

## **The Rationality of Perception \* Susanna Siegel Eastern Division APA 2018.**

Two epistemic problems, one at each interface

- between individual and cultural milieu (Whit):  
Can the epistemic status of a culturally entrenched presumption be transmitted to an individual who unreflectively absorbs it?
- within an individual's mind, between perceptual experience and beliefs, etc:  
Can the epistemic status of an individual's prior outlook be transmitted to a perceptual experience, when the outlook shapes the experience?

RP argues that such transmission is possible. The epistemic basing relation operates in places where it hasn't much been studied.

### **The intra-personal problem**

The interface where it occurs is the location of a large varied family of phenomena. "Cognitive penetration" is used to cover influences on perception, where

- **perception** can include: early vision, perceptual judgment, perceptual experience, introspective beliefs about these things.
- **influencers** can include: belief, skill, expertise, fear, desire, preferences.
- **mechanisms of influence** include or exclude: feature-based attention imagery.

### **1. How psychologically realistic?**

Nagel: The intra-personal problem only arises for experiences that are influenced in a psychologically unrealistic way.

Firestone and Scholl (2016) cast doubt on cognitive penetration of experience, by giving us reason to expect current and future putative experimental evidence for it to face "a small number of experimental pitfalls".

**Reply:** F&S do not undermine reasons to think that a range of cognitive factors can influence perceptual experience in ways that could lead to cases like mine.

- As they define it, cognitive penetration is supposed to happen only if the mind has no fundamental division into between perception and cognition. But the hypothesis that perceptual experience can be hijacked doesn't entail anything about the architecture of the mind. So even if they showed that there's no cognitive penetration of the sort that threatens the idea of perceptual modules, that wouldn't be evidence against effects on perceptual experience.
- F&S themselves grant the existence of some cognitive effects on perceptual experience where attention alters perceptual processing, such as the cocktail party effect. So although they claim to undermine the idea that perceptual experience can be cognitively penetrated, they allow some cognitive influences on experience.

- The supposed “experimental pitfalls” include possibilities we knew a priori could be alternatives to effects on perception (or experience), such as false introspective belief, just post-perceptual belief, and effects of attention at the onset of perceiving (eg, turning your head, opening your eyes).

Some evidence for cognitive effects on perceptual experience

- **Attention influences perceptual processing** As many critics have pointed out (Block, Carrasco, Lupyan, Mole, Wu, Clark), there are many ways for attention can alter perceptual processing, even when it is driven by cognition and skill, and these alterations affect perceptual experience.
  - Which features you attend to (e.g., faces, red things, motion) is driven by both cognition and skill (e.g. musical and athletic skill radically alter what you see and hear, even after perception begins).
- **Memory color:** Grey bananas look more yellow than grey non-bananas. Even intra-perceptual processes can be epistemically appraised as rational or irrational (Z. Jenkin: experiences are based on reasons when they result from memory color, core cognition, and some cross-modal interactions.)
- **Imagery can contribute to perceptual experience** Macpherson’s (2011) mechanism of memory color, hearing a story about motion can cause motion aftereffects.

Given these kinds of effects on perceptual experience, we shouldn’t take my cases to be psychologically unrealistic on the grounds that in general, perceptual experiences unfold without any influence from prior outlooks.

We should not wait for psychology to tell us whether cases like mine happen before we explore their epistemic implications.

## 2. Hijacking

Jill fears that Jack is angry and suspects he is. When she sees him, he looks angry to her, due to her fearful suspicion.

Q: Does Jill’s visual experience of Jack as angry give her just as much reason to believe her eyes as she could have if her experience weren’t influenced by her fearful suspicion that Jack is angry?

**Yes.** Pautz. Phenomenal conservatism, access internalists.

What else should Jill believe?

**No.** Nagel. Markie, McGrath (internalists), reliabilists (Lyons, Ghislen)

Similarity to wishful/fearful thinking, confirmation bias

**Both Yes and No.** Distinctions needed. Railton: rational but unreasonable

I call experiences that give rise to this problem ‘hijacked experiences’, to capture the idea that prior outlooks (which sometimes can steer perception perfectly well) have more weight in determining which experience you’ll have than properly perceptual inputs (such as Jack’s face).

