

## **The Given**

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### **1. The given, and the Myth of the Given**

In *The Mind and the World Order*, C.I. Lewis made a famous distinction between the immediate data ‘which are presented or given to the mind’ and the ‘construction or interpretation’ which the mind brings to those data (1929: 52). What the mind receives is the datum – literally, the given – and the interpretation is what happens when we bring it ‘under some category or other, select from it, emphasise aspects of it, and relate it in particular and unavoidable ways’ (1929: 52). So although any attempt to describe the given will inevitably be an interpretation of it, this should not give us reason to deny its existence: ‘no-one but a philosopher could for a moment deny this immediate presence in consciousness of that which no activity of thought can create or alter’ (1929: 53).

Whatever those outside philosophy might think, Lewis was certainly right about what philosophers were prepared to deny. His conception of the ‘given’ is without question one of the targets of Wilfrid Sellars’s influential critique of the notion of the ‘whole framework of givenness’ (1957).<sup>1</sup> One of the things Sellars was attacking was the idea that something that was merely given by the senses could put one in a position to be justified in making a judgement about the empirical world. The

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<sup>1</sup> As is, surely, H.H. Price’s view in *Perception* (1934). Sellars studied with Lewis at Harvard, and with Price in Oxford.

‘given’ in this sense is a myth because one cannot be given what one is not in a position to receive. In the case of experience, Sellars’s point is that one’s experience cannot serve as the justification for one’s empirical beliefs unless one is able to bring the experience, in some way, into the ‘space of reasons’.

In his presidential address to the APA in 2005, which is the focus of the present volume, Hubert Dreyfus reminisces about how as a student at Harvard he attended C.I. Lewis’s lectures on epistemology where Lewis gave epistemological arguments for the existence of the given (Dreyfus 2005). Dreyfus himself accepts the Sellarsian critique of the given, as does John McDowell, and as do many others. But Dreyfus thinks that even those who, like McDowell, reject the ‘myth of the given’ nonetheless fall under the influence of another myth: the myth of the mental. This is the idea that our fundamental way of interacting with the world in experience is intellectual or rational in character. Dreyfus argues that this is a myth because it ignores the more fundamental enactive engagement with our world, which he calls ‘embodied coping’.

McDowell has responded to Dreyfus’s charge that there is no reason why his conception of experience cannot fully accommodate an account of embodied coping. I think McDowell is right: there is nothing in his views that make it impossible for him to recognize the phenomenon of embodied coping and fully incorporate it within his conception of the mind. But it seems to me that a deeper disagreement between McDowell and Dreyfus lies not in their attitudes to embodied coping, but in their attitudes to experience. Despite his rejection of the given in the mythical sense with all its works and empty promises, it is clear that in recent work McDowell does accept something like a distinction between what is given to us, and what we bring to

experience. This is not meant as a criticism of McDowell; later in this paper I will defend a similar distinction. But it is important to emphasize what McDowell is saying here is very different from Dreyfus's view of experience: there is something like a given, for McDowell, as he himself acknowledges (McDowell 2008). In order to set the stage for this, I must first briefly explain the developments of McDowell's views about experience.

In *Mind and World* (1994), McDowell had argued that the challenge posed by Sellars can only be met if experience has conceptual, propositional content. An experience is an experience *that things are thus and so*, and *that things are thus and so* is something one can also judge (a proposition). *That things are thus and so* is the propositional content of the judgement, and a judgement's having this content is an actualization of the conceptual capacities of the subject. Likewise, McDowell argues, when an experience has the propositional content *that things are thus and so* this too is an actualization of the conceptual capacities of the subject. Because experience involves the exercise of conceptual capacities, experiences *themselves* – and not just the beliefs based on them – can be relevant to a subject's standing in the 'space of reasons' and therefore can act as justifiers of a subject's beliefs.

McDowell has changed his mind recently (2008) on certain details of this account, under pressure from objections from Charles Travis (see e.g. Travis 2007). He now rejects the idea that experience has propositional content, and replaces this with a conception of experience as 'intuition' in a Kantian sense, which has a non-propositional content. An intuition in this sense is defined as 'a having in view' (2008: 260). Let's assume, to borrow one of Travis's examples, that seeing a pig underneath an oak is an example of having something in view, and therefore of an intuition. This

experience has a certain content, which should not be understood as representing something ‘as so’, since that would be propositional (2008: 267). But neither should experience be understood as some understand it, simply as relating us to objects – the pig and the oak (see Brewer 2006). Rather, the content of an intuition is something structured, it has a *unity* (2008: 264-5). The details of this proposal are complex, but at their core is the Kantian proposal that the content of an intuition – what is presented in the experience – is structured by (for example) formal categories of object and property.

