Perception and Mind-Dependence: Lecture 4  
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1 Recap

We considered several of the standard arguments against sense data. We saw that none of them were conclusive. But we did note that a sense datum view seems not to accurately capture the kind of contact we have with the world through perception. So we should hold out for a different view.

We considered adverbialism, and intentionalism, which both reject an act-object conception of experience. The latter view is much more promising, but it does face a number of important, as yet unresolved, questions.

Finally, we considered a general argument against common-factor views. If this argument is sound, then we ought to be looking at rejecting (2) below:

(1) The hallucinatory experience consists in the presentation of a mind-dependent object (rather than a mind-independent one).
(2) The perceptual and the hallucinatory experience have the same nature. Hence:
(C) The perceptual experience consists in the presentation of a mind-dependent object (rather than a mind-independent one).

2 Disjunctivism

A disjunctivist position rejects the claim that perceptual and hallucinatory experiences must have the same nature—even when they are subjectively indistinguishable. The main motivation is that of retaining naïve realism. Hinton (1973) is often credited as the founder of this approach, although some of the ideas can already be found in Austin (1962). (For an important discussion of these matters, see Snowdon: 2008). Forms of disjunctivism are developed in Snowdon (1981), McDowell (1982) and Martin (2004, 2006).

The primary motivation for premise (2) is the idea that if two experiences are subjectively indistinguishable, then they must have the same nature. This is indeed a compelling idea, but disjunctivists reject it. As Martin says:

In general, it is a sound methodological principle to assume that two things which can’t be told apart are relevantly similar until one finds reason to overturn that assumption. The naïve realist [disjunctivist] will be someone who thinks that just such reason can be found for distinguishing between veridical perceptions and illusory or hallucinatory ones. (1997, pp. 81—82)
Note: naïve realism and disjunctivism are separate ideas. One way to retain naïve realism in light of the argument from hallucination is to adopt a disjunctivist position. But non-naïve-realists may also be attracted to a disjunctivist view. (We will focus here on naïve realist disjunctivism.)

Why is the view called ‘disjunctivism’? The fundamental idea is that having an experience is either a matter of having a perceptual experience, or else a matter of having a hallucinatory experience, whereby the two sorts of experience mentioned here have different natures. As Snowdon says:

The experience in a genuinely perceptual case has a different nature to the experience involved in a non-perceptual case....The experience in the perceptual case in its nature reaches out and involves the perceived external object, not so the experience in the other cases. (2005a, pp. 136-137)

It follows that experience-claims have ‘disjunctive’ truth-conditions. There are two very different ways in which they can be made true.

3 ‘Positive’ vs. ‘Negative’ Disjunctivism

Most disjunctivists accept naïve realism about perceptual experience. An important question to ask, however, is this: what should a disjunctivist say about hallucinatory experiences? What is the nature of such episodes?

The disjunctive account of perception really says that there are two quite different sorts of oasid-experience, which may none the less be indistinguishable to their owner. The first is the genuine article, and the second, though it is indistinguishable, has nothing in common with the first other than the fact that they are both oasid-experiences. In the standard formulation of the account, misleadingly, this is explicitly the way in which the second disjunct is characterized: we characterize it solely by saying that it is like what it is not. Presumably, however, there may be available a more direct characterization of the second disjunct, and in a totally explicit version of the theory it would indeed be characterized in that better way. The current characterization is just the sort of place-holder, showing what has to be said about the relation between the first and second disjunct. (Dancy, 1995, p. 436)

We can think about this issue in terms of the argument from hallucination. Should the naïve realist disjunctivist accept premise (i) (or anything like it)?

Those who accept premise (i) might be called ‘Austinian Disjunctivists’. The arguer from hallucination first argues that hallucinatory experience consists in the presentation of mind-dependent objects. She then attempts to generalise this across the board, by relying on the idea that the perception and the hallucination are subjectively indistinguishable. Here is what J. L. Austin, in Sense and Sensibilia, has to say about this idea:
But if we are prepared to admit that there may be, even that there are, some cases in which 'delusive and veridical perceptions' really are indistinguishable, does this admission require us to drag in, or even to let in, sense-data? No. For even if we were to make the prior admissions (which we have so far found no reason to make) that in 'abnormal' cases we perceive sense-data, we should not be obliged to extend this admission to the 'normal' cases too. For why on earth should it not be the case that, in some few instances, perceiving one sort of thing is exactly like perceiving another? (1962, p. 52)

A real lemon, and a cleverly painted bar of soap, might be indiscriminable: try as you might, you just cannot tell them apart. Yet they are very different. Austin thinks that we can say essentially the same thing about experiences. (Recall H. H. Price’s claim, that if one were to go from being aware of an external thing to being aware of a sense datum, one ‘should expect at least a jerk or a flicker as the one is replaced by the other’. Austin rejects this idea.)

