

Searle on the Intentional Content of Visual Experiences

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ABSTRACT: There is no unique idea regarding the form of the (Intentional) content part of visual experience in the specification. The philosophers' approaches diverge as to whether the content of visual experience is equivalent to a sentence expressing proposition or not. Some of them (mainly philosophers from the phenomenological tradition) consider that one must use a proposition for the specification of the content only when the subject, while having a visual experience, exercise a concept or judge. For the other cases, which can be called *simple seeing*, a noun phrase is preferable. I argue that, holding that the specification of Intentional content of the visual experience should be in the form of a proposition, John Searle gives up the first-person Intentionality and therefore bypasses the first-person important distinction between simple seeing and judgmental seeing. The specification of the content only in the form of the proposition does not allow making such a distinction on the level of description. Then I argue that the feature of the causal self-referentiality of the visual experience belongs to its psychological mode but not, as Searle holds, to the Intentional content of the visual experience.

KEYWORDS: Intentional content – Searle – visual experience.

1. Introduction

Every theory of Intentionality is to explain how the Intentional state must be individuated. For this purpose, most theories of Intentionality distinguish the psychological mode of the Intentional state from the objects

or state of affairs it is directed at. These are two crucial points in the individuation of the state. The Intentional states such as *a visual experience* that there is a yellow wagon there and *a remembrance* that there is a yellow wagon there are directed at the same state of affairs, whereas their psychological modes are different. Yet a visual experience *that there is a yellow wagon there* and a visual experience *that a man is walking in the garden* are psychologically the same, but are different Intentional states; because the state of affairs at which they are directed are different.

However, it is not sufficient for the individuation of an Intentional state, since there can be cases where the psychological mode and the object are the same, but the Intentional states are still different. For the same object I might have a belief *that there is a yellow wagon there* and *that there is a yellow cubic form thing there*. Therefore, most theories of Intentionality distinguish still one point – Intentional content of the state. The Intentional content of the state contains the mode of presentation of objects or state of affairs. When we specify the content, we make explicit how our Intentional state is directed at its object.

To this we should add that, when the content is complex, its structure order also becomes important for the individuation of the Intentional state. For example, my visual experiences *that the pen is on the paper* and *that the paper is on the pen* are different. Because though the contents of the states have the same constituents, their structure orders are distinct.

The content is brought into light in reflection on the Intentional state by a person who directly experiences it. So the specification of the content should be committed to the subject's mode of (re)presentation of objects or states of affairs toward which the Intentional state is directed. If I see an apple tree and specify the content of my visual experience as *an apple tree*, or *that this is an apple tree*, the specification of the content is exactly committed to my mode of presentation of that object. Even if I know much more about apple trees, I cannot specify my knowledge on the content, substitute *an apple tree*, say, with the description *a deciduous tree whose fruits I like to eat*, which might be implicit at the moment of the visual experience, or add any implicit knowledge to the content. If I do so, then it means that my specification does not express how the content exactly is.

However, there is no unique idea regarding the form of the content part of visual experience in the specification. The philosophers' approaches di-

verge as to whether the content of visual experience is equivalent to a proposition or not. Some of them (mainly philosophers from the phenomenological tradition) consider that one must use a proposition for the specification of the content only when the subject, while having a visual experience, exercise a concept or judge (cf. Mulligan 1995, 170). For the other cases, which are called *simple seeing*, a noun phrase is preferable. Searle, however, maintains that the linguistic correlate of the content should be a sentence expressing proposition.

In what follows I will argue that, holding that the specification of Intentional content of the visual experience should be in the form of a proposition, Searle gives up the first-person Intentionality and therefore bypasses the first-person important distinction between simple seeing and judgmental seeing. Moreover, if we hold the view that the role of the content in the individuation of the state consists in its containing the mode of presentation of objects or state of affairs, then Searle's theses that the specification of the content of the visual experience is propositional and that the specification of the causal self-referentiality of the visual experience is to be made explicit in the content of that state do not match that function of the content of the Intentional state. Then I will argue that the causal self-referentiality and the other features of the visual experience belong to its psychological mode but not to the Intentional content of the visual experience.

Before touching these problems in a detailed way, let us first briefly consider some ideas from Searle's conception of the visual experience, which are apt for this paper.

