

Introduction

PERCEPTION, DESIRE AND INTENTION

My goal in this dissertation will be to draw certain analogies and disanalogies between the psychological transitions from perceptual experience to perceptual belief (which fall under the umbrella of what I call *theoretical transitions*), and the psychological transitions from desires to intentions (which fall under the umbrella of what I call *practical transitions*). The hope is that the comparative work carried out in the present investigation will help to illuminate our understanding of both types of transitions.

To define terms, let us say that an agent has the *perceptual belief* that some *X* is *F*—for example, that the object before her is red—just in case that agent has a perceptual experience with the content *X* is *F* and the belief in question is an instance of assent to that perceptual content.¹ On this view, the content of a belief must be identical to the content made available by a perceptual experience to which the agent assents in order for the former to be properly described as a perceptual belief. In short, I define a perceptual belief as assent to perceptual content. However, the following two points of clarification are in order. First, the claim that one forms the perceptual belief that *X* is *F* by assenting to a perceptual experience with that content does not entail that *X* is *F* exhausts the content of the perceptual experience to which the agent assents. An agent may perceive that *X* is *F*, *G*, and *H*, and yet only form the perceptual belief that *X* is *F* and *G* based on that perceptual experience. On the present account, the belief that *X* is *F* and *G* still counts as a perceptual belief, even if the content of the belief does not exhaust the content of the perceptual experience upon which it is based. Second, the present account of perceptual belief leaves room for the possibility that an agent may arrive at the belief that *X* is *F* and *G* in response to a perceptual experience with the content that *X* is *F*. However, the belief that *X* is *F* and *G* would not be a

¹ The content of a perceptual experience (or the corresponding perceptual belief) should not be confused with the content of a linguistic report of that perceptual experience or belief. Typically, the content of the former is comparatively richer and more fine-grained than the content of the latter. For example, if an agent sees that the object before her is red, the content of her visual experience is typically richer and more fine-grained than the content conveyed by her assertion: “the object before me is red”. Furthermore, I hold that when an agent forms the perceptual belief that the object before her is red, what she assents to is the content of her perceptual experience, not the less finely grained content of the corresponding linguistic assertion. A general discussion of the content of linguistic reports falls outside the scope of the present investigation.

perceptual belief. It may be the conjunction of the content of the perceptual belief that X is F, and the content of a non-perceptual belief that X is G, or it may be the conjunction of the content of two perceptual beliefs. However, insofar as the content of the two beliefs are conjoined to form another belief—namely, one with the content that X is F and G—this new belief (even if the product of two perceptual beliefs) is not itself a perceptual belief. I will be presupposing the above definition of perceptual belief throughout my investigation.

On the view I wish to defend, a perceptual belief is simply an attitude an agent adopts toward the content (or part thereof) of a perceptual experience. Hence, a perceptual belief may be said to share its content with the perceptual experience upon which it is based. I will refer to the psychological process that begins with the introduction of a certain content into thought by a perceptual experience and that culminates in assent to that content as a *transition from a perceptual experience to a perceptual belief*. The perceptual experience that constitutes the starting point of the transition makes a particular content available to an agent, at which point any number of psychological attitudes or mental activities may be directed toward that content. It may simply be entertained (i.e., held in mind), assented to (i.e., believed), dismissed as unreliable (i.e., disbelieved), modified by the imagination, combined with other contents, and so on. Thus, a perceptual belief is only one of any number of possible attitudes that can be taken toward the content of a perceptual experience.

When one perceives a certain state of affairs (e.g., that the object before one is red), one's perceptual experience represents that state of affairs as being the case. When one assents to the content of one's perceptual experience (i.e., when one forms a perceptual belief), one is assenting to a certain state of affairs being the case. Let us refer to this kind of assent as *theoretical assent*.² Analogously, I wish to argue that when one desires a certain state of affairs, one's desire represents that state of affairs as something to be brought about. Two points of qualification are worth noting at the very outset. First, I hold that, strictly speaking, a desire represents a certain state of affairs as something to be brought about *by me* (i.e., the agent who has the desire). Hence, the content of a desire includes, not only that a certain state of affairs is to be brought about, but that the state of affairs is to be brought about *by me*.³ However, for the sake of convenience, I will continue to say that desires represent a particular state of affairs as something to be brought about, with the qualification, 'by me', left implicit. Second, I will only be concerned with a certain subset of desires; namely, those that can

² The transitions from perceptual experiences to perceptual beliefs are only one example of theoretical transitions. I follow the standard practice of applying the label "theoretical" to all belief-yielding psychological transitions. However, the present discussion will be limited to case of perceptual belief, since it is there that I believe the analogy between theoretical and practical transitions are most striking.

