

Thought and experience

Alva Noë

1 The dependency thesis

The blind can think; but can the thoughtless see? Here are some reasons to believe that experience requires thought and understanding. When we experience, we learn, and what we experience depends on what we already know. Deafness is not a species of stupidity, as Ryle observed (Ryle 1949 204). Nevertheless, the failure to tell by looking that the ordinary, well-lit tomato in front of one is a tomato, is probably a good indication that one does not know what tomatoes are, that one lacks the concept tomato. In general, on the assumption of normal eyesight (and normal ambient conditions), one can test knowledge by determining what a person can see. Conversely, on the assumption of normal knowledge, one can test eyesight by determining what a person is able to identify by looking.

Considerations such as these lend support to a philosophical conception of perceptual experience according to which perceptual experience is concept-dependent in the sense that when we have perceptual experience, we exercise our grasp of concepts. For example, when I have a visual experience as of geese flying overhead, I exercise my knowledge of (among other things) what geese are, and what flying is. The experience is concept-dependent because I could not have had just that experience as of geese and flying if I did not have those concepts. This is not to say that one needs the concept of a goose to see a goose. The point is that one could not see a goose as a goose or as flying if one lacked these concepts.

The basic idea is put well by Peacocke (1983). He writes that the “representational content [of experience] is the way the experience presents the world as being, and it can hardly present the world as being that way if the subject is incapable of appreciating what that way is. Only those with the concept of a sphere can have an experience as of a sphere in front of them, and only those with spatial concepts can have experiences which represent things as distributed in depth in space” (7). This view provides an explanation (or at least a clarification) of the rational role of experience. What makes it the case that my experience as of an ox a few feet in front of me can be relevant to the question of whether there is an ox a few feet in front of me is just the fact that what I experience is precisely the same as what I come to believe, namely, that there is an ox a few feet in front of me. It is difficult to imagine how experience can play such a rational role if not for this shared content. This would seem to show that it is just in virtue of the fact that the content of experience is conceptual that experience can have a rational bearing on judgment.¹

To say that experience has a rational role is not to defend the so-called belief-theory of perception according to which having a perceptual experience just is coming to form a belief (Armstrong 1968). This extreme doctrine is widely recognized to be misguided. After all, one is not always inclined to believe that things are the way they (visually) seem to be. For example, in the Müller-Lyer illusion, it looks to one as if two lines are unequal in length, even when one knows that they are not. This sort of consideration has led Evans, among others, to insist on the belief-independence of experience (Evans 1982 123-124). On a weak construal, Evans’s conclusion is correct. One can have an experience as of p without believing p, or without even, as in the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion, being inclined to believe that p. But Evans appears to make the much stronger claim that from the fact that one can have a visual experience that p without believing or being inclined to believe that p, it follows that experience has no rational

bearing on judgment at all. But this stronger claim is untrue. The interest of the fact that the lines can look unequal even when one knows that they are not is precisely that, this divergence notwithstanding, experience continues to have a rational bearing on judgment. How things look to one remains at least relevant to how one ought to judge things to be. This is the crucial point. One cannot have the experience that p without at least recognizing that the experience raises the question whether the corresponding judgment (that p) is true. Surely the significance of the striking belief-independence of perceptual experience is not that belief (or judgment) and experience have no systematic connection, but that, rather, one can have an experience which represents things as being one way, and a belief which represents them as being a different way. That is, judgments and experiences can diverge and even contradict one another. But to say that they can be in conflict is to say that they can be in accord; and this would seem to show that they have the same sort of content.

Experience, then, is judgment-dependent in this sense: the ability to grasp the judgment or thought that, for example, there are deer grazing in the meadow, is a precondition of one's ability to have the corresponding experience. And because experience is in this way judgment-dependent, it is also concept-dependent. That is, to have an experience as of deer in the meadow, one must, among other things, know what deer are and what a meadow is. Armstrong was mistaken when he claimed that experience just is the acquisition of belief. But Evans, it turns out, was no less mistaken in his denial that there is any rational linkage between experience and belief.

