

## Epistemic Charge

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forthcoming in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*

Psychologists have long argued that perceptual experiences, like many other perceptual states, result from inference – or at least, from a process they have happily called ‘inference’.<sup>1</sup> But by and large, those interested in the epistemic role of perceptual experience have not concluded that experiences epistemically depend on the inferences psychologists describe. For instance, there is no presumption that the structural goodness or badness of the inference can make the experience it leads to better or worse. Instead, it is usually presumed that experiences are not the kind of states that can have a rational standing, and that they differ in this respect from beliefs. Ernest Sosa voices this idea when he says:

“[W]hen [perceptual] experiences help explain the rational standing of some other state or action, they do not thereby problematize their own rational standing. Being so passive, they have no such standing”.<sup>2</sup>

The kind of rational standing Sosa is describing goes beyond harboring power to justify other beliefs, and it goes beyond having the power to transmit justification to a belief from another source. To say that a mental state has a rational standing in Sosa’s sense is to say that by itself, being in the mental state redounds on the rationality of the subject of the experience. It enters the calculus that determines how rational or how irrational the subject is. In this respect it is comparable to the property a belief can have of being justified, in the sense of having been formed epistemically well or badly. If you want to know what determines how rational or irrational a subject is overall, you have to take account of how well-formed or ill-formed her beliefs are.

The idea that perceptual experiences have no rational standing is entailed by the thesis that experiences are unjustified justifiers. Proponents of that thesis don’t mean that the experiences are anti-justified, or that they have some other negative epistemic status. They mean that experiences are off the grid of epistemic appraisability. The grid supports beliefs, but not experiences. Experiences have no rational standing.

Why does it matter whether a person’s experiences can reflect their rational standing? If experiences could have a rational standing, then we’d have to re-think the boundary between the a-rational aspects of the mind, and the aspects that

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<sup>1</sup> Perceptual experiences characterize the way things appear to you in perception or hallucination. Psychologists who posit perceptual inference include Alhazen (1989/ca 1030), Helmholtz (1867/1910), Rock (1975). For discussion see Hatfield (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Sosa (2007), p. 46. Sosa ultimately disowns this picture.

determine our rational standing. That boundary, or one part of it, has often been taken to divide perception from belief.<sup>3</sup>

Is there any reason to suspect that experiences have a rational standing? Perhaps the strongest philosophical suspicions come from certain cases of cognitive penetration of perceptual experience – a type of influence on it by psychological precursors.<sup>4</sup> Consider Vivek, a vain performer, who projects his self-conception onto the audience when he performs. Vivek is prone to wishful seeing. He wants and expects people to enjoy his performance, and when he looks at the sea of faces, approval is all he sees. Unbeknownst to him, Vivek's vanity - like imperceptible tinted sunglasses - affects his visual experience of the faces in the crowd. To arrive at a belief that's congruent with his vanity, Vivek has no need to jump to conclusions. He can just believe his eyes. When he believes his eyes, he takes himself to have gained evidence (or perhaps a more generic form of rational support) for his belief that people like his performances. And so he strengthens his belief.

Were it not for the presumption that experiences have no rational standing, we might suspect that when Vivek's vanity affects his experience, his experience is ill-founded, for the same reason as a vanity-induced belief would be: because it's an extension of the ill-founded exaggeration beneath Vivek's vanity. If Vivek's vanity left his experience untouched, but made him infer, from the looks on their neutral and displeased faces, that the people he sees are pleased, we wouldn't hesitate to consider his belief ill-founded. If Vivek's wishful seeing could have the same epistemic effects on his perceptual experience as his wishful thinking has on his belief, then presumably the other routes to ill-founded belief besides wishful thinking also have epistemic parallels for experience.

The question whether perceptual experiences redound on the subject's rational standing has direct application to self-defense law. Here we have another reason why the question matters. Self-defense laws mitigate sanctions against some forms of physical aggression. In US law, for an act of self-defense to justify aggression, the defender has to believe that he or she is in immanent danger, and

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<sup>3</sup> Discussions of the boundary include Davidson (1982) and more recently A. Smith (2005). Even many who reject Davidson's idea that perceptions can't justify beliefs (only beliefs can) agree with him that perception has no rational standing of its own. Where the boundaries are around what Davidson calls the 'house of reason' arises in discussions of how implicit biases as measured by the Implicit Association Task. On the issue of how implicit biases may redound on the moral or rational standing of the subjects, see many of the papers in Brownstein and Saul (2016).

<sup>4</sup> I argue that cases like these have an epistemic impact on perceptual experience in Siegel (2011) and (2013): they reduce the power those experiences could otherwise have to provide justification for subsequent beliefs formed on the basis. This kind of epistemic impact could be further explained by experiences detracting from the subject's rational standing.

the belief has to be reasonable.<sup>5</sup> Jurors in self-defense cases are supposed to assess the reasonableness of the defendants' actions, in part by assessing the reasonableness of their beliefs. And to determine whether the belief is reasonable, they're supposed to consider what a reasonable person in the defendants' circumstances would believe about the immanence and the extent of the threat that they face. They are supposed to ask what would be reasonable to believe about those things, in those circumstances.

Consider a defendant who attacks a man he believes is holding a gun. The man was holding something, and it looked to the defendant as if it was a gun. But suppose that the defendant's perceptual experience was cognitively penetrated by an ill-founded unconscious presumption - a form of racism, for example - that men who in certain observable respects resemble the man the defendant sees are dangerous.<sup>6</sup> We can suppose that the cognitive penetration happens by an unconscious inference from this presumption. We don't have to build in to the notion of inference to perceptual experience that inference establishes an epistemic dependence of the experience on the presumption - that conclusion is too close to what's at issue. We can use a notion of inference (presumably the one used by psychologists) that leaves it open whether inference has epistemic effects or not.<sup>7</sup>

If the reasonableness of the person depends only on the interface between experience and subsequent belief, and not on psychological background of the experience, then the belief that the man is dangerous (because he is holding a gun) might seem to be reasonable. But if the gun-experience itself detracts from the subject's rational standing because it is inferred from an ill-founded presumption, then when we assess what a reasonable person under similar circumstances would believe, we need not hold constant their experience. A reasonable person in similar circumstances would not have an experience that they inferred from the ill-founded presumption. Just as a reasonable person's beliefs would be by and large shaped by reasonable presumptions, so would their perceptual experiences.

