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Unconscious Perception and Perceptual Knowledge

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Abstract: It has been objected recently that naïve realism is inconsistent with an empirically well-supported hypothesis that unconscious perception is possible. Because epistemological disjunctivism is plausible only in conjunction with naïve realism (for a reason I provide), the objection reaches it too. In response, I show that the unconscious perception hypothesis can be changed from a problem into an advantage of epistemological disjunctivism. I do this by suggesting that: (i) naïve realism is consistent with the hypothesis; (ii) the contrast between epistemological disjunctivism and epistemic externalism explains the difference in epistemic import between conscious and unconscious perception.

Epistemological disjunctivism is an alternative to internalist and externalist accounts of perceptual justification. According to it, conscious perception P affords the subject S an opportunity to acquire factive and fully reflectively accessible rational support R for S 's perceptual belief that ϕ . Had S instead experienced an hallucination H subjectively indistinguishable from P , whatever S 's rational support for the belief that ϕ would have been, it would have been weaker than R . Does this claim gain or lose plausibility if coupled with naïve realism? On the one hand, naïve realism corroborates the epistemic difference between P and H by introducing a metaphysical difference between them: P is constituted by the mind-independent object, H is not. On the other hand, the conjunction of epistemological disjunctivism and naïve realism inherits controversial commitments of the latter. Those, it might be argued, include a denial of an empirically well-supported hypothesis that unconscious perception is possible (Berger & Nanay, 2016; Block & Phillips, 2017). In response, I show that naïve realism reinforces epistemological disjunctivism with respect to both conscious and unconscious perception.

First, I spell out what I think is the best available formulation of epistemological disjunctivism, and explain why it is implausible without the support of naïve realism (section 1). Second, I suggest a small tweak to the formulation of naïve realism so as to make it

compatible with the unconscious perception hypothesis (section 2). Third, I show that the contrast between epistemological disjunctivism and epistemic externalism can be used to account for the difference in epistemic import between conscious and unconscious perception (section 3).

1. Epistemological disjunctivism and naïve realism

Epistemological disjunctivism has been delineated in various ways. Because I am unable to survey them all here, below I set forth only the one I prefer. That said, my approach to unconscious perception is, at least in principle, available on other expositions of epistemological disjunctivism as well.

When the subject S (i) consciously sees the object O, (ii) has the concept of O, and (iii) brings O under that concept, S sees that ϕ (where ϕ equals "That is O"). The fulfilment of the (i-iii) conditions suffices for perceptual knowledge because seeing that ϕ is a specific way of knowing that ϕ . Importantly, perceptual knowledge is recognitional, not evidential, i.e. perceptually knowing that ϕ consists in recognizing what one sees, not in basing the belief that ϕ on 'perceptual evidence'. Justification enters the picture only when S is required to provide a reason for her belief that ϕ . In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge, S can meet this requirement because she knows that ϕ and she knows that she sees that ϕ , i.e. she is in possession of factive and fully reflectively accessible rational support R for her belief that ϕ . S's overall evidence for ϕ is not limited to the true perceptual belief "That is O", as it consists of the totality of S's knowledge. Still, R would be unattainable without the fulfilment of the (i-iii) conditions.

This formulation of epistemological disjunctivism can be traced in works of Alan Millar (see e.g. Millar, 2010), albeit Millar prefers 'traditional direct realism' over naïve realism (Millar, 2007). Contrary to Millar, I suggest reading the condition (i) above through the lens of naïve realism. Why? Consider a genuine visual perception P of the object O by the subject S and a corresponding hallucination H by S's counterpart S*, where H is indistinguishable from P by introspection alone. Naïve realism is the only currently available theory of perception which denies that the phenomenal characters of P and H are qualitatively identical. On naïve realism, the phenomenal character of P is partially constituted by O. Thus, only under naïve realism is what S is aware of incompatible with O not being around. Conversely, if naïve realism was false, what S is aware of would be consistent with O not being around. This, in turn, would contest the idea that P furnishes S with an opportunity to acquire factive and fully reflectively accessible rational support for her belief that ϕ .

