Comments on 'Perceptual Content and the Content of Mental Imagery' by Bence Nanay
Online Consciousness Conference 5

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First, I would like to thank Richard for his work in organizing the Online Consciousness Conference, and for inviting me to participate. I would also like to thank Bence for a stimulating paper on an interesting topic. I've enjoyed thinking about these issues, and look forward to reading Bence's response to my comments and the discussion.

Bence is interested in providing an explanation of the phenomenal similarity between seeing and visualizing. After describing two approaches to explaining the similarity—the Similar Content View and the Dependency Thesis—Bence argues that the Similar Content View should be preferred on the grounds that it has more explanatory power with respect to various similarities and dissimilarities between seeing and visualizing. In my comments, I'm going to focus two aspects of Bence's argument: first, I think he doesn't provide a thorough enough characterization of the difference between seeing and visualizing in an important range of cases. In particular, I'll claim that he overlooks the significance of the fact that in most cases of seeing, objects are experienced as physically present, whereas in cases of visualization, objects aren't experienced as being independent of the experience of them. Second, I'll argue that once we take these further facts about the phenomenology of the two cases into account, it looks like the Dependency Thesis will be in a better position to explain them than the Similar Content View. I'll also suggest that a defender of the Dependency Thesis can respond to Bence's arguments against the explanatory power of their view in relation to the features of seeing and visualizing he highlights.

Bence begins by claiming that the experience of visualizing a red apple and of seeing one are quite similar. My initial response upon reading this claim was: yes and no. Here is a similarity: both experiences involve visual phenomenology that I would describe by making reference to the way red apples typically look. Here is a difference: when I see a red apple, the apparent presence of the apple is experienced as distinct from my experience of it. In other words, the apple appears to be physically located somewhere before me in space. When I visualize an apple, on the other hand, I do not usually experience it as physically present.

Bence describes the similarities and differences between seeing and visualizing in other terms. He emphasizes the idea that the two experiences can be so similar that we cannot tell them apart. This is what he takes the Perky experiments to show. This conclusion is controversial, but even if we grant the possibility that they could in some cases be indistinguishable, Bence acknowledges that this is not usually the case.

To explain what Bence thinks the difference between seeing and visualizing usually consists in takes a bit of stage setting. According to the Similar Content View that he favors, both seeing and visualizing should be analyzed as possessing representational content. The content of any particular state will attribute properties to various locations relative to the observer. These properties can be more or less determinate, and by attending to a particular location, the observer tries to make the property at that location more determinate (and in some cases succeeds).

Bence then claims that the only difference between perceptual content and the content of visualization "concerns where the extra determinacy comes from" (p. 6). In the case of seeing, the extra determinacy comes from sensory stimulation, while in the case of visualizing, it comes from memory or apparent memory.

The first thing to note about this proposal is that it doesn't posit any structural phenomenological difference between seeing and visualizing, since it claims that there is no structural difference between the content of the two states. As Bence puts it, the difference between the two states is "between the dynamics of how the represented properties, and importantly, the determinacy of the represented properties, change in response to the allocation of attention" (p. 7).

For the sake of argument, let's suppose we agree with Bence that seeing and visualizing share the determinable-determinate structure he attributes to them, and that attention can play a parallel role in attempting to make attributed properties more determinate in the two cases. If these states really have this commonality, then his view will be in a good position to explain it. Bence mentions some differences between seeing and visualizing at the end of his paper that I'll return to below, but he doesn't discuss the difference I mentioned at the outset of my comments, and which seems to me one of the most striking distinguishing features of the two states, namely that objects usually seem physically present when we see them and do not seem physically present when we visualize them. How can the Similar Content View explain this fact?

One possibility would be to interpret the content of the two states as propositional, and attribute the difference to the propositions entertained in the two cases. But Bence's version of the view eschews propositional contents in favor of non-conceptual contents that attribute properties to spatial locations in the visual field. What sorts of properties are attributed by these contents? Bence doesn't say much about this in order to preserve the generality of the account, but presumably the attributed properties are perceivable properties. That, it seems to me, is part of the upshot of claiming that the contents in question are not propositional. So I'm curious how Bence would propose to account for the difference between the apparent presence of seen objects and visualized objects in terms of properties attributed to visual space. I'm not claiming that no such account could be offered, but it's not obvious to me how it would go.

This difference when it comes to the apparent presence of objects, which I've suggested is a prominent distinction between most cases of seeing and visualizing, seems easily accounted for by the Dependency Thesis, which Bence flags as the main competitor to his view. According to the Dependency Thesis, visualizing involves representing seeing. On this account, there is a major structural difference between seeing and visualizing, insofar as seeing involves a relation (possibly representational) to perceived objects, and visualizing involves a representational relation to the experience of seeing objects. If there were this structural difference, however, that would provide a way of accounting for the phenomenological difference between seeing and visualizing that I've been emphasizing. Given that visualizing is primarily a relation to an experience rather than an object, it stands to reason that the objects of the represented experience would not be experienced as physically present. The fact that they are not can be explained as a structural feature of the experience. In the case of seeing, however, one's relation is to objects, rather than the experience of objects, so even in cases where no objects are physically present (a case of hallucination) the structure of the experience reflects the fact that they seem to be present nonetheless.

Note that the primary difference that Bence posits between seeing and visualizing doesn't provide an explanation for the difference in the apparent presence of objects in the two cases. The idea that changes in the degree of determinacy provided by attention derive from sensory stimulation in the case of seeing, and memory or apparent memory in the case of visualizing, does not predict a structural representational difference between the two cases; rather, it simply points to a potential source of representational differences. Hence, the asymmetry that exists between the two cases on Bence's account shouldn't make any difference when it comes to accounting for the phenomenology of the experiences.

Given that the structural difference between seeing and visualizing posited by the Dependency Thesis predicts a phenomenological difference between the two states, what can this view say about cases where there supposedly is no phenomenological difference, as Bence's interpretation of the Perky experiments suggests? One potential response would be to claim that in such cases, visualization is not what is going on at all. Rather these are cases of hallucination. Since hallucinations will be structurally similar to seeing in the relevant respects, that's what will explain why the two experiences can't be distinguished. Given the asymmetry that the Dependency Thesis posits between seeing and visualizing with respect the apparent presence of objects, if the participants in the Perky experiments were in fact visualizing, this would entail a phenomenological difference from seeing such that they could tell the two states apart. [Upon reflection, one interpretation of the argument in this paragraph is that it provides a reason to reject Bence's interpretation of the Perky experiments based on the conceptual distinction between visualizing and hallucinating.]

What about the further arguments Bence provides regarding the explanatory power of the Similar Content View relative to the Dependency Thesis? He mentions two features of visualizing that are meant to favor his view: first, that visualizing is accompanied by eye movements that mimic eye movements during visual perception, and second, that visualizing is biologically primitive (that is, it exists in animals that are less cognitively sophisticated than humans, such as pigeons). In brief, I don't see why either of these objections to the Dependency Thesis is particularly troubling. Bence admits that eye movements during visualization aren't incompatible with the Dependency Thesis, it just doesn't predict them, whereas the Similar Content View does. Moreover, it is unclear to me why representing one's own (previous) experiential states isn't what is going on in cases of conscious memory, which would seem to be attributable to more primitive organisms. Given the much more substantial discrepancy with respect to what the Similar Content View and the Dependency Thesis predict regarding apparent phenomenal presence of objects in seeing and visualizing, it seems to me that the advantage in explanatory power is held by the defender of the Dependency Thesis.