2. Searle's conception of the visual experience

Searle's conception of the visual experience is a part of his theory of Intentionality whose main idea is that "[...] every Intentional state consists of an *Intentional content* in a *psychological mode*. Where that content is a whole proposition and where there is a direction of fit, the Intentional content determines the *conditions of satisfaction*¹" (Searle 1983, 12). The visual expe-

¹ The conditions of satisfaction is not an unambiguous notion. In *Intentionality*, where this notion is clarified, Searle writes:

rience as a kind of the Intentional state also bears these features. For Searle, “[i]t does not just make reference to an object”, but its “[...] content requires the existence of a whole state of affairs if it is to be satisfied” (Searle 1983, 40). Therefore, he holds that the content of the visual experience has to be propositional. For example, if “I have a visual experience of a yellow station wagon”, the content of my visual experience is *that there is a yellow station wagon there*, but not merely *a yellow station wagon*. But this is not all; for he additionally holds that some kind of Intentional states (intentions, orders, and visual experiences) have more complicated content than what one can specify by directly reflecting on it. The visual experiences, like intentions and orders, for Searle, are causally self-referential, and this feature should be specified in the content of those states. So, according to him, the Intentional content of the visual experience of a yellow station wagon has to be made explicit in the following form:

Conditions of satisfaction are those conditions which, as determined by the Intentional content, must obtain if the state is to be satisfied. For this reason the specification of the content is already a specification of the conditions of satisfaction. Thus, if I have a belief that it is raining, the content of my belief is: that it is raining. And the conditions of satisfaction are: that it is raining – and not, for example, that the ground is wet or that water is falling out of the sky. (Searle 1983, 12-13)

From this passage we can see that, by holding that they have the same specification, Searle endorses the conditions of satisfaction to be depended on the Intentional content. According to his “it is raining” example – since it holds that if the same state of affairs was believed under a different aspect, the conditions of satisfaction of the corresponding Intentional state would be different – one can even maintain that, like the content, the conditions of satisfaction contain a mode of representation of the state of affairs. R. McIntyre, considering a similar interpretation, suggests that “conditions of satisfaction must be stated from the *subject’s* point of view” (McIntyre 1984, 472). However, when we deal with this notion in the context of Searle’s theory of perception, we see that his use of this notion is equivalent to the third-person notion of state of affairs, rather than to the subject’s view-point. Here, for Searle, “conditions of satisfaction are always that such and such is the case.” In what follows, corresponding to the context in which Searle uses it, we will take the notion of conditions of satisfaction to be equivalent to the notion of state of affairs.

I have a visual experience (that there is a yellow station wagon there and that there is a yellow station wagon there is causing this visual experience). (Searle 1983, 48)

The idea here is that, in the perceptual cases, it is necessary for the visual experience to be caused by the conditions of satisfaction of this very visual experience. Otherwise, the visual experience is not a perception;² it might be a hallucination, or another kind of misperception. And for Searle, that the visual experience must be caused by its conditions of satisfaction is part of the conditions of satisfaction of this visual experience; therefore, it has to be specified in the content of that experience.

3. Is the content of the visual experience equivalent to a proposition?

Searle's main reason to state that the content of visual experience is propositional is that it "[...] is an immediate (and trivial) consequence of the fact that they have conditions of satisfaction, for conditions of satisfaction are always that such and such is the case" (Searle 1983, 41). As mentioned above, the Intentional content, for Searle, always requires a state of affairs for its satisfaction (cf. Searle 1983, 41).

² Searle makes a distinction, which seems to me superfluous, between the visual experience and the perception. According to this distinction, the perception involves the notion of succeeding. The visual experience, however, might be unsuccessful either. The hallucination or illusion, for example, do possess a visual experience, but these are not perception cases. Yet this distinction violates the intuitive idea that Intentional states with the direction of fit must have two values regarding the satisfaction of their conditions; they can be either satisfied or unsatisfied. The beliefs, for example, can be either true or false. According to Searle's visual experience/perception distinction, visual experiences can have these two values, but perceptions, in order to be perceptions, must only be satisfied; because, for Searle, when they are not satisfied, they are *not* unsatisfied perceptions, what they logically must be if they are Intentional state with a direction of fit, rather unsatisfied visual experiences. So it turns out that the perception must only be true of its conditions of satisfaction – which is logically not the case. Though Searle uses the mentioned notions interchangeably, this can show that the visual experience/perception distinction is superfluous.

