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Sensory Modality and Perceptual Reasons

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Abstract

Perception can provide us with a privileged source of evidence about the external world – evidence that makes it rational to believe things about the world. In *Reasons First*, Mark Schroeder offers a new view on how perception does so. The central motivation behind Schroeder’s account is to offer an answer to *what* evidence perception equips us with according to which it is what he calls *world-implicating* but *non-factive*, and thereby to glean some of the key advantages of both externalism and internalism, respectively. He answers this motivation by developing a more specific view that he calls the *Apparent Factive Attitude* view, which pairs an answer to what evidence is provided by a perceptual experience with an answer to why having that perceptual experience provides you with that evidence. In this paper, we advance two interconnected problems for Schroeder’s *Apparent Factive Attitude* view. A traditional intuitive judgment that often motivates internalists is the idea that internal duplicates must necessarily be equally rational in whatever beliefs they have. Schroeder’s arguments rely on a weaker claim – that people who are both internal *and historical external* duplicates but differ only in the veridicality of a single perceptual experience must be equally rational in whatever beliefs they have. In this way he preserves what he argues to be a more compelling internalist intuition. But our arguments will show that Schroeder’s view is committed to denying an even more compelling internalist intuition yet – that internal duplicates must have the same *phenomenology*.

Keywords: Reasons; perception; evidence; internalism; externalism; justification; rationality

1. Background

Schroeder’s first goal for an account of perceptual evidence is that perceptual evidence should be, following theorists like McDowell and Williamson, *world-implicating*. What this means is that the evidence should entail something about the world outside of the perceiver’s head.¹ If perception can equip you with evidence that entails things about the world outside of your head, then it is not true that skeptical scenarios are consistent

¹Despite their agreement on world implication, how McDowell and Williamson come to this shared commitment is importantly distinct. For McDowell (1994, 2006, 2008), perceptual evidence is a *prerequisite* © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

with all of your evidence, or that you cannot rule them out on the basis of evidence. And so the idea is that perceptual evidence can make belief about the world rational because it is the best kind of *reason* to form beliefs – evidence that entails that their contents are true.

The Apparent Factive Attitude view says that basic perceptual evidence is world-implicating because it always takes the form, *I ψ that p* , or *this is a ψ -ing that p* , where ψ is what Schroeder calls a *factive perceptual relation*. For example, when a visual experience of a cup makes it rational to believe something about the cup, it is because it equips you with the evidence, *I see that there is a cup*. Seeing that there is a cup entails that there is a cup, and so this evidence is world-implicating. Schroeder (2021) holds that analogous claims hold for auditory, tactile, and other modalities, even though “hear that” and “feel that” do not carry the same factive import as “see that” in English, but we’ll focus just on the case of visual evidence, for clarity and simplicity.

The idea that perceptual evidence is world-implicating is not novel with Schroeder, but he observes that it is usually accompanied – as in the work of both McDowell and Williamson, among others – by the idea that you come by this world-entailing evidence only in the good case. Schroeder thinks that this is a mistake. But rather than appealing to the internalist intuition that internal duplicates must necessarily have equally rational beliefs, which is both logically very strong and relies on dubious insight into distant possibilities, he rejects this view on the basis of the logically weaker intuitive judgment that internal duplicates with *identical external histories* cannot differ in the rationality of their beliefs, just because of a single difference in whether a perceptual experience is veridical or not.

Instead, Schroeder says that perceptual evidence makes belief rational by being what he calls a *subjective reason* to believe, that it grounds knowledge by being what he calls an *objective reason* to believe, and that only objective reasons need to be true. Given that your perceptual evidence is *I see that there is a cup*, you do not have objective reason to believe – and hence are not in a position to know – unless you really do see that there is a cup, i.e., unless you are in the good case. But this does not prevent you from having subjective reason to believe that there is a cup – from its being rational for you to believe this on the basis of this very evidence – even in the bad case, where you have this evidence but it is not true.