Therefore, the plausibility of epistemological disjunctivism depends on the plausibility of naïve realism.

Craig French (French, 2016) argues that formulating epistemological disjunctivism in terms of *seeing things* instead of *seeing that ϕ* enables one to account for the factivity of perceptual justification without incurring any substantive commitments in metaphysics of perception. The problem is that French brackets issues concerning reflective accessibility. Consequently, his proposal collapses into a defence of epistemic externalism (i.e. the view that perceptual warrant is externally grounded, yet not fully reflectively accessible). By contrast, it is essential to epistemological disjunctivism that R is *both* factive and fully reflectively accessible. And when the latter condition is also taken into consideration, it turns out that the plausibility of epistemological disjunctivism varies widely depending on which theory of perception is assumed.

2. Naïve realism and unconscious perception

Naïve realism construes perception as a direct relation between the subject and the mind-independent object. Perceptual relation explains both the qualitative character and the epistemic import of conscious perception in the following way: the properties of the mind-independent object *just are* the properties that constitute the phenomenal character of perception (see e.g. Brewer, 2011; Campbell, 2002; Martin, 2009).

The critics infer from this that naïve realism renders perception as conscious by definition, which amounts to contradicting well-established empirical science (see e.g. Berger & Nanay, 2016; Block & Phillips, 2017). This poses a problem for epistemological disjunctivism as well: if naïve realism is rejected, (i) it becomes difficult to substantiate the claim that the subject can have factive and fully reflectively accessible rational support for her perceptual beliefs, and (ii) it is unclear how the epistemological disjunctivist could account for epistemic import of unconscious perception.

The best strategy for the naïve realist is to accept the possibility of unconscious perception by allowing for perceptual relations without phenomenal character. On this proposal, perception is relational no matter whether it is conscious or not. It is relational because it has the mind-independent object among its constituents. Whether being in such relation results in the subject being conscious of the object is a further question. The difference between conscious and unconscious perception can be explained in terms of their respective relata, namely their subjects and their objects.

Although this formulation of naïve realism is certainly unorthodox, it should be noted that neither of the main motivations of naïve realism is undermined simply by accepting the unconscious perception hypothesis. Some of them, e.g. arguments from fine-grainedness (Brewer, 2011) and transparency (Martin, 2002) of experience, concern phenomenology of perception, which is something that unconscious perception lacks by definition. Hence they remain unaffected by the possibility of unconscious perception. By the same token, they are insufficient to establish naïve realism as a general theory of perception.

However, not all arguments for naïve realism appeal to phenomenology. Charles Travis' (Travis, 2013) argument to the conclusion that the idea of perceptual content is incoherent applies equally to both conscious and unconscious perception, thereby undermining the objection (see e.g. Block & Phillips, 2017; Nanay, 2014) that positing perceptual representations is indispensable to account for unconscious perception.

Another argument for naïve realism rests on the claim that the subject is not infallible with respect to the phenomenal character of her own experience (Martin, 2009). This point actually gains support from empirical evidence for unconscious perception. For such evidence consists of numerous cases in which subjects make incorrect judgements concerning the kind of mental state they are in (they report not perceiving the stimulus despite perceiving it).

Finally, the possibility of unconscious perception does not undermine John Campbell's argument that only naïve realism properly explains how perceptual consciousness makes demonstrative thought and reference possible (Campbell, 2002). Unconsciously perceiving O and employing the relevant concept is necessary but insufficient to enable the subject to demonstratively judge that "That is O". To suffice, perception has to be conscious. Suppose O is F, i.e. a kind of thing that people can perceive only unconsciously. Even if we could report our experiences of F-things, 'this would evidently be a case in which none of us had the slightest idea what we were talking about' (Campbell, 2002: 223). Still, unconscious perception, if it exists, presumably can and does influence the way the subject behaves, thus suggesting that it provides the subject with some epistemic import.