2 Dretske against dependency

Dretske has attacked the dependency thesis (1993; see also 1969, 1995). There is a difference, he claims, between seeing something which happens to be F (thing-awareness), and seeing that it is F (fact-awareness). Part of the difference, he explains, is that to see that something is F is to come to form a belief about it and so requires the exercise of concepts. You can't see that something is an armadillo if you don't know what armadillos are. You can, however, be visually thing-aware of something which happens to be F, even when you have no idea what Fs are. You can see an armadillo, Dretske claims, without forming any beliefs whatsoever. But to see a thing (to be thing-aware of it) is to have a visual experience of it. Hence, Dretske concludes, there is a kind of visual experience that is, as he puts it, concept-free (1993 263).

The supporter of dependency can accept Dretske's premises. His conclusion—that there are concept-independent visual experiences—does not follow. The argument rests on the assumption that the only way for concepts to enter into experience is in the guise of experiential judgments (e.g. seeing that x is F). But consider the Müller-Lyer experience again: it visually seems to me just as if this line is longer than that one. As noted in the previous section, we can have this experience without judging, or even being inclined to judge, that the line really is longer than the other. But, as we have argued above, one could not have this experience if one were incapable of grasping the thought that one line is larger than the other. Experiences are not takings or judgments, but they are internally related to takings and judgments, and it is incoherent to suppose that there could be experiencers who could not grasp thoughts about how they experience things as being.

Dretske is certainly right that when you are thing-aware of an armadillo, you have an experience of it, even though you may not be able to enjoy the corresponding fact-awareness. But the experience is of the armadillo only in a non-intentional sense.² You do not, that is, have an experience as of the armadillo. Armadillo-hood does not enter into your experience.

Intentionality is a pervasive feature of visual experience. All visual experience is intentional.³ Every experience non-intentionally of something is also an experience as of something. If you see an armadillo, then there is some way things visually seem to you to be (although how things look to you may have nothing to do with armadillos). How the experience presents things as being is the intentional content of your experience.

But to have an experience with intentional content, one must have concepts. For your experience to present things to you as being some way, you must be able to appreciate what that way is (as Peacocke 1983 noticed). Your experience presents things as being the way you would judge them to be were you to take your experience at face value. Dretske is surely right that when you are thing-aware you have an experience of the thing of which you are thing-aware. But thus to characterize the experience is not yet adequately to individuate the experience. It is, if you like, to mention the experience without indicating how the experience was experienced, without revealing what the experience was an experience as of. (This shows, I think, why concepts must figure in our account of consciousness.)

Dretske's claim to the contrary notwithstanding, all seeing is seeing as. Dretske considers this view. He writes:

One can, to be sure, see armadillos without seeing that they are armadillos, but perhaps one must, in order to see them, see that they are (say) animals of some sort... To be aware of a thing is at least be aware [sic] that it is... how shall we say it?... a thing. Something or other. Whether or not this is true depends, of course, on what is involved in being aware that a thing is a thing. Since we can certainly see a physical object without being aware that it is a physical object (we can think we are hallucinating), the required concept F (required to be aware that x is F) cannot be much of a concept. It seems most implausible to suppose infants and animals (presumably, conscious of things) have concepts of this sort. If the concept one must have to be aware of something is a concept that applies to everything one can be aware of, what is the point of insisting that one must have it to be aware? (1993 268-269)

There is a principled way of answering Dretske's question. The intentionality of perceptual experience is a basic fact about the phenomenology of perception. Experience has content. Visual experience is experience of objects and features of the environment.⁴ There just is no more basic, more neutral way of describing how things perceptually seem to us than that available to us when we describe our experiences as of the kinds of things and properties and events we take to inhabit the world around us (Strawson 1979). We pick out or individuate experiences by reference to judgments we would make were we to take the experience at face value. We have visual experiences as of geese flying overhead, deer grazing in the meadow, lions hunting down gazelles,

and armadillos crossing the road. To have visual experiences is not to judge that things are some way or other, but it is to represent things as being some way or other. It is to represent things as being a way we can appreciate them as being. That's why experience requires the mastery and exercise of concepts.