My goals in this paper are to put us in a better position to assess whether experiences have a rational standing, and to put the idea that they do in a favorable

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the role of reasonable belief in self-defense law see Lee 2003, Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> Some experiments, including Correll 2002 and 2015, Payne 2001, Eberhardt 2004 suggest that perceptual beliefs can easily be influenced by presumptions of racial hierarchies, such as the presumption that Black men are dangerous. These results are compatible with cognitive penetration of the sort described here, but do not establish it.

<sup>7</sup> Some writers define 'inference' in a way that disallows any such use (Boghossian 2012, Wright 2014). For discussions of inference from stored assumptions and low-level input to perceptual experience, where it is not presumed that inferences have to influence a subject's rational standing, see Hatfield (2002), Clark 2013, Hohwy 2013, Panicello (2013).

light. As a start, I argue that nothing in the nature of perceptual experiences precludes them from having a rational standing, and hence nothing precludes them from being epistemically affected by inference in the same ways as beliefs are.

If we can coherently picture what kinds of epistemically relevant relationships rational or irrational experiences could stand in to other mental states, we'll be in a better position to assess both the idea that experiences could have a rational standing, and the extent to which this idea helps us analyze the epistemic situations of people like Vivek.

To help articulate epistemically significant relationships between experiences and other mental states, I propose a specific account of the epistemic property that gives experiences a rational standing. Using a comparison with electricity, I'll call that property "epistemic charge" (a definition is coming later). Epistemic charge is designed to help describe the epistemic impact of psychological precursors on perceptual experience, and the impact that those experiences can then have on subsequent beliefs. Once the notion of epistemic charge is on the table, I consider what strikes me as the most plausible account of its scope and grounds, and its implications for the global structure of justification.

To start, I consider and reject reasons to think experiences are precluded from having a rational standing, and float a positive reason to think they do (section 1). After arguing that experiences are not already a form of belief (section 2), I formulate a more exact version of the thesis that experiences can have a rational standing (section 3), and discuss its global epistemic implications (section 4). It might seem that *epistemological foundationalism*, when it puts perceptual experience in the foundation of justified belief, stands or falls with the status of those experiences as unjustified justifiers. Ultimately I'll argue that that this isn't so. But even for foundationalists, the idea that experiences are epistemically charged is highly revisionary.

## **1. Does anything preclude experiences from being epistemically charged?**

At start of this paper, we met a reason to think that experiences cannot be epistemically charged: because in having experiences, the subject is passive. What kind of passivity might underwrite the epistemic unevaluability of experience? We can distinguish between three kinds of passivity. I argue that none of them preclude experiences from being epistemically charged.

A first kind of passivity is phenomenological. It is not part of the phenomenology of perception that our experiences seem to result in mental activity of any sort. But the same is true of many of our beliefs. They do not seem to result from active reasoning either – we simply find ourselves believing that it is time for lunch, that our neighbors are kind, or that the music is too loud. Phenomenological passivity is a poor diagnostic for epistemic charge.

A second kind of passivity is passivity with respect to any kind of reasoning. Could this kind of passivity underwrite the epistemic unevaluability of experience? We apply epistemic norms to all beliefs, even when they don't result from reasoning. For instance, self-ascriptions of experiences are sometimes not the result of reasoning, and cases where we simply believe our eyes also do not result from reasoning. And in some social contexts, allegiances can pull the strings of belief in ways that seem to involve no reasoning at all.<sup>8</sup> And yet none of these routes to belief preclude us from evaluating them as justified or anti-justified.

Perhaps the most powerful version of the idea that experiences are precluded from being epistemically charged draws on a third kind of passivity: passivity with respect to deliberation, or explicit reasoning. In explicit reasoning, one explicitly appreciates (through having a belief, for instance) that a set of considerations supports a conclusion.

One might think that experiences cannot be epistemically evaluable, because one cannot form an experience as the result of deliberation, or of explicit reasoning. In contrast, any belief could in principle be formed in those ways – even if it not every belief is actually so formed. And that is why all beliefs are epistemically appraisable, according to this line of thought. The thesis that all beliefs could be formed epistemically well by deliberation is stronger than the thesis at issue here, which is that all beliefs could be formed by deliberation – whether they're formed epistemically well in that way or not.

A first reply is that the generalization about beliefs seems false. On one disambiguation, the generalization is that for any believer, all of that subject's beliefs could have been formed by deliberation. But if believers need to have starting assumptions, the generalization won't be true. There will be initial prior beliefs that are needed to get a system of believing off the ground. Some examples for human belief might be the built-in assumption that light comes from above, or assumptions about spatio-temporal continuity of ordinary objects, or unearned confidence in other people's testimony or the deliverances of perception.<sup>9</sup>

On a different disambiguation, the generalization is that for any belief, it could be formed by deliberation – even if it isn't the case that all of a subject's beliefs could be. Beliefs with the content 'I believe that p' could in principle be formed by deliberation – even if they are typically formed by introspection and without deliberation. The same point seems to hold for endorsements of perceptual experience, in which a belief with content P is formed on the basis of an experience whose content includes P. (I'll return to shortly to the idea that a proposition could

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<sup>8</sup> Tamir and Mitchell (2012.)

<sup>9</sup> For a suggestion that our system of belief needs starting assumptions, see Railton (2013) and Hohwy (2013). For potential examples of starting assumptions about ordinary objects, see Carey (2009).

be the content of an experience). Even if one could believe P by endorsing an experience with content P, that same belief could be reached by deliberation.