3. Conscious vs. unconscious epistemic import

I suggest that the difference in epistemic import between conscious and unconscious perception should be explained in terms of the contrast between epistemological disjunctivism and epistemic externalism.

In experimental practice, the conclusion that the stimulus was perceived unconsciously is drawn from the observation that the subjects report no consciousness of the stimulus, and

yet perform a task that requires perception of the stimulus with above-chance accuracy. Epistemic import of unconscious perception, i.e. unconscious perceptual warrant, is what enables the subject to perform at this level of accuracy despite being unaware of the stimulus. Epistemic import of unconscious perception is thus severely limited, and can be assessed only *post hoc*, by showing that the subject's behaviour was different than it would have been had no perception happened. This can be understood along the lines of epistemic externalism, i.e. the view that perceptual warrant is externally grounded, yet not fully reflectively accessible. Namely, unconscious perceptual warrant is externally grounded because unconscious perception is relational, yet not reflectively accessible because unconscious perception lacks phenomenal character.

Does it mean that one can unconsciously see that ϕ , thereby acquiring perceptual knowledge that ϕ ? Assuming that justification is not necessary for perceptual knowledge, unconscious perceptual warrant might seem sufficient. But granting this would be precipitant. To see why, compare three mushroom pickers:

- (A) John sees that there is a parasol mushroom before him, and knows that he sees that because he has just checked by moving the mushroom's ring back and forth on its stalk.
- (B) Henry sees that there is a parasol mushroom before him, yet he does not know that he sees that, for had it been a death cap, he would still have thought it is a parasol mushroom.
- (C) Ned unconsciously sees a parasol mushroom.

According to the view sketched in section 1, the epistemic difference between (A) and (B) concerns justification. In (A), John not only knows that there is a parasol mushroom before him, but he can also justify his belief that this is so because he knows that he knows. In (B), Henry knows that there is a parasol mushroom before him because he sees what in fact is a parasol mushroom and correctly recognizes it as such, yet he is unable to rule out that it is a death cap. In (C), Ned does not know that there is a parasol mushroom before him.

Since Henry is epistemically lucky, ascribing knowledge to him is controversial. I think he knows because what he sees *is* what he thinks he sees, which, *ceteris paribus*, grants him a free meal. If what he sees *was not* what he thinks he sees (a death cap), that meal would cost him a liver failure. This is what distinguishes perceptually knowing from not knowing. That what Henry sees *could have easily not been* what he thinks he sees is irrelevant because it does not decide whether a liver transplant will be needed.

Still, (C) is epistemically weaker from (A) and (B) even if Henry does not count as knowing. In (B), Henry behaves just like John; to distinguish between (A) and (B) we would have to ask John and Henry about the death cap possibility. Only then would the difference between their epistemic standings become evident. By contrast, if we asked Ned the same question, he would not even know what are we talking about, as he is unaware that there is a parasol mushroom in the vicinity. If Ned was a real mushroom gourmet, unconsciously perceiving a parasol mushroom could increase his saliva secretion, and make him prone to walk in the mushroom's direction. But assuming that Ned lacks any further knowledge about this situation, that is all unconscious perception can afford him. Even if it might prompt mushroom-related thoughts in Ned's mind, those would not be about that particular parasol mushroom because he is not conscious of it.

Given all that, unconscious perceptual warrant is best characterized as limited to affecting the subject's conscious thought and behaviour in a manner that makes her prone to think about what she is conscious of in some ways rather than another, or to react to what she is conscious of in some ways rather than another. Such influences are not instances of perceptual knowledge. For knowledge entails success, whereas unconscious perception only makes success more probable.

4. Conclusion

In the final analysis, the possibility of unconscious perception does not create a problem for the conjunction of epistemological disjunctivism and naïve realism. On the contrary, it provides a contrast that highlights the epistemic import of perceptual consciousness. It is against the background of unconscious perception that we can see and appreciate the epistemic import of perceptual consciousness, which is precisely what both epistemological disjunctivism and naïve realism were designed to emphasize.

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