Some of Dretske's remarks suggest a reliance on an argument from animals and infants. This argument runs as follows: from the fact that animals and infants have perceptual experiences but lack conceptual capacities, it follows that experience is not concept-dependent. There are two problems with this reasoning. First, it does not give someone already committed to the dependency thesis any reason to renounce that commitment, since, on the assumption of that thesis, the fact that animals have perceptual experience itself entails that they have concepts. In the absence of a non-question-begging way of deciding whether animals or infants have concepts, it is difficult to see how to offer a non-tendentious rebuttal to the argument from animals and infants. But second, note that the dependency thesis does not challenge the claim that animals and infants can see. What it challenges is whether it makes sense to speak of the visual experience of animals and infants in a way that is divorced from the assessment of their broader cognitive capacities. Consider newborn babies. They obviously respond differentially to stimuli (e.g. looming faces). Does this give us reason to believe that they experience the baby-external environment as being this way or that (e.g. as containing looming faces)? Perhaps. But however we answer this question, if the dependency thesis is right, then we must suppose that the power of the infant thus to represent the environment in experience is in step with its power to represent the environment in thought. It could only look to the infant as if a face is looming, if the child could grasp such thoughts as, for example, "there's a face." According to the dependency thesis, how the baby

experiences the environment is limited by what it can think. And so with animals. What perceptual experience do we ascribe to a lion when we say that it stalks the gazelle? Would we wish to say that it looks to the lion as if the gazelle are grazing on the open savannah? We can justify this sort of ascription only if we suppose that lions have some measure of knowledge of gazelles, grazing and savannahs.

3 Perceptual consciousness

According to Dretske, there are conscious states of which we are unconscious. When you see something, but fail to notice it, you are in a conscious state (of awareness of the thing), but lack any awareness that you are in this state. What makes an experience (or mental state) conscious? Dretske suggests the general outlines of an answer: “[w]hat makes an internal state or process conscious is the role it plays in making one...conscious of some thing or fact. An experience of x is conscious, not because one is aware of the experience, or aware that one is having it, but because, being a certain sort of representation, it makes one aware of the properties (of x) and objects (x itself) of which it is a (sensory) representation” (280).

The defender of dependency can accept this proposal of Dretske's. There are conscious states of which we are unconscious. Hence, awareness of an experience cannot be what makes the experience conscious. What makes experiences conscious is not our awareness of them, but, as Dretske explains, their readiness to play a role in making us aware of objects and properties. But this is only part of the story. For what enables experiences to play this role is that they are linked internally to capacities for judgment and discrimination. Without this link it is not clear at all how the mere occurrence of an

experience could provide a reason to judge. As we noted earlier, what makes my experience as of x's being F relevant to my eventual judgment that x is F is the fact that experience and judgment share a common content. The linkages between experience and capacities for thought and judgment depend on the conceptuality of experience.

To be conscious, as Dretske suggests, a perceptual state must be the kind of state that normally serves to make us aware of features of the environment. What I am arguing is that to play that role, a state must have conceptual content. Consider some examples.

Recent work on so-called implicit memory demonstrates that people often remember a good deal more than they experience themselves as remembering.⁵ So, for example, although an experimental subject may fail to supply any evidence of remembering having seen a given word (say "elephant") during an earlier trial, she will be much more likely to complete the word-fragment "ele____" with the word "elephant" than she would with another word such as "elevator". Patients with lesions in primary visual cortex exhibit normal symptoms of blindness, even though they are able implicitly to perceive certain stimuli. Such "blindsight" patients do not have normal visual experience—it never visually strikes them that things are thus and such—even though, under forced choice conditions, they are able correctly to identify stimuli.⁶

In both of these cases, individuals would seem to be unconscious of their awareness of a (past or present) feature of the environment. These are examples, then, of conscious states of which we are unconscious. But notice that this unconscious awareness rests on settled conceptual capacities. It would only be coherent to suppose that a blindsight patient is unconsciously aware of a horizontal line gradient in the upper right quadrant

of the visual field, if we presupposed that she knew what such a line gradient was (or what it looked like). Likewise, the implicit memory paradigm described above presupposes that we are dealing with a literate subject, i.e. with someone who knows what words are, and how to spell, etc. These points can be made, mutatis mutandis, for the Freudian unconscious as well. The man may unconsciously wish to marry his mother and murder his father, but only on the presupposition that he knows who his mother and father are.

