Review: Epistemic Openness and Perceptual Defeasibility

Reviewed Work(s):
Perception and Reason by Bill Brewer
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Bill Brewer contends that we should embrace a principle he calls (R): perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs. He rejects traditional foundationalist and coherentist pictures of perception and perceptual justification and argues for a view on which perceptual experiences themselves intrinsically give reason for empirical beliefs. Brewer sees perceptual experience as conceptual; imbued with a content which gives a subject a perspective on the elements of his or her immediate environment. This 'epistemic openness' to the environment provided by perceptual content grounds the reason-giving role of experience.

I agree wholeheartedly with Brewer that we can make no headway in either epistemology or the theory of content if we cleave to a picture of perceptual experiences as being blank sensations. Here, though, I want to raise some questions about Brewer's account of how perceptual experience gives reason for perceptual belief.

Brewer gives the core of his answer in Chapter Six of *Perception and Reason*. A perceiving subject has reason to make the judgement that he does because:

...he understands that his current apprehension that things are thus and so is in part due to the very fact that they are. His grasping the content that that is thus is in part due to the fact that that is thus. He therefore recognizes the relevant content as his apprehension of the facts, his epistemic openness to the way things mind-independently are out there. (204)

The reason-giving role of experience is then neatly summed up so: For the perceiving subject,

[s]imply in virtue of grasping the content that that thing is thus, he has a reason to believe that that thing is indeed thus; for he necessarily recognizes that his entertaining that content is a response to that thing's actually being thus, given his location and present circumstances. (204–5)

One point in particular needs highlighting about this account, and this aspect of it will be the focus of my discussion below. The explanation of the
reason-giving properties flows entirely from the *content* of the experience, and the fact that in having the experience, as with any contentful psychological state, one is thereby entertaining its content; with no appeal to the fact that this is an *experiencing* with that content. Brewer’s claim is that in entertaining the content of an experience (i.e. a veridical perceptual experience) one thereby necessarily recognises its truth and hence has a reason to endorse the content. In this way, his account echoes what some have wanted to say about examples of self-evident propositions, such as may be expressed by sentences like ‘I am here now’, or, ‘Whoever is tall, is tall’, where one’s mere entertaining of what the sentence expresses reveals to one that it must be true, given that one entertains it, and hence gives one reason to believe it. The distinctive role that experience plays here comes only at the point at which we explain what it is for one to come to entertain such contents: according to Brewer, for perceptual demonstrative contents, the subject’s grasp of them ‘depends upon her possession of certain conscious experiences’ (200). So the subject couldn’t be entertaining the contents in question if he or she were not having an experience with those contents, and this underwrites the subject’s recognition of the fact that he or she couldn’t be entertaining the content were ‘this not thus’.

This is a bold and novel attempt to explain the justificatory properties of perceptual experience in terms of its content. If Brewer can sustain this claim, then his development of the theory of content will have paid remarkable dividends in the epistemology of perceptual belief. However, I want to press this account in two ways. The first concerns the scope of the account. The account has plausibility only if it is true that the contents that perceptual states possess can only be entertained through having those perceptual states. I shall question whether we can plausibly restrict the content of experience in this way. Second, Brewer assumes that perceptual experiences are distinct from perceptual beliefs and indeed independent of them, and he claims that the reasons provided by perceptual experience are defeasible. A subject can refrain from endorsing appearances and do so rationally. I shall suggest that the claim that the content alone of experience gives one reason to endorse it is inconsistent with the presence of these two properties.

1. Brewer is committed to viewing the epistemologically relevant content of experience as entirely conceptual. In response to concerns with the fineness of grain of experience—that we can discriminate, for example, shades of colour and shapes far more finely than we have either terms or recognitional capacities for—Brewer suggests that a subject is always able to make a perceptual demonstrative judgement of the form ‘that is thus’ with the appropriate degree of fineness of discrimination (172). The first part of Chapter Six is given over to arguing that just such perceptual concepts can only be entertained when one has before one a perceptually presented scene.
In the broader scheme of things, such purely demonstrative judgements are of little epistemic or pragmatic value. What matters in making judgements about the objects we apprehend is knowing how to classify them. A judgement of the form ‘this is thus’ will not do any such thing for one. Brewer is indeed keen to admit a broader range of perceptual judgements rationalised by experience, ones which classify objects one way rather than another. The first part of Chapter Eight is given over to explaining how skills of recognition and classification can arise for a subject such that he or she can non-inferentially judge that that (a perceptually salient object) is an orange. However, this broader range of judgements poses a problem for him.

