

## Reply to Travis

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

### 1. The Content View vs. Which properties experience can present

My book engages in two orthogonal debates: one over the Content View, the other concerning which properties can be presented in experience. To pursue the second debate, one needs a way to make more precise the sense in which properties are presented in experience. In my discussion, the Content View plays that role. Travis is overlooking the distinction between these two debates when he writes that "...denying perceptual experience representational content is not endorsing that all we see are congeries of shapes and colours, or that what we see is anything other than what is there...Siegel presents us with a false choice." I agree with him that we could be perceptually related to K-properties, even if the Content View were false.

### 2. Fine-grained vs. coarse-grained awareness

Travis summarizes his argument against the Content View like this:

"There is an unbreachable divide between generalities, which are instanced, and history, which does the instancing. If perception lacks representational content, that is because generalities are thought's objects, while perception's are historical".

We could formulate the argument using two premises:

- P1. Anything that represents must involve generality.
- P2. Perceptual experience does not involve generality.
- Conclusion: Perceptual experience does not represent.

Travis discusses several notions of representation, but the relevant one for P1 is the three-place notion, according to which X (a person, or her utterance) represents Y as F. His defense of P1 seems to be roughly that anything that represents in this sense involves predication, and for any predicate, there are many ways for that predicate to be satisfied. For instance, John could satisfy the predicate "is walking" in a wide variety of ways, and of course others besides John can walk too. The generality consists in both the multiple ways for "is walking" to be satisfied, and the multiple ways for an utterance of "John is walking" to be true. Both the utterance, and someone's thought that they express using that sentence, represent that John is walking. And their representing that John is walking consists in part in their determining how things would have to be, in order for John to be walking.

Travis defends P2 by saying that perceptual experience is characterized exclusively by the things perceived, and the things perceived are always particular objects, such as John, and particular events, actions, or in Travis's phrase, "instances", such as John walking. John is not the kind of thing that has instances, and the same is supposed to be true of John walking. That perceptual experience relates us only to particular things is supposed to be shown by grammar: Travis asserts that properly perceptual states are never reported by locutions involving 'that'-clauses, such as *S sees that p*. Instead they are only ever reported by locutions that denote the awareness of particular things, such as *S sees John walking*.

Exactly what particular things are we aware of? Travis seems to say that we are perceptually aware not only of particular objects, but also of instances of some of their properties, and he speaks as if these are different. When John instantiates walking, his "instance of walking" denotes something distinct from him. The instance of walking that belongs to John is therefore not just that which instantiates walking, since that would be John all over again.

Travis implicitly distinguishes between generalities that are visibly instanced, and generalities that are instanced, but not visibly so. Visual experience is "awareness of... things being as they are", and "Things being as they *visibly* are is...their instancing whatever...generalities are visibly instanced by their being as they are". There remain several ambiguities surrounding the notion Travis intends to express by "visible instance of things being as they are". On the first reading of "visible instance", an instance would remain visible even if no one was perceiving it, comparable to Travis's discussion of "demonstrable looks" in his (2005) - such as the look of petrol (watery) or lemons (yellow, slightly oblong, etc) - in which he says demonstrable looks would have to fix the contents of experience if anything did. On the second reading, a generality is visibly instanced, only if someone is experiencing it. This ambiguity corresponds to the distinction I drew on p. 62, in the course of criticizing Travis's previous objections to the Content View, between demonstrable looks and picking up on demonstrable looks. In his contribution to this symposium, Travis prescinds from saying what, if anything, selects which generalities the visibly instanced ones belong to, when he writes "Whether there is some determinate cluster of such [visibly instanced] properties is an issue we can leave aside". But since he thinks experience is perceptual awareness of visible instances, the visible instances are presumably (plain old) demonstrative looks, with the awareness playing the role of picking up on them.<sup>1</sup>

So experience as Travis construes it is an awareness of visible instances. But there is a further ambiguity in the notion of "awareness of visible instances" that Travis uses to individuate experiences. When you see John, there are many ways he could look. The

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<sup>1</sup> Otherwise awareness of visible instances would be a form of awareness of an experience, rather than a form of awareness that constitutes an experience.

same is true, as Travis points out, when you see John walking. There are many ways John, when walking, can look. On a fine-grained interpretation, when you are aware of John walking, the property of walking characterizes how John looks to you. On a coarse-grained interpretation, you can be aware of John walking, without the proposition that someone is walking being so much as suggested by your experience, as something reasonable to believe on its basis. Sid and Pia might both be perceptually aware of exactly the same visible instances in the coarse-grained sense, yet have different fine-grained awareness of those instances. This difference is a difference in whether the properties whose instances you're aware of characterize how the things you're aware of look (that is the fine-grained option), or whether they simply identify which things these are (that is the coarse-grained option).