Schroeder therefore owes us an answer to why having a visual experience as of a cup in front of you equips you with the subjective reason, *I see that there is a cup*, even when you are in the bad case and do not actually see that there is a cup. The Apparent Factive Attitude view answers this question by saying that when you have a visual experience as of a cup, it *seems* to you that you see a cup. On this view, the phenomenology of visual experience is not just the phenomenology of there being a cup nearby; it includes the phenomenology of seeing the cup to be there. According to Schroeder, you can have this subjective reason even if you do not actually see that there is a cup, because it is *always* part of the phenomenology of visual experience, veridical or no, that it is an instance of seeing.

2. The warm-up problem: the epistemology of experience

Our first problem for Schroeder concerns the evidential position that his account puts us in, in order to form beliefs about our own perceptual experiences. Recall that

for coming to know whereas for Williamson (2000), it is a *consequence* of knowing. Thank you to an anonymous referee for calling for clarity.

according to the Apparent Factive Attitude view, the evidence with which you are equipped, when you have a visual experience as of a cup in front of you, is *I see that there is a cup*. In the good case this is true, and so it puts you in a position to know that there is a cup by being an excellent objective reason to believe that there is a cup, because it entails that there is a cup. And in both the good and bad cases this seems to you to be true, and so it puts you in a position to rationally believe that there is a cup by being an excellent subjective reason to believe that there is a cup.

We can turn the very same account inward, to ground knowledge and justify beliefs about your own experiences. After all, your evidence, *I see that there is a cup*, does not only entail that there is a cup. It also entails, trivially, that you see that there is a cup. So in the good case this puts you in a position to know not only that there is a cup but that you see that there is a cup. And in the bad case this puts you in a position to rationally believe that you see that there is a cup. And we can turn our attention even further inward. Not only does your evidence, *I see that there is a cup*, entail that there is a cup and that you see that there is a cup, but it also entails that you have a visual experience as of seeing a cup. So in the good case, you can know that you have a visual experience as of seeing a cup, and in the bad case, it can be rational for you to believe that you have a visual experience as of seeing a cup.

So far, so good. Schroeder's view grounds knowledge and rationalizes beliefs about experience – both factive experience and its internal correlates – in the very same way that it grounds knowledge and rationalizes beliefs about the world. The problem is that we believe that in the bad case it should be possible not only to rationally believe that you are having a visual experience as of a cup, but to know it. Being in the bad case makes it impossible to know that there is a cup, but it should not make it impossible to know that you have a visual experience *as of* seeing that there is a cup.

This is something that is well-explained by the phenomenological views of perceptual evidence that Schroeder rejects. But it is not predicted by Schroeder's account. On the contrary, since according to Schroeder the only evidence that you come by in virtue of having a visual experience as of a cup is *I see that there is a cup*, in the bad case all of this evidence is false. And according to Schroeder, false evidence cannot be objective reason to believe, and knowledge must be based on objective reasons. So according to Schroeder, when you are in the bad case, you cannot even know that you have the internal correlate of seeing.²

This is a very surprising result. Schroeder's motivations make it clear that his goal was to carve out a space that can take advantage of traditional forms of externalism about perceptual epistemology without embracing their strongest consequences. But here his view is leading us to a very strong kind of externalist conclusion – that what you can know *even about the subjective character of your own experience* depends on whether you are in the good case or the bad case. Of course, there are many epistemic asymmetries between the good case and the bad case. But it would be very surprising – and a much stronger form of externalism than Schroeder led us to believe that we would be signing up for – if this was one of them.

²It is worth noting that the problem arises both because of Schroeder's view of what perceptual evidence is and a further assumption that knowledge is believing on the basis of sufficient subjective and objective reason. One might, however, think that knowledge on the basis of falsehood is possible. Given the dialectic with Schroeder in the present paper, we will spot Schroeder's premise and put this thought to one side. Thank you to an anonymous referee for highlighting this additional source of potential concern for an account like Schroeder's.