Railton finds the image misleading, as it suggests to him a type of force that's both unusual and outside the mind. –Reply: Inside the steering-system, and steering has gone awry. But maybe a metaphor that does justice to the weights would be better.

### 3. Is No more plausible than Yes?

I acknowledge the force of Yes, but ultimately I defend No. Pautz asks:

Then how come you don't split your credence equally between Yes and No?

- Distributing credence and stopping there would be fundamentally unilluminating. It wouldn't identify the good-making or bad-making features. Take a position vs. understand the reasons for taking it.
- If one were to divide, why divide *equally*? It can be hard to tell what the relative forces are that pull in each direction.
- I felt pulled me more strongly toward No by a long pattern of real-world cases that include not just situations analogous to Jill's, but also live disagreements about the epistemic status of that situation.

I defend the **Downgrade Thesis**: Jill's experience contributes less to her reason to believe her eyes than it could, if it weren't hijacked by her fearful suspicion.

I argue that the Downgrade thesis is well explained by the Rationality of Perception.

**Rationality of Perception**: Both perceptual experiences and the processes that give rise to them can be rational or irrational.

For instance, the relationship between Jill's suspicion and her experience can make her experience irrational, and that's why it's downgraded.

**Inferential modulation thesis**: Perceptual experiences (such as Jill's) can be the conclusions of inferences from prior outlooks (such as Jill's suspicion).

Other modes of hijacking by prior outlooks include: inferring poorly *from* one's experience, selective intake of information, bypassing (= failing to use) perceptual experience, closing off perceptual inquiry too soon.

Pautz: What intuitive force does the Downgrade thesis have?

I was pulled toward No by a cultural phenomenon: the long pattern of massive indignance to a well-known strand of brutality in American society.

This same phenomenon also led me to address both scaled-up version of the same epistemic problem.

Two steps took me to No.

(i) Start with a type of situation – brutal yet culturally normal – in which: there are massive protests and indignation after someone (almost always a man, usually white, often armed and often a police officer) is acquitted for using force (often lethal) against someone else who is black (usually a man or a boy), on the grounds

that the shooter's belief that that man or boy posed imminent severe danger was reasonable.

The protests come mostly from people who live regularly with the threat of this kind of violence against them, their siblings, cousins, etc. and who therefore navigate the consequences of being perceived as threatening.

You could see the acquittals vs protests as a living disagreement about whether the beliefs were reasonable. What's culturally normal is both the legal legitimacy of these beliefs as reasonable, and the refusal to accept that epistemic categorization of them, on the grounds that the fear deemed reasonable by legal institutions is an unreasonable cultural myth of the dangerous black boy or man, operating in the minds of individuals.

Some instances in the pattern:

2014 Ferguson. In explaining to a grand jury why it was reasonable for him to shoot his gun at 18 year old Michael Brown, Darren Wilson describes Brown as having "the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked."

1973 riots in Queens. Officer Thomas Shea (first NYC police officer tried for murder while on duty) acquitted for shooting to death 10 y.o. Clifford Glover. Claimed the 4<sup>th</sup> grader was reaching for a gun, but no gun was ever found.

1964 Harlem riots. Officer Thomas Gilligan shot and killed 15-y.o. James Powell in Yorkville. They claimed he had a knife, but no knife was ever found.

Other cases never became part of public political life but show the same pattern of acquittal and indignance.

(ii) Consider whether the massive reactions would be any different if the protestors knew that the shooters had hallucinated cues for danger (menacing look, gun, etc) as opposed to forming that belief in response to what they correctly see.

When I focus on the cultural myth operating in individual minds, it doesn't seem to matter whether it takes the form of perceptual experience or just belief.

- It doesn't seem incumbent on someone to whom the fear was directed to excuse the officers upon learning they their racist outlook had reached all the way to their perceptual experiences.
- If a racist hallucinates me as dangerous, I have several reactions. I'm terrified (especially when the guy is armed), angry, offended, and I'm more inclined to think the hallucinator has an epistemic problem than I am to think they're being reasonable because their twisted outlook has infiltrated all the way to their perceptual experience. It redounds poorly on him if the hallucinator can't see an ordinary shoplifting teenager for what he is.

This reaction is incompatible with Yes. Assumption: many protestors share it.

Pautz: “Unlike the Gettier case, the Downgrade thesis just doesn’t enjoy consistent intuitive support”.