While it is not implausible that one can only entertain demonstrative concepts in the context of so experiencing something, particularly those relating to the most determinate way in which something is coloured or irregularly shaped, there is much less plausibility to the idea that one can only employ a recognitional concept for being cubic or pink, say, in the experienced presence of such an object. Indeed, even if one claimed that some experiential context needed to be provided, it is unclear for these concepts why mere imagination would not do (in contrast to the case of demonstrative content where Brewer does wish to press that point, see p. 226). It is conceivable that one could merely entertain the hypothesis that that (perceptually presented thing) is a cube, when catching just a glimpse of an object through a haze, unable to tell its precise shape. As far as the recognitional, non-demonstrative concept of a cube goes, merely entertaining a demonstrative hypothesis containing it would not be sufficient for one to have reason to believe that something is a cube—one could entertain this thought even if the object wasn’t in fact cubic. So we can’t explain the reason-giving role of experience with respect to this content merely by citing the presence of the relevant recognitional concept of a cube in the experience’s content. We should have to say that it was because it was an experienced content, rather than merely entertained or imagined.

Summing up his account of non-demonstrative perceptual knowledge, Brewer writes:

the subject’s reasons for his judgement, that \( a \) is \( F \), say, are provided by his being in a position to entertain the perceptual demonstrative content ‘That is thus’ in the context of his knowledge that that is \( a \) and that being thus is (a way of) being \( F \). (249)

In this gloss, no reference is made to concepts of \( a \) or \( F \) actually figuring in the content of the experience itself, so perhaps Brewer does want to restrict experiential content and immediate experiential justification to purely demonstrative content. On the other hand, Brewer stresses that this non-demonstrative knowledge should be thought to be non-inferential. However, taking the quotation at face value suggests that it is inferential twice over. First, there seems to be an ineliminable appeal to the beliefs that that is \( a \) and thus is (a
way of) being $F$ in explaining why the judgement $a$ is $F$ is justified. Second, if we ask for the justification of these two equations, then since their content is not echoed in the experience, we must appeal to various implicit background beliefs, presumably linking past appearances of this sort to the presence of $a$ or something's being $F$.

It would be a high price to pay to have to restrict an account of purely perceptual justification to these demonstrative judgements, but the same issue may even be faced in relation to Brewer's favoured restriction to demonstrative content if these can be complex. Suppose that you are presented with two balls, one bright scarlet, the other pink. Why shouldn't such an experience put one in a position to demonstrate the one object and then falsely predicate of it the shade of the other? After all, presumably one can perceive the difference in shade between the two—so it is plausible to suppose that one can experience and judge that this (i.e. the scarlet ball) is not that way (i.e. pink). If one can entertain this complex judgement in virtue of how one experiences, then, given normal assumptions about compositionality of conceptual content, one can entertain the simpler atomic content, ‘this (the scarlet ball) is that way (i.e. pink)’. The latter content is false in this situation, but apparently entertainable (and only entertainable) given that one has a suitable experience. So one can't come to recognise the truth of such contents merely in virtue of entertaining them. To hold the line against these, Brewer would have to deny that negation can figure in perceptual contents and would have to explain how perception of difference can be accounted for solely in terms of atomic demonstrative contents.

If Brewer is to have a genuinely non-inferential account of non-demonstrative and complex perceptual belief, he needs to appeal to concepts which could both figure in experience and be exploited independently of it in classifying objects. Given this, he cannot appeal merely to the fact that an experience has a particular content containing such concepts in order to explain its reason-giving role. For the same content could be present in another psychological state which lacks any such reason-giving role, as our example above illustrated. The reason-giving role of experience can only be explained if we make reference to the experience's being an experience as well as to its content.

