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Direct Realism and Immediate Justification

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## ABSTRACT

Direct realism with respect to perceptual experiences has two facets, an epistemological one and a metaphysical one. From the epistemological point of view it involves the claim that perceptual experiences provide immediate justification. From the metaphysical point of view it involves the claim that in perceptual experience we enter in direct contact to items in the external world. In a more radical formulation, often associated with naïve realism, the metaphysical conception of direct realism involves the idea that perceptual experiences depend on the items in the external world they are related to. This paper describes a simple account that makes room for immediate justification provided by perceptual experience. The simple account establishes an explanatory relation between the justificational role of a perceptual experience and the fact that such an experience provides a reason for a belief. The account is evaluated in the light of some objections. Different ways to react to those objections are discussed. It will appear that in order to preserve the explanatory relation established by the simple account, one has to accept naïve realism. By breaking the connection between reason and justification, on the other side, one jeopardises the possibility for perceptual experience to deliver immediate justification.

## BIOGRAPHY

Gianfranco Soldati works on phenomenology, mind and knowledge. Among other things he is interested in problems related to self-knowledge and in the philosophical analysis of experience. His publications (in English, German, French and Italian) contain a book in German on Husserl's Logical Investigation, and articles on self-knowledge and introspection, on the phenomenology of thought, and on demonstrative thought. Before obtaining the chair for modern and contemporary philosophy at Fribourg University (Switzerland), Soldati has lectured at the University of Tübingen (Germany).

I

Direct realism, in the way I shall understand it here, is a position about perceptual experiences, experiences that purport to bring us in contact with the external world through the exercise of our sensory abilities. Direct realism has at least two facets, an epistemological one and a metaphysical one. In what follows I shall address mainly the epistemology of direct realism. Different options in this respect will however be evaluated also in the light of their metaphysical consequences.

From the epistemological point of view direct realism is a claim about the role of perception with respect to the epistemic situation of the perceiving subject. Direct realism in this domain contains the claim that perceptual experiences provide the subject with *immediate* justification, a kind of warrant that does not depend on any further, for instance inferentially acquired justification. The subject might use the warrant provided by perceptual justification in order to make judgements about the external world without having to rely on any further evidence.<sup>1</sup>

There are different kinds of arguments that might be used in order to challenge this idea of immediate justification. One such radical argument moves from scenarios inspired by Cartesian scepticism. In what follows I shall not discuss such sceptical arguments. I shall discuss a number of problems related to immediate justification that do not presuppose any specific answer to Cartesian scepticism.

The epistemological notion of perceptual immediacy should not be confused with a number of other notions that stand in its vicinity. Consider for instance the question as to whether beliefs based on perception may involve the exercise of a further capacity, specific, for instance, to the formation of beliefs. To maintain epistemic immediacy is not yet to reject psychological heterogeneity. Nor should the idea that perception provides immediate justification be confused with the contention that such justification should yield infallibility, a condition such that the presence of the warrant would suffice to exclude the possibility of error of any belief based on it. There is no obvious incoherence in a notion of perceptual justification that would be immediate and yet *prima facie*, and thus defeasible in the presence of undercutting circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the position is not to be confused with a particular stance concerning the way the immediate justification delivered by perception is used by the subject. For instance, for a perceptual experience to deliver immediate justification it may not be required for it to be available as such in deliberation.

To insist on the distinction between these claims is not yet to deny that there are important relations between them. Much depends on the general theoretical background against which the possibility of immediate justification will be established. Part of what follows aims at clarifying the nature of these dependencies.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance (Pryor 2005) : 183.

<sup>2</sup> (Pryor 2005) provides a defence of a version of *prima facie* immediate justification.

For any theory of perceptual knowledge to qualify as a form of direct realism it has to face a number of well-known difficulties. I shall now present a simple account of perceptual knowledge that appears to satisfy the epistemological requirement of direct realism. I shall then briefly describe how and at what price such a theory might meet some of those challenges. It is certainly not my contention that for any theory of perceptual knowledge to satisfy the requirement of direct realism it has to adhere to the simple account that follows. I do, as a matter of fact, consider that account to be more plausible than many of its alternatives, but nothing in what follows depends on this preference. Nor do I take the account, as it stands, to be fully specified. It obviously needs substantial refinements. The point is that those refinements will come as options a direct realist has to face when trying to specify the simple account. I do want to suggest that those options finally cover the main alternatives the direct realist has to choose from, whether she starts from the simple account I am suggesting or not.