The view is not, however, that in experiencing the pig under the oak, we ‘apply’ the concept of an object to the pig. This would confuse the content of the intuition with the content of the ‘discursive activity’ which it can give rise to – for example, when describing the thing under the oak as a pig or as an animal. So there is a distinction between the content of an intuition and the content of a judgement or an assertion which is based upon it. McDowell no longer thinks that what one can see is also what one can judge. Nonetheless, he still insists that the content of an intuition is conceptual, in the sense that ‘every aspect of the content of an intuition is present in a form in which it is already suitable to be the content associated with a discursive capacity’ (2008: 264). What it is for content to be conceptual, then, is not for it to be *conceptualized* – in the sense that one has to be actually exercising a conceptual capacity when in a state with such a content – but for it to be *conceptualizable*.

Travis’s own picture is somewhat different (Travis 2007, Travis forthcoming). He thinks that there is no need to think of experiences as having ‘content’ at all. Seeing a pig under an oak simply is an awareness of some portion of the visible world, our visible surroundings. If we have the concept of a pig, or the ability to

recognize pigs, then we can judge that the pig is under the oak on the basis of this experience plus our ability to recognize that what we experience is an instance of a thing of a certain kind. Concepts for Travis involve generality – in his terminology, they ‘reach’ beyond the particular situation of (e.g.) seeing something. Making the judgement that the pig is under the oak involves asserting that this particular situation is a situation of a certain kind (a pig-under-an-oak kind). And if the situation *is* one of this kind, then this experience can ‘bear for you’ on what you should think.

McDowell claims that Travis’s picture – although correct in some respects – ultimately involves a commitment to the Myth of the Given. McDowell’s charge is that on Travis’s view, ‘having things in view must be provided for by sensibility alone’ (2008: 267). However, this is not something that should worry Travis. Having things in view – seeing, experiencing – *is* provided for by sensibility alone, since he conceives of seeing ‘as seeing what is there (roughly before the eyes) to be seen’ (Travis forthcoming). So if something is before one’s eyes, one’s visual capacities are working as they should, one sees it: it is ‘in view’. Travis answers the distinct question of how seeing justifies one’s belief – of how, in Travis’s own words, it ‘bears for us on what to think’ – by claiming that one can recognize what is seen as an instance of a general kind of thing, and that this role is carried out by the application of concepts, or reason.

Although McDowell thinks that this correctly describes one way in which experience is related to conceptual judgement, he argues that this is not the only way (2008: 266). This is because what has to be in view is not just what is there to be seen – the pig under the oak – but the pig ‘present to one through the presence to one of some of its properties, in an intuition in which concepts of those properties exemplify

a unity that constitutes the content of a formal concept of an object'. It is only if this is so that 'one is thereby entitled to judge that one is confronted by an object with those properties' (2008: 271). Both Travis and McDowell, then, accept that at a certain point in the description of justification, we arrive at a connection between two kinds of fact, and this connection is what justification consists in. For McDowell, the connection is between the unified non-propositional content of an intuition and the propositional content of the judgement which one makes. For Travis, the connection is between what is seen and the judgement which one makes by applying concepts to what is seen. The difference between them concerns whether there is any role for something like the 'content of an intuition' in describing this connection. But they both agree that there is a connection, and that once this connection is made, the Myth of the Given is avoided: neither view involves saying that one can be given something which *justifies* which one is in no position to receive. For neither view says that *what justifies* you in believing that there is a pig under the oak is *mere* sensibility: on each view, you can only be justified if you bring concepts to bear on what you see.

It is not clear to me what remains of the Sellarsian attack on the given for someone who has the conception of the relationship between seeing and conceptualizing which Travis has. If seeing is an encounter with some portion of reality, and making a judgement about what is seen is applying one's concepts to what one sees on the basis of this seeing, then I see no obstacle to the claim that seeing something can justify one's judgement.<sup>2</sup>

Suppose, then, we put the debate about the Myth of the Given to one side. Is there still any point in talking about what is given in experience, or about the

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted here to unpublished work by Ciara Fairley.

distinction between what is given and what is brought to experience? In the rest of this paper I will try and answer this question. But first I need to introduce some concepts central to the recent debate in the philosophy of perception.

## **2. The content of experience**

Apart from the discussions inspired by Sellars, recent philosophy of perception has not had much to say about the idea of the given. Theories of perception talk instead about the ‘content’ of experience, or the representational or ‘intentional’ content of experience. But if there is a question about the given, then surely it ought to be connected in *some* way with the question about representational content. The claim that experiences represent the world is supposed to be a description of the connection between the mind and the world in experience. Surely there must be some link between this and the idea of the given sketched above, if that idea has any value at all?