So we can ask: when Travis says that experience is awareness of visible instances, is the awareness of visible instances fine-grained or coarse-grained? These two options mark different ways of individuating experiences.

One might think Travis allows that experiences are fine-grained on simple plausibility grounds. It would be amazing to deny that the proposition that someone is walking is ever suggested by an experience of seeing someone walking. Not all coarse-grained experiences – e.g., not all cases of seeing John walking - will suggest this proposition as something reasonable to believe. But every coarse-grained experience will involve some fine-grained experience or other. If Travis meant to be challenging the idea that there is any such thing as a fine-grained experience, he would presumably submit the notion of experience to the same scrutiny as he applies to the notion of representation, rather than using the word “experience” throughout the commentary without ever mentioning that he means something entirely different from his opponents, all of whom use the fine-grained notion.

But several strands in Travis's commentary suggest that he has the coarse-grained notion in mind, and that he does mean to deny the existence of fine-grained perceptual experiences. He writes: “what Pia saw may be John walking, whether she realizes this or not. All could have been a fleeting blur to her.” He says that “phenomenology....lies is what is witnessed”, where what is witnessed are particular things like John and John walking. Moreover, since coarse-grained experiences don't determine a specific phenomenal character, they don't represent anything in the way the Content View posits – so perhaps given Travis's opposition to the Content View, charity should lead us to this interpretation. The thesis that experiences are exclusively coarsely-grained entails the falsity of the Property View, and the Property View leads directly to the Content View (p. 71); whereas the Argument from Appearing assumes that there are fine-grained experiences, and it is an argument for the Property View. I agree with Travis that “nothing in perceptual experience”, when construed as coarse-grained awareness, “select[s] some item ...to be the way ...things are represented as being”. For that, what's needed is a fine-grained experience.

There's thus a simple reading of Travis's discussion, on which he thinks that there simply is no such thing as a finely-grained experience. On this reading, the only things that Travis is prepared to label "an experience" occur upstream of the specificity in the subject's conscious life that proponents of the Content View call "experience". Such specificity enters only after the subject has combined a coarsely-grained experience with concepts, judgments, or some other non-perceptual factor.

This position has the same structure as the Reid-esque view I discuss at various points in the book (p. 21, p. 133), with coarsely-grained awareness of visible instances substituted for raw feels. Travis locates experiences in this structure where Reid locates sensation: in a confrontation with the world that needs to be combined with a separate, "cognitive" ingredient in order to get anything truth-evaluable. The difference is that Travis characterizes the confrontation with the world as a person-level, conscious relation to things like John and his tropes, rather than with an early effect, by a brute incursion of what is seen, on the perceptual system (the effect might be the sub-personal state of sensory traducer, or a putative person-level conscious state such as a raw feel).

I don't dispute the existence of coarse-grained experiences, and I doubt that anyone would. What matters is whether these are the only experiences in the picture. If Travis thinks the only experiences in the picture are coarse-grained ones, then he is not straightforwardly denying the Content View or the first premise of the Argument from Appearing, for instance by asserting their negations, which would be "At least some experiences do not have contents" and "Experiences do not present properties as instantiated". If he makes these claims about coarse-grained experiences, then his criticisms of the Content View are best taken as disputing the presupposition that experiences are finely-grained. And in that case, what we then need from Travis are some grounds for denying the existence of anything to satisfies the fine-grained notion of experience that figures in the Content View and my argument for it.

I think we can see Travis as challenging the existence of finely-grained experiences on the grounds that perception and thought exhibit a division of labor that underwrites both premises P1 and P2. But if we look closely at his picture of the different roles of perception and thought, we find that Travis's appeal to their division of labor fails him twice over. It doesn't call into doubt the existence of finely-grained experiences, and it doesn't provide any other traction against the Content View.

### **3. The division of labor between perception and thought**

According to Travis's picture, perception provides the subject-matter for thought, without attributing anything to that subject-matter. Its evolutionary value, Travis says, is to relate us to things that we can potentially recognize as belonging to "generalities". In contrast, thoughts connect particulars to generalities:

“A thought represents the particular case as bearing a certain relation to a certain generality. If it represents correctly, the particular case does bear that relation to that generality. The idea of a thought (in Frege’s sense) can be parsed as follows: the thought is *of* some particular way for things to be, which it presents as a way things are.”