Two understandings of this view can be put forward. The first understanding is possible in terms of the assumption that every particular object (since it has properties) can be treated as a state of affairs; the second can be suggested in terms of the basic characteristic of the situation of seeing. Let us begin with the first.

Suppose my seeing a station wagon. The station wagon I see has properties. It has a color, weight, a certain place in the space; it can be old, without repair, and so on. That is, the object seen is, so to speak, a bundle of different states of affairs. Nevertheless, from Searle's example we can see that the phrases *there* and *in front of me* refer to the space relation between particulars, between the subject and the object, rather than to any property of the object perceived. Therefore, to hold the first view would be incorrect.

What Searle means is presumably the second, which can be called the situation of seeing. It is simple to note that in the situation of seeing there must be at least two particulars – one of them must necessarily be the person who sees and the other(s) must be object(s) of seeing – and a spatial relation between them, so that the person can see the object(s). This is a sufficient reason to state that seeing requires a state of affairs, but to my mind, not sufficient to state that the Intentional content of seeing (or visual experience) requires a state of affairs. Because the notion of situation of seeing we use here is a notion of the third-person view, whereas the notion of Intentional content of the visual experience indicates a phenomenological fact, the person's mode of presentation of that situation, but not refer to it from the "outside".³ Accordingly, they should have different specifications.

However, one might argue that, insofar as everybody has a belief that seeing entails the existence of an object in the field of vision, there must be an implicit sense in the content of every seeing that what is seen is always before the person experiencing this visual experience. Therefore, it would be reasonable to hold that the spatial indexicals such as "there" or "here" can be made explicit in the content of seeing. So, for example, it might be suggested that the content of my visual experience of a station wagon should be described by the noun phrase *a station wagon there*. Below, I will

³ That might be seen as a bare stipulation, but Searle seems to agree with this, for he holds that he deals with "first-person Intentionality".

show that such a specification of the content would be incorrect as well. But now I want to emphasize that the specification of the content with the proposition *that there is a station wagon there* would be also indefinite. Because if the situation was described from the third-person view, we could hold that, for the description is the description of a state of affairs, it must be in the form of proposition. Yet if we hold that this is a description from “first-person Intentionality”, then it must be committed to the person’s view of the situation which, depending on the person, can be seen either as an object, or as a state of affairs. Thus, if the person sees the situation as a state of affairs, it is preferable to describe it with a proposition; if not, then, for it would be different way of seeing, the description should be conducted with a noun phrase. In other words, the specification of the content must be the specification of how the subject experiences it.

If we give up this thesis and hold the view that the specification of the content of seeing must be only propositional, then ambiguities in the description will be inevitable. Because from the intuitive level of experiencing our visual experiences we know that we should distinguish between *simple seeing* and *judgmental seeing*. This distinction

[...] is evident from the fact that at any given moment we perceive many more objects, and features of objects, than we make judgments about. When I look out of my window at my garden and judge on the basis of what I see that the tree in my garden is blooming, I see at that moment other plants besides the tree. I also see at that moment many more features of that tree besides its blossoms, features, about which I judge (at that moment) nothing at all. (Miller 1984, 34)

To put it otherwise, in most cases when we have visual experiences, we do not judge; we simply perceive. A judgmental seeing, however, is entertained when we make judgments on the basis of our visual experiences which are concurrent with those judgments.

If we make such a distinction between simple seeing and judgmental seeing, it is simple necessity that descriptions of the content of these experiences must also be distinguished from each other. And it is useful to employ noun phrases for the first cases, and propositions for the second cases, in order to show these two different ways of seeing on the descriptive level.

Searle’s neglect of this convention derives from the fact that, though he deals with “first-person Intentionality”, he passes over the distinction

between simple seeing and judgmental seeing, which is an evident phenomenological fact, and specifies the contents of visual experiences with a whole proposition in terms of the third-person view, which does not allow noticing this distinction.