³ In this regard, desires are like perceptual experiences, which have what Christopher Peacocke refers to as "first-person content" (C. Peacocke [2003], "Awareness, Ownership, and Knowledge", *Agency and Self-Awareness*. J. Roessler and N. Eilan (eds), (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 104).

feature in practical transitions. There are some kinds of desires, such as the desire that it rain tomorrow, that cannot feature in a practical transition (insofar as it's raining tomorrow is not something one can intend). However, in the discussion that follows, I will use the word 'desire' to refer only to desires that are potentially intention-yielding.

I define an intention as assent to a representation of a certain state of affairs as something to be brought about.⁴ Hence, one may be said to form an intention if one assents to the content of a desire. I will refer to the type of assent instantiated in an intention as *practical assent*. It is worth emphasising that the notion of assent at play here is a technical one, and I will attempt to unpack it more fully in the chapters that follow. The difference between theoretical and practical assent has both to do with the different types of content assented to (a claim about which I will have more to say shortly) and the different types of psychological attitudes (i.e., sets of dispositions) such assent instantiates—beliefs in the case of the former, and intentions in the case of the latter.⁵

The content of a perceptual experience may be described as *true* just in case the state of affairs that the perceptual experience represents as being the case actually is the case, and *false* otherwise. I will refer to all content that can be assigned a truth-value as *theoretical content*. I hold that, like the content of a perceptual experience, the content of a desire exhibits a two-valued logical structure. However, I deny that the content of a desire has a truth-value. This denial seems to comport with our quotidian intuitions about the content of desires. For example, if I desire to purchase a new flat screen television, we do not typically think of the content of my desire as being either true or false. This piece of common sense is given theoretical plausibility by the thesis, defended in the present investigation, that desires do not represent a particular state of

⁴ This commits me to the view that intentions are distinct psychological phenomenon, and stands opposed to attempts to reduce intentions to other psychological states, like beliefs and desires. Philosophers who explicitly defend such a reduction include: D. Davidson [1980], "Actions, Reasons and Causes", *Essays on Actions and Events*. (New York: Oxford University Press); R. Audi, [1973], "Intending", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 70, pp. 387-403; and P. Churchland [1970], "The Logical Character of Action-Explanations", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 79, pp. 214-236. Philosophers who resist such a reduction include: M. Bratman [1984], "Intention and Means-end Reasoning", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 90, pp. 252-265; J. Searle [1983], *Intentionality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); and B. Aune [1977], *Reason and Action*. (Dordrecht: Reidel), esp. pp. 89-102.

⁵ The notion of theoretical and practical assent I wish to defend bears a number of important similarities to the two kinds of 'endorsement' limned in the work of Hector-Neri Castañeda. (See: H. Castañeda [1975], *Thinking and Doing*. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel), chapter 10. See also: H. Castañeda [1983], "Reply to Brand", *Agent, Language, and the Structure of the Will*. J. Tomberlin (ed.), (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company), pp. 411-417. Like Castañeda [1983], I see belief and intention as being fundamentally different attitudes that involve different sets of dispositions and different kinds of content (p. 412). Hence, I reject both what Myles Brand [1983] refers to as *Object-Assimilationism* and *Attitude-Assimilationism*; the claims that intentions and beliefs share a common object and a common psychological attitude, respectively. (M. Brand [1983], "Intending and Believing", *Agent, Language, and the Structure of the Will*. J. Tomberlin (ed.), (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company), pp. 171-193.

affairs as being the case. Nevertheless, we do ordinarily think that the content of a desire may be defective in certain ways. For example, suppose I desire to close my bedroom window when, in fact, my bedroom window is already closed. There seems to be an intuitive sense in which the content of my desire is defective. Given that the content of some desires are defective while the content of others are not, and assuming that these exhaust the relevant possibilities, it follows that the content of desires are two-valued. Moreover, the fact that one of the two possible values is preferable to the other entails that there is a norm of some kind that applies to these values.