That experience has ‘content’ is, of course, a piece of philosophical jargon or terminology, and it has meant many different things to different writers. It’s worth reminding ourselves of some of them. When G.E. Moore in ‘The Refutation of Idealism’ (1903) talks about the view (which he rejects) that the sensation of blue involves blueness as its ‘content’, what he means is that it involves the instantiation of a property.<sup>3</sup> Today this would be better classified as a ‘qualia’ view rather than a content view. Another example is Moritz Schlick’s 1932 essay ‘Form and Content’. Schlick says that ‘the difference between form and content is, roughly speaking, the

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<sup>3</sup> When Moore discusses the view that ‘blue is said to be part of the content of the “the sensation of blue”’ he compares a sensation of blue to a blue bead or a blue beard, and says that ‘the relation of the blue to the consciousness is conceived to be exactly the same as that of the blue to the glass or hair: it is in all three cases the *quality* of a *thing*’ (1903: 447-8).

difference between that which can be expressed and that which cannot be expressed' (1932: 291). Schlick was not only talking about the mind, but he does apply the distinction between form and content to things like the experience of colours. He argues that although one can express some truths about the colours of things, 'the content itself (e.g. the green of the leaf) ... cannot be grasped by any expression' (1932: 303). This is 'not because content is too difficult to get at, or because the right method of investigating it has not yet been found, but simply because there is no sense in asking any questions about it. There is no proposition about content, there cannot be any' (1932: 306; see also Harrison 1973). Again, these remarks would make little sense if 'content' had its contemporary meaning; in its inexpressibility at least, Schlick's notion of content again has more in common with the contemporary notion of qualia.

'Content' in these earlier uses referred to something specifically sensory. In contemporary discussions, however, 'content' refers to the representational dimension of mental states. One of the merits of Susanna Siegel's 2005 *Stanford Encyclopedia* article, 'The Contents of Perception', is that she gives a definition of content of experience which can apply to both the sensory and to the (putative) representational aspects of experience. Siegel defines content as 'what is conveyed to the subject by her perceptual experience' (Siegel 2005). On some views what is conveyed to the subject is something sensory ('qualia' or what Moore calls 'content') on some views something representational (an intentional content) while on some views what is conveyed to the subject is simply one's visible surroundings. McDowell's view is something else again: what is given is the content of an intuition, neither a representation nor simply one's visible surroundings (2008: 264).

To my ear, ‘what is conveyed’ sounds rather close to ‘what is given’. So if we adopt Siegel’s definition of ‘content’ we can also say that the content of an experience is what is given to the subject in that experience. Not all participants will accept this use of the word: Travis and Brewer, for example, will not describe their position as a view about content, since they take content to be something representational. For this reason, I will use the word ‘content’ as Siegel defines it, and I will use ‘representational content’ to describe the putative feature of experience which Travis and Brewer think does not exist. Similarly, McDowell thinks that intuitions have content but that this content is not representational (2008: 266-7). So we can mark this distinction again by distinguishing content in the broad sense from representational content. A common definition is that a state of mind has representational content when it is assessable as accurate or inaccurate: Michael Tye says ‘any state with accuracy conditions has representational content’ (Tye 2009: 253).

If content is what is given or conveyed to the subject (by definition) then the substantive question is what content is. In other words, what is given or conveyed to the subject in an experience? In the next section I will outline the dominant contemporary answer to this question, which I call ‘standard intentionalism’ and in the section after this I will describe an alternative.

### **3. Intentionalism and propositional content**

Intentionalism about the mind is that all mental phenomena exhibit intentionality, the directedness of the mind upon its objects (see Crane 2009a). Intentionalism about experience is the view that experience is (wholly or in part) an intentional state or event. Since it is common to call intentionality mental representation, then we can say

that an intentionalist view of experience is the view that experience is a representational state. The content of an experience, according to intentionalism, is how the world is represented to be by the experience. This again conforms to Siegel's definition: *how things are represented as being* is what is conveyed or given to the subject in an experience.

What I will call the 'standard' intentionalist view is that the content of experience is *propositional*. A proposition is something that can be true or false. An intentional state which has propositional content is a propositional attitude; hence perceptual experience is a propositional attitude. As Alex Byrne puts it:

All parties agree that perceiving is very much like a traditional propositional attitude, such as believing or intending ... when one has a perceptual experience, one bears the perception relation to a certain proposition *p*. (Byrne 2005: 157)

When Byrne says that perceivers stand in a 'perception relation' to a proposition, he obviously does not mean that we *perceive propositions*, in the sense that we perceive pigs and people. This would be to confuse the representational content of an experience with what it is in the world that we experience (what I would call, following Husserl, the 'object' of the experience: Crane 2009a). What Byrne means is that a subject perceiving a pig should be understood in terms of their being in a representational state which is assessable as true or false. There are well-known reasons for taking such representational states to be *relations* between the subject of the state and a proposition (see Fodor 1980). This 'perception relation' then should not be confused with the 'perception relation' which holds between a subject and a pig

when they perceive a pig. It is unfortunate perhaps that the same name has been given to both relations; but once the distinction is made, confusion should evaporate.

Having said that the content of experience is propositional, the next question that typically arises is what the nature of these propositions is. And here it may seem as if there are already a number of well-established theoretical options. One can take propositions to be ‘coarse-grained’ as Russell did: containing the objects and properties in the world that they (or the states whose contents they are) are about. Or one can take them to be composed of modes of presentation of objects and properties, as Frege did (see the excerpts from Russell and Frege in Moore 1992). The Russellian view takes the sentences ‘Hesperus shines in the evening’ and ‘Phosphorus shines in the evening’ as expressing the same proposition; the Fregean view denies this. A position which combines some elements of each is the Stalnaker-Lewis view of propositions as sets of worlds, or related ideas such as centered worlds, or sets of possibilities. This view tries to capture some of the intensionality of the Fregean view while building up propositions only out of ordinary (albeit non-actual) objects and properties.

