

PERCEPTUAL CONTENT

MATJAŽ POTRČ
Filozofski fakultet u Zadru
Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar

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In the first part the leading contemporary accounts of content are criticised. Eliminativism and the syntactic account fail because they flatly deny the existence of content, whereas causal theories are still not specific enough.

An alternative account is proposed, relying on the role of perception. If the organism perceives external objects it possesses a basis for the formation of content.

Content — the content of the mental states — makes indeed for a hard chapter. One of the reasons for this, it seems to me, is that it has always been determined syntactically. But this might mean, in the last resort, that content has not been determined at all.

To see why the state is like this, it is reasonable to start the discussion with two rather negative attitudes towards content. The first one is eliminativism. And the second one is nearer to our interest. It is the claim that it is sufficient, in order to determine the content, to determine it in such a way that it would fit in what could be called the syntactic mould. I shall try to argue against both of these views. Against eliminativism, I shall try to defend, in rough outlines, the realism of the content. And, against syntacticism, I shall track further my earlier views. I shall try to say that syntacticism is not compatible with the realistic account of content. (It will be thus presupposed, at this point of discussion, that the realistic account is correct.) I shall claim that the syntactic framework does not determine content at all.

Later, it will be argued what kind of account of content is possible at all. Here, I should say that content should be taken for what it is. And to see, actually, what it is, we should look at its origins. I hope that it is now at least to some extent plausible, that the way of acquisition of content is perceptual. This follows from our discussion of perceptual input systems. And I think that it is useful to develop an account of content along the perceptual lines. This kind of account would promote the perceptual content as the basic kind of content.

There is one objection to this point of view, namely that it is impossible to specify content with more means than the syntactical ones. The conventional propositional account of content, expressed as p, q, r, would be all we need. But as well, it would be all that we can offer. This view is narrowly linked to the specification of rational processes for the manipulation of content. But, what we need is an account of content, and not of the processes that manipulate it.

The real question is whether such an account, which puts stress on the perceptual kind of content, can solve some problems joined with the standard accounts of content. These problems should first be identified, and then, the responses to them should be given.

Let me start this discussion from the beginning.

Content — eliminativism

Eliminativism, as applied to content, is the view that content does not really exist. One of the forms of eliminativism would be the claim that content is nothing but a description which should be revealed as inappropriate, as soon as we dig deeper along its lines. To understand what it means to say that content is but a way of our description, and that it does not, consequently, correspond to anything real, the examples of folk-psychological ascriptions will be given. For example, many people often express the feeling of being tired. The eliminativist would claim that being tired is just a way of imprecise description that shall be substituted with a more accurate scientific description. And this, he means, will become obvious as the scientific view digs deeper into common parlance, like it did in the case of our speaking that the Earth turns around the Sun, and not the other way round. Similarly the content expressing the view of someone being tired really refers to a cluster of what are now scientifically determined properties. Once all the corresponding physiological processes supporting the feeling of being tired shall be known, the content of someone being tired will be shown to be inappropriate, to refer to nothing at all. One can say, in favour of folk-parlance, that nevertheless, the content already mentioned refers to a cluster of properties. It can be useful like a common noun, thus it will still be there, in its referential role, even if it is not sharply delineated.

The eliminativist will have to show that even my content that the cat is on the mat does not refer to anything. There is a way

for him to affirm this. He would claim that ascription of the content is but a useful fiction. Many times it can be shown that contents are ascribed wrongly. We often misinterpret the behavior of people, on the ground of which we ascribe content to them. One might claim that all that there is to content are some reactions of the organism, due to its hardwiring. Although it might seem that responses of the organism are appropriate, there is simply no such thing existing as content. It is nowhere to be found. If we search for the place where something like content can be stored, in the end we shall find nothing but an array of hardware, synapses and circuits, but no content as such. Thus, it would be appropriate to treat content, in the best sense, as a useful commonsense fiction.

The answer to this would be to show that there is indeed some basis for content, that its interpretation should be realistic. So, if I have a mental content that I am happy, or that the cat is on the mat, this is something that corresponds to some entity in my hardware, no matter how it is to be individuated, and no matter what kind of material realisation there is in the hardware.