4. The causal self-referentiality as a feature of the psychological mode

Now let us consider Searle's thesis that the causal self-referentiality of the visual experience has to be specified in the content of that experience. For this purpose, let us put aside his view that the content of seeing is equivalent to a proposition. Because whether the content is propositional or not is irrelevant here; for both cases we observe the same fact: what is initially specified in the content is enriched by the contentual constituents which are step by step made explicit. For example, while seeing a station wagon, we first realize that the content of my visual experience is not simply *a station wagon*, but *a station wagon there* (or *there is a station wagon there*). Then, analyzing more deeply, it is figured out that the visual experiences have the feature of causal self-referentiality which should also be specified in the content.

Here I am going to show that the features of the visual experiences such as causal self-referentiality, or *thereness*, do not belong to the content and therefore cannot be specified in the content of the visual experiences.

The fact that does not let specify the content of my seeing *that there is such and such there* as *that there is such and such there and that there is such and such there is causing this visual experience* (cf. Searle 1983, 48) could be that the part of content which describes the causal self-referentiality of my visual experience is not accessible to my reflection on the content from the first person view. No matter how much I would reflect on my content of the visual experience, I cannot find in it "that there is a yellow station wagon there is causing this visual experience." This is evident from the fact that whenever we see we do not exercise the concept of the causality in the content of our experience.

Yet Searle himself foresees this problem. He adds that "[...] the sense in which the visual experience is self-referential is simply that it figures in its

own conditions of satisfaction”, but “[...] not that it contains a verbal or other representation of itself [...]” (Searle 1983, 49). By this Searle means that the part specifying the causal self-referentiality in the content is not a representation as the other normal part. Rather, it is the specification of conditions of satisfaction what requires the causal self-referentiality to be added into the content.⁴

However, to my mind, if we hold that the content’s function is to determine how the state exactly relates itself to the world, and accept the intuitive idea in terms of which is made a distinction between the content and psychological mode of the Intentional state – namely, the idea that, while the psychological mode is held, the content of the state can vary depending on constituents (and their structure order) of which it consists or vice versa – then the specification of the causal self-referentiality in the content seems to be incorrect.

To see this, let us pose a question: What makes the visual experience a psychologically distinct kind of the Intentional state? We can answer this question by observing that the Intentional state called the visual experience is intuitively distinct from other kinds of Intentional states. That is, as we have a visual experience, we experience typologically special Intentional state whose distinctness is evidently noticed from the first-person view when we compare it with the other kinds of Intentional states; in visual experiences we experience the Intentional object as sensuously self-given. We can represent the same object in different Intentional states; we can remember, desire it (cf. Husserl 1970, LI V, §20). However, it is easy to observe that when we give up seeing and change the psychological mode, though the content can remain, the self-giveness of the object also disappears.

It is the feature of self-giveness of the object what compels philosophers to specify the visual experience by distinct ways. Most philosophers, including Searle – as we have seen – specify this basic feature of seeing with using different indexicals in the content part of the specification. D.W. Smith, for example, uses the indexicals *this* or *that*, arguing that the content of seeing has a demonstrative element. By this he means “[...] that feature of a visual experience – that part of its intentional character – which

⁴ This view is the continuation of Searle’s idea that the Intentional content and the conditions of satisfaction have the same specification (cf. Searle 1983, 13).

consists in its being a presentation of a particular object visually before the subject” (Smith 1989, 41). D.W. Smith mentions two features which for him are derived from the demonstrative content: 1) “a *singular* presentation of a particular object ‘itself’”; and 2) “a presentation of a particular object *sensuously before* the subject” and its “causing this very experience.” In other words, the demonstrative content *this* engenders two features which is described by still two indexicals: *itself* for the singularity, and *there* (or *here*) for an object’s being before the subject so that the object can cause this experience. If we explicate all this features, the content of our visual experience of a station wagon, according to Smith, will be: *this station wagon itself there and causing this very experience* (cf. Smith 1989, 45).

However, what Searle firstly emphasizes is not *that-* or *thisness* of the content, but *thereness* of the object, which, according to Smith, is derivable from *thisness* of seeing. But at any rate, for Searle, the causal feature is also derivable from *thereness*, in other words, from the fact that the object seen is sensuously before the subject. In a nutshell, both philosophers agree that the indexical feature of the visual experience should be specified in the content. That seems to me unjustifiable.