To adopt this kind of view is to adopt a version of ‘positive disjunctivism’. What such views have in common is this: they agree that hallucinatory experiences have act-object structure, i.e. present things to subjects. Such views are well-placed to account for this intuitions driving premise (1).

A positive disjunctivist does not, however, have to say that the objects of a hallucinatory experience are mind-dependent. Other views have been defended. See Johnston (2004), Knight (2013), Smith (2002). Hence, there are forms of positive disjunctivism which actually reject premise (1). (Though note: these views still seem well-placed to accept the intuitions driving it.)

A ‘negative disjunctivist’, by contrast, rejects the idea that hallucinatory experiences have act-object structure. One version of this view is Martin’s epistemic account. We will shortly consider an argument for this position.

My own view (for what it’s worth) is that Austinian Disjunctivism seems attractive. There is a strong case for saying that premise (1) is true. So we should rescue naïve realism by denying (2).

4 The Causal Argument

First Background Idea:

For each perceptual experience, there is a (possible) hallucinatory experience with the same type of proximate neural cause.

In one case, you perceive a pink elephant. There is a long causal process, starting with light leaving the elephant, leading up to a neural state, which is the proximate neural cause of your experience. In another case, you merely
hallucinate a pink elephant, perhaps due to direct stimulation of your brain. **Supposition:** the proximal neural cause of the hallucination is of exactly the same type (or kind) as the proximal neural cause of your perception.

**Second Background Idea:**

If two events have the same type of proximate neural cause, then they have the same nature.

Given this **second background idea**, it follows that the perceptual and the hallucinatory experience have the same nature after all. We can then use the **first background idea to generalise** to all perceptual experiences.

One could perhaps reject the **first background idea**, by claiming that experiences, as mental events, are not a part of the physical world, and hence do not have physical causes (see Martin: 2004 for discussion). However, this move seems pretty radical. It is better if we can accept what Martin calls **Experiential Naturalism**, the view that experiences are a part of the ordinary (physical) causal order.

A better move would involve rejecting the **second background idea**. A principled way to do this emerges once we note that in general, there are substantive, constitutive conditions on the occurrence of relational events.

**ACTION**

In one case, you point towards the door. This is an action, which, plausibly, has a proximate neural cause. But the action itself is a relational event, which involves you, pointing, and the door. So this event just could not occur unless that very door were to exist, regardless of whether the same type of proximate neural cause were to occur.

**SINGULAR THOUGHT**

Philosophers distinguish genuinely singular or Russellian thought from general thoughts. Jane’s singular thought about Wesley just could not exist unless Wesley did. It is a relational event involving Jane, thought, and Wesley. If Wesley does not exist, then Jane will not have a singular thought about him, regardless of which type of neural cause occurs.

So the naïve realist can reject the ‘same cause, same effect’ principle on independent grounds. She can then say that in the good case, neural event type N causes a perceptual experience, whilst on the bad case, neural event of type N causes a hallucinatory experience. **The same type of neural event gives rise to a different type of experience depending on the context.** (It depends on whether the experiencing subject is ‘hooked up to’ an external object in the right way. Plausibly, this will involve ‘appropriate causation’.)
Is this a plausible view of causation? Some philosophers are not sure. Johnston raises this question: how could the proximal neural event could ‘know’ which experience to cause? He says that on the present view:

…the brain state would have to “look back” and inspect its causal antecedents in order to see what mental act to cause...Otherwise, how could brain state “know” that it should cause...direct awareness of things in the environment when it was preceded by a normal causal chain going all the way out through the visual system to an external object? How could the brain state “know” to instead cause...the kind of visual awareness involved in hallucination, awareness which is not of any object there in the scene before one’s eyes, in the case where there was no such normal external connection? (2004, p. 116)

Similarly, Foster says:

By the time the psychological event is due to be produced, there is no physical record of how the process was started. So by what mechanism does the mind adjust its response to fit the character of the remote cause? How, as it were, does the mind know whether the central nervous process was caused in the normal or the artificial way before selecting its response?' (2000, p. 28)

I suggest that it is not at all clear what to make of this. In effect, Foster and Johnston demand an explanation as to how the same type of neural event could give rise to different experience-types in different contexts. But perhaps there is no more to be said than this, namely, that the context in which a cause occurs matters to what sort of effect it produces.