2. Leave this worry to one side. I want now to turn to the question of the defeasibility of perceptual warrant as it applies even to Brewer's privileged range of demonstrative judgements. Rather than offer an analysis of defeasibility, let us fix on a concrete case. Suppose that you know that I have a system capable of causing perfect hallucinations of oranges in subjects, and that I regularly run tests where I alternate the actual viewing of an orange with a perfect hallucination of one. You subject yourself to my machine. Unknown to you the machine has developed a serious fault and is incapable
of causing hallucinations: if it looks to you as if there is an orange there, then that could only have been because you are seeing one. Nonetheless, you have information which seems sufficient to make rational a doubt on your part as to whether there really is an orange before you when it looks to you as if that is what is there. Given that doubt, you do not endorse appearances, and despite the fact that it looks to you as if that (the thing before you) is a certain way (the way an orange can look), you refrain from making any judgement about the matter. So, the experience you have is independent of your beliefs—it can look to you as if something is that particular way without you so believing it to be. And your failure to believe is a reflection of the defeasibility of perceptual justification—you have reason sufficient to undermine the warrant that experience provides for judgement.

Here is one picture of defeasibility: You see smoke rising from the copse. Smoke means fire. So you take yourself to have reason to conclude that there is a fire in the copse. However, if you also learn that I am trying out my new smoke machine, then this new piece of information defeats the evidence that you had for the presence of fire. You still believe that there is smoke rising from the copse, and that smoke means fire, but in the light of the new information, smoke in these circumstances cannot be taken as a sure sign of fire.

This does not fit the case of perceptual defeat, or won't do as long we agree with Brewer that perceptual experience itself has a reason-giving role. You are not solely justified in believing that that is an orange simply on the basis of believing that you have a certain kind of experience and that in general such kinds of experience mean, or are reliably correlated with, the presence of oranges in your immediate environment. So it is not that the defeating information leaves you with your initial belief that there has been such an experience, and your general belief about the connection between such experiences and the world, while removing the evidential support between these and a belief about the world. If in the normal case, the experience itself intrinsically justifies the belief that that is an orange, then the defeating information must somehow bear on it and the warrant it provides for the judgement. How can one's defeating information bear directly on the warrant associated with an experience?

The problem can be put most forcefully from a first person perspective. Assume with Brewer that experience is an 'openness' to parts of the physical world around one. Then, when one sees an orange, what is presented to one is that thing right there (the orange) looking the particular way it does (the way oranges do). It would seem as if the first person perspective on one's experience reveals something sufficient to warrant the judgement that that is an orange—given how things appear to one, one couldn't but judge them to be that way. If the experience does not change simply through one's having the collateral information, how can evidence undermine what seems to be simply a presentation of how things are?
Now this is a problem which any theory of perceptual justification must face if it wants to endorse a view of experience as presenting aspects of the world while allowing for the defeasibility of experiential justification. But it is an intractable one for Brewer. According to him, the warrant associated with experience comes from its content and the fact that a subject necessarily recognises that he or she can be entertaining that content only if it is true. Given this characterisation of the warrant associated with experience, it is difficult to see how any ancillary information which casts doubt either on the presence of fruit or the reliability of one’s senses can undermine one’s judgement that things are so. For if one cannot help but recognise the truth of the content in entertaining it, what room is there for any doubt? For Brewer grasping that content necessarily is to recognise its truth. How can Brewer’s subject conceive of how he or she can have gone wrong? If he or she lacks any such conception, then how can the warrant in question be rationally defeated?

To answer this, Brewer would need to separate entertaining a perceptual demonstrative content from recognising its truth. Two possibilities suggest themselves. First, Brewer might claim that grasping the content does not, after all, amount to recognising its truth. If one has defeating information, then one may grasp the content and yet not see that its truth conditions must be met. One might question whether grasp of content and of truth conditions can be sufficiently pulled apart. Moreover, if a gap is introduced here, then it looks as if more is needed to determine its truth value than one’s grasp of it. In that case, merely entertaining the content would not give sufficient reason for believing it.

The other option is to suggest that the reason-giving force of experience may be undermined if one can doubt whether one is entertaining the content in question. Brewer endorses an ‘object-dependent’ conception of perceptual content and singular thought. If no object is present, as in a case of hallucination, then no singular judgement can be made and the experience cannot have the content it would have otherwise. So were one having an illusion or hallucination one could not be entertaining the very same content. Brewer might then claim that thinking it probable that one is suffering an illusion may lead to doubt about what the content of one’s experience is.

