

## Perceptual Normativity and Accuracy

Richard Kenneth Atkins  
Presented at Central APA, 2011

**ABSTRACT:** The accuracy intuition—that a perception is good if, and only if, it is accurate—may be cashed out either propositionally or representationally. The propositional understanding is correct. The representational understanding is not, but reflection on why it's not reveals that perceptual normativity is a kind of successfulness.

Someone who is inclined to think that perceptions are subject to normative assessments might think that perceptions are normatively assessed for their accuracy. This seems to fit with our intuitions. Let's call the accuracy intuition the intuition that what makes our perceptions good is that they accurately tell us what the world is like.

There are two ways to cash out the accuracy intuition. One of them is quite right, but it applies only to a specific kind of perception. The other one is quite wrong. However, once we figure out why it's wrong, we can see that the first way to cash out the accuracy intuition is just a special instance of a more general way to understand the normativity of perception as successfulness.

The first way to cash out the accuracy intuition is propositionally. It involves a commitment to two theses, the Propositional Accuracy Thesis and the Propositional Normativity Thesis. Let *S* be a perceiver and *p* be a proposition, then:

**Propositional Accuracy Thesis:** *S*'s perception that *p* is accurate if, and only if, *p*.

**Propositional Normativity Thesis:** *S*'s perception that *p* is good if, and only if, *S*'s perception that *p* is propositionally accurate.

From these theses, it follows that my perception that the chair is red is good if, and only if, the chair is red. Also, my perception that John is crying is good if, and only if, John is crying.

I think that this first way to cash out the accuracy intuition is correct. Here is a good argument for it. Perception-that is a perception the primary component<sup>1</sup> of which is

---

<sup>1</sup> By the "primary component," I mean the part of the perception that is most salient when we consider it with respect to our philosophical interests. We might have a perception

a judgment (as opposed to *perception-as*, the primary component of which is a concept, and *basic perception*, the primary component of which is representational content).

Judgments have propositional content. The norm of propositions is truth—or, in the case of propositions that partly constitute judgments formed on the basis of perception, accuracy. A proposition *p* is true—or, in the context of a perception-that, accurate—if, and only if, *p*. Therefore, perceptions-that are good if, and only if, they are accurate.

However, note that this kind of perceptual normativity is limited to perception-that and does not apply to all kinds of perception. Not every perception is a perception-that. Very young children, for example, perceive but do not (I presume) make judgments. I think the same is true of many kinds of lower animals, such as fish and Gila monsters. (Higher animals like chimps and bonobos may make judgments, so I exclude them.)

Nevertheless, we are inclined to think that child and animal perception can be good or bad. For example, a fish that sees a shark about to attack it and escapes from the shark has good perceptions, I would think, insofar as the fish's perceptions enable it to avoid becoming a shark's dinner. Indeed, fish might use perception to accomplish a diversity of aims, such as to find a mate, to find suitable habitation, to hunt prey, etc. So, we might be interested in giving an account of what it takes for these basic perceptions—as opposed to perceptions-that—to be good or bad.

For that other account, namely an account of the normativity of basic perception, we might appeal to a second way to cash out the accuracy intuition. The second way to cash out the accuracy intuition is representationally. This will involve two theses, the Representational Accuracy Thesis and the Representational Normativity Thesis. Let *S* be a perceiver and *r* be the representational content of a basic perception, then:

**Representational Accuracy Thesis:** *S*'s basic perception with representational content *r* is representationally accurate if, and only if, there exists or occurs what *r* represents to exist or occur.<sup>2</sup>

---

that also involves a judgment but, considered relative to our philosophical interests, we abstract away from the judgment and consider the representational content to be the primary component of the perception. In that case, it would not be a perception-that but a basic perception.

<sup>2</sup> We'll set veridical hallucinations aside, as in principle excludable from perception.

**Representational Normativity Thesis:** S's basic perception with representational content r is good if, and only if, it is representationally accurate.

Here are two examples to illustrate this. My basic perception of the red chair is good if, and only if, there exists a red chair that the representational content of my basic perception represents. My perception of John crying is good if, and only if, John's crying occurs and the representational content of my basic perception represents it. Note that the form of these statements differs importantly from the examples in the Propositional Accuracy Thesis, where there is a "correspondence" of proposition and fact. Here, there is a "correspondence" of a representation and a thing or event that has the properties or characters it is represented to have.

I know of one kind of argument in favor of the Representational Normativity Thesis, but before considering it let's look at some counterexamples to the thesis. First, consider the necessity claim that a perception is good only if it is representationally accurate. Now, imagine that an error theory about color perception is true. Accordingly, all of our ordinary beliefs about color—such as that this piece of paper is white—are false. If so, our basic color perceptions will still be good relative to our practical interests. For example, if my wife asks me to hand her a white towel in the drawer, I will still hand her the towel she wants, even though there is no white towel in the drawer (because no towels are white) and any belief I would form about the towel's color would be false.

For another example, suppose I am in a room lit with a blacklight. I see a neon-purple sheet of paper. I believe truly that the sheet of paper is white. My belief is justified because I know how blacklights affect the appearance of white sheets of paper. Consequently, my perception that the sheet of paper is white is still propositionally accurate and good. However, my perception is not representationally accurate—the sheet of paper is white, not neon-purple.