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The simple account of perceptual knowledge I suggest to start from would be articulated as follows. My belief that it rains, let us say, is true by virtue of the fact that it rains. We may say that the fact that it rains makes my belief true. My perceptual, for instance visual experience of the falling rain justifies my belief that it rains. The fact that it rains does not justify my belief that it rains and the visual experience does not make the belief that it rains true. The belief could be true without me, or anybody else, perceiving the falling rain. The perceptual experience justifies the belief that it rains, however, *because* it is an experience of, or about, the falling rain. This explanatory relation depends on another, more fundamental relation, a relation that is essentially expressed in the first person by using the notion of a reason. If you ask me why I believe that it rains, what *my* reason is for believing that it rains, I may fittingly say: because I saw *it!* The perceptual experience justifies my belief because it provides *me* with a reason for believing that it rains. For an experience to deliver a reason to believe, the relation between the experience and the belief must be rational. There must be a rule of thought such that accepting the premise entitles one to move to the conclusion. In order for this to be possible, at least two conditions must be satisfied. First the perceptual experience must possess a feature that enables it to enter into such an inferential relation. And second the subject must be credited with the relevant assertive attitude towards that feature.<sup>3</sup> The satisfaction of these requirements *can* be obtained by taking perceptual experiences to involve an acceptance, or an endorsement, of a propositional content. If the perceptual experience involves my accepting, as opposed to my desiring or doubting, the fact that it rains, then the experience provides me with a reason to believe that it rains because, trivially, I would simply believe what I see. The rational relation between perception and belief would be based on a logical relation between their contents. The perception provides a reason for the belief in so far as what I believe can be inferred from what my perception is about.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance (Heck 2000): 508.

<sup>4</sup> There are different ways to think of this inferential relation (see for instance (Martin 1993) : 79 or McDowell 1994 : 7).

In the way it has been sketched so far, the simple account appears to be compatible with the epistemological conception of direct realism described above. If the belief can be directly inferred from the perceptual experience, without needing any further premise, then a perceptual experience provides immediate justification for the belief based on it. But the view needs to face several well-known worries. Let me mention the most important ones and see how the direct realist might react to them.

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One might first insist on the difference between seeing the falling rain (simple seeing) and seeing *that* it rains (epistemic seeing). The question, one might suggest, is how simple seeing rather than epistemic seeing can justify *and* provide a reason for a belief. Simple seeing does not involve any content with propositional form, and so cannot involve an acceptance or an endorsing. But if this is the case, then the justification delivered by perception cannot be accounted for in terms of a rational relation. Although the perception might be said to be about the falling rain, this relation does not suffice for the perception to provide a reason to believe.

Among the available responses one might either chose to deny the very possibility of simple seeing, as understood above, or, in the opposite direction, concede that the connection between justification and rational grounding ought to be severed. The first option might itself be motivated in different ways. It might involve the claim that perception is in some sense belief-like, for instance by virtue of the fact that it involves the exercise not only of sensory, but also of conceptual capacities. Or it might alternatively be supported by the view that even in the case of simple seeing what one sees has propositional structure, be it an event or a fact. One never sees just an object, or a property. One always sees some object exemplifying some property. Such an argument might, but need not be based on the first option: it is not obvious that for one to perceive a fact, or an event, as opposed to an object, one needs to exercise conceptual capacities.

If one accepts however that simple seeing has no feature that enables it to enter into a rational relation to a belief, then one might preserve its justificational role by conceding that justification and rational grounding fall apart. Perception, it might be said, can justify a belief by virtue of its (reliable) relation to facts in the world, even if that relation is no feature that manifests itself in the way the experience occurs in consciousness. Since it does not manifest itself in consciousness it cannot play any role in the rational grounding of the subject's belief. So if the subject's belief is rationally grounded at all, then it is grounded on more than just the occurring perceptual experience. It could, for instance, be grounded on the subject's further belief that her experience is of a type that is reliable. This further belief might itself be warranted inductively, or it might be allowed to be ungrounded, being simply the manifestation of a cognitive tendency built into human nature.

