like a binary selection function.

Sensing itself could come in degrees that correspond to attention, where the attentional degree of sensing makes a difference to a subject's phenomenal properties. This account characterizes attention as an adverbial modification of sensing.\* Listening is hearing attentively. Watching is seeing attentively.

\*[[Mole, C. (2011). *Attention is Cognitive Unison*. Oxford University Press.]]

Such an adverbial view is not fully in the spirit of intentionalist theses about phenomenal character. But some credence theorists endorse degrees of belief towards contents. Can an intentionalist like Speaks, who is willing to admit a distinct phenomenal relation of attending, be happy with graded manners of standing in the sensing relation?

Whatever the answer, *The Phenomenal and the Representational* is lucid, comprehensive, and rich with ingenious argumentation. It is a tour de force, and it repays careful attention. Anyone interested in contemporary philosophy of perception must read it.\*

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