Some thoughts attribute properties to unrepeatable particulars (“history”, in Travis’s term – if Travis sees Pia, then she is history). But not all thoughts do this, since we can quantify, or otherwise generalize - as in “Dogs bark” and “All cats are animals”. When we generalize in these ways, then there need not be a particular object or scene that we are perceiving, and to which we are attributing properties. Travis’s rendition of thought thus seems to miss an aspect of Fregean thoughts that Frege himself emphasized.<sup>2</sup>

We can set this point about thought aside, though, because what underlies Travis’s main complaint against the Content View is the division of labor he posits between perception and thought, where attributing properties to particular things (objects and property instances) can happen in thought but not in perception. He thinks the division of labor undermines the idea that we have fine-grained awareness of particulars (and thereby undermines the first premise of the Argument from Appearing), by showing that experience does not present properties as instantiated – because if they did, then perception would go beyond its distinctively perceptual function, and would instead perform a function that thought performs. In performing that function, perception would involve generalities, contrary to his P2. The division of labor is also supposed to show that experiences are never accurate or inaccurate – because if they were, then once again, it would perform the function of bringing the particular under the general.

Why can’t anything in perceptual experience select a generality that things fall under? Travis’s answer seems to be: because the things we perceive are all particular things - either objects or property-instances. If experience is exhausted by our coarse-grained awareness of particular instances, then it contains nothing in it that could select a generality in terms of which accuracy conditions could be defined. Here we can see that Travis’s central piece of reasoning is the following conditional:

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<sup>2</sup> Why does Travis attribute this overly restrictive characterization of thought to Frege? In the case of quantification, we apply a second-order function--the meaning of the quantifier--to a first-order function, in which case there is functional application without application to an object. I hesitate to think that Travis is mistaking the specific case of applying a function from objects to truth-values with the more general case of applying a function to an argument of whatever type, though someone who made that mistake would characterize thought the way he does.

(\* ) If an experience is exhausted by coarse-grained awareness of particular things (such as John and instances of walking), then it cannot by itself attribute properties to objects.

I've substituted "attribute properties to objects" for Travis's "represents the particular case as falling under a generality". So far as I can tell these formulations come to same thing, and both denote the function of thought that Travis - on purely grammatical grounds - takes to be missing from perception. And since Travis grants that if the first premise of the Argument from Appearing is true, then that argument establishes the Content View (from the premises of the Argument of Appearance, he says, "what follows is a kind of validity," and he doesn't dispute any of the other premises), he grants that if experiences attribute to properties to objects, then they have accuracy conditions.

Perception may get its evolutionary value from providing a subject-matter for thought. But from the fact that it performs this function, it doesn't follow that it does not also perform the function that Travis assigns to thought – the function of attributing properties (such as the property of walking) to objects (such as John), or the function of attributing properties (such as the property of happening quickly) to events (such as John's walking). Put in terms of coarse-grained and fine-grained awareness, from the fact that (some) experiences are cases of coarse-grained awareness of particular things, it doesn't follow that they are not also cases of fine-grained awareness of particular things. Travis's division of labor hypothesis is not merely that perception performs a function not performed by thought – a plausible hypothesis that could be granted on all sides. Travis's division of labor hypothesis is rather that perception performs *only* a function not performed by thought. The crucial question is whether the way in which perception plays its distinctive role of providing subject-matter for thought also "selects an item to be the way things are represented as being." If it does do this kind of selecting – *a fortiori* if it has to, in order to play its distinctive function – then Travis's strong division of labor hypothesis is false.

So our question has to be: if we grant Travis the assumption that perceptual experience can only be reported by locutions such as "S sees John" or "S sees John walking", and never by locutions of the form "S sees that p", does the grammar of the former two expressions support Travis's strong division of labor hypothesis? It seems not. As Anscombe highlighted, some uses of "see" report fine-grained experiences, such as "I see rays shooting out from the light when I squint at it".<sup>3</sup> The fact that despite appearances, no such rays exist is beside the point that "rays" helps describe the specific character of the experience, not just the object seen. In addition, from the fact that a *report* of a coarse-grained experience (such as the report "I see you") does not

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<sup>3</sup> Anscombe, G.E.M. 1965. "The Intentionality of Sensation: A Grammatical Feature". In Ronald J. Butler (ed.), *Analytic Philosophy*. Blackwell.

purport to specify which fine-grained experience the perceiver is having, it doesn't follow that the report could be true, without the perceiver having any fine-grained experience at all. So much more than grammatical grounds are needed to make the case against the existence of fine-grained experiences.

Summing up so far: we could see Travis as challenging the Content View and my argument for it by appealing to the idea that there are no fine-grained experiences. His line of reasoning against fine-grained experience is that perceptual experience differs from thought by providing a subject-matter for thought, and that grammatical considerations show that it plays this role by consisting exclusively in an awareness of particular things. In response, I've argued that the grammar of locutions like "S sees John" and "S sees John walking" do not establish that we are aware of particular things in a way that precludes that awareness from determining accuracy conditions. Travis's grammatical considerations do not weigh against the assumption that experiences are finely-grained. So we're left with the crucial question: why think there are any fine-grained experiences?