The challenge coming from the idea of simple seeing, then, does not concern so much the issue as to whether perception has some feature with propositional structure – standing in a reliable relation to something in the world is propositional enough. The question rather is whether that feature is manifest in consciousness in order to be poised for rational usage. But what exactly does it

take for a feature of perceptual experience to be manifest in consciousness in a way that suffices for it to deliver a rational ground for the subject's beliefs?

We certainly need to distinguish manifest features of an experience that deliver an immediate reason for a belief of a certain kind from manifest features that deliver only mediated reasons for a belief of that same kind. A direct realist who endorses the simple account we started from would be looking for immediate reasons for beliefs concerning features of the external world. Suppose, along the example mentioned above, that a perceptual experience presents a certain conscious quality and that the presence of that quality reliably indicates the satisfaction of an external condition. The presence of the quality would offer a reason for the subject to form a belief about the external world only by virtue of a further belief, for instance, as mentioned above, a belief concerning the reliability of experiences presenting precisely that quality. The problem, we can now see, is not that the experience lacks a propositional feature necessary to enter into an inferential relation with a belief, but that that feature (here: a reliable relation to an external condition) would not be available to the subject as a something she can have an assertive attitude towards and she can use as a reason to form a belief. Not the propositional feature of the perceptual experience would be directly available, but some feature that would be contingently related to it.

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Four questions about perceptual experiences are thus relevant at this stage for the assessment of their epistemological role. One question is whether perceptual experiences possess a feature that allows them to enter into an inferential relation to beliefs. Another question is whether that feature constitutes what is generally called the content of the experience. The third question is whether that feature is manifest in consciousness. And the final question is whether it is manifest in a way to deliver an immediate justification for the belief. For a direct realist who intends to preserve the connection between justification and rational ground that was established in the simple account, all for four questions must be answered in the positive.

Consider the first two questions to start with. For an experience to enter into an inferential relation to a belief, we said, it must present a feature that has propositional structure. But how exactly must that feature be related to the experience? Is it enough for the experience itself to *have* a propositional structure? It does not seem so. Consider the way an experience, like a pain, provides a justification for the belief that one is having that very experience. Suppose it does it, as required from the simple account, by virtue of providing a reason for the belief. Now, the experience itself, let us suppose, is not a bare particular but an event that occurs in the stream of consciousness, something like me feeling pain at a certain moment in time. The fact that I feel pain at some moment has propositional structure and is thus ready for inferential use. So one might wish to infer from the experience the belief that one has the experience. But we mentioned two requirements for rational grounding: propositional structure and assertive attitude. It is not enough then, in the case under consideration, to have a pain, one also needs to have an assertive attitude towards that very fact. The experience is what one has an assertive attitude towards. The experience, the fact I feel pain at a certain moment, must constitute the object, or the content, of my acceptance. The attitude itself may

not have to be an independent state. Following an influential suggestion coming from Brentano, one may hold that experiences contain, as part of their occurring in consciousness, their own acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Still, not the experience as a fact, but the experience as content of an assertive attitude, constitutes a reason to believe. The claim that perceptual experiences must have a *propositional content* in order to deliver a reason for a belief can now be recognised as a consequence of the two conditions we mentioned at the beginning: they must be poised for inference and they must involve an assertive attitude.

What does it take for propositional content to be manifest in consciousness in order to constitute an *immediate* reason for forming a belief? In the light of what we have said so far, we can see that for this to be the case, propositional content must be presented to the subject as something he can endorse, something he can have an assertive attitude towards. If a perceptual experience could be credited with propositional content that is not available for the subject's assertive attitude, then that content would not be available as a reason for a belief. Propositional content that is manifest in this sense would then constitute an *immediate* reason for believing if it alone would suffice to establish a warrant for the belief based on it.