What is to decide between these different conceptions of propositional content? On the one hand, one might want to choose the Russellian conception because it gives the best account of the fact that perception is ‘direct’: that it directly concerns objects and properties in the world. Or it might be thought to give the best account for the fact that perception seems to be ‘object-involving’. On the other hand, one might want to respect the fact that perception has an ‘aspectual’ element: that when one perceives things, one always does in some limited way; some properties are perceptible while others are not, and even the properties themselves might fall under

some ‘mode of presentation’. On the face of it, the Russellian conception would count any perceptual experiences of the same object as having the same properties as having the same content (the same thing is ‘conveyed to the subject by the experience’). The Fregean, by contrast, would count experiences as having different contents when they present their objects in different ways (according to the way Fregean modes of presentation are individuated).

Michael Tye has clearly expressed the kinds of reasons someone might have for taking different views on the nature of the propositional content of experience. He asks us to consider his visual experience of the surface *S* of an object *O* looking red:

My visual experience intuitively represents *S* as having the property of being red. At this level my experience is accurate if and only if *S* is red. But my experience also has something important in common with certain other visual experiences not directed at *S*. Suppose, for example, that *O* is replaced with another object *O'* that looks just like *O* or that I am hallucinating a red surface so that phenomenally it is for me just as it is in seeing *S*. Intuitively, in all three cases, it seems to me that *there is* a red surface before me. At this phenomenal level, my experience is accurate if and only if there is a red surface before me. This content is existential, not involving *S*, though it does also include the subject of the experience. (Tye 2006: 508)

The issue Tye is addressing is when we should count experiences as being the same or different. The three distinct experiences Tye mentions can be classified as having different contents, but also at some other ‘level’ as having the same representational content. There is something to be said for each answer. After all, in the first case, the subject is actually seeing *S*, so the correctness of the experience should depend on how things are with *S* itself. But on the other hand, if we should count experiences as representing the world in the same way when they seem the same to the subject, then

we should treat the representational content as general or ‘existential’. Which should we choose?

David Chalmers has responded to this tension by adopting a ‘pluralistic’ conception of the representational content of experience:

One should be a pluralist about representational content. It may be that experiences can be associated with contents of many different sorts by different relations: we can call such relations content relations. For example, there may be one content relation that associates experiences with object-involving contents, and another which associates experiences with existential contents. ... On this view, there may not be such a thing as the representational content of a perceptual experience. Instead, a given experience may be associated with multiple representational contents via different content relations. (Chalmers 2006: 78)

The idea is that rather than there being one ‘perception’ relation between the subject and the propositional content of experience, there are many, one for each distinctive kind of content (not just Russellian and Fregean, but for the different kinds of contents within these categories: object-dependent, quantificational etc.). Chalmers’s proposal is based on the idea that ‘associating’ different kinds of contents can serve to highlight different aspects of the state in question.

If we think of the representational dimension of experiences in terms of associating different propositions with a concrete event, then content pluralism about experience is plausible, just as it is plausible about attributions of some other mental states. Consider desire: did Oedipus want to marry his mother? In one sense, obviously not; he would not have assented to that sentence, he would not have entertained that thought to himself, and he would have done many things inconsistent with having the desire. So we should say that the sentence ‘Oedipus wanted it to be

the case that he married his mother' has a false reading. But there is also a sense in which it is true that he wanted to marry his mother: his mother is such that Oedipus wanted to marry her; he wanted to marry Jocasta, and Jocasta was his mother. It would be pointlessly dogmatic to insist that these claims are false, or that they serve no purpose in the description of the situation (after all, this was the source of the tragedy).

In struggling to make sense of these phenomena, philosophers have appealed to various distinctions between kinds of attitude ascriptions: for example, it is common to say that in the *de dicto* sense ('Oedipus wanted it to be the case that ...') it is not true that he wanted to marry his mother, but that in the *de re* sense ('His mother is such that Oedipus wanted...') it is true. That there are these two kinds of descriptions *and* that they can make explicit the ambiguities in these situations is very plausible. We might think, then, of different contents (the complete *dictum* in the *de dicto* case, and the incomplete content in the *de re* case) as being associated with Oedipus's state of mind via different 'content relations'. And this might be the model for perceptual representational contents, as Chalmers has argued.

If an experience literally has multiple contents, and the content of an experience is what is conveyed to the subject, then it follows that multiple contents are conveyed to the subject in an experience. So if my experience conveys to me that Hesperus is shining in the sky, it also conveys to me that Phosphorus is shining in the sky, it also conveys to me that there is something shining in the sky; and so on.