One point supporting this claim for the realism of content would be the correspondence of content to facts, and another one would be its causal role. As for the correspondence of the content to the facts, we can claim that content is always got via some kind of perception. So, if I entertain the content that there is the cat on the mat, this will happen in the case where I typically perceive, visually or in some other way, that there is a cat there, on the mat. And, if I entertain the content of myself being tired, this will typically happen in the case where I perceive myself as being tired. It is difficult to think that there would exist any content, if some kind of perception would not be in its basis. But, if this is the case, the realistic interpretation of content is appropriate, because there is some causal trace, in the very existence of the content tying it with the perceptual state that has given basis for the formation of the content. Content shows some causal kind of link with its perceptual basis. Again, this means that there is some causal support for the claim about its existence, and that realism about the content itself is right.

The syntactic account of content

One of the claims for the realism of content is its causal connection with the perceptually given environmental states of affairs or objects, the causal connection of contentful states with

the objects or states of affairs they carry information about. But, this is only one part of the causal story for the realistic support of content. The other part of the story is to allow for the causal role of content in its relations with other contents, and with behaviour of the organisms entertraining them. This seems to be a sharp realistic claim. But, I shall try to show how the things are not exactly like that, and that this kind of seeing the causal story of content leads to some kind of antirealism, of a far subtler sort than it has been the case in the discussion till this point.

This kind of causal account of content says that if there are some contents, we experience their causal interaction. My thinking that if swimming is healthy, then I shall go to the seashore, and, my further confirmative thinking that the swimming is indeed healthy, will lead me, according to the *modus ponens* inference, to the conclusion, that I shall go to the seashore. Such kind of logical interaction which we usually would put down as $p \rightarrow q$, $p - q$, actually shows that there has to exist some causal role of each of the contents p or q . If contents exercise mutual influence, this is by itself a proof that they do exist. If something has a causal role, then it would exist.

This is obviously a causal account of content. But, nevertheless it is a way of escaping its determination. It is a realistic view concerning content. It says that content has a real existence, because it exercises causal power. But, again, it is a way to escape its determination. It is not extremely difficult to note this fact, and this only makes it still more interesting. The view under discussion says that there is some causal influence of the content. But, everything the view is interested in, furthermore, is only the specification of causal links that join one content to another, *no matter what the content really is*. This view is what I refer to as the syntactic view concerning content. Its characteristic is that its only interest lies in the shape of the content, according to which this particular content exercises its influence on surrounding contents. It is not important at all, for this point of view, that the content p can be specified linguistically: swimming is healthy. It suffices that it be specified like p . With one additional clause, or afterthought maybe, that in a holistic system of contents, its computational value, its stepping in contact with many of its conspecifics, would give exactly the specification it has. So, if we would not know anything else about p than its label, its shape, and, given that we would know about other contents, we could determine its linguistically characterised propositional value by putting it into a sufficient number of inferential, thus causal links with other contents and compute its value from there.

If there is just one modus ponens that is at our disposition, then we do not need to specify content at all. It is sufficient that we are acquainted with its shape.

This point of view, that it is sufficient for us to know the shape of the content, in order to determine it, is curious indeed. It ends with the claim that there is no difference among contents. All that counts is their causal role in the inferential relations such as modus ponens. But this is no real determination of content. The point I want to stress is that for determining the content along its inferential, or syntactical lines, it suffices to determine the shape of the content according to which it exercises its causal role in the relation to its conspecifics. But, in order to account for the inferential or syntactical role of content, I would further claim, the content itself does not need to be specified at all. So, it does not matter whether p is the content that I am tired, or that the cat is on the mat. The important part in the story is its causal role in the inferential procedure of, say, modus ponens.

It seems perplexing to realise, indeed, that content is not specified with what I call the syntactic move. What has been specified are, indeed, the inferential, syntactical relations of propositional logic. But the content that there is a cat on the mat, can not be specified by this procedure at all. I would even claim that it is impossible to determine contents at all, if there is only the inferential role, and thus the shape of contents determined. The specification of this syntactic apparatus cannot count as specification of content at all, till the moment that at least one content is not determined according to its shape, and is, on the contrary, determined according to its perceptual basis. Again, the perceptual basis as should be clear enough, is tied to the information in the surroundings of the organism, concerning primarily objects or states of affairs.