In reply, making deliberation the main diagnostic of epistemic charge treats beliefs formed in those ways as the ideal form of beliefs – leaving other beliefs as pale approximations. But belief in general may not have any ideal form. Even if it does, it may have multiple ideal forms. A different paradigm of belief is the toddler's knowing, and hence believing, that her socks are on (after putting them on herself with much effort). The route to belief wasn't deliberation, which would require more self-conscious reasoning than she is capable of, but rather a mix of observation integrated with action. A more mature subject could reach the same first-person belief ('I just put my socks on') by deliberation. But the toddler couldn't. Yet the toddler's belief seems to redound on the toddler's rationality just as much as the older subjects' beliefs redound on theirs. And its role in the subject's mind seems just as 'beliefy' as beliefs formed by deliberation: its felt strength comes in increments, and it belongs to the toddler's outlook on the world. The toddler's belief shapes her sense of possible futures: if her belief is firm, she might expect to put on her socks again tomorrow, whereas if her feeling that she can put on her socks is unstable, her putting them on might feel to her like a fluke. The felt strength of her belief will shape her memory of putting on her socks, and her sense of herself and others: she can put her socks on – unlike a baby, who can't. It makes her disposed to respond to challenges as to whether she can or can't put on her socks. With this cognitive profile, the toddler's belief is no less beliefy than a belief formed by deliberation.<sup>10</sup> These considerations suggest that the rational standing belief is not grounded in each belief's arising from a process that is either deliberation or a pale approximation of it.

A different idea is that experiences cannot be epistemically charged, because they cannot be rationally adjusted in response to criticism. According to this idea, for a mental state to be epistemically charged, it must be possible for a subject to adjust it, in order to make it conform to any epistemic norms that can be used to evaluate it. But now picture being told (and believing) that your experience came about because of your vanity. It doesn't seem possible to adjust your experience, other than by looking away, covering your ears, or otherwise closing off perceptual input (assuming the experience is not a internally generated hallucination). If the experience is over by the time you come to criticize it, there seems to be no way to adjust it at all, rationally or otherwise. So if being able to adjust perceptual experience without managing the intake of perceptual information is necessary for epistemic charge, then by this measure, it seems that experiences can't be epistemically charged.

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<sup>10</sup> I owe this insight to Peter Railton's discussion of belief and epistemic authority in Railton (2013).

In reply, we can distinguish between three kinds of adjustment of a mental state in response to rational criticism: adjustment by deliberation, adjustment by disowning the mental state, and adjustment by habituation. If experiences were adjustable by deliberation in response to rational criticism, then in response to criticism, such as the information that the contents of one's experience is heavily influenced by vanity, or that the experience is irrational, one would have to be able to explicitly reason to a new experiential conclusion that rationally addresses the critical information.

Adjustability by deliberation is a poor diagnostic for epistemic charge. (Three paragraphs back, we considered whether all beliefs can be formed by deliberation; here what's at issue whether all beliefs that one has already can be adjusted by deliberation – weakened, strengthened, or disowned). Beliefs in delusions cannot be adjusted by deliberation – no one has ever been talked out of the monothematic delusional belief in Capgras syndrome, for example, or out of delusional beliefs in schizophrenia.<sup>11</sup> But that doesn't stop the beliefs from having epistemic charge. In fact these beliefs seem to be paradigms of irrationality. Many beliefs are formed and adjusted without deliberation. The issue raised by Vivek's vain projection onto experience is whether his experience is like those beliefs in that respect.

The second kind of adjustment is disowning a mental state. If this kind of adjustability is a good diagnostic of epistemic appraisability, then experiences satisfy it. Even if you couldn't make yourself stop having the experience, you can cease to rely on it in your reasoning and action. Ceasing to rely on an experience can even be done to a past experience. So there is such a thing as disowning an experience. When we respond to rational criticism of beliefs by giving up the belief, or by weakening it, this is what we do: we cease to rely on what we believed in reasoning and action (or we cease to rely on it so heavily). So what happens when you cease to rely on a belief happens as well when you cease to rely on an experience.

There is also a difference. In the case of belief, ceasing to rely on a belief can't come apart from ceasing to have the belief.<sup>12</sup> But experience can persist, even if you

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<sup>11</sup> On monothematic delusions (in which people admit to the implausibility of the belief but still maintain it), see Bortolotti (2013) and Coltheart 2005. On schizophrenia and treatment, see Frith and Johnstone (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Are monothematic delusions such as Capgras syndrome (in which the deluded subject reports with distress that a spouse has been replaced by an impostor) an exception to thesis that ceasing to rely on a belief constitutes ceasing to have it? These delusions are sometimes described as 'circumscribed' because the subject does not act in all the ways one would expect they would, given their desires, if the subject believed that an impostor had replaced their spouse (Bortolotti 2013). But the subject is relying on the impostor hypothesis for some subsequent reasoning and actions, and if they didn't, the delusion would be a poor candidate for being a

don't use it in reasoning or action. (Here we find another difference in temporal profiles between experience and belief). If the experience persists, does that show that experiences are never fully rationally adjustable?

No. Consider the Müller-Lyer illusion, which typically arises via an uncontroversially a-rational process. If you know the lines are not the way appear, and you cease to rely on the experience, then there is no further rational adjustment to be made in the situation. The situation is analogous to giving up a belief that you have learned is anti-justified.

Contrast Vivek's experience when it arises from his vanity. If Vivek learned that his experience arose from his vanity, and the experience persisted because of his vanity, that would be a case of residual irrationality. Vivek's situation would be analogous to someone obtuse who disowns an attitude (e.g., disrespect for someone they treat badly), but lacks the understanding needed to correct all the perspectives that go with it. Sometimes the fact that an experience persists, even when a subject disowns it, does constitute residual irrationality.

The third kind of adjustment of a mental state works by the subject's controlling the conditions that tend to give rise to that type of mental state. We might call this adjustment by habituation – a strategy described by Pascal in his discussion of how one can make oneself believe in God.<sup>13</sup> For instance, suppose one can't bring oneself to believe that climate change will lead to large-scale human disaster (because it is so unfathomable), but wants to believe in it. One might put oneself in circumstances that one thinks would lead to forming this belief, by exposing oneself to all the evidence for the likely drastic effects of climate change, and by talking often with people who are firmly convinced of the grim consequences. Beliefs may be indirectly adjustable by orienting oneself to the factors that shape belief.