What does it mean to say all these things are 'conveyed' to me by my experience? If it is a claim about the information which the experience delivers, or what kind of information can be derived from the fact that I am having this

experience, then it is not difficult to make sense of the claim (whether or not the claim is true). But if it is a description of the phenomenology of the experience, of what it is like to have an experience, then it is less clear what it means. When having a visual experience of the planet Venus in the evening, it does not *seem* as if many distinct (and possibly incompatible) contents are being conveyed to me. What is given or conveyed to me is a certain scene, a certain region of concrete reality, which seems like a reasonably unified thing. It does not seem like receiving multiple messages saying different things (even if these messages are relayed by different ‘content relations’).

Or take the Lewis-Stalnaker conception of propositions as sets of possible worlds, and consider my experience of a pig under the oak. What is conveyed by my experience is that there is a pig under the oak. This is the propositional content of the experience, and according to the Lewis-Stalnaker view, this propositional content is the set of all worlds in which the pig is under the oak (we can ignore the details of centering etc., since these are not relevant to the basic point here). In what sense could what is phenomenologically (consciously) conveyed to me simply *be* this set of worlds? It is hard to see how content pluralism, whatever its other merits, could be a theory of the phenomenology of experience.

But if we take it at its word, standard intentionalism is precisely intended to be a theory of phenomenology. According to Peter Carruthers, for example, ‘phenomenal consciousness consists in a certain sort of intentional content’ (2000: xiii). And Tye is well-known for the claim that phenomenal character is one and the same as representational content (1995). So these intentionalist views are explicitly intended to be views about phenomenology. In fact, even independently of the defence of

intentionalism, it is widely supposed that content has supposed to have something to do with phenomenology. Siegel, for example, writes:

Another commonly-held constraint is that the contents must be adequate to its phenomenology...The notion of phenomenal adequacy has considerable intuitive force. This suggests that the contents of experience have to in some way reflect the phenomenology of the experience. (Siegel 2005)

Given how Siegel originally introduced the word 'content', it seems like an understatement to say that phenomenal adequacy is simply another 'constraint' on content. Content, remember, is what is conveyed to a subject in an experience, and an experience is a conscious state or event. Surely *part* of what is conveyed is how things are consciously?

So the question remains: what has an experience's propositional content got to do with its phenomenology? Part of the answer, presumably, is that what is given to me has a certain form: not just the pig, the oak but *that the pig is under the oak*. It is in this sense then that what is given to the subject (and therefore what the subject takes in) is something that can be true or false, a proposition in this sense. Certainly the idea that what we *take in* in experience is something with a propositional structure is an idea which is widely defended, even outside the circles of standard intentionalists. This is what McDowell famously argued for in *Mind and World*, even though he has now rejected it. But there he said that 'one takes in, for instance, sees, that things are thus and so. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge' (McDowell 1994: 54).

Nonetheless, it is not easy to make literal sense of the idea that what we take in in experience is what we can judge. When I judge, because of what I can see, that

the pig is under the oak, this is something which in a certain way, abstracts from the real presence of the pig there. The content of the judgement can outlive the experience, it can be the content of others' judgement, things can follow from it (for example, that something is underneath the oak).

What can outlive the experience, of course, is the concrete state of affairs: the pig actually being under the oak. Could this be what is given to the subject? Maybe; but not according to the standard intentionalist account. This is because, for the standard intentionalist, what is given is something that can be true or false. But the pig being under the oak is not something that can be true or false. It is just something that is there. Nor is it something from which things follow. Things follow from truths or propositions; the pig being in the garden is not a truth or a proposition, but something in the world. And things in the world are not true or false.<sup>4</sup>

So we have to distinguish between the propositional content of an experience, and what is phenomenologically given to the subject. The reason for this is the plausibility of content pluralism, plus the implausibility of saying that multiple representational contents are given to the subject. Of course, it is possible to question content pluralism; but I will not examine this route here. Rather, I want to propose a very different way of thinking about the intentionality of perception. I don't think we should abandon the idea of propositional content; but we have to see it as playing a different role.

## **5. A phenomenological conception of content**

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am especially indebted to Charles Travis's unpublished 'Unlocking the Outer World', though we somehow end up with very different views. Mark Johnston (2006) has raised some similar criticisms of standard intentionalism, a view which Johnston (rather misleadingly) calls 'the fact-directed view'.

In 'On Sense and Reference' Frege employed an analogy with seeing the moon through a telescope to distinguish between sense, reference and what he called 'idea' (Frege 1892). The moon is analogous to the reference of a word; the image on the telescope lens is the sense (it the 'property of many people') and the idea is compared to the image on the retina. An idea is something which is dependent on a particular perceiver, a particular subject, at a particular moment. It is, therefore, by definition unshareable.<sup>5</sup>

Standard intentionalism treats the content of experience as something at the level of Frege's sense (whether or not they individuate propositions in the Fregean way). Contents are abstract objects, and intentional states are relations to these objects. But there is no need for intentionalists to deny the existence of Fregean ideas, just because they accept Fregean sense. Moreover, intentionalists need not treat ideas as simple 'qualia' in the usual sense of that word: non-representational conscious mental properties. An idea is plausibly construed – like an image on the retina, with which the analogy is made – as a representation. But it is a representation which is concrete and particular, specific to this person, this time and this place.