#### **4. Why think there are fine-grained experiences?**

Frege did not discuss perception at any length. If he had, he would have addressed the question: what is it about perceptual experiences that explains why we go on from on their basis thoughts involving some generalities, but not others? If experiences are finely-grained, these questions have a straightforward answer. In contrast, if they are (exclusively) coarsely-grained, then to explain why we go on to form certain beliefs and not others on the basis of an experience, we need to look beyond the experience itself. We need to consider the extra-perceptual factors that combine with experience to produce a determinate way that things are for a subject.

Coarse-grained experiences are in some ways analogous to Vic's hemming and hawing, as Travis describes it: "the impression Vic gives you all depends on what you know of him, what you have in mind at the moment, and so on. There is no definite way for things to be – again the third term in the [representation] relation – determined by Vic's doings as such." We can usefully compare Travis's larger picture containing coarse-grained experience with the epistemological views of Anil Gupta.<sup>4</sup> According to Gupta, experiences by themselves do not determine any propositions that are candidates for being justified by the experience. Gupta thus goes beyond holding that experiences provide justification for believing a proposition *p*, only when conjoined with other cognitive factors, such as (justified) background beliefs. He goes further in suggesting a specific explanation for this: experiences need help from cognitive factors, even to determine which propositions are candidates for being justified. When Travis seems to

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<sup>4</sup> Gupta, A. 2006. *Empiricism and Experience*. Oxford University Press.

embrace coarse-grained construal of experiences, he makes an analogous point about what it is like to see John walking. What it's like to see John walking is not determined solely by coarse-grained experiences, but instead by coarse-grained experiences together with other factors that Travis calls "conceptual capacities". To the extent that Travis rejects the standard fine-grained construal of experiences, he thinks the only notion of what it's like to see John walking takes hold, only after coarsely-grained experiences have been combined with conceptual capacities. In Travis's mouth, "What it's like to see Jon walking" thus does not characterize experiences as he construes them, since those are coarsely grained, and states characterized by "what it's like to phi" locutions are always downstream of those experiences.

The reason to think there are fine-grained experiences is that experiences are phenomenal states, and coarse-grained experiences do not determine any specific phenomenal states – as Travis himself points out: there are many ways John could look when you see him.

It's clear that Travis allows that is some finely-grained state in the vicinity of perception. He just thinks it's wrong to call it an "experience". Why? Perhaps because he wants to reserve that term for person-level, conscious states that play a distinctively perceptual role, as he construes it. I've argued that nothing can play that role, without also playing one of the roles of thought as Travis construes it. The strong division of labor thesis is false.

## **5. Hallucinations and illusions**

If there are fine-grained experiences, then the first premise of the Argument from Appearing is true. Travis seems to grant that if this premise is true, then the Content View is true too. I've therefore taken him to be disputing the existence of fine-grained experiences. But in his discussion of hallucination and illusion, fine-grained experiences seem to creep back in.

Travis takes issue with the idea that there could be veridical hallucination, using his own version of my Amazing Coincidence example. "Sid...hallucinate[s] a horned toad jumping onto his knee. By coincidence, a horned toad does then so jump. This is not for the hallucination to be accurate...it is not *of*, does not despite, that bit of history, the surroundings of Sid's knee being as they then were....no particular case is brought under any generality." Presumably Travis thinks since Sid is not seeing his knee, his knee is not brought under any generality. Maybe so, but Travis does not address the obvious possibility that is suggested by the spatial structure of visual experience: the hallucination attributes certain properties to the space around Sid. If it was Pia hallucinating instead of Sid, her hallucination would attribute those same properties to the space around her.

Travis's own proposal about hallucination is obscure. He writes "Suppose that it is for Pia just as though John were walking, though [neither] he nor anyone is there at all.



Then perhaps its being like this for her is itself no visual phenomenon, but a phenomenon of thought...Still no sign of content of her (e.g. visual) experience.” What exactly is Pia’s experience, if it is not an awareness of any visible instance? If Travis means that the hallucinatory experience is just is a thought, then it will have representational content, but then the strong division of labor hypothesis will be false. The supposedly “unbreachable divide” between generality and “instances” will not align with the distinction between thought and perceptual experience. Alternatively, if he means that hallucinations are thoughts instead of experiences, then he faces pressure to explain why no representation is involved in the indistinguishable non-hallucinatory experience.<sup>5</sup>

Even if Travis denies that hallucinations are experiences, since he speaks of specifically visual illusions, he seems to accept that illusions are experiences. Here a fine-grained notion of experience seems to creep in, since the illuded Pia cannot be aware of John walking, only of John. In what could her illusion then consist? Not just of her awareness of John, since she has that in the case where she isn’t illuded as well. Once fine-grained experiences are in the picture, the force of Travis’s claims against the Content View diminishes greatly.

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<sup>5</sup> If hallucinations are not perceptual experiences, then the only perceptual experiences will be case of perception. Travis wrongly suggests that I use “perceptual experience” to denote only those experiences in which perception is taking place – contrary to my explicit definition on p. 26.