The phenomenon of perceptual learning suggests that if habituation can apply to perceptual experience as well. Suppose that one is used to using eye and hair color to distinguish faces from one another, and one then moves to a place where everyone has the same eye color and hair color. One might then try to focus on features of faces that vary, such as the distances between their eyes, or between eyes and nose, or nose and mouth, to code individual differences. By engineering one's own course of perceptual learning, one could come to have different experiences of other people's faces. By controlling one's attention, one can habituate to having other experiences. So if adjusting by habituation is diagnostic of epistemic evaluability, then once again, experiences satisfy it.

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belief to begin with. (For discussion of whether delusions are beliefs, see Currie and Ravenscroft (2002).

<sup>13</sup> See B. Pascal, *Pensées Section III Translation* by W. F. Trotter.



So far, I have rejected what strike me as the two most powerful kinds of reasons to think that experiences can have a rational standing: experiences are passive, and experiences are not rationally adjustable. Several varieties of passivity and unadjustability pertain to beliefs as well. This continuity could naturally lead someone to wonder: what might ground the rational standing of belief, and could that factor also ground the rational standing of experience?

A natural idea is that what grounds the rational standing of both states is their role in the mind. Perhaps there is no further feature of belief, or of routes to belief, that explains why beliefs can be evaluated as epistemically better or worse. Instead, it is their role as states that contribute to our outlook on the world. The outlook may be unstable or temporary, or it may be better characterized by incremental states (such as credences) than binary ones. Parts of the outlook will be odds with others, and not all parts will have equal weight in the subject's considered view. But any part of the complete outlook will belong to a perspective on how things are in the world. Experiences that we disown or disbelieve might not belong to our considered outlook, but they are part of the complete outlook.

Belonging to an outlook plausibly anchors appraisals of other mental states, such as fears and desires. For instance, desires are most plausibly seen as rationally unappraisable when they construed as devoid of any representation of what is desired as favorable or unfavorable, and fears are most plausibly seen as rationally unappraisable when they are construed as devoid of representations of anything as frightening. We can also distinguish between our considered outlook on the world, and our complete outlook on the world at a moment. Experience forms part of how things are from our perspective. We will see in section 3 a way to develop the idea that a mental state has a rational standing because it belongs to the subject's outlook. First I'll look more closely at the idea that experiences are already a kind of belief. Since beliefs have a rational standing, if experience is a form of belief, then that would suggest that experiences have a rational standing too. And if – as I argue next - experience is not a form of belief, then if experiences can have a rational standing, this won't be due to their status as beliefs.

## **2. Experience and belief**

How can we tell whether experiences are beliefs? Experiences aren't beliefs, if they differ from beliefs in their basic structure. For instance, if beliefs are relations to propositions but experiences are not, then experiences will differ from beliefs. What might experiences consist in, if they differ from belief in this way? A first proposal is that they are not directed toward the world at all: they don't even seem to present the subject with aspects of the environment distinct from them. Think of 'seeing stars' from being hit on the head, or the pink glow that one experiences with eyes closed in sunlight. According to this position, which I'll call the raw-feel view, all experiences are undirected toward external things.

The raw-feel view entails that experiences are distinct from belief. But it may not easily fit with the idea that experiences have a rational standing. Since experiences as the raw-feel view construes them do not constitute any part of one's outlook on the external world, they therefore don't constitute any outlook on the world that is more or less rational than other outlooks.

A second proposal is that experiences, when they aren't hallucinations or any kind of illusion, are perceptions of external things and their properties. This structure for experiences is distinct from belief, since beliefs can be false, whereas perception as construed here can only relate perceivers to objects that exist and properties that those objects actually have. Call this proposal Naïve Realism.<sup>14</sup> Like the raw-feel view, Naïve Realism entails that experiences are distinct from belief (on the assumption that beliefs are relations to propositions). But unlike the raw-feel view, Naïve Realism is compatible with the idea that all experiences – not just the ones that aren't illusions or hallucination – are the kind of state that can be accurate or inaccurate about the subject's environment. Just as beliefs can be true or false, according to this idea, all experiences have accuracy conditions: conditions under which they would be accurate about the environment. Call this proposal the Content View. When Naïve Realism is combined with the Content View, some experiences are fundamentally relations to objects and properties that those objects have, but these experiences, like all experiences, have accuracy conditions.<sup>15</sup> Because they are assessable for accuracy, having an experience constitutes having an outlook on the world.

So far, I've considered two proposals about how experiences could differ in their basic structure from beliefs. Could experiences be propositional attitudes with the same direction of fit as beliefs, yet still be distinct from them?<sup>16</sup> This question is especially pressing if some experiences (such as illusions and hallucinations, as someone partial to Naïve Realism might want to construe them), or all experiences, have accuracy conditions that are not derived from some other non-belief-like structure.

There are several differences that could underwrite a distinction between experiences and belief, even if they are both propositional attitudes. Consider the temporal profile that standardly attaches to experiences and beliefs. Beliefs have inertia that experiences lack. If you acquire a belief, then it tends to stay in the mind, with no need to re-establish it. Of course it is possible to forget what one once believed. But the inertia of beliefs facilitates their role in planning and guiding

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<sup>14</sup> For a defense of Naïve Realism, see Martin (2004).

<sup>15</sup> This claim deserves more discussion. For defense see Siegel (2010) chapter 2, for criticism, see Travis (2013).

<sup>16</sup> For defenses of experiences as belief, see Glüer (2009) and Byrne (2009), the earlier accounts by Pitcher (1971) and Armstrong (1968), which are criticized by Dretske (1969) and Jackson (1977).

behavior, and to that extent forgetting is not typical. Suppose you learn that your friends' plane will land at 10pm. If your belief didn't last as long as your plan to meet them at the airport shortly after 10pm, then you'd have to revisit the plan. And if the world changes in a way that makes the belief false – for instance, if the plane is delayed – that fact alone normally tells us next to nothing about whether the belief will change. Analogous observations apply to occurrent judgment. If you occurrently judge that your friend's plane will land at 10pm, even when the judgment ends, the content is typically retained.