Fregean ideas are a model for what I want to call the content of experience in the phenomenological sense – what is phenomenologically given or conveyed to subjects in their experience. This particular way of representing the world in this experience is what we might call (following Husserl 1900/1901) the 'real content' of the experience. *Real* here is contrasted not with *unreal*, *fake* or *imaginary* but with *ideal*. Ideal objects are what contemporary Anglophone philosophers would call 'abstract' objects: objects without a location in space and time. In order to identify

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<sup>5</sup> For making me see the importance of this analogy, I am indebted again to Travis.

content in the ‘real’ sense, we need to make a distinction between the particularity of any perceptual episode, and the ‘abstract’ or ‘general’ nature of propositional content. By abstract here, I mean: not tied to any particular moment of thinking or experiencing. It is because of this that a proposition does not have a spatiotemporal location: it can be the content of many acts of thinking, even if it is an indexical proposition that represents a certain particular time. Contrast this with the mental representation of this particular pig at this particular moment. This representation is tied to this moment; although another event could represent the same pig, in the same way, it would not be this particular representation – just for the reason that this particular representation is an unrepeatable, dated, located ‘concrete’ occurrence.

The distinction between a concrete, particular act with what I am calling its ‘real’ content, and the abstract, ‘general’ content which can be assigned to the act, should be fundamental to the theory of intentionality. The propositional content which can be assigned to an act is ‘abstract’ not just in the sense that it is an object which has no spatiotemporal location, but in the sense that it ‘abstracts’ from some of the concrete reality of the experiential episode. If the propositional content of the act is something that can be shared between different subjects, or something that can be shared in different acts of the same subject, then it is something which abstracts from the particularity of the subject’s own condition. The real content, however, is unrepeatable because essentially linked to the state and time of the act’s occurrence, and specific to its bearer. In this sense of content, no-one other than me can have mental episodes with the content of my mental episodes. Someone could have a very similar experience, of similar things, or even an experience which seemed exactly the same. But that would be to generalise across different concrete experiences, and

*describe* the sense in which they are the same. Describing is relating the experience to a propositional content. But this description is an attempt to capture some aspect of how the representation represents the world. It – the description – is not the representation itself.

The ideas involved in experiences – particular, conscious episodes – have content, since they are a case of something being given or conveyed to the subject. But what kind of content do they have? I have argued elsewhere that experiences have non-propositional content, in the sense that their fundamental way of representing the world is non-propositional. Non-propositional content ought not to be mysterious. Many pictures have non-propositional content: they have represent objects and their properties but are not the kind of thing you can use to ‘say’ things. Pictures can have correctness conditions, but there is a difference between a representation having a correctness condition expressed as a proposition and its having a proposition as its content (see Crane 2009b: 10).

Experiences construed in this way have something in common with McDowell’s ‘intuitions’. They have non-propositional content, and their content has a certain kind of unity: as McDowell says, ‘in a visual intuition, an object is present to a subject with those of its features that are visible to the subject from her vantage point’ (2008: 265). A intuition is a particular event or occasion of something being brought into view. McDowell insists that the content of an intuition is conceptual, but this is consistent with not *every* aspect of the content actually being conceptualised, or thought about, or made the content of a judgement (2009a: 264; see also 2009b: 346-7). The view that not everything that is presented in an experience is conceptualised is one I find very plausible; but I would prefer to call it the view that

experience has *non*-conceptual content! Judgement (or McDowell's 'discursive activity') is the conceptualisation of the content of experience (*cf* Crane 1992: 155). Experiences or McDowell's intuitions 'reveal things to be as they would be claimed to be in claims that would be no more than a discursive exploitation of some of the content of the intuition' (McDowell 2008: 267). It is useful to think of conceptualisation as the 'discursive exploitation' of the content of an experience, which is there to be conceptualised but not necessarily so exploited. And it seems to me that many of those who taken themselves to believe that experience has 'non-conceptual content' can agree with McDowell here.<sup>6</sup>

Where I depart from McDowell, though, is in taking experience to be representational. I need to explain what I mean by this, although the basic line of thought is familiar. We should start with a basic perceptual phenomenon: the case of seeing. When we see the world, it is quite correct to say that we take in concrete reality. The things we see around us present themselves to us from particular perspectives, in particular conditions of illumination and in concrete relations to things around us. One possible position is to say that this is all we need to understand experience: what is experienced and the relations in which these things stand to us (see Brewer 2006). If this were so, then there would be no difficulty in explaining how experience takes in concrete reality: for that's what experience is, a relation to the layout of concrete reality. This is the 'relational' conception of experience.