We envision that Schroeder might respond by revising his view. Instead of saying that visual experience as of seeing a cup has the phenomenology as of *I see that there is a cup*, Schroeder might conjecture that this state has *both* the phenomenology as of seeing that there is a cup and the phenomenology of its narrow correlate. This would mean that having a visual experience as of a cup would equip you with two different pieces of evidence – both *I see that there is a cup* and *I have a visual experience as of there being a cup*. Only one of these would be world-implicating, but nothing in Schroeder’s account precludes it turning out that perceptual experience also provides evidence that is not world-implicating, so long as it *does* provide evidence that *is* world-implicating.

We will assume in what follows that Schroeder will want to accept the solution that we have just offered. He should say that the phenomenology of visual experiences includes both what we will call *factive phenomenology* – its seeming that *I see that there is a cup* – and what we will call *non-factive modal phenomenology* – by which we mean not the phenomenology of not being factive, but just its seeming that *I have a visual experience as of there being a cup*. But this, we believe, just sets up the more important problem: given that visual experience involves non-factive phenomenology, why does it also need to involve factive phenomenology?

3. The real problem: factive phenomenology

For epistemic theorizing it’s clear why one would want to include a world-implicating element in visual phenomenology. But for Schroeder’s thesis to be defensible, it must earn its keep as a thesis about the mind. And one apparent virtue of Schroeder’s view is its explanation of how visual phenomenology and auditory phenomenology are different.

This is borne out experimentally, something Schroeder himself draws on: “What is distinctive and striking about the experiment and others like it, is that subjects *experience* the information *as auditory* – their auditory experience *changes* when they open their eyes, and they do not experience a conflict between where the sound looks and sounds to be coming from” (115, emphasis added). And this seems exactly right. In typical cases, we are able to tell, on the basis of what it is like, whether we are undergoing an auditory experience or a tactile experience or a visual experience and so on. According to Schroeder, this is because in visual phenomenology it seems to you that you see that something is the case, whereas in auditory phenomenology it seems to you that you factively hear that something is the case.

But unfortunately, Schroeder has failed to distinguish this explanation from a closely related, non-factive one: that in visual phenomenology it seems to you that you are in the *internal correlate* of seeing, and in auditory phenomenology it seems to you that you *non-factively* hear that something is the case. And as we have just argued, there are independent reasons why Schroeder should accept that visual and auditory phenomenology differs in their non-factive phenomenology.

Indeed, we can now make the problem from the previous section even sharper. As we have just noted, not only are visual and auditory phenomenology different, but *we can tell* – even in illusory cases – whether our phenomenology is visual or auditory. That is, we can *know* which it is. But this is precisely the thing that we argued in the last section that Schroeder’s account would not be able to explain unless he accepts our suggestion that perceptual experiences also have non-factive modal phenomenology. So the thesis that perceptual experiences have factive phenomenology cannot be supported by the differences in visual and auditory phenomenology.

4. A strong commitment

We have just shown that Schroeder's reasons for thinking that perceptual experiences have factive phenomenology fail to establish this conclusion. The factive phenomenology of perceptual experiences does not do any work in distinguishing the phenomenology of different perceptual modalities that cannot be done as well or better by what we have called non-factive modal phenomenology.

Recall that Schroeder is trying to chart a path that takes advantage of many externalist insights while also recognizing internalist insights. Many internalists claim that internal duplicates must be equally rational in their beliefs, but Schroeder rejects this claim, relying instead only on a very restricted version of this thesis which he claims is much more obviously true. But another claim that is much more obviously true is that internal duplicates must have identical *phenomenologies*. If Schroeder aims to preserve the most compelling internalist judgments, then we might hope that his account would also preserve this result.

Unfortunately, this is not so. Here is a familiar reason for thinking that perceptual experience does not have factive phenomenology: imagine that Lars, due to the precise interventions of a neurosurgeon, is hallucinating a cup and is not seeing one. Signals from his optic nerve have been blocked but his visual cortex is being strategically stimulated. When Lars blinks, unbeknownst to him, the neurosurgeon ceases the nervous intervention and reveals a genuine cup. It is commonly claimed – rightly, we think – that it is possible for such a switch to occur without there being any phenomenal difference for Lars.

