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Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*.

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The Rationality of Perception rewrites perception's rational role and its rational standing. This book is ambitious and creative. It is sure to have a big impact on the philosophy of perception, as epistemic questions return to focus.

Perception is not an unjustified justifier, according to Siegel. Instead, its epistemic status can vary. Accordingly, the power of conscious perception to support judgments, beliefs, and outlooks can vary. In this view, perception's epistemic status depends on its etiology. If their precursors differ, experiences that share content and phenomenology can differ epistemically and rationally, even if a subject could not tell them apart. But this is not just due to differences in external factors, such as reliability. Instead, it stems from what happens within a perceiver. In particular, experiences can stem from inferences, and epistemic variability arises from better or worse inferences. Given inferential routes to experience, the surprising implication is that experiences can be more or less rational. That is, harboring an experience can accrue to a subject's rational status.

The problem of hijacked experience animates Siegel's account (chap. 1). Suppose that an extra-perceptual condition, such as fear, prejudice, belief, or outlook, can affect perceptual consciousness. For instance, experimental psychologists have reported that a gray banana photo can look faintly yellowish, given the shades to which subjects match it. This appearance may be thought to stem from presuming that bananas are yellow.

First-personally, this could strike you as a case in which you'd be warranted in strengthening your belief that bananas are yellow. But, knowing the full story, doing so seems suspicious. Having an experience hijacked by what you believe undermines its capacity to support the belief that caused it. With full knowledge, this would not be rational.

Against those who maintain that perceptual experiences have fixed potential to support beliefs, Siegel says experiences that share content and phenomenal character can differ epistemically. In particular, they can differ by degree in their capacity to support cognition. Thus, they are assessable epistemically, as better or worse. Experience is not so innocent.

Hijacking is hypothetical. It requires that extra-perceptual cognition or emotion can affect the character and the content of perceptual experience. Thus, whether experiences are epistemically modulated turns on an empirical question.

Results from experimental psychology are relevant. Siegel discusses several findings suggesting that beliefs, emotions, and other aspects of one's cognitive outlook can affect perception. However, a debate about cognitive penetration now entering its fifth decade has yielded no consensus. In a recent salvo, Firestone and Scholl (2016) argue forcefully that each case in which cognition purportedly affects perception is best explained in other terms, concluding that no compelling evidence exists that cognition directly affects perception, without mediation by attention, development, or learning.

On one hand, Siegel is comfortable resting on the hypothetical. However, Siegel also says results from experimental psychology do not settle the central philosophical issue (xviii–xix). The former concern processes and mechanisms, and the latter concerns experience. Whether “top-down” effects ever alter relatively early perceptual processing, Siegel suggests, does not touch the fact that thinking affects experience, which any introspective perceiver can appreciate.

Some will object that it is not evident that extra-perceptual cognition or emotion affects experience itself, understood as perceptual phenomenology, rather than how things seem to a perceiver to be on the basis of perceptual consciousness. How things seem to be during conscious perception could require some measure of recognition, interpretation, snap judgment, or rapid inference. Thus, if only such seemings are shaped by extra-perceptual cognition, then perceptual experience itself could retain a steady epistemic footing.

It is not so controversial that seemings understood in this way are epistemically assessable. If they correspond approximately to “seeing as” or what Dretske called “epistemic seeing,” there is no debate about whether they are assessable as accurate and thus contentful. And their epistemic status might vary, depending on their cognitive precursors. This is not so revisionary.

Nevertheless, in Siegel’s view, seemings are reflected in or partly constitute perceptual phenomenology. According to Siegel, even if there is a continuum and not a clearly-defined boundary between perceptual and cognitive processes, perceptual experience is well defined, phenomenologically (xviii).

Even so, within perceptual phenomenology, there could be a difference. In the first place, there may be a difference between aspects of experience that can be affected by cognition and those that cannot. Thus, some could be variable, epistemically, and some could be fixed. So, appearing angry and appearing yellow might differ. This could be so even if each type of aspect shares the same basic rational standing.

However, there could be a more substantive difference in the types of states that contribute to experience, between those invariably involving just responsiveness to the environment and those also stemming from recognition, categorization, snap judgment, or rapid

inference. Sensitivity to yellowishness thus may differ from looking angry. Each makes a genuine contribution to what it's like consciously to perceive. But the epistemic standing of each type also could differ, such that only the latter are plausible candidates for being epistemically evaluable.

A purist may not treat seemings as purely perceptual. However, it is very strict to deny that what it's like in consciously perceiving depends on how we take things to be. Seemings plausibly contribute to perceptual consciousness. They make a difference to what it's like for a perceiving subject. Moreover, they bear many of the marks traditionally associated with perception. They are relatively spontaneous and effortless, and they do not typically strike us as being under direct, deliberate, or deliberative control in the short run. In addition, reflexive seemings typically do provide a measure of warrant for perceptual judgments and beliefs, and we take them to do so. Seemings are part of that to which subjects appeal in rationally supporting perceptual judgments and empirical beliefs. Thus, Siegel's account of their epistemic standing and modulation is important for any full account of perception's rational role.