Similar points can be made in the more familiar case of seeing but not noticing. A good deal of what we see goes unnoticed. If you have read this essay up until this point, then you have, presumably, read each word and so you have, presumably, seen each letter of each word. You saw the first 't' on page 5, but you may not have noticed it.⁷ Imagine you are hiking on an overgrown trail.⁸ You do not notice that you are about to be struck in the eye by a branch, but at the last moment you turn your face and so protect yourself from injury. You saw the branch, but did not notice it (at least until the last minute).

Consider that it only makes sense to describe these as cases of seeing without noticing, because we tacitly assume that the unnoticed features might have been noticed. But surely you could not have noticed the first 't' on page 5, or that there was a low-hanging branch, without some exercise of concepts. Concepts are brought into play even when you fail to notice, when you see, as it were, automatically or "without thought". The fact that one does not stumble over the letters of a text and that one is not forced to attend deliberately to each and every one of them is constitutive of being a comfortable reader. Similarly, dodging branches manifests an awareness of the danger of certain obstacles, an

awareness which nevertheless is conceptual. One may not have had an experience as of a dangerous obstacle, but one's alert reactions to what is in fact present in the environment exhibits intelligence and understanding.

What makes experiential states conscious, then, despite the fact that we may not be aware of them when we have them, is their connection to the judgments and thoughts that do make up our awareness of the environment around us. By dint of the fact that experiential states have conceptual content, they are states of which we are sometimes aware and states of which we can normally become directly aware. In this they may be contrasted with the 'subpersonal' informational states of cognitive psychology. The states of my brain and nervous system have representational content. What these states represent, however, is not in any way constrained by what I know or understand or think. Their nonconceptuality is part and parcel of their nonexperientiality.⁹

4. An empiricist argument

Dretske has a further argument on behalf of the claim that the visual experiences that accompany our thing-awareness are nonconceptual. I call this argument the empiricist argument for nonconceptual content.¹⁰ The argument begins with the recognition that one condition of full grasp of more or less observational concepts is the ability perceptually to detect instances of them in the environment. In order to learn the concept red, for example, one must be able visually to detect red. Mastery of the concept red consists, inter alia, in the ability to identify red things. A blind person cannot do this.¹¹ More generally, to know what red is is to know how red things look. The ability to see an observational property must be in place if one is to be able to

master the corresponding concept, and this perceptual ability cannot itself presuppose mastery of the concept. If one needed to have the concept of red in order to pick out instances falling under the concept, then one could never come to learn the concept. This suggests that the nonconceptual ability to be thing-aware of an observational property (the ability to have an experience it), can be said to be the ground of the related conceptual abilities. Indeed, it is precisely because of the link between understanding and the ability to make certain kinds of perceptual detections that the concept red is taken to be an observational concept.

Dretske uses a different example. He invites us to consider the case of monkeys who are trained to discriminate the larger of any two presented rectangles and so (let's assume) to abstract the property of being larger than. The trained monkeys thus acquire the ability to be fact-aware that A is larger than B, in addition to their thing-awareness of A and B. Dretske claims that: prior to learning to identify the relation of larger-than, the monkeys must have been perceptually aware "of the condition of A and B that, so to speak, makes it true that A is larger than B?...If not, how could these animals ever learn to do what they are being trained to do—distinguish between A's being larger than B and A's not being larger than B?" (277-178).

The basic claim, that in order to master an observational concept (such as red or larger-than), one must be able to see instances of the concept, and that the ability to perceive instances cannot itself require that one already master the concept, is true. One can, after all, see an F without knowing what Fs are.

