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## Propositional and Nonpropositional Perceiving

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The general theory of perception proposed by Roderick Chisholm in his book *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*<sup>1</sup> has gained considerable acceptance among contemporary philosophers of perception. In this paper, I will review and evaluate one *part* of this theory and show where I believe an important modification is necessary.

Chisholm distinguishes what he thinks are two importantly different senses of “perceive,” a propositional and a nonpropositional sense, and then proposes a definition of each. The *propositional* sense of “perceive” is expressed in contexts in which what is perceived is referred to by a propositional clause, as in

1. George perceives that this is a door.

The *nonpropositional* sense is expressed in contexts in which the perceptual object is referred to by a noun or noun phrase, as in

2. George perceives the door.

The problem areas I will deal with are, first and foremost, the adequacy of the definitions Chisholm gives of these two senses, and second, the ways in which these senses are related to one another.

In the first section, dealing with the propositional sense, I will not be concerned with propositional perceivings in their entirety. Specifically, I will not be concerned with them as instances of *knowing* that something is such and such, which is a central feature of Chisholm’s definition. Rather, I will be concerned mainly with the mental state, qua mental, which is involved in these perceptions, that is, the mental state considered apart from any relation it may have to the object it is about. I will assume that the mental state involved in a propositional perceiving is a *conceptual* state, i.e., one which involves the exercise of concepts or thoughts, together with an accompanying propositional attitude. The key locution Chisholm uses to describe this conceptual mental state is “S *takes* something to have

some property." I will argue that Chisholm's definition of *taking* will not do the job it is intended to do in these perceptual contexts.

In the second section, I will explore what Chisholm calls the "simplest" nonpropositional sense of "perceive," which he defines wholly in terms of a *causal* relation existing between the object perceived and the subject's sensory state. Significantly, this definition does not make any reference to a taking or to any propositional state on the part of the subject, but only to the subject's sensory state. Consequently, if one accepts the idea, as I believe Chisholm would, that sensing is a nonconceptual state, then Chisholm's nonpropositional sense of "perceive" would not refer to any conceptual fact at all.

I will consider Chisholm's definition, and raise the question of whether nonpropositional perceptual contexts should ever be construed as having a propositional meaning, that is, as including the idea that the subject exhibits some thought. As we shall see, Chisholm makes allowance for such a possibility.

## I

I will take as my starting point the definition offered by Chisholm of "the most important propositional use of 'perceive'" (p. 142), which runs as follows:

3. There is something that S perceives to be *f* means:
  - (a) there is an *x* which is *f*
  - (b) *x* appears in some way to S
  - (c) S takes *x* to be *f*
  - (d) S has adequate evidence for the proposition that *x* is *f*. (p. 3).

An alternative formulation given by Chisholm of the same use is:

4. S perceives something to have such and such a characteristic. (p. 3).

The fact that Chisholm takes sentences of the form (3) and (4) as paradigmatic expressions of the propositional sense, rather than the more common form

5. S perceives that *x* is *f*

indicates, I believe, that he wishes to restrict his definition to a subclass of propositional perceivings, namely, to those cases in which the subject is also (nonpropositionally) perceiving *x*. This restriction may also be inferred from the fact that the definition includes the condition, (b), that *x* appears in some way to S, which, according to Chisholm's analysis of "appears," means that *x* is causing S to sense in a certain way, which is how Chisholm defines the nonpropositional sense of "perceive" (p. 147). Thus Chisholm is not concerned with the sort of case where, for example, George perceives that Mary is still in the shower because he hears that the shower water is still running. In this discussion, I will accept without quarrel this restriction on the proposed definition, since it does not affect the point I wish to make about its adequacy.

Initially then, Chisholm's characterization of the mental state involved in perceiving something *x* to be *f* is contained in conditions (b) and (c)—namely that S is in a certain sensory state brought about by *x*, and also takes *x* to be *f*.

Let us then turn to the definition Chisholm gives of the central concept of *taking*. According to this definition, someone's taking something to have some characteristic is identical with his having certain beliefs about what is causing him to sense in the way that he is. The definition is as follows:

6. S takes something  $x$  to be  $f$  means: S believes (i) that  $x$ 's being  $f$  is a causal condition of the way he is being appeared to and (ii) that there are possible ways of varying  $x$  which would cause concomitant variations in the way he is appeared to (p.77).

It should be noted, first of all, that while  $S$ 's *taking* something  $x$  to be  $f$  is not simply a matter of his *believing*  $x$  to be  $f$ , it would seem that it does entail that  $S$  has this belief, since it is difficult to see how anyone could have the belief mentioned in condition (i) without at the same time believing  $x$  to be  $f$ .