Having an assertive attitude towards the content of a perceptual appearance is not just a matter of being aware of that content. Arguably, in desiring or imagining that it would rain I am aware of the same content, the proposition that it rains, as when I perceive it. But only in the latter case do I have a reason to believe that it rains. The contrast may be formulated in terms of correctness of beliefs. If a perceptual experience offers me a reason to believe that it rains, then it is correct for me to believe so in the light of the perceptual experience. And it would be incorrect for me to believe that it does not rain under the same circumstances. The presence of the perceptual experience generates a rational norm for my beliefs. As in many similar cases, the requirement is subject to exemption when conflicting circumstances intervene – for instance if I have reasons to believe that what looks like a window is actually a screen where images of falling rain are projected.

In the light of the refinements we have obtained so far, the version of direct realism suggested by the simple account we started from could now be further characterised by adding the following specification. A perceptual experience provides a justification for a certain belief in so far as it puts the subject under a rational requirement with respect to that belief. If I visually experience that it rains, then it is correct to believe that it rains, and if it is correct to believe so, then I am entitled to do so.

## 5

But a further qualm needs to be addressed at this point. It concerns precisely the relation between justification and rational grounding, even apart from considerations related to simple seeing. It might be conceded that for perception to justify a belief it has to deliver a reason, and thus be poised for inferential usage, but that does not mean that it justifies *by virtue* of delivering a reason. Justification, it might generally be urged, is not constituted by, cannot be reduced to, the relation of delivering a reason. So, even if one concedes that the

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<sup>5</sup> More on Brentano's view on this issue in (Soldati 2005).

requirement issuing from a perceptual experience is a rational one, a requirement that concerns one's reason to believe, one would still need to prove it to be genuinely epistemic. A rational entitlement to believe is not as such an epistemic one.

Beliefs can be evaluated in the light of different criteria, such as coherence, psychological sustainability, epistemological centrality, and truth. Truth is crucial when it comes to knowledge: a false belief cannot, as such, qualify for knowledge. So when it is evaluated from the point of view of knowledge, a belief is appropriate when it is true. Our question, then, concerns the relation between this condition of appropriateness and rational entitlement. Does possession of the latter suffice for epistemic appropriateness? If yes, then rational entitlement delivers epistemic warrant.

Epistemic warrant, I assume, is what one obtains through justification. One has an epistemic warrant for a belief when one has a justification for it. This much is terminology. The notion of justification itself can be understood as applying to a condition whose satisfaction qualifies a belief in the light of truth. The most direct way to obtain this qualification would be any condition accessible to the subject whose satisfaction depends on what makes the belief true.<sup>6</sup> But some think we should allow a more permissive notion of justification, applying for instance to any condition accessible to the subject whose satisfaction speaks in favour of the belief's truth, without having to depend on it. For a perceptual experience to justify a belief it would then be enough for it to speak for the belief's truth. But much depends on what exactly this means.

The difference between the loose and the strict notion of justification becomes salient in the case of perceptual error. Suppose I have a visual experience as of it raining outside.<sup>7</sup> It does not rain outside, but I believe that it rains on the basis of my experience.<sup>8</sup> Does the experience justify my belief that it rains outside? Under the strict notion of justification it does not, because its occurring does not depend on the fact that it rains. Does it justify in the looser sense of justification? Does the visual experience speak in favour of the belief?

Three kinds of arguments can be used in order to maintain that it does. One might first submit, in line with what we said above, that the experience speaks in favour of the belief by virtue of one of its features that is reliably associated with the properties whose instances constitute the fact that makes the belief true. Alternatively, one might submit that the experience speaks in favour of the belief because it – mistakenly – presents the world as being such that it rains. Or one could finally suggest that the experience is of a type, which has veridical instances that do individually depend on what makes the belief true. We have already seen how the first approach should be understood. So let me say something about the two other ideas, and about the relation between them.

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<sup>6</sup> The nature of this dependence is part of what the metaphysics of direct realism has to deal with.

<sup>7</sup> This locution alone can hardly be taken to have strong metaphysical consequences, for instance with respect to the issue as to whether the experience is of the same type as the corresponding veridical perceptual experience. All we need is that there is an experience in addition to the belief (see note nr 8).