In contrast, experiences lack the psychological inertia that characterizes beliefs. Whether your experience persists typically depends on whether you remain in contact with the relevant part of the environment. If you see a skyscraper ahead, and then turn so that it is no longer in view, your skyscraper-experience comes to an end, but your belief about where the skyscraper is located will typically persist. Fading into the past extinguishes the experience, but not the belief.

These considerations suggest that if experience were a form of belief, then experiential beliefs would be short-lived, and the reason for their short lives would differ from the reasons for losing other beliefs. Experiences don't die from forgetting, or from the subject's responses to counter-evidence.

A proponent of assimilating experiences to beliefs could respond that beliefs simply vary in the range of temporal profiles they can have – experiential beliefs have one profile, and non-experiential beliefs have another. But the substantive point would remain that experiences have a distinctive temporal profile, and one that precludes it from playing a central role of belief. And the more differences one finds between experiences and non-experiential belief, the less dialectical power an assimilation of experience to belief would have. For instance, if beliefs admit of a range of temporal profiles, perhaps they admit of a range of epistemic profiles as well. Given the diversity of beliefs that the proponent of the experience-as-belief thesis has to accommodate, they seem poorly positioned to claim that experiences share the epistemic profile of belief, on the grounds that experiences are beliefs.

So there are good reasons to think that experiences aren't beliefs, and they apply to wide range of theories of the underlying structure of experiences.

### **3. Epistemic Charge**

So far, I've discussed whether experiences can have a rational standing, without looking closely at what epistemic property they would have, if they did. As a first stab, we could say that experiences would be able to be *justified* if they had a rational standing. Then experiences could be *justified justifiers*, rather than unjustified justifiers.

“Justification” is one of the most heavily used and contested terms in epistemology. It denotes different properties in different discussions. It can be hard to pin down the theory-neutral notion that competing approaches have in common, in the substantive disagreements about what justification consists in.<sup>17</sup> In light of these complexities, I won’t rely on the notion of justification in my specification of a property that experiences could have, if they had a rational standing. I will specify the property in enough detail to let us see how it helps us analyze the epistemic situations of Vivek and the racist defendant, and how its analysis of these situations differs from other analyses. My main goal is to articulate this analysis and put it in an initially favorable light, rather than defending it fully against every possible alternative.

The case of Vivek and the racist defendant raised a philosophical suspicion: that the beliefs these subjects form in response to their perceptual experience are less well supported by that experience than they could be, if the experience were not influenced by vanity or racism. We can break down this suspicion into two parts. First, the belief formed on the basis of the perceptual experience in each case is epistemically compromised. Second, the precursors to the perceptual experience help explain the epistemic shortcoming of that belief. It is as if Vivek’s vanity makes his belief ill-founded, by influencing his perceptual experience.

If we wanted to analyze the epistemic impact described by this suspicion, a simple and natural suggestion would be that the poor epistemic status of Vivek’s overconfidence is conducted by the experience to the subsequent beliefs.<sup>18</sup> The experience inherits a lesser epistemic status from the overconfidence, and Vivek’s subsequent strengthening of his belief inherits it from the experience.

This analysis entails that the experience has a rational standing, because Vivek’s initial overconfidence can conduct an epistemic property to the experience, only if the experience can inherit that property. And the experience, in turn, can transmit the property to subsequent beliefs, only if it has the property to begin with.

A property that is passed along from overconfidence to experience to belief resembles electric charge. My label for this property, ‘epistemic charge’ draws on this resemblance. Epistemic charge is a property of an experience. (I’ll consider in a moment which range of experiences, if any, it belongs to). Having an experience with this property redounds on the subject’s rational standing. How it redounds can

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<sup>17</sup> According to Alston (2005) and others who claim that many debates about the nature of justification are merely verbal, there is no common notion beneath the debates.

<sup>18</sup> A more measured analysis of this type of situation would stop short of epistemic charge, and focus only on the reduction of the experience’s epistemic power. I defend the measured analysis in Siegel (2012) and (2013). My goal here is to bring into focus the simpler, more revisionary analysis involving epistemic charge, so that we can more readily assess its advantages and drawbacks.

be modulated by psychological precursors of the experience. And like justification, epistemic charge can be transmitted to subsequent beliefs.

**Epistemic charge:** A property of experience that can be modulated by psychological precursors of the experience and transmitted to subsequent beliefs, and in virtue of which a subject's having the experience by itself redounds on the subject's rational standing.

The comparison with electricity helps describe potential epistemic features of experience. Like any metaphor, it has its limits. Some aspects of electricity, such as net-neutral charge, have no analog in any epistemic features of experience. Only negatively charged particles (electrons) are transmitted, whereas both positive and negative epistemic charge can be transmitted. The main point of the metaphor is that it provides a single label for a valenced property of experience that contributes to the valence of other things.

Like having a justified or an anti-justified belief, having an epistemically charged experience makes a pro tanto contribution to the rational standing of the subject. Consider two equally rational subjects, call them S- and S+, where S- has an ill-founded belief that p and S+ has a well-founded belief that p. (A belief is ill-founded just in case it has been formed or maintained epistemically badly, and well-founded if it is formed and maintained epistemically well.) The two subjects could end up equally rational, because S-'s other mental states compensate for the ill-foundedness of her belief that P. Here, S-'s belief contributes to S-'s overall rational standing, but we can't read off from the fact that S- has an ill-founded belief that p that she is less rational than a subject with a well-founded belief that p.

An analogous point holds for the relationship between an ill-founded belief B and the epistemic status of a belief B\* formed on the basis of B. Since other factors besides B may determine the ultimate rational standing of B\*, one can't read off from the facts that: (i) B is ill-founded and (ii) B\* is formed on the basis of B, that B\* is ill-founded as well. B's ill-foundedness might 'wash out' on the route to forming B\*.<sup>19</sup> But even if it washes out, B still transmits an epistemic property, by making a pro tanto contribution to the rational standing of B\*. And if there are other mental states, besides beliefs, that redound on the subject's rational standing, and are formed on the basis of B, then B can make a pro tanto contribution to their rational standing as well.

A final observation highlights the constraints on how epistemic charge can be moved from an experience to subsequent beliefs (or even to other experiences).