According to Siegel, an experience is epistemically appraisable, as better or worse, with respect to a specific content, in light of its being more or less capable of supporting good inferences and contributing to making beliefs well founded (chap. 3). Siegel's diagnosis is that hijacking epistemically downgrades an experience by undercutting its power to support judgments and beliefs—hijacking thus undercuts an experience's epistemic power (chap. 4). More generally, its precursors and the route by which it is formed each can decrease or augment an experience's capacity epistemically to support other states. This impacts its epistemic status.

Siegel proposes that experiences sharing content and character can differ epistemically because experiences can be products of inference (chap. 6). Stemming from bad inference

diminishes epistemic power. An experience itself may rely on a circular inference, it may jump to a conclusion not warranted by the evidence, or it may inherit the epistemic flaws of a premise on which it relies. If the banana's consciously seeming yellowish stems from an inference that relies on your belief that bananas are yellow, strengthening that belief in the face of experience is epistemically worse than it otherwise would have been because it involves circular inference (122).

How could inference yield a perceptual experience? Siegel argues that inference does not require awareness, consideration, deliberation, or control (chap. 5). A subject need not "reckon" that some evidence supports a conclusion for inference to occur. Instead, Siegel proposes that inference is a kind of response to information that appreciates its force (84). A seemingly spontaneous experience in fact can reflect responsiveness to the force of information encoded elsewhere. Thus, it can stem from inference. This differs from the notion of inference favored by philosophers. But this more permissive notion of inference accords with that employed in psychology, especially by perceptual psychologists who invoke unconscious inferences.

Stemming from inference does not just explain epistemic downgrade in hijacking. It also anchors Siegel's case that experiences can be more or less rational. A subject who has a downgraded experience suffers rationally. Siegel's conception thus levels the psychological landscape, with respect to rational standing. Nothing in principle bars any contentful psychological state from being rational or irrational, if an appreciative response to information can cause it. Perceptual experiences, judgments, and beliefs alike share that standing. Moreover, humans are not the only rational animals (see also Buckner 2017).

Suppose with Siegel that in some inferences a process or state responds appreciatively to the force of information without the subject who harbors it doing so. The subject remains

unaware that inference occurs. Still, some inferences stand out. Sometimes, a subject reaches a conclusion by reckoning—by consciously taking some evidence to support it, inductively or deductively. These inferences are more sophisticated. In such cases, it makes sense to assess the reasoning epistemically. It also can be warranted to hold the subject accountable for that cognitive act. If it is a bad inference, the subject showed poor sensitivity to reasons, or ought to have done better, and sometimes can appreciate that. The inference makes it apt to blame or praise the subject. If a subject is wholly unaware of it, an inferential route to experience, and thus its product, still may be assessable as better or worse, epistemically. But, does it warrant holding the subject accountable, or offering blame or praise? Siegel suggests it need not (xiv, xxiii). So, a type of normative assessment remains that does not apply.

Suppose, then, we subscribe to the most encompassing notion of inference. Some inferences are sophisticated. These can be rational or irrational. The fact that some inferences are rational or irrational does not show that all inferences are rational or irrational. Inferences of the permissive sort that issue experiences thus may not be among those that accrue to a subject's rational status, given that none is of the sophisticated type. Alternatively, inferences in which a subject, not just a process or state, appreciatively responds to evidence manifest a distinctive form of rational standing, which can extend to states of the same type such inferences issue. Epistemic downgrade thus leaves intact how we rationally assess subjects. This restores contour to the rational landscape.

If seemings can be assessed epistemically but not rationally, and if inference with reckoning or taking does not explain what epistemically downgrades a hijacked experience, we still owe an alternative account that does not invoke reliability or defeaters. Siegel's permissive inference remains one option. Christopher Peacocke (2018) offers an alternative factive norm

according to which one should judge that p in the face of a conscious perceptual seeming only if it is a genuine perception of the fact that p.

Like others among the most fascinating psychological phenomena, conscious perceptual seemings occupy the borderland between perception and cognition. They are intermediate between pure responsiveness to the environment and sophisticated reasoning, with reckoning and awareness. Their epistemic and rational status matters.

The Rationality of Perception is an important book. It offers a lucid description of a new puzzle about experience, and it describes a fresh approach to thinking about perception's epistemic and rational standing. It also is a pleasure to read, lively and engaging. The narrative is rich with vivid examples, and their variety illustrates the puzzle's force and its reach. This book is a welcome challenge.

References

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