One thing Chisholm seems to be doing with this definition of "takes" is giving an account of the difference between *perceptual* beliefs and corresponding *nonperceptual* beliefs. For when someone nonperceptually believes, for example, that something over there is a door, although usage permits us to say that he is taking something over there to be a door, his mental state would not be a taking in Chisholm's technical sense if it did not include the relevant beliefs about causation.

But while Chisholm's definition of taking, and of propositional perceiving, does succeed in linking the perceiver's conceptual state, by means of certain of his beliefs, with his sensory state and with his immediate perceptual environment, I will show in a moment that it does not succeed in distinguishing perceptual from nonperceptual mental states.

A propositional perceiving must be distinguished, on the one hand, from a mere sensory state, i.e., one which has no propositional element, and on the other, from one which is a mere thinking (and believing) a proposition. But I will show that Chisholm has failed to distinguish a perceiving from the latter state, since his definition holds even when the subject's mental state is a believing (where this belief is accompanied by the appropriate sensation) and not a perceiving—proving that something more must be said about the subject's mental state.

Imagine that an underworld crook, Rocky by name, is visiting a fellow gangster, Charlie, in Charlie's den. Charlie tells Rocky that he has just had a secret door installed in the paneled wall that they are both facing. Rocky however cannot detect the door, much to Charlie's delight. But since Charlie never ever lies to his friends, Rocky does not have the slightest doubt that there is a door somewhere in that paneled wall.

Now if Chisholm's definition of the propositional sense of "perceive" is the correct one, we must say in this situation that Rocky is perceiving, and in this case seeing, something to be a door in the wall. For it happens that there is something before him which is a door in the wall. It is causing him to sense in the appropriate way. Rocky takes the thing to be a door in the wall (because he believes that the door is causing his visual sensations, and that changes in the door would cause corresponding changes in his sensations), and he has adequate evidence for the proposition that there is a door in the wall.

But Rocky's taking the thing to be a door in the wall is not a *perceptual* taking; he does not *see* the thing to be a door. Chisholm's definition is unacceptable because the concept of *taking* which it employs is too inclusive.

It might be thought that this difficulty could be avoided by further specifying the relation that must hold between the sensing and the taking: it could be said that the taking is a perceptual taking only if the beliefs it involves are *caused* by one's sensory state. Rocky's taking something to be a door in the wall must be caused not by Charlie's telling him so, but simply by his looking at and sensing the wall.

But while such a qualification must, I believe, be added, it will not help us out of our present difficulties. For suppose Rocky has independent knowledge that Charlie has a hidden door in his paneled wall. Upon looking at the wall he is reminded of this fact and is thereby caused to have the appropriate occurrent beliefs. But still he does not *see* something to be a door in the wall.

I believe we have now shown that Chisholm's definition of propositional perceiving is unsatisfactory, for it applies to some nonperceptual takings. What we are looking for, of course, is a definition which is immune to the sort of counterexample we have given. But while I cannot now formulate such a definition, I can at least give some positive idea of what would be involved in constructing one. The point I wish to make can be arrived at by returning once again to our gangsters, Charlie and Rocky, and trying to determine what it is precisely that is different about their respective perceptual situations.

First of all, both Charlie and Rocky are taking something to be a door in the wall. Moreover, both are *identifying* the door as a door in the wall. But Rocky is identifying the door as a door in the wall by conceiving it in this way, whereas Charlie is identifying the door by perceiving it as a door. In other words, Charlie has *visually identified* the door in the wall. And what is causing Charlie to do this is either his visually identifying certain telltale signs of the door (cracks or grooves), or his remembering past occasions on which he saw (and hence visually identified) the door's being open, or both. Rocky, for his part, will not be seeing something to be a door until he also visually identifies it in some manner as a door.

Limiting ourselves for a moment to visual perception, the question that now arises is: how can we further characterize this mental state of *visually identifying something to be f*, which Charlie is in and Rocky is not? For obviously, our definition of propositional perceiving would be weakened if we were forced to include some undefined perceptual expression in it such as "visually identifies" or "visually takes."

The source of our problem seems to lie in the fact that both perceptual and nonperceptual takings may involve the same sensory state and the same propositional state (including the same identifying phrases, e.g., "the door in the wall"). Evidently, a solution to this problem would lie in specifying some sort of causal connection existing between the sensory and propositional state, such that the subject is visually identifying an object as having some property just in case this causal connection holds.

We have already seen that it is not sufficient simply to say that the sensory state causes the propositional state. It is necessary to go quite a bit further than this. In fact, it seems that spelling out this causal connection would involve specifying the various cues in the subject's perceptual environment which cause him to be in the appropriate sensory state,

which in turn evokes in him the appropriate conceptual response in the form of a propositional belief (e.g., that this is a door).