The basic idea behind intentionalism, however, is that experience could be essentially the same way without the objects of experience being the way they seem

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<sup>6</sup> This is an over-simplification, since it ignores McDowell's view that the unity of the content of an intuition is the actualization of conceptual capacities, albeit employing formal concepts akin to Kant's categories (see 2008: 265). Discussion of this idea must wait for a later occasion.

to be. Or: concrete reality need not be the way it seems to be in order to be experienced as being this way. It is this simple idea – the idea which lies behind the arguments from illusion and hallucination – which motivates intentionalists to treat experience as essentially representational. Experience may not seem like a representation, they say, but *if* an experience can be essentially the same despite the change or absence of its objects, then a theory of perception should recognise that this is what it really is.<sup>7</sup>

If experience is a representation – and I don't claim to have given an argument for this view – then it is a concrete, particular event or state of affairs. It represents the experienced world in a particular, concrete way: from this perspective, in these conditions. The conditions of the way it represents the world are specific to the way I am experiencing it now. Suppose I am looking at the pig under the oak in my garden. Of course, someone else can see what I see, they can look at what I look at. But my experience on this particular occasion and the way it representing the world to me now, that is specific to me and to this particular experience.

In the quotation above from Chalmers, he talked of 'associating' a content with a state of mind. What makes this 'association'? Some philosophers will say that the only way in which something can be a representation is if it is *interpreted* as such, if it can be *assigned* a correctness condition. I assume here that this is false. There can be an intrinsic form of representation which is not simply a matter of the *assignment* of a correctness condition by an interpreter, of something being described as representing something. An experience is, on this view, such a representation. What

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<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, what is denied by disjunctivists like (2002, 2004); but I will not deal with this response in this paper.

the assignment of a correctness condition does is to specify one or more of the many ways in which the experience represents the world. But the nature of that experience itself as a representation is what is *described* by the correctness condition; it does not consist in the assignment of a correctness condition.

Another way to put this point is to say that it is not part of the fundamental psychological reality of the act that it is a relation to a proposition. The psychological reality of the act is its reality as a representation; a representation is an intrinsic state (of the person, or the brain, or the soul), and this intrinsic state is something which has a specific, concrete nature of its own. This concrete nature does not consist in some unanalysed relation to a proposition. That is a theoretical, external description of the state, not what it is in itself.

The position I have described might be criticised on the grounds that ignores the distinction between *vehicle* and *content* of a representation. It might be said that of course there is a distinction between the particular, concrete event of representing something and the propositional content of that event. But this is just the distinction between the concrete vehicle of representation – the ‘way’ something is represented – and its propositional content. And, the objection runs, my observations above about the concrete nature of experiences are only relevant to the vehicle of perceptual representation, not to their content. Just as the same proposition might be expressed by a sentence or by a picture, so the same proposition might be the content of a belief and the content of an experience: the differences noted above are to do with vehicles, not content. So we do not need an additional ‘phenomenological’ notion of content.

Before responding to this objection, I need to make one clarification. The term ‘vehicle’ has been used for (at least) two different kinds of distinction in ways of

representing (see Crane 2003 chapter 4). One is the distinction between the linguistic and imagistic representation. The other is the distinction between ways in which (say) an image or a linguistic representation can be physically realised. An image, for example, can be realised analogically or digitally. Here I am interested only in the first distinction, and use the word ‘vehicle’ to mark the difference between linguistic and imagistic representation. (I admit that it can be used in the other way too.)

My response to this objection is first to point out that we adopted Siegel’s definition of ‘content’ as ‘what is conveyed to the subject in an experience’. If what is conveyed to the subject has a phenomenological dimension – as it surely must have – then it cannot be irrelevant to the content of an experience in this sense that what is conveyed is conveyed in a certain concrete *form*. If the way an experience represents the world has something in common with an image, then this fact is relevant to what is conveyed to the subject in an experience. Compare the debate about visual imagination: if visualising employs something like images, as has been argued, then this fact is not irrelevant to what is conveyed to the subject in an act of visualising, and therefore not irrelevant to the content of the act, in the present sense.

In other words, if one is trying to characterise the phenomenology of a particular experiential episode, then it is not irrelevant to that phenomenology that the episode involves a specific kind of ‘vehicle’ in this sense. One might even say that where the phenomenological conception of content is concerned, we should not make the distinction between vehicle and content: it is central to the phenomenology of an experience that what is conveyed to the subject includes its specific vehicle.

## **6. The role of propositions**

I have argued that if content pluralism is true, then a theory of perceptual experience needs another phenomenological notion of content, something resembling Frege's 'ideas' or Husserl's 'real' content. But this is not to deny that certain mental states can also be thought of as relations to propositions. There is nothing wrong with this way of thinking, so long as one thinks of it as a theoretical way of characterising or describing mental states. One way to do this is by using David Lewis's analogy between numbers and propositions.<sup>8</sup> Lewis proposed that we can think of the way in which propositional attitudes are 'relations' to abstract propositions as analogous to the way in which physical magnitudes are 'relations' to abstract numbers. Just as the weight of a standard bag of sugar can be thought of as a relation ('weight-in-kilos') between the bag and the number 1, so the belief that Mongolia had the second largest empire in the history of the world can be thought of as a relation ('belief') to the proposition expressed by the sentence 'Mongolia had the second largest empire in the history of the world'. It is true, literally true, that the weight can be related to this number in this way; but this is not what something's weight fundamentally is. Fundamentally, weight is an intrinsic (or near-intrinsic) property of an object. Similarly, it is literally true that the belief is a relation to a proposition; but this is not what the belief fundamentally is.

