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The Disunity of Perception

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“The Disunity of Perception: An Introduction”

Indrek Reiland & Jack Lyons

Perceptual experiences of a single modality (e.g. visual experiences) are phenomenologically unified. On the commonly assumed *unified* view, this is taken to entail that perception itself has a unified metaphysics and doesn't consist of further, more fundamental types of mental states or events. And this gives rise to debates over whether it is exclusively naïve realist or representationalist, whether it presents us with only low-level properties or also with high-level properties, and whether it is exclusively non-conceptual or conceptual.

In contrast, according to the once popular and recently re-emerging *disunified* view, perception has a disunified metaphysics. For example, suppose you're looking at a red apple. On Thomas Reid's classic version of a disunified view, even your perceptual experience itself consists of two components: a non-intentional *sensation* of redness and a non-inferential judgment or *belief* that it is an apple (Reid 1785). On a more modern version of the view it is your overall “perceptual” state that consists of two components: a *perceptual experience* of the apple and its redness, roundness etc. and accompanying *seemings* that it is red, it is an apple etc. (Brogaard 2013, 2014, Lyons 2005, 2009, Reiland 2014, Tucker 2010). Such views open up the possibility of dissolving the aforementioned debates by taking perception to be partly naïve realist and partly representationalist, allowing that a part of it presents us with only low-level properties while another part presents us also with high-level properties, and taking it to be partly non-conceptual and partly conceptual.

This issue presents work on the disunified view having to do with the nature of each component, its relation to debates over the metaphysics of perception and perceptible properties, and its bearing on questions about perceptual justification. It is kicked off by Jacob Berger's paper “The Sensory Content of Perceptual Experience,” in which he distinguishes between the sensory and cognitive components of experience and provides a theory about the nature of the sensory component with the aim of figuring out which properties it represents. Berger first outlines a form of quality-space semantics for sensation on which sensation represents properties that form quality spaces. And he then argues on its basis that although sensation represents colors, odors, and tastes, it probably doesn't represent kind properties because they don't form quality spaces.

Berit Brogaard & Bartek Chomanski's paper "Cognitive Penetrability and High-Level Properties in Perception" is also about the question whether we can experience high-level properties. Brogaard and Chomanski seek to question a frequently assumed connection between the view that experience is cognitively penetrable and the claim that we can experience high-level properties. They first argue that cognitive penetration is neither necessary nor sufficient for experiencing high-level properties and that there aren't even interesting probabilistic connections between these phenomena. They conclude by suggesting that this might show that naïve realism is incompatible with the view that we can experience high-level properties.

In his contribution "Kind Properties and the Metaphysics of Perception: Towards an Impure Relationalism," Dan Cavedon-Taylor picks up where Brogaard & Chomanski left off, arguing that the debates over metaphysics of experience and perceptible properties are not unrelated as has been hitherto frequently assumed. He argues extensively that naïve realists can't allow for experience of kind properties because their instances aren't perceptually detectable. Yet, all is not lost for naïve realists since they can salvage their view by disunifying their metaphysics and allowing that although we perceptually detect only low-level properties, perception also involves a representational event that represents kind properties.

Indrek Reiland's paper "Experience, Seemings, and Evidence", switches gears and presents a version of disunified view with the aim of helping us answer questions about how perception provides evidence. Reiland first distinguishes between Reidian two-component views on which perceptual experience consists of a sensation and a belief and Kantian two-component views on which your overall "perceptual" state consists of a perceptual experience and a seeming. He then presents a Kantian view by distinguishing between non-conceptual experiences and conceptual seemings and providing accounts of each. Finally, he argues that the best version of the popular dogmatist view about evidence is one which claims that it's neither experiences nor seemings by themselves, but rather the right sorts of composites of experiences and seemings that provide evidence.

In their contribution "The Epistemic Unity of Perception" Elijah Chudnoff & David DiDomenico defend the unified view, by arguing that the standard reasons for distinguishing between experiences and seemings are not decisive. Furthermore, even if experiences and seemings were distinct, this would be irrelevant from an epistemic point of view, since both are needed in an adequate story about evidence.

In the final paper “Believing in Perceiving: Known Illusions and the Classical Dual Component Theory”, Jake Quilty-Dunn distinguishes between the sensory and the conceptual components of perceptual experience and discusses the nature of the conceptual component. Most modern disunified theorists take the conceptual component to be a sui generis state usually called a seeming. In contrast, Quilty-Dunn argues for the older view that the conceptual component is a perceptual belief. He argues elaborately that standard considerations having to do with cases where one knows that one is under an illusion don’t necessitate giving up the view that the conceptual component is a belief and suggests that there are several advantages to thinking of it as such.

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