We should also consider Snowdon’s worry. Snowdon says this:

There is, surely, some inclination to accept as a basic principle about causation the claim that an occurrence C cannot produce an outcome O as its immediate result where O involves items that are not intrinsic to C and that C itself will not produce. (2005b, p. 301)

On the current proposal, in the good case, neural cause N gives rise to a relational event involving you, the subject and some external object O. But:

1. N is not sufficient for O to exist.
2. If N causes an event involving O, then N is sufficient for O to exist.

Motivating 2. is the idea that the proximate cause of a relational event has to be sufficient for the constituents of that event to exist. (Snowdon’s principle)

One option here is to pursue a different line of response. A naïve realist could perhaps deny that the perceptual experience is caused by N at all. Snowdon’s idea is that perceptions are constituted by a temporally extended physical event, beginning, in the visual case, with light leaving the object:
[Event N] is not a is not the cause of the perceptual experience, but rather a component in it, and, perhaps, the cause of the last stage in it (2005b, p. 302)

Note that this would also solve the initial worry about 'looking back':

Seeing the object is not the next event after the visual system operates. Seeing the object is an event materially constituted by the long physical process connecting the object seen to the final state of the visual system. Seeing the object is an event that is (as it actually turns out) constituted by a physical process that goes all the way out to the object seen. There is accordingly no “looking back” required by the last brain state or pattern of neuronal firing in order to determine whether to cause veridical awareness of external objects as opposed to the type of awareness involved in hallucination. There is no such “last” brain state that then causes seeing. (Johnston: 2004, p. 139)

But I think that this proposal will not work. It implies the wrong result concerning the temporal extent of some of our experiences:

SEEING THE SUN

Suppose I look at the sun just for a second. My experience is the causal upshot of a chain of event starting with light leaving the sun. But this causal process takes 8 minutes or so. So, plausibly, if my experience is constituted by this process, then my experience takes 8 minutes. Yet this is mistaken!

(Background assumption: a constituted event must have the same temporal properties as its constituting event. (If we identify the perception with the extended physical event, then the claim that the perception and the physical event follows from Leibniz’s Law, i.e. the claim that identical things share all their properties.)

A better option, it seems to me, is just to resist Snowdon’s ‘basic principle about causation’. We deny that the proximate cause of a relational event has to be sufficient for the constituents of that event to exist.

5 The Reverse Causal Argument

Causal considerations seemed to show that perceptions and hallucinations do share a common nature after all. I suggested that we might try to resist the argument by rejecting the relevant version of the ‘same cause, same effect’ principle. However, there is a further challenge that we need to consider (see Johnston: 2004, Martin: 2004, Snowdon: 2005b).

We can bring the challenge into view by considering these questions. First:
1. We know that neural event type N causes a perceptual experience in the good case. Does it also cause a perceptual experience in the bad case?

The naïve realist can, and must, say ‘no’ here. In the good case, the object O actually exists, and the subject is related to it in the right way. So the neural event N causes a perceptual experience, i.e. a relational event involving O. But in the bad case, these conditions are not met. So neural event N does not cause a perceptual experience, i.e. a relational event involving O. Instead, it merely causes a hallucinatory experience. (Note that a naïve realist has to answer this question negatively, since it is clear that hallucinatory experiences don’t consist in the presentation of external objects.)

Consider, second, this question:

2. We know that neural event type N causes a hallucinatory experience in the bad case. Does it also cause a hallucinatory experience in the good case?

It is harder to answer this question negatively. There do not seem to be any constitutive conditions on hallucinatory experience that are not met in the good case. As Martin (2004) says, we have the intuition that hallucinations are ‘inner events’. They can occur at any time or place or situation, so long as the correct local or proximate causal conditions are met.