<sup>8</sup> As stated above, the relation between the experience and the belief need not be, in fact generally is not, deliberative. It might not even be necessary to consider the experience and the belief as two separate experiences. All we need is a distinction between believing, say, that it rains on the basis of testimony and believing it on the basis of a visual experience.

On its most straightforward interpretation, the second view rests on the idea that visual experiences have representational content, whether veridical or not. If that content is propositional, then the experience can stand in the kind of inferential relation to the belief we mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> But a crucial qualification needs to be added now. If a perceptual experience does not need to be veridical in order to possess a specific content, then the simple fact that it stands in an inferential relation to a belief does not suffice to yield any justification. The simple fact that it seems to me that it rains does not speak in favour of the belief that it rains unless the fact that it seems to me that it rains stands in some relation to the fact that it rains. This can come either as an independent further condition, or as a condition built into the possession of the very content of the experience. If it is an independent condition, then we have again a case of a theory that would suppose some sort of reliable connection between the experience and the external fact. So let us look at the possibility of building the relation to the world into the possession conditions of content.

If not veridicality itself, then at least *possible* veridicality would be a requisite a perceptual experience with a given content should satisfy in order to provide a justification. There are two ways to understand this in the present context. It might first be required that any particular experience with a given content could be true. Or it might be required that the experience is of a kind that actually has true instances. Common teleological accounts of perceptual content adopt the latter view. Perceptual experiences earn their justificational power from the fact that their representational content is established by the adaptive advantage obtained through their veridical instances. More traditional approaches, such as husserlian phenomenology, are rather inclined to adopt the former view: perceptual experiences earn their justificational power from the fact that their content is such that any experience having it could possibly be veridical.<sup>10</sup>

On both views, the teleological and the phenomenological, a perceptual experience delivers a justification by virtue of a constitutive trait of its content. There is no supplementary condition an experience has to satisfy in order to earn its justificational power. There is, however, an important difference between the two views. On the teleological approach *actual* veridicality of some instances of the type is constitutive for the justificational power of all of its instances. On the phenomenological approach, instead, *possible* veridicality alone is supposed to suffice for justification. This difference has an important methodological consequence. On both views there is a conceptual connection between the fact that an experience has a specific content and the fact that it provides justification for a certain kind of belief. But on the teleological view the content itself cannot be determined independently of the subject's relation to the actual environment. No such externalist assumption is present in the phenomenological approach.

There are well-known doubts about the aptitude of the phenomenological approach to provide a genuine account for perceptual justification. I shall not be able to discuss them here. Let us see for the moment how the simple account can integrate the results obtained so far. The question we are inquiring into concerns the relation between rational ground and epistemic warrant. More

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<sup>9</sup> This alone does not mean that it is a reason, a proposition one assertively accepts in perception.

<sup>10</sup> More on epistemological issues in phenomenology in {Soldati, 2011}.

precisely, the question is whether the epistemic warrant delivered by perceptual experiences can be accounted for in terms of rational grounding.

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Remember what we conceded above on behalf of the simple account: if I visually experience that it rains, then it is correct to believe that it rains, and if it is correct to believe so, then I am entitled to do so. The fact that it rains constitutes a reason for me to believe that it rains in so far as it is available to me as a content I can endorse in perception. The fact as content of an assertive attitude constitutes a reason to believe. But the very same fact also makes the belief true. So under this approach the rational ground delivered by perception depends on what makes the belief true. This, we said above, would correspond to the strict notion of justification. So we may conclude in the light of this argument, and in tune with the simple account, that the perceptual experience justifies the belief in so far as, by virtue of the fact that, it provides a reason to believe.

But what if one wishes to leave room for the more permissive notion of justification? If we stick to the terminological stipulations used so far, we should then allow for a perceptual experience to justify a belief even if it fails to provide a reason for it.<sup>11</sup> And if that is allowed, then for a perceptual experience to justify a belief it would be sufficient but not necessary to provide a reason for it. The notion of justification could not be analysed in terms of providing a reason any more. Rather, experiences providing a reason would be special cases of experiences justifying a belief. The relation between justification and rational ground, as it is established in the simple account, would again be destroyed.