Interpretation: (i) to have rational force, intuitions should be relatively stable across people. (ii) Yes-intuitions have that kind of stability.

On (ii): Many people share my reaction to the influence of cultural myth described earlier, and that reaction is incompatible with Yes.

On (i): The Gettier intuition isn’t the only model for philosophically useful intuitions.

- Philosophical problems often have a structure where two things seem plausible yet they can’t both be true. Intuitions in this structure can retain their force even when the opposing intuitions has some force as well.

- Two kinds of rational force: provide justification vs. facilitate discovery

**Gettier intuition:** justifies denying JTB, but contributes little to subsequent discoveries. Didn’t open new questions, or help analyze knowledge.

**Downgrade intuition:** it opens the question of the scope of epistemic appraisal in the mind, even if it exists alongside intuition favoring Yes.

Inferentialist hypotheses let us see what mental agency might look like if experiences could be conclusions of inferences.

#### 4. Two kinds of fictional cases in philosophy

When Nagel asks whether my cases are psychologically realistic, she brings into focus two kinds of fictional cases in philosophy.

Psychologically realistic fictions you’re seeing a banana	vs.	Psychologically unrealistic hedgehogs control your mind
--	-----	--

Dialectical role for (even) unrealistic fiction: potential counter-examples to putatively necessary truths.

M. Huemer: “Phenomenal conservatism is a necessary truth, not a contingent one. There is no possible world in which phenomenal conservatism is false.”  
*Skepticism and the Veil of Perception.*

An unrealistically fictional hijacked experience that’s downgraded (w/out defeaters) would refute phenomenal conservatism.

Dialectical role for (exclusively) realistic fiction: illuminate what may sometimes be our own epistemic situation.

Nagel: with only unrealistic cases “our answer to the rational problems of hypothetical Charlie will not address the real-world rational problems of the figures

who inspired him...[such as] what goes epistemically wrong in vanity, racism and pseudo-science”.

**Reply:** I don't think my analysis is the right kind of theory to help us understand what goes epistemically wrong in racism or pseudo-science. To understand those things, we need tools far beyond those in analytic epistemology. E.g. for racism in the US, we'd need a big dose history and structural (economic) and cultural analyses of how myths are formed and perpetuated. RP is just a small piece of the picture.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nagel says hijacked experiences are unrealistic. Pautz says it's implausible as well as unpopular to say that they lead to epistemic downgrade. He also argues that even if the Downgrade thesis were true, Jill's perc. beliefs would still be “perfectly rational”.

### 5. Pautz's introspective work-around argument

P1. Hijacked-S knows she is having a redness-roundness experience.

P2. If Hijacked-S knows she is having a redness-roundness experience, then she has reason to believe there's a red round thing there.

Conclusion: Hijacked-S has reason to believe there's a red round thing there.

This conclusion “undermines the claim that in every core hijack case, the subject's believing the content of her experience is irrational...Her belief might be perfectly rational”. = Deflate the significance of epistemic downgrade.

**Reply:** If you don't draw this inference, then the belief isn't formed on the basis of the introspective belief.

Introspection-first thesis: People tend to form external-world beliefs on the basis of introspective beliefs, not their experiences (and background external-world beliefs).

Cf. criticism of early foundationalism according to which introspective beliefs were basic, and abductive responses to skepticism.

**A Pautz-esque objection:** Focus just on the fact that the introspective judgment, *if* the hijacked subject formed it, *would* give them reason to think there's something red and round there. Doesn't that show that they *have* perfectly good reason to believe their eyes –even if they don't use it? (Pautz: “Even you don't carry out this inference, you could do so easily.”)

**Reply:** No. If you grant the Downgrade thesis, then the subjects' epistemic situation includes forces that pull her in opposite directions, doxastically.

The fact that the experience is hijacked pressures them not to believe their eyes. Introspective judgment (if formed) pressured to believe her eyes.

So what they've got is a conflict. Why think the introspective belief overpowers the hijacked experience, as Pautz assumes? We're back where we started –a simple question (Yes/No) has no simple answer.

Perhaps Pautz thinks that if the introspective belief is justified, then the experience couldn't be downgraded in having red-roundness content. But that content plays no obvious role in justifying the introspective belief. (See footnote 12, chapter 3.3).