One basic reason that makes me suspicious of the specification of *thereness* in the content of the visual experience is its relatedness or reducibility to the self-consciousness. Self-consciousness “happens for the experiencing subject in an immediate way and as part of this immediacy, it is implicitly marked as my experience” (Gallagher – Zahavi 2005). However, it is the easiest explicable feature of Intentional states. If I make explicit the content of my visual experience together with the self-consciousness, I would have to use the proposition *I see a station wagon*, which refers to “a whole state of affairs”. Now, if the causal feature is reducible to *thereness*, considering that the situation of seeing involves at least two particulars (subject and object) and a spatial relation between them, then one can assimilate *that I see a station wagon* into *that there is a station wagon there*. Because in the latter proposition *a station wagon* refers to the object seen, but the subject – I – is hidden or implicit under the spatial indexical *there*. In other words, *there* here refers to a certain place which is only *there* from the perspective of the person who sees that object. It is in virtue of the self-consciousness that the subject is conscious of the object’s being in front of her, or *there*, in the visual experience. If there were no self-consciousness, then, whether it be implicit or explicit, she could not have the sense *there*. Therefore, *there*

necessarily implies the second particular as an implicitly self-conscious subject.

This speculation shows that *thereness* and the causal feature of seeing is derived from deeper structures of consciousness and that is why it cannot be made explicit in the specification of Intentional content, which is the surface, more vulnerable to changes, aspect of consciousness with the function to determine how the Intentional state exactly relates itself to the world at the given moment. *Thisness* or *thereness*, as well as causal self-referentiality, however, are features that, independent of the content, belong to each satisfied visual experience; if one has a satisfied visual experience, she has these features necessarily. They always recur regardless of the content, making that kind of Intentional states be identical to themselves (from the standpoint of their psychological mode).

The other reason which does not allow specifying *thereness* and the causal feature in the content, like in the case of propositional/noun phrase specification of the content, is related to the conventional side of the description. Namely, if we specify the features of seeing in the content, then the ambiguities can take place. Suppose a wagon station to be near on my road to the railway station and suppose that it is first time that I see it. While seeing it, I simply pay attention to its being a station wagon. If somebody asked me "what do you see?" my answer would be "I see a station wagon" or "I see that this is a station wagon"; because the other properties of the station wagon are irrelevant for me. Now suppose another case where, while seeing a station wagon, I am interested in seeing a station wagon with considering its place, but I have no any description for its place. Then the content of my visual experience would be *a station wagon there*. Now, this *there* is distinct from Searle's (or Smith's) specification of *there* in the content in the sense that it is taken to be explicit together with *a station wagon*, but is not made explicit in terms of the philosophical meditation on the visual experience as a kind of Intentional state. Yet, by specifying the content with *there* for all (re)presentationally different cases of visual experience of the same object, we cannot distinguish whether *there* in the content expresses the explicitness of subject's considering the place of the object or is made explicit by the meditation as an implicit feature which is general for all visual experiences independent of what the content explicitly represents. Hence, if we want to make explicit these features, it would be correct to ascribe the part specifying *thereness*, or the causal self-

referentiality (...*that there is such and such there is causing this visual experience*), not to the content of the state but to its psychological mode. However, since the verbs that stand for the psychological mode perform this function, we do not usually do such specifications. When I specify my seeing an object, say, as *I see that this is such and such*, the verb *see* here, for it refers to the psychological mode of my Intentional state, stands for the feature of *thereness* and the causal self-referentiality as well. To put it otherwise, to use the relevant (verb) expressions as shorthand for the psychological modes, or for their features, together with the expressions specifying the content, is sufficient for the whole specification of the visual experience.

5. Conclusion

I have considered that Searle gives up the first-person Intentionality when he analyses the specification of Intentional content of the visual experience and therefore bypasses the first-person important distinction between simple seeing and judgmental seeing. The specification of the content only in the form of the sentence expressing proposition does not allow making such a distinction on the level of description. Then I have argued that the causal self-referentiality and the other features of the visual experience such as *thereness* belong to its psychological mode but not to the Intentional content of the visual experience.

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