Thus, although it seems that the syntactical story delivers an account of the content to us, the realism with which it begins soon turns out to be a disguised form of the antirealism concerning content. I think that it is clear now what I mean when I say that this point of view is not, actually, specifying content at all. To repeat, it is only specifying its shape, no matter what it would be. This view is, of course, compatible with solipsistic claims according to which specification of content should stay in the internals of the organism only, and should not care about its external surroundings at all.

I hope it is now clear, what it means to say that the syntactic determination of content is incompatible with realism concerning content. It is thus not so far away from eliminativism, which

claims that content does not really exist. The syntactic framework, as I said, is not sufficient to determine content.

What is content, anyway?

It seems an easy task to determine that there does not exist any successful account of content yet. But, nevertheless, at least some positive account of content should be sketched.

We have determined, negatively, that actual causal accounts do not really specify content. In the best case, they deliver an account of mechanisms for the manipulation of contents. An account of such a kind of mechanism can be delivered once content is already there. So, we are still left with the task to determine content, to try to deliver a positive account of it.

Here, I think we can be helped with the previous discussion concerning the eventual proximities of the characteristics of modular systems of input with content. We have seen that there is no sharp line among the perceptual processes, and among the higher cognitive processes, to which content belong. Content can thus be seen as continuous, to some extent, with the perceptual mechanism. Further material, like the material concerning mental images, that are presumably joined with at least some forms of content, shows again a connection among two kind of processes; the perceptual and the higher cognitive ones.

In this way, it becomes reasonable to claim that content shows many characteristics according to which we range the systems of input among the modular processes.

First, content is formed through perceptual input processes, and this is the reason that it should be viewed itself as possessing many of these properties. Then, the content is retrieved as well, according to these processes.

Thus, we should expect that some part of content would explicitly bear a relation to the perceptual surroundings of the organism entertaining content. And, indeed, it seems to me that this part is the constant, in the predicative rendering of content. In the sentence expressing the content that a cat is on the mat, the constant part would be the cat. It is originally the object to which the perceptual attention of the organism entertaining the content is focused. It is abbreviated as *a*, and appears as combined with *F*, which stands for the property of being on the mat, in the complex sentence that a cat is on the mat, *Fa*.

There is an evolutionary part to the story why there is a centering on some item, that is presented as a constant in our predicative notation. The organism always focuses on some item, usually an object, that is important for its survival in its surrounding. And we have seen that the perceptual process has to be specified with this external object at which it is centered, in the mind.

The predicative part, F , has a value of the universal, and it is, according to this, a contribution to the content from higher cognitive processes.

So, this would be a rough account of the positive story about content, naturalised, and evolutionized. It can be further specified by inspecting the relations among perception and content.

A hint in the direction of further determining content would be to note that it is to be found at the intersection of perceptual and higher cognitive processes.

A problem with the individuation of content

I would like to conclude this story, briefly, with a problem concerning the individuation of content.

The answer to the preceding sketch of the positive account of content from an opponent would be that it is impossible to determine content perceptually. It is not only that our best strategy would consist in a syntactical specification of content. The fact is, our opponent would claim, that we have no other strategy at our disposal.

To be able to determine my content that a cat is on the mat, according to our story, the opponent says, we should account for everything that is in the world. But this is something we obviously are not able to do. Further none, we need some specification of the content that transcends the actual surrounding of the organism, which is equipped with the content, the environment populated with all kinds of stimuli. For the sake of the argument, let us suppose that the content concerning cats is equivalent to the mental image of the cat. But, as we know from the study of mental images, the typical mental image would not show any cat at all. It would only show some sketch, or skeleton of a cat. Thus, even if the content is got perceptually, as in the case of the mental image, it transcends perceiving of particular cats. But this is another way of saying that we arrived exactly where we started from, namely at the point where we have to admit that the content is interesting only to the point where its — abstract — shape differs from the shapes of other contents.