I believe we put our finger on why the content of a desire to close my bedroom window is deemed defective when the window is already closed by registering that my desire to close my bedroom window *presupposes* that my bedroom window is open. However, I maintain that the predication, “my bedroom window is open”, is not itself part of the content of my desire. Hence, while the content of a desire does not represent a particular state of affairs as being the case, it does presuppose (in an intuitive sense) that certain states of affairs are the case. In this regard, the content of a desire is like the content of a command, request, or prescription (which I also take to have practical content).⁶ For example, the imperative: “You, shut the door!” does not have the predicate: “the door is open” as part of its content. However, the content of the imperative presupposes (in an intuitive sense) the content of the predicate. Hence, I hold that the representation of a certain state of affairs as something to be brought about presupposes, but does not include as part of its content, that certain states of affairs are the case.

I will reserve the labels *true* and *false* for content that represents certain states of affairs as being the case. This is a terminological decision. I am not, in principle, opposed to saying that a desire is true (in some technical sense) just in case all the states of affairs presupposed by its content obtain. This manner of speaking is innocuous once we keep in mind that the content of a desire presupposes but does not include that certain states of affairs obtain. However, I will not speak this way. Instead, I will say (borrowing Castañeda’s terminology) that the content of a desire is *legitimate* when all the states of affairs presupposed by its content obtain, and *nonlegitimate* if some state of affairs presupposed by its content fails to obtain. Hence, I will describe desires as possessing *legitimacy-conditions*.⁷ There are at least two advantages to the present choice in terminology. First, the introduction of the labels ‘legitimate’ and ‘nonlegitimate’ explicitly registers that the correctness-conditions of desires are different from those of belief. Second, it comports with our ordinary

⁶ Although I hold that the content of a command or request is practical, just like the content of a desire or intention, I do not believe that the two sets of contents are the same in all respects. Specifically, while the content of the latter pair is first-personal, the content of the former pair is second-personal. Prescriptions may have either second or third-personal content.

⁷ Cf. Castañeda [1975], ch. 5ff.

linguistic practice, which generally refrains from applying the labels 'true' and 'false' to the content of desires.

I believe that the preceding observations about the content of desires generalise to all types of practical content. On this score, I am committed to the following two claims; one primarily negative and the other primarily positive. The first, primarily negative, claim is that practical content is different in kind to theoretical content since the latter represents a particular state of affairs as being the case while the former does not. The second, primarily positive, claim is that practical content represents a particular state of affairs as something to be brought about. One upshot of the negative claim is that one cannot intend the content of a perceptual experience or believe the content of a desire. Of course, the content of a theoretical and practical transition may be about the same thing. For example, one may believe that one will take the Chemistry exam tomorrow and one may desire to take the Chemistry exam tomorrow. However, while the belief and desire both have contents having to do with taking the Chemistry exam tomorrow, insofar as the content of the belief and desire have different kinds of correctness-conditions (truth-conditions and legitimacy-conditions, respectively), they do not share the same content-type. In other words, since the content-type implicated in the belief that one will take the Chemistry exam tomorrow is deemed defective if one fails to take the Chemistry exam tomorrow, but the content-type implicated in the desire to take the Chemistry exam tomorrow is not deemed defective if one fails to take the Chemistry exam tomorrow, I maintain that the belief and desire involve different content-types.⁸

The positive claim—namely, that desires represent particular states of affairs as something to be brought about—entails that the content of desire has a two-valued logical structure. The entailment follows from the conjunction of the claim that desires have representational content and the definition of representational content presupposed in the present study; namely, intentional content that has a two-valued logical structure. The claim that the content of desires exhibit a two-valued logical structure makes room for the third major thesis I wish to defend; namely, that desires, and other psychological states with practical content, may feature in rational transitions. Like the transition from a perceptual experience to a perceptual belief, the transition from a desire to an intention is an example of a transition *into* thought. However, while assent to the content of a perceptual experience (i.e., a perceptual

⁸ We may gain a firmer grasp on the claim that the content-type of a desire or intention is different from the content-type of a perceptual experience or belief by distinguishing between a content's matter and its form. Let us refer to a content's matter as the state of affairs the content is about. Let us refer to a content's form as the type of correctness-condition that the content takes. In order for content C_1 to be identical with content C_2 , C_1 and C_2 must be the same in terms of their matter and their form. Since this is never true in the case of the content of a perceptual experience or belief, on the one hand, and the content of a desire or intention, on the other, the former pair can never be said to have the same content as the latter pair.