An advocate of the simple account cannot accept this result. So it appears that she would have to insist on the strict notion of justification for her analysis of perceptual knowledge to be acceptable. In so far as the simple account makes room for immediate justification, then, immediate justification would depend on the rejection of the permissive notion of justification.

One might, and some are, happy with this result. But some are not. Some might find the permissive notion of justification more attractive, for instance because it is better in tune with the idea that a subject might be blamed for holding on beliefs that contradict available evidence but not for trusting evidence that happens to be deceiving. But there is a further reason that can move one to promote permissive justification. This is related to the metaphysical consequences of the simple account. If we are bound to say that only perceptual experiences that provide reasons as understood above can provide immediate justification, then we have charged us with a heavy burden with respect to the epistemology of perceptual knowledge. It seems that we have committed ourselves either to admit that perceptual experiences do not as such provide immediate justification, or to endorse a view that restricts the application of the notion of perceptual experience to veridical instances. In that case we would have moved from the epistemological conception of direct

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<sup>11</sup> I do not take this point to be established in the basis of ordinary language. Some may think that this is not the way we should use the term 'reason'. I would not wish to quarrel about that, as long as the distinction I have in mind is marked somehow in terminology. More on this point in section VII.

realism to a strong metaphysical conception of direct realism, a conception that is frequently associated with *naïve* realism: not only do we perceive external items when our experience is veridical, but the experience itself depends on the fact that makes true the belief justified by the experience. It would then seem that the simple account that maintains the explanatory relation between justification and rational grounding in the way described so far can endorse the idea of immediate justification only under the condition that it accepts the metaphysical conception of perceptual experience proposed by naïve realism.

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Naïve Realism has become a widely accepted position in recent years. And so one might regard the considerations above as offering a further argument in its favour. Or, if one finds naïve realism unpalatable, one might conclude that the idea of immediate justification provided by perceptual experience ought to be abandoned.

But one might wonder whether the simple account is really bound to use the notion of reason provided by a perceptual experience in the way I have been suggesting. Why could the simple account not allow for deceiving perceptual experiences to deliver a reason? The question, of course, is not whether there is *some* notion of reason that could be used in this sense. The question is whether there is a notion of reason that can be used in order to explain the way perceptual experience delivers immediate justification. So the question is not, for instance, if a subject could not have a reason to believe that it rains on the basis of the fact that she has an experience with some qualitative character she knows to be typically related to the fact that it rains. Whatever kind of justification the perceptual experience would provide in that case, it would not be an immediate one. And the question is not whether the simple fact that the subject is in a state by virtue of which it actually, or typically, stands in relation to some external fact would suffice to justify the belief that such a fact obtains. The question is whether it would be right to say that it justifies the belief by virtue of providing a reason for the subject to form the belief. And for this to be the case, we have seen, the relevant fact must be manifest in consciousness. A perceptual experience cannot provide any immediate justification if what it makes manifest in consciousness as a reason fails to contain the feature that establishes its relation to the truth of the belief it is supposed to justify.

I have mentioned three ways of conceiving permissive justification. On the first view perceptual experiences would provide justification simply by virtue of their contingent relation to the world, independently of any of their intrinsic features. It seems that experiences that do not carry their justificational power in their own nature could not qualify for immediate justification. So we would be left with the two other positions, one that claims that the experience's justificational power depends on the fact that it is of a type that has veridical instances and one that submits that possible veridicality of the particular experience suffices.

We certainly cannot say that any feature an experience possesses by virtue of belonging to a type is as such manifest in consciousness. The feature should at least be decisive for the experience to be of that type. A red sphere does not become somehow square simply because there are red squares. If an experience earns its justificational power simply by virtue of being of a type that has

veridical instances, that alone would hardly suffice to make that feature manifest in consciousness. But we have to suppose that the situation is different when the experience is said to possess the content it has precisely by virtue of the fact that it is of a type that has veridical instances. But I am not sure I see why this should be so. In line with the analogy I used above I would say: even if it were true that there must be red squares for a sphere to be red, that would still fail to make the sphere in some sense square.

We would thus be left with the last option, an option that says that possible veridicality would suffice for the demand a stake. An inquiry into the real prospects of such a view has to be left for another occasion.

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