Let me try to answer this objection now. The shape of the cat might be just a skeleton, or an abstraction, transcending all particular cats. Yet, there are at least two things to be noted. There is no other way for the content to be formed on the ground of its perceptual experience, of encountering the cats in our example. The proof would be that till the moment the individual sees only one kind of cat, all the others will have exactly the features of this one, or, he would be able to generalize only on the ground of this perceptual encounter. Would he know that the tiger is a kind of cat? The other problem is in retrieving the content. It might happen that the retrieval of content proceeds perceptually. And, this means that at the time of retrieving the content the individual is exactly in the state of perceiving the cat. Thus, the retrieval of content brings some perceptual mechanisms that are exactly those which are encountered in the individual's perceptual directedness to the external object he is perceiving.

Next, my claim has not been that the syntactic account delivers only a sketchy account of content, if we measure it along the perceptual lines. My claim is that there is no content whatsoever specified by the syntactic approach. The cat, and being on the mat, a and F, are simply not important for the syntactical account.

I wish to claim at this point that the sketchy account of the content, at least of the part of the content, of the cat, a, say, is exactly the account which perception is able to provide. Who says that we perceive all the details in our different forms of perception? Who says that in visually perceiving the cat I am not perceiving, primarily some skeletal sketch of the cat? But, this would mean, contrary to the syntactic approach, that I perceive the cat nevertheless. The question is to which part shall I direct the interest of my process of visual elaboration of information. Shall I direct it to the cat as a whole, or to the cat's paw? But this varying of the perceptual attention is the basis for the carrying of the a, of the constant. So we see again how the perceptual basis for at least one part of content, of the constant, varies along with perceptual attention.

This means, as well, that the account of *the very content* might in principle be delivered with the help of mechanisms through which the organism has built the content on perceptual basis, and to which it has perceptual means of access.

Let us grant that this is so, that the study of perceptual content can give us an account of content and not only of the mechanisms that are there for the manipulation of content. But, should this mean that some problems for the standard account of content could at least in principle be solved with this move?

It seems that the answer is already sketched. The first question for the standard view of content is exactly the determination of content itself, a realistic story about content. This main challenge, it seems, could in principle be vindicated with the help of my proposal. But, this surely is no minor contribution to theory.

Let me now sketch some additional troubles and answers. There is trouble in delivering the content of inexistent objects, and this is surely no comfort for a theory that puts such a stress on surrounding objects. The Riddle can be solved by the perceptual account claiming that Santa Claus enters my content because — as I know — I had some perceptual information about him. Maybe I just heard about him, maybe there were traces of his causal deeds, as my receiving his presents. Or, again, I could have seen him on the street, and he might have given me a present there. So, in this sense a perceptual account of inexistent objects could be delivered. The inexistent has its roots in the existent.

What about hallucinations and mistaken perceptions or errors?

I see a dagger. And Othello hallucinates it. This could be explained by moving in othello's previous perceptual encounters with daggers. Is our content the same or different? It is different, because Othello only disposes of the quasi-perceptual directedness, on the ground of earlier experiences. And, this can be easily verified by considering action and its consequences — where the perception has to play such an extensive role. There usually *would* be a dagger there, as I entertain a content about it. Even if I hallucinate it. But the consequence of holding the belief with a particular hallucinatory content is easily, and happily discarded.

What about my perceiving a dog as a cat? This simply shows that in the access to the external object, there is a great deal of higher internal computation in the perceptual moduli of an organism. But, notice that, even if mistaken, the content is directed at some external object. This shows the properties of the internal computational system of visual perception. But, it also shows us how the ordinary perceptual process would be directed at the external object in the surrounding of the organism, which is entertaining the perceptual content.

So, the determination of the content's intentionality would be externalist. In the same way as perception itself is directed externally, to help the organism's actions in the world of the objects that are around it and that are important to it. If the organism perceives external objects, it possesses a basis for the forma-

tion of content. And it is no wonder that the content itself, then, shows at least some properties of the perceptual mechanisms through which it is shaped.

Matjaž Potrč: PERCEPTIVNI SADRŽAJ

S a ž e t a k

Dominantne teorije o mentalnom sadržaju su nezadovoljavajuće. Eliminativizam negira samo postojanje sadržaja, a slično u krajnjoj liniji postupaju i sintaktičke teorije. Predlaže se stoga, kao alternativa, teorija koja bi posjedovanje mentalnih sadržaja utemeljila u percepciji.