Some discussions in the literature on externalism and first person authority would endorse this last suggestion. But it is both radical in its scepticism about the knowledge of one’s own mind—that mere doubt about one’s circumstance can deprive one of knowledge of what one is thinking—and under-motivated. We normally think that people are in a position to tell what thoughts they are entertaining through entertaining them. In contrast to the case of obviously true sentences, we do not have a situation here in which one can doubt that the vehicle does express one content rather than another—the introspective character of experience is fixed by its content according to
Brewer. The mere fact that there are other situations in which I am unable to
tell that my psychological state lacks a content does not yet show that in a
situation in which it does have a content I can be deprived of that knowledge.

There is a far simpler response available here. It is quite consistent with
Brewer's object-dependent conception of perceptual content and also with the
restrictive infallibilist conception of reasons that he endorses, although it is
not reconcilable with the idea that content alone explains the reason-giving
potential of experience. According to Brewer, a veridical perception that a
given object looks a particular way gives a reason which a perfectly matching
illusion of the same object would not (228–30). So a subject unknowingly
suffering an illusion would mistakenly take himself or herself to be justified
in the judgement he or she makes, even though he or she is not. For such an
approach to justification, having defeating reasons for perceptual justification
is to think it possible that one is in a position with no reason at all for the
demonstrative judgement one is inclined to make. Following John McDow-
ell, who endorses both of these features of perceptual justification (See
'Knowledge and the Internal', this journal 55:877–93), one might simply
claim that perceiving that something is the case puts one in a position to
know that that is so. What is distinctive of perception is that it is an open-
ness to the world, that how things are in one's environment make themselves
manifest to one. Having things so manifest puts one in a privileged epistemic
position such that one can then come to have knowledge about how
one's environment is. There are situations—cases of illusion or hallucina-
tion—when one is not so epistemically privileged; the world fails to be man-
ifest to one, even though from the inside, reflecting on one's situation, one
would not be able to tell that the situation is so. Someone who is alive to a
genuine possibility of illusion or hallucination will allow doubts about
whether they really are perceiving to constrain the judgements he or she
makes. Even if a subject is in the privileged situation, the presence of doubts
can put him or her in a position where he or she cannot responsibly exploit
the privilege that they have. And it is in this way that collateral information
can defeat the justificatory role that otherwise perception would play.

It is easy to see how this avoids the problems posed for Brewer. A subject
who reflects on his or her situation can see that more is needed than just that
their psychological state have a certain content, he or she needs to be perceiv-
ing that things are so. There is no surprise in the thought that mere reflection
or introspection alone cannot reveal to one whether one is veridically perceiv-
ing or suffering an illusion or hallucination. Nothing about the characterisa-
tion of veridical perception as an openness to the world, or the world being
made manifest to one, implies that one cannot but recognise this fact about
it. So there does seem genuine psychological room for the doubt to act as a
defeater. Once we restrict the materials for an account to the point at which a
subject only has to recognise the content of her psychological state and its truth conditions, then that room would seem to vanish.

I don't mean to suggest here that only a disjunctive account of perception and an infallibilist view of reasons can accommodate perceptual defeasibility. Although I favour a disjunctive conception of experience for reasons quite separate from our current concerns, I am sure that one can develop an account of perceptual defeat consistent with the view that experiential content is common to veridical perception and illusion, and that it provides fallible reasons present in both cases. On any of these approaches we need to allow that a subject who has good reason to think that he or she is not perceiving can lack warrant for judgement, even if he or she is in fact perceiving. It is difficult to accommodate the reasonableness of this without making room for the subject’s appreciation that warrant turns on the presence of a property which he or she cannot necessarily recognise the presence of. I cannot see how one could combine an internalist-flavoured theory of justification with a commitment to first person authority over the content of thought (as Brewer does), and yet claim that the relevant property must be some aspect of content. So a theory of perceptual defeat needs to appeal to the kind of state a subject is in, when explaining the reason-giving role of perception, and not just its content.¹

¹ Thanks to Scott Sturgeon, Tim Crane and Charles Travis for comments.