

Cognitive Penetrability and The Content of Perception

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In this paper I will discuss the issue of the theory-ladenness of experience in relation to the content of perceptual representations. I will consider two distinct arguments for the content of perceptual representations to be nonconceptual. First, the existence of cognitive impenetrable perceptual stages driven only by bottom-up processes is a necessary and sufficient condition for perceptual representations to have nonconceptual content, since our concepts do not influence the content of those representations (Raftopoulos & Mueller, 2006). However, I will argue that perception is only ‘partially’ cognitive impenetrable. Specifically, intermediate perceptual processes—normally considered to be cognitive impenetrable—are influenced by cognitive factors. In fact, at this stage top-down attention plays a fundamental role in creating a representation of an object, as described by Feature Integration Theory (Treisman & Gelade, 1980). Second, visual representations are structured in a different way than cognitive representations: Cognitive representations have conceptual content in the very sense that they satisfy the Generality Constraint (Evans, 1982). By considering how visual representations compose at intermediate stages by means of attention, I will argue that visual representations, like cognitive representations, satisfy the requirement of the Generality Constraint. I will conclude that if one takes cognitive penetrability and the satisfaction of the Generality Constraint as necessary and sufficient conditions for representations to have conceptual content, then the content of representations at intermediate stages of the visual processing is conceptual.