

## Reply to John Campbell

Forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies* in a symposium on *The Contents of Visual Experience* by Susanna Siegel

A straightforward way to challenge the Content View is to argue that there could be a visual perceptual experience that doesn't have any contents. Since my type of experience contents have to be conveyed to the subject, and since I say those contents can be derived from the properties presented in experience, a way to pose this type of challenge is by giving a case in which a subject consciously experiences some properties, but those properties are not conveyed to the subject. Campbell tries to block the Content View in this way, by arguing that some creatures as a matter of course consciously experience properties, while those properties are not conveyed to them.

The conveying constraint says that for something to be a content of experience, it has to actually be conveyed to the subject. But being actually conveyed is itself a modal condition, consisting in being available for one of three functions: guiding action, belief-formation, and introspection. The conveying constraint thus consists in a kind of accessibility, rather than in actual access. To provide his type of counterexample to the Content View, what Campbell needs are visual experiences of properties, where the properties are inaccessible in all three of the ways that define the conveying constraint.

Campbell's examples involve color vision by animals and children. A tiger in the veldt, he says, may distinguish its prey from the foliage by consciously seeing the contrast in color between figure (prey) and ground (foliage), without the color being conveyed to the tiger in any of the three admissible ways: "it does not form beliefs about the colors of things, it does not use color to guide its actions, and it does not form introspective beliefs about what color experiences it is having." Since being conveyed is a matter of accessibility to belief formation, action or introspection, the relevant feature of Campbell's tiger is that it *couldn't* do any of the things Campbell lists - not that it *doesn't*, but for now we can leave this point aside. Introspection is probably out of the question for the tiger, and perhaps belief is too, depending on what beliefs are. But guiding action? Campbell points out that the tiger can't sort things into piles according to color, and so its color experience can't guide that particular type of action. But even if the tiger can't sort things into piles according to color, it would have to be suffering from a pathology to be unable to use its color experience in any way to guide its behavior. And given the role of its color experience in distinguishing the prey from its foliage, its color experience would guide its pursuit of the prey. Given its drive to hunt, the tiger pursues the prey, in part because it can see it, and by hypothesis, the tiger can see its prey, only because that animal's color looks different to the tiger from the color of the animal's surroundings.

Since the tiger differentiates the prey from its surroundings, by virtue of seeing the difference between colors, it is sensitive to the information that the prey differs in color from its surroundings. Nonetheless Campbell thinks it wouldn't make sense to talk

about the tiger's color experience as being accurate, or being subject to an illusion. Why exactly wouldn't that make sense, given that the conveying constraint is met? If the camouflage of the tiger's prey had succeeded, then the tiger would see two parts of the scene as continuous when they are not. As things stand (given how Campbell describes the case), the tiger is sensitive to information that most adult humans could express this sensitivity by saying "that color is different from that color", demonstrating a different color each time. The tiger can't say anything, let alone say anything by using demonstratives. But that inability does not preclude it from having experiences, and it doesn't preclude those experiences from having accuracy conditions that would be shared by the demonstrative utterance.

Analogous points apply to the child who sees the '5' on the Ishihara display. The child indicates that she sees the '5', because she is cooperating in taking the test, and because the '5' looks to her to have a different color from its surroundings. Here her color experience is guiding her report, and so is guiding her behavior. And in using her experience of a color to distinguish an object from its surroundings, there does after all seem to be a candidate content of the experience that goes with it.

Perhaps some experienced properties are not even accessible, in some pathological cases - such as a tiger who sees the color contrast between prey and foliage, but can't act on the basis the spatial differentiation that its color experience underwrites. But Campbell would presumably not want to base his case against the Content View on pathological cases.

Would such pathological cases constitute a counter-example to the Content View, by being cases in which properties are experienced without being accessible? Not if the conveying constraint is tied to accessibility given normal, fully developed cognitive functioning. Then even the pathological tiger's experience would be accessible, as would the color experience of a child who cannot form beliefs attributing colors to things. Such a child's color experience would be accessible, by virtue of the fact that if her cognitive capacities were more fully developed, it would be natural to form color beliefs on the basis of that experience.

