

Is there a TV in my head?: Content, Functional Mapping, and the Myth of the Given

Just what are we talking about when we talk about the ‘content’ of perception? The aim of this paper is principally to disambiguate two different ways of thinking about perceptual content by considering its criteria of *individuation*: just what makes it the case that two people’s experiences have the *same* perceptual content? This will be done by drawing a parallel with the content of informational storage mediums: just what is it for a DVD and a VHS tape to have the same content? In the latter case the answer is that there is some kind of *mapping* from one medium to the other, which is to be understood in terms of the *functional* relationship they stand in to a TV. The question of whether there is a TV in my head is thus the question of whether there is a *functional mapping* from states of the causal mechanisms underlying my perceptual capacities to those of others sufficient to allow us to claim that we share the same perceptual content.

This raises the issue of the sheer range of possible functional mappings and the *fineness of grain* of the types of content they individuate. Intuitively, there are mappings which let a DVD, an AVI file, and a VHS tape have the same content, and others that take the VHS tape to be too dissimilar to the other two. On this basis, we can distinguish two types of content: *parochial* and *universal*. The former covers all forms of content whose individuation is *dependent* upon functional mappings that are specified in terms of particular causal mechanisms, whereas the latter covers all forms of content whose individuation is entirely *independent* of any particular causal mechanism. This distinction turns out to have interesting connections to the relation between *form* and *content*, and to the notion of *information* as such. However, the real upshot of the distinction is the way it lets us reformulate an important aspect of Sellars’ account of the myth of the given: the *categorical given*.

To understand this it’s important to recognise that Sellars’ inferentialist account of conceptual content individuates it in functional terms. This means that it is in principle possible to produce functional mappings between states of the particular causal mechanisms that underlie different people’s conceptual capacities. Moreover, we can show that these mappings are strictly mechanism independent, and thus that conceptual content is properly universal in the sense just defined. However, what makes conceptual content unique is that it can involve particular causal mechanisms to perform *language-entry* and *language-exit* moves, and thus come in *empirical* and *practical* flavours, without thereby losing this universality. This is a consequence of the social articulation of the space of reasons, which grants it an in principle *extensibility* that prevents empirical and practical content being indexed to a single mechanism or a restricted set of mechanisms. This is one way of cashing out the ‘unboundedness of the conceptual’.

Given this, we can formulate the myth of the categorial given as follows: there is some form of *universal perceptual content* that is distinct from *empirical conceptual content*. This is just the claim that there is some sense in which any two sentient creatures could be said to have the same experience without having the same, or indeed any, conceptual grasp of this experience. The myth of the categorial given is essentially the idea that I have a TV in my head that has no particular causal-functional structure. It is the postulation of a kind of content that cannot in principle be individuated. This is why *introspective* phenomenology is doomed: what it says about experience is either to be superceded by *empirical* analysis of our perceptual mechanisms or entirely parasitic upon *semantic* analysis of our conceptual economy.

The paper closes by saying something about what an *extrospective* phenomenology would look like. It frames this issue by tackling the dispute between McDowell and Brandom over the nature of perception. Brandom's challenge to McDowell that the status of his claims about the necessity of conceptually articulated but unendorsed conceptual contents is unclear holds, insofar as it is stuck in the murky ground we have already covered between empirical psychology and philosophical semantics. However, although Brandom's minimalism about perception is strictly correct, if we acknowledge Sellars' own insight that it is entirely possible for us to develop *second-order* perceptual capacities to report upon states of our own perceptual mechanisms, this allows us to tell a much more nuanced story about the possible *functional architectures* our perceptual mechanisms have, and thereby both the way our talk about our *sensations* (the other kind of 'looks' talk) maps on to our perceptual architecture, and the way the causal mechanisms that underlie our conceptual capacities can be *intertwined* with this architecture.