Someone may object to this example based upon a particular theory of color, according to which colors are relational properties. On this theory colors are no more than the way an object appears to some subject in a given set of circumstances. So, "x is white" is shorthand for "x is white to subject S in circumstance C." Moreover, "x is

neon-purple” is shorthand for “x is neon-purple to subject S in circumstance C.” So, the sheet of paper *is* neon purple because that is the way the sheet of paper appears to me in the circumstance of the blacklight.

One problem this theory faces is providing an account of how any color perception could be representationally accurate or not. There are at least two approaches. One is to claim that no color perception is representationally accurate. However, this approach does not fit with the facts, as we not infrequently disagree with people about the colors of objects.

The other approach is to maintain that there are pragmatic constraints on the circumstances for representationally accurate color perception, agreed to by the subjects at hand. According to this approach, a perception is accurate or not according to whether it is under the “right” circumstances, i.e. the pragmatically constrained circumstances.

On this account, the perception is still not representationally accurate, for we do not think that blacklights are the “right” circumstances for judging the color of an object. This is evident from the fact that we very frequently misjudge the colors of objects in blacklights. If there were some rational disagreement about the color of an object—of any object—no one would look at it under blacklights to settle the disagreement.

The examples of an error theory about colors and correctly judging the color of a sheet of paper under blacklights show that representational accuracy is not necessary for a perception to be good or bad.

Perhaps, then, representational accuracy is sufficient for a perception to be good or bad. However, there are also counterexamples to this position. For example, imagine that I aim to suffer an optical illusion. Illusions are kinds of perception<sup>3</sup> in which we perceive an object but misrepresent its attributes. In other words, they are representationally inaccurate perceptions because although we represent an existent thing or event we do not represent it with the properties or characters it has. In this case, if my perception is accurate, then I fail to suffer the illusion. Yet, if I fail to suffer the optical

---

<sup>3</sup> That illusions are kinds of perceptions is evident from the fact that although we have words for other kinds of perceptual experiences—like dreaming and hallucinating—we don’t have a word like illusioning or illusionating. Rather, we say that we have misrepresented the object of perception, we have misperceived it.

illusion, then my perception is not good insofar as I fail to achieve my aim of suffering the optical illusion. So, my perception is accurate but it is not good.

There is a second counterexample to the claim that representational accuracy is sufficient for a perception to be good or bad. Graphic designers have the aim of designing products so that they look appealing on store shelves. However, store shelves are not lit with ordinary light. Rather, store lights tend to have a bluish fluorescent tint. Hence, graphic designers design their products under blue light; blue light is the lighting-standard for designing products.

Notice, however, that perceiving under blue-tinted lights is not an ordinary circumstance. I cannot be the only one to have been misled about the color of an article of clothing because of fluorescent lighting. The fact that we regard such perceptions as misleading or erroneous reveals that we do not think blue-tinted light suffices as an ordinary circumstance for the accurate perception of color.

Here is the counterexample. Suppose a graphic designer aims to match a newly designed product to one on the shelves. She looks at the one on the shelves in blue light. She then picks out the matching color in ordinary light. She designs the new product, but she finds it does not match the object on the shelves because she selected the color under the wrong circumstances, the ordinary circumstances rather than the bluey-lit circumstances. Her perception under ordinary circumstances is representationally accurate. However, it is not good precisely because it fails to fulfill her aim of matching the two products. So, here is a case where a perception is representationally accurate but is not good. Hence, accuracy is not sufficient for good basic perceiving.

I have been arguing that representational accuracy is neither necessary nor sufficient for basic perceptions (as opposed to perceptions-that) to be good or bad. However, there is one argument that might support the view that good perceptions are representationally accurate perceptions. Ruth Garrett Millikan presents the key idea when she writes,

There is no intrinsic reason why an animal that perceives only affairs of practical significance to itself should not perceive these affairs perfectly objectively and perfectly accurately. For example, In order to manipulate any object in my world I will need to perceive its spatial relation to me. But its spatial relation to me is a

perfectly objective relation. Surely I am best off if I perceive it accurately (2006: 101).

With this idea in mind, someone might argue for the Representational Normativity Thesis in one of two ways, both based upon evolutionary considerations. First, perception serves the survival of organisms. Organisms are best served when their perceptions are representationally accurate. So, good perceptions are representationally accurate perceptions.

Here is the second way to run the argument: Perception serves the survival of organisms. Organisms are best served when their perceptions are representationally accurate. Consequently, the perceptual apparatus has been designed to naturally aim at having accurate perceptions. So, good perceptions are accurate perceptions.

However, in neither argument does the conclusion follow from the premises. Consider the first version of the argument. Millikan is surely correct that accurate perceptions will generally serve me best relative to my survival. But, I don't think it follows from this that my perception is good *because* it is accurate. Rather, it only follows that my perception is good *because* it serves my interests, a primary one of which is survival. It just so happens that accurate perceptions are the ones that serve this interest. However, inaccurate perceptions might serve others of my interests and might be good insofar as they serve me relative to those other interests.