What is going on here, it seems to me, is that the concrete belief state is being 'modelled' by the abstract proposition. Propositional contents can be used to 'model' mental states in the way that (e.g.) relations between numbers can model physical systems; or idealised systems can model target physical systems. Abstract objects of

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<sup>8</sup> I understand that the analogy derives from Lewis, but it has been illuminatingly discussed by Field 1978, Churchland 1981, Stalnaker 1984, and most recently in an important study by Matthews 2007.

various kinds are assigned to mental states; relationships among these objects parallel relations among the mental states. Propositions can be used as part of the model of a mental state – under the proviso, of course, that there is an element of idealisation in any model (this is why, for example, we do not expect a system of a subject's real beliefs to exhibit deductive closure).

I call this the 'semantic' conception of content. 'Semantic' because the standard practice of formal semantics is to assign objects (e.g. functions, sets, properties) to parts of sentences in an attempt to show how relations between these objects determine the semantic properties (truth or falsehood) of the whole sentences. This is what an interpretation is. To take a simple example: an interpretation might assign a particular object to a name, '*a*', and a set of objects assigned to a predicate '   is *F*', and the sentence '*a* is *F*' is true just in case the object assigned to the name is a member of the set assigned to the predicate. Interpretations become more complex with propositional attitude states, of course, but the overall aim is to let the relationships between the objects assigned by the interpretation determine the intuitively correct truth-values of the sentences.

In the case of intentional states, different assignments of propositional objects highlight different aspects of the mental state being modelled. We can say this consistently with saying that some kinds of propositional objects do better than others in capturing how things seem to the subject. If we want to express how the world seemed to Oedipus in the complex condition he was in, then we will want to assign a proposition to his desire that does not represent his mother as his mother, for example. This is consistent with assigning the state a *de re* content which relates him to his mother herself. There is no conflict here; it is just a aspect of our complex practice of

attitude attribution. Nonetheless, it is also possible to hold that the desire itself is an intrinsic state of the subject which has its own representational nature which is only partly captured by the various ways of relating it to propositions.

In the case of perceptual experience, Christopher Peacocke's well-known theory of 'scenario content' is a good example of a style of assignment of content which aims to get close to the way an experience represents the world in all its detail (Peacocke 1992). A scenario in Peacocke's sense is a set of all the ways of filling out the space around the perceiver with objects and properties which is consistent with the correctness of the experience. As such, it attempts to describe much more detail of the real content of an experience than (say) a simple subject-predicate proposition does. But it is still a content in the semantic sense.

Treating relations to propositions as models therefore enables us to see why Chalmers's content pluralism is so plausible. Different kinds of propositional objects can be used to highlight or emphasise different aspects of an experience: some might highlight the fact that the state involves an episode of seeing some particular object, others might highlight the fact that things would seem the same if one were experiencing a distinct but indistinguishable object. Content pluralism allows different kinds of contents to be used in different models. It is the best theoretical representation of our practice of attributing intentional states.

## **8. Conclusion**

There is, I have claimed, something like a 'given' in experience: it is the phenomenological conception of content ('what is conveyed to the subject'). The propositional content of a perceptual experience is also something that deserves the

name of ‘content’. But it must be distinguished from content in the phenomenological sense. The content in the phenomenological sense is something spatiotemporal, concrete, particular and specific to its subject. The content in the propositional sense is not. There are, therefore, two conceptions of the content of experience, the semantic and the phenomenological. I think that the phenomenological conception has a certain priority, since it is part of what is being modelled. Semantic contents can only be ‘descriptions’ of this content.

I’d like to end with a more general moral. Frege and Husserl both rejected psychologism about logic. Logic cannot be the science of human thought, for familiar reasons. Hence logic is better understood as being about abstract (‘ideal’) relations between items which are timeless, shareable and abstract. Many contemporary philosophers join Husserl and Frege in rejecting psychologism about logic. But in embracing a purely semantic conception of the content of experience, they go too far in rejecting psychologism about the psychological. Psychologism about logic is an extreme thesis, and surely false. Psychologism about the psychological, on the other hand, is very likely to be true.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This paper derives from lectures given at the Universities of Barcelona (to the LOGOS group), Lausanne, Stockholm, Hertfordshire, St Andrews, Parma, Warwick (the MindGrad conference) and at the Institute of Philosophy in London. I am grateful to participants on these occasions for discussions, and especially to Katalin Farkas, Pepa Toribio and Charles Travis.

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