This is no challenge to the dependency thesis, however. For the experience you have when you are aware of the observational property but do not possess the observational concept, is not (and cannot be) the experience as of that property. The experience must be as of something, however (owing to the intentionality of perceptual experience). What dependency commits us to is the requirement that you have the conceptual resources—however primitive—to appreciate how things are experienced as being.¹²

I have proposed (following Strawson 1979, Peacocke 1983, and McDowell 1994) that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual. Why do so many philosophers (e.g. Evans 1982, Peacocke 1992, Crane 1992, Dretske 1993, 1995) find this claim unconvincing? Here's a speculative answer. The dependency thesis runs smack against widespread tacit allegiance to what I call the light-bulb conception of visual experience. According to this conception, you open your eyes and the light bulb of conscious experience goes on within. Just like that. One thing wrong with the light bulb conception is that it represents seeing as less complicated than it really is. Seeing takes learning. This is clearly true from a neurological point of view. As the young infant exercises its visual capacities, the neural connections are formed that, ultimately, enable the adult to have the kind of experiences characteristic of mature vision. But there is a second sense in which we acquire the ability to see. To see isn't just to have veridical visual experiences. It is to have veridical visual experiences that we understand! Part of what this understanding consists in is sensory-motor coordination. Visual experiences in the mature perceiver are spontaneously linked to capacities for movement and action (e.g. head and eye movements). Kittens who have been prevented from active visual

exploration fail to develop the most basic forms of visual-motor coordination (Held & Hein 1963). (This is a form of blindness.) And part of what this understanding consists in, or so I have been arguing, is the integration of sensory impressions and conceptual skills. To see is to have visual experiences which are veridical and which are integrated into motor and thought systems. In the absence of such integration, visual impressions are to us like signs in an unfamiliar language. A final bit of evidence for this can be found in the literature on the surgical restoration of sight in the congenitally blind. The relevant point is that patients find it extremely difficult to cope with the newly acquired perceptual impressions. Learning to see late in life is, if I am right, like learning a second language.

The upshot of these considerations is that there is very little reason to suppose that there is a common experiential core to the experiences of the preconceptual and the conceptual. We cannot factor experience into a conceptual part and a raw experiential part in such a way as to allow us to make sense of the intactness of that experiential part in the absence of its conceptual framing. Capacities for experience and thought go hand in hand and are in a sense one. Creatures acquire capacities for experience as they actively explore and begin to think about the world.

Notes

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¹ The idea is a Kantian one: if experience is to have a rational bearing on judgment, it must be conceptual. Kant's famous dictum—"thought without content is empty, intuitions without concepts are blind"—gives expression to the idea that if experience is to be conceived as awareness of objective features of a mind-independent reality, as opposed, merely, to the chaotic play of the manifold of intuition, it must be conceptual. These themes have been investigated by McDowell (1994).

² The distinction between an intentional and a non-intentional sense of "objects of perception" is due to Anscombe 1965.

³ The intentional content of experience is what Peacocke (1983) calls its "representational content".

⁴ Strawson's Kantian criticism of sense-data theory turns on this observation (Strawson 1979). His work on this topic is unduly neglected in recent discussions.

⁵ For a discussion of implicit (or unconscious) memory, see the papers collected in Underwood 1996. Schacter 1996 provides an informative introduction to memory in general and implicit memory in particular.

⁶ On blindsight, see Weiskrantz 1986 and Block 1994.

⁷ This example is Dretske's. See his Seeing and Knowing (1969).

⁸ Stephen White suggested this example (personal communication).

⁹ Compare this point with Evans's claim that informational states are experiential if they are linked, in appropriate ways, to what he referred to as "a thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system". (158) When there is such a further link, Evans wrote, "we can say that the person, rather than just some part of his brain, receives and possesses the information [contained in a perceptual state]." (158)

¹⁰ Peacocke (1992) has also developed this argument. See Noë (forthcoming) for a discussion.

¹¹ Of course there are many things a blind person can do with a color concept. Lack of understanding here is only partial.

¹² Similar points can be made about Dretske's examples of the infant perception of numerical quantities (1995), and the perception of patterns whose difference initially escape notice (1993). In these cases, it is not that the subject has an experience whose content outstrips her conceptual capacities. It's just that the experiences in question do not draw on the subject's grasp of concepts she cannot be thought to have.

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