belief) involves taking that content to be true, assent to the content of a desire (i.e., an intention) involves taking that content to be legitimate. Moreover, just as assent to a perceptual experience with false content yields a false perceptual belief, so too assent to a desire with nonlegitimate content yields a nonlegitimate intention. Further, just as there are rational norms governing the transitions from one belief to another (i.e., transitions *in* thought), so too there are rational norms governing the transition from one intention to another. For example, we may say that the content of a belief or set of beliefs, B_1 , logically implies the content of a belief or set of beliefs, B_2 , just in case the set of states of affairs represented as being the case by B_2 is a subset of the set of states of affairs represented as being the case by B_1 . Analogously, we may say that the content of an intention or set of intentions, N_1 , “logically” implies the content of another intention or set of intentions, N_2 , just in case the set of states of affairs presupposed by N_2 is a subset of the set of states of affairs presupposed by N_1 .

The word ‘logically’ appears in scare quotes (in the previous sentence) in order to flag that I am not talking about a relation that holds between truth-value bearing items. Terminological purists would, no doubt, resist a literal application of the word ‘logical’ to such items. However, part of what I wish to call into question is the assumption that only truth-value bearing items can stand in a logical relation to each other. Thus, I maintain that practical contents, though they lack a truth-value, may stand in certain logical relations to each other. This claim is given added plausibility when we consider that all of the standard logical connectives may be applied to practical contents. Negation: one may intend not to have the slice of cheesecake on one’s plate⁹; conjunction: one may intend to brush one’s teeth and go to bed; disjunction: one may intend to catch the number 1 train or the number 2 train; conditional: one may intend to attend the party only if one intends to dance the night away; and biconditional: one may intend to pass the class if and only if one intends to fulfil all the course requirements. Moreover, the standard equivalence rules may also be applied to practical contents. For example, the practical thought expressed by the preceding conditional is preserved when we reformulate it in terms of the equivalent disjunction: one may intend to either not attend the party or dance the night away.

Another claim that is likely to spark the ire of terminological purists is my insistence that desires have *representational* content. It is standard to reserve the label ‘representational’ for contents with truth-values. Given this manner of speaking, it follows from the claim that the content of desires lack truth-values that desires lack representational content. We may accommodate the standard terminology, without doing violence to the picture presently on offer, by simply registering that although all representational content (i.e., content with a truth-value) is intentional content (i.e.,

⁹ The intention not to have the slice of cheesecake on one’s plate should not be confused with not having the intention to have the slice of cheesecake on one’s plate; the former entails that one has a certain intention while the latter does not.

content that is about some state of affairs), all intentional content is not representational content. Specifically, while the content of a desire is about a certain state of affairs (and therefore intentional), it nevertheless lacks a truth-value (and is therefore not representational). Under this re-description, my claim that desires have representational content simply amounts to the claim that representational content is not the only type of intentional content with a two-valued logical structure; which just is to say that truth-conditions are not the only type of correctness-condition. Thus, the view presently on offer can be re-described so as to accommodate the standard terminology. However, I will go against philosophical orthodoxy by using the word ‘representational’ to refer to any content that displays a two-valued logical structure (whether truth-value bearing or not).

There may be a temptation to object to the preceding characterisation of the correctness-conditions of practical contents—i.e., legitimacy-conditions—on the grounds that it is too normatively thin. For example, if one was committed to a guise of the good account of desires and intentions, one may wish to say that to desire or intend to bring about a certain state of affairs is to conceive of that state of affairs as good. On this view, to desire to open my bedroom window is to conceive of opening my bedroom window as good, in a normatively thick sense that goes beyond a mere description of the physical prerequisites (e.g., my window being closed) for the opening of my window to be brought about. However, by apparently restricting legitimacy-conditions to the conditions necessary for bringing about a certain state of affairs, the account presently on offer seems unable to accommodate anything like the normatively thick conception we find embodied in guise of the good accounts.