If this is correct, then that provides compelling reason for thinking that at no time in the scenario was *seeing* made manifest to Lars. Rather, what's manifest to Lars is that he is undergoing an experience *as of* a cup before him throughout. Seeing, as such, doesn't get into the content of his experience and so isn't part of the content of his appearances. This is part of what is attractive about the idea that perceptual phenomenology only involves non-factive modal phenomenology. Since *what it is like* to see that there is a cup and *what it is like* to hallucinate that there is a cup are the same, there is only one thing that it seems to be.

Schroeder, of course, will say that the reason that there is no difference in Lars' phenomenology is that it seems to Lars that he is seeing that there is a cup both before and after the switch. But we can sharpen the argument from the previous paragraph by seeing it as an argument from symmetry: why is it that when you visually hallucinate the cup, it seems to you that you see that there is a cup, but when you see that there is a cup, it doesn't seem to you that you hallucinate that there is a cup?

Schroeder might appeal, in response, to an asymmetry between veridical and hallucinatory experience. Hallucination, Schroeder might say, depends on veridical experience in a way that veridical experience does not depend on hallucination. But we can press this point in an even more forceful way. Suppose that Lars sees that there is a cup on the table. Lars has many internal duplicates – not only possible Larses in similar possible worlds who have had similar pasts to his but now hallucinate a cup rather than seeing that there is one, but also possible Larses in distant possible worlds who have always been envatted or demonized or dreaming.

In these worlds, Lars's visual experience *as of* seeing that there is a cup on the table has its typical causal etiology for that world, though he does not *see* that there is a cup because there is in fact no cup. In these worlds, envatted perceptions are the *normal* case, and from the point of view of these worlds, strange distant possibilities where

perceptual experiences are caused by bits of ceramic instead of ones and zeroes are what is fantastical.

If internal duplicates have identical phenomenologies, then all of Lars's internal duplicates must have the same phenomenology. So if it seeming to Lars that he sees a cup is a feature of Lars's phenomenology, then it must also seem to envatted-Lars and demonized-Lars that they see that there is a cup. Not just that they are having visual phenomenology as of their being a cup, but that they are genuinely *seeing* that there is a cup.

But there is a fundamental symmetry between envatted worlds and our world, with respect to the causes of the state that Lars is in when he has a visual experience as of seeing that there is a cup on the table. This experience merely has different characteristic causes in each world. So if envatted-Lars has a phenomenology as of seeing that there is a cup on the table, even though seeing is not something that ever happens in his world or nearby worlds, then it is hard to avoid the conclusion, by parity of reasoning, that the actual Lars has a phenomenology according to which it seems to him that the Matrix is cup-wise. This is not only an implausible commitment, but it is only the first among many. Lars will also have a phenomenology according to which it seems to him that he is dreaming of a cup that he being presented in VR with a cup, and so on. Something has gone wrong.

There will of course be possible externalist replies at this juncture – accounts according to which the phenomenologies of Lars and envatted-Lars differ. But as we have emphasized, part of Schroeder's aim was to retain the attractive aspects of internalism while drawing in the world-implicating benefits of externalism. We worry that a very compelling aspect of internalism – the thesis that duplicates are phenomenally the same – now comes under threat. And this is dialectically important since it is awkward for Schroeder to say that the disjunctivist views have to be replaced given that they flout his weaker internalist principle while then himself embracing an unpalatable rejection of another internalist hypothesis.

5. Putting the problems together

Both of the problems that we have isolated for Schroeder constitute respects in which his view takes on stronger externalist commitments than may have been apparent at first glance. Our first problem was that as stated, Schroeder is committed to the view that in the bad case, you cannot know whether your perceptual phenomenology is visual or auditory in the same way that you can know this in the good case. And our second problem was that Schroeder is committed to denying that internal duplicates must be phenomenological duplicates.

Both of these are possible views, but both are characteristic of particularly strong forms of externalism. And both are intuitively false. Indeed, awkwardly, the intuitive judgments that each of these commitments are false are arguably at least as forceful as the intuitive judgment on which Schroeder places so much weight in motivating his view – that internal and historical duplicates must be rational duplicates.

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