## 6. Is Yes more plausible than No? Seamless transitions

Pautz: Seamless transitions favor Yes over No -- more so than the other cases.

Unhijacked tomato-hallucination → seeing a tomato.

Hijacked tomato-hallucination → unhijacked tomato-hallucination.

Equal Justification: no epistemic change in either seamless transition.

Downgrade Thesis: the un-hijacked experience has more epistemic power than the hijacked experience.

Pautz: "In my experience, people I've discussed these cases with treat them the same. In both cases, such an out-of-nowhere increase in your confidence **with no change in your phenomenal life** would be totally capricious."

"If you just happened to increase your confidence in the proposition that a red and round thing is there [just after] the seamless transition, you actually had a reason to do so".

**Reply:** seamless transitions provide no new traction beyond the original cases. In these transitions, you have no inkling of the difference between your situation before and after. --For Pautz that's the counter-intuitive part. No changes in epistemic status without any "changes in your phenomenal life". And that was already a feature of the original cases.

## 7. Can pain be rational or irrational?

Williamson: Too much self-pity, and you take an itch to be a pain.

Experience: itch

Introspective belief: I'm in pain ← False

Pity-driven pain: Too much self-pity turns an itch into a pain.

Experience: pain

Introspective belief: I'm in pain ← True

Causal routes from fear to pain are realistic: fear can cause stress hormones which can intensify pain. But those feedback loops don't show that anyone is responding inferentially to their itches or self-pity.

Pautz thinks I'm committed to the possibility of inferring a pain from an unjustified belief that you have a pain in your leg. He then says the Downgrade thesis implies that the pain is unjustified. And he finds both results implausible.

**Reply:** Pautz overestimates the scope of the Downgrade thesis, RP, and Inferentialism. These theses are meant to analyze the problem of hijacked perceptual experiences.

- Perceptual experiences can be hijacked only because there's such a thing as a perceptual inputs to a perceptual experience (even if some such experiences, such as hallucinations, have no perceptual inputs). There is not obvious analog to perceptual inputs in the case of pain or itches.
- Unlike bodily sensations, perceptual experiences are directed toward the external world.

Pautz may think that I'm forced into allowing inferences to pain experiences from beliefs, even if my central theses only treat perceptual experiences. What would force me into that?

(a) Pains have to have accuracy conditions ("Otherwise you'll hold a sense-datum theory of pain")

(b) If a state has accuracy conditions, then it must be possible for the state to be an inferential response to other things.

**Reply:** Pautz ignores disanalogies between pains and perceptual experience, and corresponding instability in the accuracy-condition approach to pain.

Why it's hard to be an intentionalist about pain-experience:

- If the property represented is bodily damage, that doesn't reflect phenomenology.
- if the property represented reflects phenomenology, it's intrinsic (Pautz's dissertation and 2010, and Chalmers 2006 via Pautz).
- But if there are no illusory pain-experiences, then experientially representing the pain property (eg attributing it to your leg) entails that your leg instantiates the property. So the property seems to be relational.

It's hard to find a good candidate for the property that could be presented in pain-experience, on an intentionalist view.

In addition, if there are no illusory pain-experiences, then some would say there isn't really anything that these experiences are accurately representing.

None of these problems arise in trying to find contents of perceptual experiences.

Pautz ignores these differences. He assumes that pains and perceptual experiences are the same sort of state when he says: "You can just immediately know that headaches can't be assessed for rationality. Don't we likewise have at least some immediate a priori reason to think that visual experiences are also not assessable for rationality?"



**Reply:** This is a denial of a position, not a reason to deny a position. It rests on assimilating pain to perceptual experience.

### **8. Naïve realism**

Russell held a relational theory of belief, but presumably thought that beliefs so construed could be conclusions of inference. So perhaps propositional contents aren't needed for a state to be eligible as the conclusion of an inference.

### **9. Downgrade: reliabilism vs inference**

If the Downgrade thesis is true, what explains why experiences are downgraded by perceptual hijacking?

Inferentialism: when experiences are the conclusions of inferences, bad-making features of the inference (anti-justified premises, poor reasoning, etc) can explain why the experience is downgraded.

Reliabilist challenge to Inferentialism: Inference is irrelevant. The sole bad-making feature of both experiences and beliefs is failure to belong to a truth-conducive process that determines that epistemic status of the experience or belief.