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<sup>19</sup> Suppose that a belief B is ill-founded, but it is part of a complex belief in a scientific theory, and the complex belief is well-founded. B's ill-foundedness washes out, if the fact that B is ill-founded makes no difference to the epistemic status of a subsequent belief B\* formed on the basis of the complex theory.

Consider Vivek's experience, which characterizes an audience member's facial expressions, as well as the color of her hair. Vivek's vanity affects the expression that Vivek sees (or seems to see) on her face, but not the color he sees in her hair. It might seem natural to say that Vivek has a single experience with contents that characterize her face (face-contents) and contents that characterize her hair color (hair-contents). On the epistemic charge analysis, is the single experience negatively charged, because vanity's exaggerations influence the face-contents, or positively charged, because the hair-contents arise in a perfectly epistemically respectable way?

To account for these variations, we'll have to say things like "in having content C, the experience can provide less than the usual amount of epistemic support". Epistemic charge will then be relativized to a specific content of the charged experience. In having face-contents, Vivek's experience will be negatively epistemically charged. It won't be Vivek's experience that is positively or negatively charged, but rather Vivek's experience, in having a certain content, that is positively or negatively charged.<sup>20</sup>

I've presented the notion of epistemic charge as a tool that provides a possible analysis of cases like Vivek's. To defend this analysis, one would have to defend the initial suspicion that it is irrational for Vivek to strengthen his belief that his audience is pleased, and argue that this conclusion should be analyzed in

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<sup>20</sup> Is there reason to relativize epistemic charge twice over – once to the contents of the experience, and again to the contents that the experience (in having the selected contents) can justify believing? One might think one should, on the grounds that even when we focus only on the face-contents of Vivek's experience, if his face-experience has any epistemic charge at all, it would seem to be negatively charged, relative to believing the face contents, but positively charged, relative to the contents of the introspective belief that he has a face-experience. On this picture, epistemic charge would be a relational property of the face-experience, rather than a monadic property of it.

Whether there is reason to think that epistemic charge would have to be relational in this way depends on the role of the face-experience in providing justification for the introspective belief. On some views, the structure of justification of the introspective belief comes from self-referential contents of the experience ('I am having a face-experience'), rather than the face-contents themselves (Kriegel (2011). On other views, it does not come from any contents of the experience at all, but rather from the route by which the introspective belief is formed (Byrne 2012). If either of these approaches to introspective belief are correct, then they remove the apparent motivation for thinking that a face-experience could be negatively charged relative to face-contents, but positively charged relative to the contents of an introspective belief that self-ascribes the face-experience.

terms of epistemic charge rather than in some other way.<sup>21</sup> I won't do either of those things here, because there are more fundamental questions to address about the scope of epistemic charge that determine the implications of the analysis for global structure of justification. And these implications are part of what would need to be assessed, to assess the analysis.

I'll focus on explaining three things about the following thesis.

**Epistemic Charge thesis:** Some experiences are epistemically charged.

To assess this thesis, further explanation is needed on three fronts:

**Scope:** What is the scope of epistemic charge among experiences?

**Ground:** In virtue of what do experiences have any epistemic charge at all?

**Modulation:** What kinds of factors can modulate the epistemic charge of an epistemically charged experience?

The scope question asks whether all perceptual experiences have epistemic charge. Is having epistemic charge exceptional or standard? The ground question asks what features of charged experiences, or what facts about experiences, explain why they are epistemically charged at all, as opposed to having no epistemic charge.

The ground question bears directly on the scope question. The scope of epistemic charge will depend on the distribution across experiences of the factors that ground its epistemic charge. For instance, if the factors are exclusively contingent features of experience – such as resulting from projected overconfidence - then only the experiences with those features will be charged, and these experiences may occur only occasionally. At the other extreme, if the grounding factors are constitutive of experience, then all experiences will be epistemically charged.

The modulation question assumes that experiences can be epistemically charged, and asks what kinds of factors can increase or decrease its charge, or flip its valence from positive to negative. Taken together, the ground and the modulation questions ask for an account of which features give an experience the specific epistemic charge that it has. We have already met a possible answer to the modulation question: inference can modulate epistemic charge. If experiences can be epistemically charged, this opens the possibility that at least some of the routes

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<sup>21</sup> In Siegel (2011) and (2013) I argue that it would indeed be epistemically problematic for Vivek to strengthen (even further) his confidence that audiences like him in response to his vanity-generated experience. For discussion, see McGrath (2013), Huemer (2013), Fumerton (2013), Tucker (2014), Jackson (2011), and Zeimbekis, ed. (2015)

to experience that psychologists call ‘inferences’ belong in the class of inferences that establish epistemic dependence of conclusions on their inferential inputs.

In the rest of the paper, I sketch what strike me as the most plausible and powerful potential answer to the scope and ground questions. The sketch lets us see more clearly how the Epistemic Charge thesis could be developed, what it entails, and what impact it would have on the global structure of justification.

#### **4. The scope and ground of epistemic charge**

Let us start with the scope question. If some but not all experiences have epistemic charge, then the uncharged experiences can in principle still be unjustified justifiers. The impact on the global structure of justification is different if all perceptual experiences have epistemic charge.

When we consider possible grounds, there’s good reason to think that if any experiences are epistemically charged, then being charged is standard rather than exceptional. And some potential grounds for epistemic charge suggest that it is universal.

What are the most plausible grounds for epistemic charge of experiences? Earlier I suggested that the fact that experiences form part of our outlook on the world helps motivate the Epistemic Charge thesis, once the misleading apparent reasons to reject it are cleared away.

When we consider which features of experience underlie its contribution to an outlook, a first suggestion is its phenomenal character - at least those aspects of it that are closely tied to the presentation of properties in experience.<sup>22</sup> The phenomenal character of perceptual experience purports to characterize how things in the external world are. I’ll call this kind of phenomenal character ‘presentational phenomenology’. In the rest of the discussion when I mention the phenomenal character of perceptual experience, I am taking for granted that it is presentational phenomenal character.