An affirmative answer to 2. does not show naïve realism to be false. It shows only that an experience of the hallucinatory kind occurs when one perceives. This is consistent with saying that, when one perceives, a quite different event, of the distinctively perceptual kind, occurs as well.

What does this mean? Perhaps two experiential events occur. Or perhaps we have one single event which falls under two different kinds.

At this point the naïve realist has to answer this question: what account of hallucinatory experience can we give that is consistent with this result?

Note that disjunctivists wishing to accept premise (i) face a particular challenge here. On their view, to satisfy Kh is to be a relation to a sense datum, whilst to satisfy Kp is to be a relation to an external item. But is it really plausible to say that when you perceive an item, you are aware of a mind-dependent thing and also an external object? (See Snowdon: 2005b)

Arguably, once we have shown that perceiving involves being aware of a mind-dependent sense datum, it is much more plausible, and economical, to accept a common factor view. We accept that perceiving and hallucinating both involve one single type of experiential event: awareness of sense data.
We then distinguish perceiving and hallucinating in terms of their indirect objects, that is to say, in terms of how they are caused (see Johnston: 2004).

6 The Epistemic View

According to Martin (2004, 2006), naïve realists must accept that perceiving involves having one experience which falls under two different kinds. If Kp is the perceptual kind, and Kh is the hallucinatory kind, then we accept that:

To perceive is to undergo an experience that satisfies both Kp and Kh.

Now for an experience to satisfy Kp is for it to present external objects. But what is it for an experience to satisfy Kh?

Crucially, Martin denies that falling under Kh is a matter of presenting mind-dependent sense data, or indeed of presenting anything at all. So Martin thinks that naïve realists should be negative disjunctivists.

MARTIN’S IDEA:
To have a hallucinatory experience is just to be in a condition that is indistinguishable, through reflection alone, from a veridical perception.

(E) S has a hallucinatory experience as of an F just in case: S cannot know, through reflection alone, that S is genuinely perceiving an F.

The veridical perception consists, most fundamentally, in the presentation of an F. But because it is a veridical perception of an F, one cannot know, through reflection alone (or indeed in any other way), that it is not a veridical perception of an F. (One cannot know that something is not an F given that it is an F. Knowledge is factive: one only knows what is the case.)

So the perceptual experience has the nature that naïve realists say it does. It falls under naïve realist kind Kp. But it also falls under the hallucinatory kind Kh. (It also meets the negative epistemological condition). No problem!

Questions:

(Q1) How could having an experience merely consist in meeting a ‘negative epistemological condition’?

(Q2) A stone cannot tell through reflection that it is not having a veridical experience. But it is not experiencing!
Creatures that lack the ability to reflect introspectively can have hallucinations of various kinds. Can Martin account for this? (Siegel: 2004)

How could meeting a negative epistemological condition afford one distinctive knowledge of the sensible qualities (Pautz: 2010)

7 Rescuing Positive Disjunctivism

Recall the following question:

2. We know that neural event type N causes an hallucinatory experience in the bad case. Does it also cause a hallucinatory experience in the good case?

A naïve realist wishing to embrace positive disjunctivism should answer this question negatively—otherwise the view would be of doubtful coherence, i.e. positive disjunctivists must deny that an experience of the hallucinatory kind can occur in the perceptual case.

One way to defend this move is to insist that for a neural event to cause a hallucinatory experience, it has to be part of a non-standard causal chain, i.e. a causal chain that does not involve an external object in the appropriate way. (For this suggestion see Snowdon: 2005b, p. 303. Cf. Martin: 2004).

Whether this move is defensible remains to be seen. But it would enable the naïve realist disjunctivist to offer an account of hallucinatory experience that fits best with the manifest facts about such episodes, e.g. that they seem to present objects, and provide us with knowledge of the sensible qualities.

In the end, then, the best view might be the one that J. L. Austin hints at: a combination of a sense datum view about hallucinating, with a naïve realist view about perceiving. (This is my own view of matters, for what it’s worth.)

8 Summing Up

There are many ways to react to the argument from hallucination. Most of them involve rejecting naïve realism and embracing a common factor view. It is, however, possible to retain naïve realism, by embracing disjunctivism.

Bibliography