I've been assuming so far, with Campbell, that the tiger consciously sees the color contrast between prey and foliage – as opposed to distinguishing them on the basis of unconscious color perception. If its differentiation were unconscious, like a blindsighter's, then the case wouldn't pose any challenge to the Content View. This assumption about the tiger is an addition beyond the assumption that it uses the prey's color to differentiate it. When Campbell says that "For a property to figure in the phenomenal character of experience seems to be a matter of its being possible to use it as a basis for selection of a region or object", he does not make explicit exactly what relationship he finds between phenomenal character and figure-ground differentiation. Since blindsighted subjects can distinguish figure from ground in their blind field, in which case figure-ground segregation is unconscious, I'm taking the link Campbell finds

between phenomenal character and figure-ground differentiation to be that phenomenal character typically enables such differentiation.<sup>1</sup>

So far, I've focused on Campbell's specific examples, and suggested that they don't illustrate properties that are experienced by a subject without being conveyed to her. But specific examples aside, Campbell thinks the general phenomenon that the examples are meant to illustrate is predicted by Huang and Pashler's distinction between two ways in which a property may figure in visual experience: roughly, selection and access. A property F of an object or region o plays a selective role, just in case the perceiver uses F to distinguish o from its surroundings. In contrast, Campbell says the access role is "the way in which properties of objects seen are 'conveyed' or 'accessed' by the subject". Put in terms of this distinction between these two roles, his reasoning against the Content View goes roughly as follows:

- (i) If a property figures in phenomenal character, then it can play a selective role.
- (ii) A property can play a selective role without being accessed.
- (iii) If a property is conveyed, then it is accessed.

Together these three claims entail that

- (iv) A property can figure in phenomenal character, without being conveyed.

Given the conveying constraint on contents, premise (iv), in turn, seems to support the temporal and explanatorily priority of phenomenal character over representation. "The trouble with representationalist accounts of perception," he writes, "is that they collapse the basic level of sensory experience into the higher-level, purely cognitive stage at which the properties of objects are explicitly accessed." This remark expresses the idea (which is also suggested by claims (iii) and (iv) above) that for an experience to have contents, something additional would have to happen, besides simply having the experience. In formulating the idea that phenomenal character is prior to representation, we can see that Campbell assimilates conveying to actual access:

"The accessing of a property by the perceiver may indeed be a matter of representational content, but the figuring of a property in visual experience is more basic than its being accessed by the perceiver; 'conveyed' in Siegel's term".

Since the conveying constraint is formulated in terms of accessibility rather than actual access, premise (iii) is false. Given the assumption that contents have to be conveyed, Campbell's reasoning does not support either the temporal or the explanatory priority of phenomenal character over representation, in my sense of representation. Evidence

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<sup>1</sup> R. W. Kentridge, C. A. Heywood, L. Weiskrantz. "Spatial attention speeds discrimination without awareness in blindsight". *Neuropsychologia* 42 (2004) 831–835.

that selection occurs before actual access would not thereby be evidence that selection occurs before accessibility, or before the conveying constraint is met.

To defend the priority of phenomenal character of representation along the lines Campbell suggests, a natural strategy would be to make the case that content has to be tied to actual access, not to accessibility, while retaining Campbell's idea (defended extensively by Ned Block) that phenomenal character can be divorced from actual access.<sup>2</sup> How might such a case be made? Suppose that an experience could not get so far as having accuracy conditions, without those accuracy conditions being accessed. Then nothing could be a content of an experience, without its actually being accessed, and the rest of Campbell's argument could remain as it is. I doubt that such argument could succeed. But whether it can succeed or not, for Campbell's line of reasoning to put pressure on the Content View, my conveying constraint would first have to be revised, and so that is where the issue would need to be joined.

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<sup>2</sup> N. Block "Consciousness and Cognitive Access". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 108, Issue 1 pt 3 (October 2008), p. 289-317.