Phenomenal conservatism is the thesis that having an experience with content P (where P is an external-world proposition) suffices to provide prima-facie justification to believe P. Both phenomenal conservatives and others say that the phenomenal character of perceptual experience endows experiences with powers to provide justification to subsequent external-world beliefs formed on their basis. The first proposal about the grounds of epistemic charge starts from a closely related idea: the presentational phenomenal character of perceptual experiences endows

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<sup>22</sup> This type of phenomenal character is discussed under different labels, sometimes with other dispensable features, such as ‘perceptual acceptance’ H.H. Price (1950), ‘perceptual consciousness’ (Smith 2002). For further discussion see Siegel 2010, Bengson (2013), Chudnoff (2012).



them with a rational standing of their own. This idea can be put in the form of an argument for a universal epistemic charge thesis.

### **The Phenomenal Ground Argument**

P1. All perceptual experiences have presentational phenomenal character.

P2. The presentational phenomenal character of perceptual experiences gives them epistemic charge.

Conclusion: All experiences have an epistemic charge.

The key premise of the Phenomenal Ground Argument, P2, raises several questions. In order to see what kind of impact phenomenal grounds for epistemic charge would have on the global structure of justification, I'll consider how these questions could most plausibly be answered.

First, if experiences are epistemically charged just by having a presentational phenomenal character, then what valence (if any) does the charge have, and in what increment? As a starting observation, normally it is reasonable to believe one's eyes and other senses. If you want to know whether the sunset has started, you can find out by looking. Ordinary perceptual experiences like this one can provide a baseline amount justification for believing the contents of those experiences, or closely related contents. These observations suggest that in the normal, pervasive situations in which it is reasonable to believe your eyes, if perceptual experiences have any epistemic charge at all, they have a positive epistemic charge.

But what exactly is the role of phenomenal character in giving experience positive charge? On a first interpretation of P2, the phenomenal character merely makes it the case that experience is epistemically charged, and other factors combines with the phenomenal character to determine which valence it has and in what increment. Since there is no such thing as having an epistemic charge, but lacking any determinate charge, for this option to develop the Phenomenal Ground Argument, the other factors would have to be present in all cases. In this respect, experiences would resemble beliefs as they are often construed. Beliefs are often thought to have an epistemic status no matter what, but which epistemic status they have depends on factors besides the mere fact that one has the belief, and whatever factors these are, there is no escaping them.

A second interpretation of P2 makes experiences more closely analogous to beliefs as *epistemological conservatism* construes them. According to epistemological conservatism, merely having a belief gives it a positive epistemic status.<sup>23</sup> Since presentational phenomenal character is a feature that experiences have, the Phenomenal Ground Argument on the second option says that merely having a perceptual experience (due to its phenomenal character) gives it a pro

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<sup>23</sup> Quine (1951), Sklar (1975), Harman (1986). For overview and critical discussion, see Christensen 1994). "Conservatism in Epistemology" *Nous* 28:1, 69-89.

tanto positive epistemic charge. If an experience retains its power to provide justification to subsequent beliefs formed on its basis, it is providing that power by passing on its own positive epistemic status. This option would be aptly labeled *phenomenal conservatism*, were that label not already used for a different position. I'll call it perceptual conservatism.

Perceptual conservatism does not entail that all experiences have a baseline positive epistemic charge, even though all experiences have phenomenal character. The phenomenal character of experience could be a factor that initially contributes positive epistemic charge, but other factors could modulate the charge by making it negative or reducing its increment of positive charge. For instance, Vivek's vanity could modulate the epistemic charge of his experience of the faces in the audience, so that his experience is negatively charged.

Suppose that P is a content for believing which Vivek's experience could provide the usual amount of justification, were it not influenced by his vanity. How does the phenomenal character of Vivek's experience, with its power to provide justification for P, interact with the influence of Vivek's vanity on his experience, which we're assuming leaves his experience negatively epistemically charged?

Perceptual conservatism entails an aggregative model, on which the experience has a positive charge that provides some pro tanto justification for P, but the influence of Vivek's vanity leaves the experience with more anti-justification for P. Here, the pro tanto justification bestowed by the experience is simply outweighed - it does not go away. The aggregative model fits most easily with perceptual conservatism.

In contrast, on a preventive model, the influence of Vivek's vanity prevents the experience from having its customary positive charge in the first place. Here the contest between the two factors takes place prior to any pro tanto contribution of determinate epistemic charge by phenomenal character. The preventive model is therefore not compatible with perceptual conservatism.

Both aggregative and prevention models provide a way to explain the usual substantial epistemic support we often have for believing our eyes. And both models respect the conjunction of two ideas: first, that the ultimate contribution of an experience to the rational standing of the subject depends on its relationship to other psychological states, and second, that the phenomenal character of experience endows it with an epistemic charge.

### **Phenomenal grounds and the global structure of justification**

If a universal Epistemic Charge thesis is true, as per the Phenomenal Ground argument, then no experiences will be unjustified justifiers, according to the usual sense whereby unjustified justifiers are not admissible for being justified or anti-justified. If there are no unjustified justifiers in this sense, does that entail that the justification of belief must have either of these two structures: continuing in a regress, or cohering with other mental states?

No. If epistemic charge were phenomenally grounded, then the overall structure of justification could be in many respects the way that foundationalists took it to be. Phenomenal grounds could introduce self-justifying experiences. These experiences would be similar in one respect to the traditional 'unjustified justifiers': nothing else would justify them. But rather than being epistemically neutral, these experiences would be epistemically charged by their own features. If at least some self-charged experience are self-charged positively, then they can play one of the roles of unjustified justifiers: they contribute to justification, without needing to be justified by anything else. They could be self-justifying justifiers.

Could a belief be immediately justified by a positively charged experience? A subject S's belief that p is immediately justified by an experience, just in case there need be no further propositions that S must be justified in believing from a source other than the experience, in order for the experience to justify her in believing that P – or if there are, being justified in believing those propositions need not play a role in S's getting justification to believe P from her experience.