Now I believe, though I cannot prove, that philosophers who attempt to spell out, on commonsense grounds alone, those features of the environment and of the sensory processes which they produce in a perceiver, which are in normal cases responsible for the fact that he propositionally perceives in those situations, will not succeed. For I believe it is necessary to draw on the technical constructs of modern psychologists of perception in order to determine adequately these causally necessary conditions of perceptual identification and perceptual taking.<sup>2</sup>

If I am right about this, then the consequence would be that philosophers who attempt to define or to explicate propositional perceiving, but who do not incorporate the relevant psychological constructs into their account, will have to include in their descriptions of the perceptual mental state some undefined perceptual expression such as “visually identifies” or “visually takes” (or more generally, “perceptually takes”).

In the case of Chisholm’s definition, it becomes necessary, for the reasons given, to replace condition (c) of that definition (S takes  $x$  to be  $f$ ) by

(c’) *S perceptually takes  $x$  to be  $f$ ,*

where the term “perceptually” is being used as an imprecise substitute for the sort of causal conditions we drew attention to above.

## II

In this section, I will broaden the discussion of perceiving somewhat by considering Chisholm’s nonpropositional sense of “perceive”—viz., the sense it has in contexts in which it takes as its grammatical object a noun or noun phrase, as in

7. George perceives the cat.

I will also consider how the propositional and nonpropositional senses of “perceive” are related and whether their meanings sometimes overlap.

Clearly the nonpropositional use of perceptual verbs abounds in ordinary discourse, though just what is *meant* by these sentences is not easy to say. While the propositional sense of “perceives,” as we have seen, makes reference to a conceptual state of the perceiver, Chisholm believes that the “simplest” nonpropositional sense, in contradistinction, is wholly “definable in terms of ‘sensing’ and certain causal concepts of physics and physiology” (p. 149). If this is correct, then perceptual sentences of this type do not refer to any conceptual facts about the perceiver, in the sense in which this involves the exercise of concepts or thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

Chisholm’s definition of the nonpropositional sense seems to conflict with a view held by some philosophers of mind that everyday nonpropositional contexts should be construed as meaning, or at least implying, that the subject is *propositionally* perceiving in his situation. Thus Gustav Bergmann holds that English sentences such as (7) (George perceives the cat) should always be taken as having the force of

8. George perceives that this is a cat.<sup>4</sup>

And Wilfrid Sellars has made the slightly weaker claim that sentences of the form "S perceives *x*" ordinarily imply that S is propositionally perceiving some fact about *x*. As he puts it:

"Jones sees *x*" implies that Jones has singled out *x* in terms of some *fact* about it and is in a position to ascertain by vision *more facts* about it (*see that x is f, g, h, etc.*) . . .<sup>5</sup>

Regarding Bergmann's claim, it seems that there are clearly some nonpropositional contexts that cannot be interpreted in the way Bergmann suggests. Thus the sentence

9. George saw the cat and took it to be a hat cannot mean the same as

10. George saw that this was a cat and took it to be a hat,

for (10) implies that George took what he saw to be a cat. It must be admitted, then, that there are some nonpropositional uses of "see" which do not have the straightforward propositional meaning Bergman gives them.

How should we understand the meaning of "George saw the cat" as it occurs in (9)? Since the concept of a cat does not enter into George's mental state (though it enters into our description of the total situation), it is natural to suppose that what is meant by this clause is at least this: that George is in a sensory state which is *caused directly* by the cat which is before him. And this seems to be the commonsense idea behind Chisholm's somewhat technical definition of nonpropositional (visual) contexts, which is:

11. "*S sees x*" means that, as a consequence of *x* being a proper *visual* stimulus of S, S senses in a way that is functionally dependent upon the stimulus energy produced in S by *x* (p. 149).

But the propositional and nonpropositional senses are not nearly as divorced as this discussion has so far made them appear. To begin with, we must take note of the fact "that the propositional sense of "perceive" has the same causal implications as the nonpropositional sense. Chisholm affirms this in his definition of the propositional sense which, it will be remembered, included the condition (b), *x appears in some way to S*, which for Chisholm is synonymous with *S perceives x* (p. 149) (which in turn is about S's sensing in a certain way with respect to *x*).

That the propositional sense does have these causal implications can be seen by considering the following case. Imagine that George is looking at his hat in optimum conditions (the light is good, he is awake, his eyes are open, etc.), and in these conditions he sees something to be his hat. Meanwhile, we have George's brain rigged up in such a way that by appropriately stimulating it we are able to induce in him a perceptual state which supersedes any other that he might be having, and which is so similar to his original normal experience of seeing the hat, that when in this state he continues to believe that he is seeing something to be his hat.