While I do not wish to endorse a guise of the good account (at least with respect to practical content in general), I believe that the notion of legitimacy-conditions presently on offer can accommodate, and is therefore potentially no less normatively robust than, the guise of the good account. For example, let us say that the realisation of the good is the constitutive aim of desire, just as the realisation of the true is the constitutive aim of belief.¹⁰ One natural way to unpack the claim that desire has the good as its constitutive aim is to say that when a desire represents a particular state of affairs as something to be brought about, the satisfaction conditions for that desire includes the goodness of that state of affairs. However, the constitutive aim is most plausibly seen as attaching to the attitude itself rather than to the content of that attitude. This suggests that it would be a mistake to assume, based solely on the premise that the good is the constitutive aim of belief, that the content of desire

¹⁰ I derive the present formulation of the guise of the good account from Anscombe, who posits that “truth is the object of judgement, and good the object of wanting” (G. M. Anscombe [1963], *Intention*. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, pp. 76). On an alternative construal of the guise of the good thesis, the good represents the constitutive aim of intention but not of desire. The argument that follows may be adapted, *mutatis mutandis*, to accommodate such formulations of the guise of the good thesis.

includes a representation of a certain state of affairs as good. Hence, we must find some other way of unpacking the claim that an attitude has a certain constitutive aim. Moreover, whatever alternative proposal we arrive at must preserve the idea that the satisfaction conditions for a desire includes the goodness of the desired state of affairs. The notion of legitimacy-conditions presently on offer is particular well suited for this purpose. The key is to include among those states of affairs presupposed by the content of a psychological attitude any state of affair that must obtain in order for the constitutive aim of that attitude to be satisfied. Thus, if the realisation of the good is the constitutive aim of my desire to close my bedroom window, then the fact that closing my bedroom window is a realisation of the good is presupposed by the representation of closing my bedroom window as something to be brought about. The upshot is that the representation of closing my bedroom window as something to be brought about is legitimate only if closing my bedroom window is, in fact, a realisation of the good. Hence, the notion of legitimacy may be made to accommodate a normatively thick conception of the correctness-conditions of desires, including the thesis that the good is the constitutive aim of psychological attitudes with practical content.¹¹

Finally, I wish to comment briefly on the general theoretical framework in which the present investigation figures. The notion of a psychological transition that features in the present study is associated with a mode of explanation in which the explanatory items (i.e., the *explanans*) are states or processes with representational content (i.e., psychological phenomena). This mode of explanation requires that the representational content of the states and processes involved in a transition stand in a certain normative (i.e., logical) relation to each other, in order for them to carry out their explanatory function. This mode of explanation stands in contrast to one in which the explanans either lack representational content altogether or in which the logical relations that hold between the representational content of the explanans is simply not relevant (such as the mode of explanation one finds in the natural sciences). Following Donald Davidson, I hold that it is possible to re-describe a psychological transition in non-psychological terms; that is, in terms that render their representational content irrelevant.¹² However, once such a re-description has been undertaken, one loses touch with the mode of explanation in which talk of reasons, truth and goodness are relevant.

¹¹ Personally, I favour something more along the lines of Alan Millar's account of the constitutive aim of intentional action, which is that the intended action have a point. See: A. Millar [2004], *Understanding People*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 63-68. However, in the case of moral agents, I believe that desire has the constitutive aim of realising only the morally permissible. The upshot is that, for moral agents, a piece of practical content is legitimate only if it is morally permissible.

¹² Like Davidson, I endorse an ontological reduction, but oppose a conceptual reduction, of the psychological (or what Davidson refers to as the 'mental') to the physical. See: D. Davidson [2004], *Problems of Rationality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

I will refer to the mode of explanation that considers the logical relations that hold between psychological states or processes as *folk-psychological explanations*. Folk-psychological explanations stand in contrast to the neurophysiological explanations one finds in certain branches of empirical psychology, which fail to consider the logical relations that hold between the representational content of psychological states or processes. They also stand in contrast to the type of teleological explanations offered by evolutionary psychology. Under a teleological characterisation, the function of a psychological state or process is to promote the inclusive fitness of the agent enjoying the psychological state or process. Under a folk-psychological characterisation, the function of a psychological state or process is to render the behaviour (linguistic or otherwise) of the agent enjoying the psychological state or process intelligible. The investigation carried out in this dissertation is continuous with the folk-psychological mode of explanation; a mode of explanation that considers the logical relations that hold between psychological states; a mode of explanation that is fundamentally concerned with our attempts to render an agent's thoughts and actions intelligible; a mode of explanation in which talk of theoretical and practical transitions, understood as distinct types of rational transitions, finds its home.