Consider the second argument. It is surely right that perceptual apparatuses have evolved to be representationally accurate more often than not. But, there is an important equivocation on the notion of a "natural aim." A natural aim might be an aim that an organism desires or intends to achieve by virtue of evolutionary design. In that case, it is surely right to say that insofar as an organism achieves those natural aims, then its means of achieving them (viz. perception in this case) are (at least instrumentally) good.

However, notice that in this case my natural aim might be coordination with others. Also, coordination with others might be best served when I have color perceptions *even if* there are no such things as colors. Consequently, even representationally inaccurate perceptions might be quite good relative to my practical interests and my perceptual system might evolve to be representationally inaccurate precisely to serve me in achieving the natural aim of coordination.

On the other hand, a “natural aim” might be an aim that an organism’s processes have, quite independently of the desires of the organism in which those processes take place. For example, my heart has the natural aim of pumping blood and does so quite independently of any desire I have. In like manner, perceptual apparatuses might have the natural aim of accuracy quite independently of any desire I have, and the achievement of that aim might be good.

However, this is a very imperfect way of talking about aiming, for there is no desire or intention on the part of the organism nor on the part of evolutionary processes to attain that aim. Rather, there is only luck in solving the problems that are presented to diverse organisms in the face of evolutionary pressure. But why should we consider it good that the problems were solved in the way they were? It was certainly *fortuitous* and *fortunate* that they were solved, but normativity seems to involve more than fortuity and fortune. We should demand a stronger notion of normativity than this argument assumes.

These responses to the evolutionary arguments are consistent with the above counterexamples. In the error-theory case my representationally inaccurate perceptions are good because they serve me well relative to the aim of handing my wife the towel for which she has asked. In the blacklight example, my representationally inaccurate perceptions are good because they serve me well relative to the aim of making a true judgment. Furthermore, in the case of suffering an illusion, my representationally accurate perceptions are not good because they fail to serve me relative to my aim of suffering the illusion. Also, in the case of the graphic designer example, her representationally accurate perceptions are not good because they fail to serve her relative to aim of designing the product.

Here is the upshot of these considerations: Basic perception serves us relative to practical aims and relative to epistemic aims. When basic perception serves us well with respect to either of these aims, when we desire or intend those aims, then it is good. This is why the fish’s perceptions are good. This is why my representationally inaccurate perceptions are good. Moreover, this is why my representationally accurate perceptions are not good.

This insight generalizes from basic perception to perception-that, as a species of perception where the primary component is a judgment. When we have perceptions-that,

we aim to form true judgments, for making a judgment on the basis of perception is something that we *do* when the need to do so presents itself. We do not typically make judgments when we perceive—we only make them as we need to, when we have the aim of making a true judgment. For example, when I walk down a hallway thinking about the normativity of perception, I avoid walking into all manner of things—a chair, an open door, a wastebasket. However, I make no judgments about them even though I perceive them and avoid them. I don't undertake the *act* of making a judgment. In contrast, when I am asked what color a shirt is, I do make a judgment because the need to do so presents itself.

Why, then, are perceptions-that good when they are propositionally accurate? Because when we perceive-that, we aim to make a true judgment on the basis of our perceptions. When we achieve that aim, then we have a good perception. When we don't, we have a perception that is not good.

Here we have a second argument in favor of the first way of cashing out the accuracy intuition. This second argument is based on more general considerations about the nature of perceptual normativity as a kind of successfulness, considerations that also apply to basic perception. The considerations leave in tact the Propositional Normativity Thesis and provide insight into the normativity of basic perception as a kind of successfulness.

There are two objections to this line of argument that perceptual normativity is a kind of successfulness. First, someone might object that I could aim to suffer an illusion and make a judgment about my illusory basic perception, in which case my perception-that would seem to be propositionally inaccurate but good. However, in this case I do not make a judgment about the object of perception but a judgment about the representational content of my perception, as is indicated by the locution "It appears as though...." This is not a perception-that but an introspection-that, a reporting of the way things appear to one's self. In contrast, if I unwittingly suffer an illusion and make a false judgment, then I do perceive-that but I fail to have a good perception-that.

A second objection is that if perceptual normativity is a kind of successfulness, then I could aim to lie to someone, in which case I could aim to make a false judgment on the basis of a perception. In that case, it would seem, I have a good perception that is



propositionally inaccurate. I reply that a liar certainly aims to mislead but he is in fact sensitive to the truth. He first has a propositionally accurate perception. What he lies about is his accurate perception-that.

For example, suppose I see that John is crying because his wife has just decided to leave him. I go into the other room where his (soon-to-be ex-) wife is packing. She asks me, "Is John crying?" I say, "No, he's relieved." Here, I have had an accurate perception-that and it is a good perception, but I have lied. In fact, it would not have even been a lie were John actually relieved or had a propositionally inaccurately perceived that John is crying.

## **References**

Millikan, Ruth Garrett. 2006. Useless Content. *Teleosemantics: New Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Graham MacDonald. Oxford: Clarendon Press.