I think it is clear that on those occasions in which George's perceptual state is brought about by the apparatus attached to his brain, we would not say that he was seeing his hat.

This shows, I believe, that a necessary condition of  $S$ 's seeing  $x$  to be  $f$  is, as Chisholm maintains, that there is an *unbroken causal connection* between the object perceived and  $S$ 's sensory state—a connection which is made fairly definite in Chisholm's definition (11).

The upshot of this is that the propositional use of perceptual verbs has a dual function in that it refers to certain causal psychophysical facts as well as conceptual facts. The sentence "George perceives something to be a hat" implies that George and the hat are related in a way other than that in which a thought and its object are related, that is to say, they are related in the same kind of way in which the hat is related to the skull on which it sometimes lies.

If then, the propositional sense of "perceive" includes as part of its sense the nonpropositional sense, then it would certainly be a mistake to think that these two senses were independent. It becomes even more of a mistake once it is realized that the nonpropositional use sometimes has a sense which is very close to the propositional sense, for it sometimes refers to a conceptual fact as well as a causal fact.

Indeed, Chisholm grants this when, after giving the definition (11) involving causal concepts, he enlarges his account of nonpropositional perceiving in the following way. We may not, he points out, wish to say that someone "sees an object  $x$  unless, in addition to sensing in the required way, the man also *took* the object  $x$  to *be* something" (p. 150). In order to make his definition "adequate to this felt requirement," he adds to his definition the condition:

11b. "and  $S$  takes  $x$  to have some characteristic" (p. 150).

I believe Chisholm is saying something important here which I hope to drive home with my example of the gangsters and the hidden door. This time we will suppose that Charlie does not tell Rocky that there is a hidden door in the wall, and that Rocky does not suspect that there is. Now should we say, when Rocky gazes at the paneled wall, that in addition to the wall he also sees the hidden door in the wall?

Clearly the only sense in which he might be said to be seeing the door is that he is being caused by the door to sense in a certain way. But there is a very clear and natural sense in which he does *not* see the door, namely the sense in which one fails to see an object if one has not (either consciously or unconsciously) identified the object as an object in one's visual field.

Now I do not wish to say that sentences of the form " $S$  perceives  $x$ " never have the purely causal sense Chisholm first gives them, where they mean that  $S$  is sensing in a certain way with respect to  $x$ , but do not imply that  $S$  is engaged in any conceptual activity. However, they certainly do very often have a second and more important sense, as Chisholm recognizes, which is such that when  $S$  perceives an object  $x$  in this sense, then (a) there is an unbroken causal connection between  $x$  and  $S$ 's sensory state (spelled out in 11), and (b)  $S$  perceptually takes  $x$  to have some characteristic. Notice that it is necessary to include the term "perceptually" in condition (b) to ward off the kind of counterexample used in the last section. Also, condition (b) should be understood as implying that  $S$ 's sensing and his taking are causally connected in the intimate though undefined way that we sketched in the last section.



We now have what I believe is a satisfactory definition of the most important nonpropositional use of perception verbs. Moreover, the definition given is in agreement with Sellars' above interpretation of nonpropositional contexts, as long as we add the qualification that these contexts may sometimes describe illusory cases, where the "fact" in terms of which S singles out  $x$  is not true of  $x$ , as in (9).

The result of our discussion is that the concept of perceiving, in *both* of its most important propositional and nonpropositional senses, is a meeting ground between the causal and conceptual spheres. As it turns out, the only difference between the propositional and nonpropositional senses of "perceive" that has emerged in this discussion is that the former but not the latter includes the conditions that the proposition involved in the experience is both true and justifiably accepted, and hence a suitable candidate for knowledge. While I do not wish to minimize this difference, the similarities I have stressed seem to me more important.

### Notes

1. R. Chisholm, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca: 1957). References to this work will hereafter be included in the text.
2. I have limited my discussion to *Perceiving*, since I do not think that Chisholm's more recent book, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs: 1966), exhibits any change of view or of emphasis that bears significantly on my claims.
3. See, for example, Julian Hochberg, *Perception* (Englewood Cliffs: 1964), chap. 5, for a brief account of some of the higher-order variables, (e.g., light-intensity ratio, texture-density gradient, figure-ground), that are currently used in explaining perception and illusion.
4. As we will see in a moment, Chisholm holds that the nonpropositional use sometimes has a different sense, in which it does refer to conceptual as well as causal facts.
5. "Intentionality," in *Meaning and Existence* (Madison: 1960), p. 7.
6. "Phenomenalism," in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (New York: 1963), p. 71.