Observation: I am sure it is possible to develop:

- reliabilist constructive defenses of the Rationality of Perception (Ghijssen)
- debates between inferentialist and reliabilist modes of RP as extensive as the original debates between reliabilism and evidentialism.

I didn't want to take on the reliabilist reconstruction or recapitulate these older debates, for several reasons.

- the inferentialist attempt at constructive defense lets us see if we can find mental agency in the basement of the mind – processes that generate perception and perceptual experience. In contrast, according to reliabilism, flawed mental agency can never be a fundamental epistemic flaw, so closes off inquiry into the scope of mental agency in the mind.
- It seemed premature to argue abductively for RP, when there's so much explain about the content of the hypothesis in the first place.
  - Are experiences the right kind of thing to have epistemic status
  - Could inferences affect experiences in the ways they effect beliefs.

What's most needed is a proof of concept.

- It struck me that reliabilism didn't have an obvious way to account the bad-making features of some inferences that exhibited bad kinds of circularity. That's the part Nagel criticizes.

Suppose you have belief X. Belief X hijacks your perception. On the basis of an experience hijacked by belief X, you strengthen the belief.

My guiding thought was that if your original route to belief X started out truth-conducive, your route to strengthening X in response to experience wouldn't become any less truth-conducive. And yet that kind of strengthening seemed bad.

I didn't say what I meant by "strengthen" here. Nagel unpacks the notion in two ways: credences and resilience, and for each way she says reliabilists can after all (contrary to my criticism) explain what's bad about the route to strengthening.

**Reply 1:** I meant a third thing. I avoided discussing credences in this context because the interface between experiences and credences is poorly understood on the standard assumption that experiences are binary rather than gradable.

Strengthening belief that p = strength of disposition to rely on p in reasoning and action. When Jill strengthens her belief that Jack is angry, she becomes less likely to ask him for a favor, more likely to be annoyed if she thinks his anger unjustified, etc.

Some will say this is just adjusting credence, but I think Jill's credence (as measured by betting behavior, eg) that Jack is angry might stay the same while her binary belief increases in strength in this sense.

Railton: a non-epistemic, affect-driven boost to the strength of one's assurance.

Suppose strengthening = raising credence in the same proposition.

Nagel: then if the process starts off making .97 legitimate and you strengthen to .98, you're not properly calibrated. Degree of reliability has to calibrate with credences.

**Reply 2:** In principle that's an option. But is reliability as finely grained as credences? If it's too coarse-grained to distinguish .97 and .98, then either increasing is an epistemic freebie or something other than reliability is needed.

Suppose strengthening = resilience. Nagel focuses on the temporal profile of mood but I had in mind a simpler case. Starting at 9am Jill thinks Jack is angry. At noon she sees him and has her hijacked experience.

When, at noon, Jill strengthens the resilience of her belief that Jack was angry from 9am-noon, she need not be making a prediction about Jack's mood at 12:30. Instead, now it takes more evidence (or other belief-shaping factors) than it would have taken before noon to convince her that all morning Jack has been angry.

**Reply 3:** I can't formulate a plausible-sounding reliabilist analysis of strengthening in this case, since we're holding constant the reliability of the process that generated belief that subsequently gets strengthened.

## **10. Are hijacked experiences perceptual experiences?**

Yes. Perceptual experiences = a kind of phenomenal state that can be either hijacked or not, hallucinatory or not.

Nagel: No. Hijacked experiences are pseudo-experiences because they don't 'put you in touch with the world'. "Experiences proper" put you in touch with the world. – Hallucinations, possibly illusions aren't experiences, and therefore aren't

Crosstalk. Even by Nagel's lights hijacked experiences are experiences in my sense. For Nagel, hallucinations, illusions, and hijacked experiences form a unified epistemic category. They're all faulty for the same reason.

- Goes against the idea (granted even by many externalists about J) that the evil-demoned subject is justified believing that there's mustard in the fridge
- Blind to epistemic badness missing in a-rational hallucinations but found in some hijacked ones.

**Bonus: How Whit got that way and in what ways is he unreasonable**

Q: What psychological mechanisms mediate the cultural absorption of entrenched presumptions? Railton: affective dimensions of processing information