

RESEARCH AGENDA

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Fact Perception

My current research is in perception, and in particular in the intentionality of perceptual experiences. Motivating my work is the idea that theorists have overlooked a promising possibility concerning the content of perceptual experience. While most work in this area has been done under the assumption that only physical objects (such as coffee cups) and their properties (such as their size or color) can properly be said to be perceived, epistemologists, phenomenologists, students of ordinary language, and even experimental psychologists have quietly been amassing evidence that the old paradigm will not do. My position is that *states of affairs* (or *facts*, such as *that the coffee cup is on the table*) should be included alongside *objects* and *properties* as literally perceived by human subjects. I call this the fact perception view.

Naturalism and the Fact Perception View

The fact perception view, as I develop it, is naturalistic: it has its roots in work currently being done by philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists under the headings of “enactivism” and “embodied cognition.” It is most closely aligned with the work of Alva Noë on so-called “sensorimotor” accounts (accounts which tie perception and action inextricably together). Such accounts run contrary to orthodox (mostly computational) approaches in vision science and elsewhere, but they are not thereby anti-naturalistic. Rather, following J. J. Gibson’s ecological approach, such accounts seek to *expand* our notion of perception by talking about perception as a function of the whole organism (not just the sensory systems) and that which is perceived as the broader environment of that organism (not just those elements in direct causal relations with the sensory systems at a given time). I am firmly in this new camp, as I spell out in my paper “An Enactive Account of the Perception of Facts” (forthcoming in *Behavior and Philosophy*). As I show there, the sensorimotor account of our perception of objects that Noë develops can be extended to include facts as perceived. And while there are still many technical details to be explored on this front, my view inherits the naturalism of the embodied cognition movement.

The Primacy of Fact Perception

Many disciplines touch on issues relevant to my current research insofar as they make technical use of the notion of *perceptual content* in an effort to shed light on particularly human experience. This, of course, includes the philosophies of mind and perception, but also epistemology, phenomenology, the ordinary language tradition, and experimental psychology. Each of these disciplines has a stake in how we understand the notion of perceptual content: they either *make claims about it* or *take claims about it to be so* (i.e., either as objects of theory construction or as starting points for further theorizing). There is much to say on this score, but, in brief, the philosophers and psychologists of mind too often treat perceptual content (and other mental content) as just another variable to be squeezed into one or another preferred metaphysical view of the mind; they simply *deduce* the nature of perceptual content on the basis of their materialism, functionalism, dualism, etc. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the epistemological tradition that I think most deeply about—broadly: post-Kantian—offers transcendental arguments which conclude in demands on any sensible notion of perceptual content, seemingly independently of the considerations that drive metaphysical theorizing about the mind. The result is a stalemate.

This is where I think phenomenology, ordinary language philosophy, and experimental psychology can be brought in to the discussion. All three of these disciplines, I argue, point

toward the possibility that theorists have been *too conservative* in their identification of what can properly be said to be perceived. Each, in their own way, suggest that facts are perceived alongside objects and properties. This is the topic of my writing sample, the forthcoming “The Primacy of Fact Perception.” If I am right about this, a new paradigm in the study of the intentional contents of perceptual experience will have opened up, one that can break the stalemate between naturalistic philosophers of mind and post-Kantian epistemologists as well as open up the discussion to whole disciplines that had previously been seen as out of touch with contemporary analytic studies of intentionality.

Works in Preparation

With the two previously mentioned articles, a good deal of the foundational work on fact perception has been sketched. I am currently building on this foundation in two ways. First: while the two previously mentioned papers are very ambitious in their scope, there are a number of more targeted questions that can be addressed, including objections to different elements of the project as well as exercises in the application of the fact perception account that demonstrate its usefulness to theorists both in- and outside of the philosophy and psychology of perception. I currently have three papers in various stages of completion along these lines:

“Limitations of the Current Debate Over Seeing As”

Puts the fact perception view in contact with the literature on “seeing as” through a consideration of Wittgenstein’s notion of aspect-seeing in Part 2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. I argue that the fact perception view offers a nice interpretative lens through which we can read Wittgenstein’s cryptic remarks in *PI*.

“Can There Be Objects of Perception?”

Defends my use of the notion of an *object of perception* from followers of J. L. Austin who say that there is no sense in identifying anything as properly perceived. I argue for content pluralism and against what amounts to content anti-realism.

“Containing ‘Virtual’ Content”

Raises the threat of what I call “content explosion” for Noë’s sensorimotor account and proposes the adoption of the fact perception view as a Noë-friendly response. I argue that Noë needs a notion of interests which shape perceptual experience, a notion central to the fact perception view.

Book Project

Though publishing the results of my studies into fact perception in peer-review journals is my top research priority, I see the endgame here to be a book-length manuscript that I aim to complete within 3-5 years. The book will bring together, extend, and contextualize the results of all the work just described, as well as make use of work completed before those papers. In particular, it will draw on discussions in my 2007 dissertation, *Concepts in Experience: An Essay on Conceptualism*, to further motivate the need for an account of fact perception. And unlike the papers, where practical considerations like word limits are paramount, the book will put my view into explicit contact with its spiritual ancestors (including Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell) and competitors, as well as draw out its consequences for the philosophies of mind, knowledge, language, action, and more.