Consider first whether an experience with content P could immediately justify a belief that P. Here, there won't be any other proposition besides P that S has to be justified in believing, in order for her experience to justify her in believing that P. Even if the p-experience came to have its positive charge in part by the influence of antecedent psychological state with content p\*, it is an open possibility that the p-experience could justify believing that p, without relying on justification for believing p\*. For instance, the increment of positive charge bestowed by presentational phenomenology might be enough to provide justification for believing p, and the psychological antecedents might be responsible for providing an increment of positive charge that goes beyond what is needed. On this scenario, the experience with content P could provide immediate justification for believing p.

The situation is no different when we consider the role of a positively epistemically charged experience with content p (a p-experience) in justifying a subject in believing a different proposition q. Even if justification from the p-experience for believing p plays a role in providing the justification for believing q, this justification need not come from a source distinct from experience. So epistemically charged experiences can immediately justify beliefs, and those beliefs, together with the experiences that immediately justify them, could in principle form a foundation for knowledge.

In addition to asking whether self-charged experiences could provide immediate justification (they can), we can also ask whether they have to provide immediate justification. Here, the answer is No. If the minimal unit needed to provide justification includes more than the just an epistemically charged experience, then even a positively charged experience will not be able to provide immediate justification.

The Phenomenal Ground Argument develops the idea that epistemic charge is grounded in the fact that experience belongs to one's outlook on the world. One might ask whether highly inattentive experiences contribute to one's outlook in a way that grounds epistemic charge.<sup>24</sup> The phenomenal ground approach could be refined by excluding highly inattentive experiences. But since most experiences fall outside the category of highly inattentive ones, even this adjustment would make the scope of epistemic charge far-reaching. Epistemically charged experiences would still be standard rather than exceptional.

The phenomenal ground idea could be developed either in a way that takes the foundation to include beliefs that self-ascribe experiences, or in a way that takes the foundation to include beliefs about the external world. If experiences are positively self-charged in having the self-reflexive content "I am having this experience", then the foundation can include self-ascriptions of experiences. If experiences lack self-reflexive contents, and their only presentational phenomenology is reflected in external-world contents, then the foundation can include beliefs about the external world. The important point is that from the fact that all perceptual experiences are epistemically charged by their presentational phenomenal character, it does not follow that foundationalism is false, or that it is true, or that experiences cannot provide immediate justification or that they can. These positions can only emerge from further commitments, beyond the commitment that all experiences are positively epistemically charged by virtue of their presentational phenomenal character.

### **Inference: Ground vs. Modulator**

I've been discussing the hypothesis that the presentational phenomenal character gives experience an epistemic charge. This hypothesis develops the idea that experiences are epistemically charged because they belong to one's outlook on the world. According to a different way to develop this idea, experiences have a rational standing exactly when they result from the kinds of inference that establish epistemic dependence relations. For instance, if Vivek's perceptual experience of the faces arises from unconscious reasoning, then it is epistemically charged, whereas if his other perceptual experiences arise from merely causal routes, then they have no epistemic charge. In general, on this view, the scope of epistemic charge will extend exactly to the range of experiences that result from inference.

The hypothesis that inferential routes to experience give it an epistemic charge fits with the idea that experiences are epistemically charged because they belong to a person's outlook. We draw inferences from information (including misinformation) we have already. When the information we infer from belongs to our outlook, the conclusion of the inference will belong to it as well.

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<sup>24</sup> For discussion of the epistemic role of highly inattentive experiences, see Siegel and Silins (2014).

However, an experience contributes to the subject's outlook whether it is inferred (in the relevant sense) or not. The inferential approach to grounding epistemic charges limits the epistemically charged experiences to the ones that develop through reasoning from of a pre-existing outlook. Experiences that are influenced non-inferentially by a pre-existing outlook, or that contribute to one's outlook without being influenced by the outlook one had prior to the experience, will not be epistemically charged. This division seems artificial.

If experiences can be epistemically affected by inferences, a more plausible role for those inferences is to modulate epistemic charge, rather than grounding it. As a modulator of epistemic charge, an inference to experience adjusts an epistemic charge that is grounded in something other than inference.

Which inferences could plausibly modulate epistemic charge? One might think that even if Vivek's projection operates by via an inference that makes his experiences epistemically charged, the inferences that operate over processes internal to the visual system are the wrong kind to modulate any epistemic charge.<sup>25</sup> More radically, one might deny that any inferences to experiences could modulate epistemic charge. To analyze Vivek's epistemic situation, some other modulating factors would be needed.

If inferences to perceptual experiences can modulate their epistemic charge in ways that are analogous to the epistemic effects of inference on belief, then the inputs to the inference must have epistemic standing as well. The ultimate sources of epistemic support for inferential inputs to experience will affect the global structure of justification. Here the options are the same as the ones we find when we ask about the ultimate sources of justification of belief: there is an infinite chain of inferences, or a non-linear structure by belonging to which a belief can be justified, or a structure that contains some elements that provide their own epistemic charge – for example, via a phenomenal ground.

### **Conclusion**

On the face of it, it might seem that the epistemic charge thesis on its own stacks the deck against foundationalism, by robbing that position of its unjustified justifiers. On closer examination, however, reconfiguring the domain of epistemic normativity by itself doesn't determine what the structure of justification can or cannot be.

When we consider experiences such as Vivek's, perhaps the correct philosophical suspicion is that all experiences are susceptible to being formed epistemically well or epistemically badly. We just didn't see it, because we weren't focusing on the

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<sup>25</sup> Several papers in Zeimbekis (2015) take this line. For discussion see Siegel (2015) and Jenkin and Siegel (2015).

cases where experiences extend and elaborate pre-existing irrational attitudes, and we were presuming that experiences differed from beliefs more than they do.\*

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\* Thanks to attendees of the Aristotelian Society meeting of June 2015, and to audiences in Southampton, at the 2015 Midwest Epistemology Workshop in Missouri, and in Tim Crane's project on New Directions in the Philosophy of Mind in Cambridge. For comments and discussion, many thanks to Paul Boghossian, David Chalmers, Katalin Farkas, Marina Folescu, Jane Friedman, Zoe Jenkin, Paul Marcucilli, Farid Masrour, Matt McGrath, Nico Silins, Matt Soteriou, Scott Sturgeon, Kurt Sylvan, Jonathan Vogel, and Sebastian Watzl.

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