

## SEMANTIC RESPONSIBILITY

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I attempt to develop a notion of responsibility (*semantic responsibility*) that is to the notion of belief what *epistemic* responsibility is to the notion of justification. 'Being semantically responsible' is shown to involve the fulfilment of cognitive duties which allow the agent to engage in the kind of reason-laden discourses which render her beliefs appropriately sensitive to correction. The concept of semantic responsibility suggests that the notion of belief found in contemporary philosophical debates about content implicitly encompasses radically different classes of beliefs. In what follows I make those different types explicit, and sketch some implications for naturalisation projects in semantics and for accounts of the (putative) non-conceptual content of perceptual experiences.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I attempt to develop a notion of responsibility that is to the notion of belief what *epistemic* responsibility is to the notion of justification. I propose to call it *semantic responsibility*. The concept of semantic responsibility highlights the fulfilment of certain personal level cognitive duties regarding the holding or withholding of a belief. To fulfil these duties is for a subject to be capable of what I call *forward-looking tuneability by reasons*, i.e. to engage in inferential practices in which the subject can be prompted to corrections by reasons. Evidently, not all beliefs require for their entertainment the subject's capacity to engage in these kinds of inferential practice. Most (but by no means all) perceptual beliefs, for example, involve no such personal level cognitive duties. The concept of semantic responsibility thus suggests that the notion of belief found in contemporary philosophical debates about content implicitly encompasses radically different classes of beliefs. It will part of my task here to make those different types explicit.

The thesis I want to defend is that the cognitive role of the beliefs which exhibit self-critical openness is so importantly different from the cognitive role of beliefs not thus critically open that it becomes fruitful to regard the two as exemplars of different *cognitive kinds*. We are semantically responsible only towards those of our beliefs thus open to reason-based correction. I shall use a deontological conception of *epistemic* justification as the anchor point from which to develop this notion of *semantic* responsibility. An adequate characterisation of this notion will also require some discussion of the issue of voluntary control, since the plausibility of deontological conceptions of epistemic justification is often presented as requiring that our beliefs be under voluntary control (see e.g. Alston, 1988). Let it be clear, however, that I do not intend to contribute directly to the epistemological debate, and that the notion of *semantic* responsibility is not intended to replace or even support the notion of *epistemic* responsibility as it is usually invoked within that debate. In general, my main contention is that, even if deontological approaches fail to yield a general notion of justification in epistemology, a responsibilist conception of *belief* is both plausible and essential if we are to characterise the special variety of belief involved in reason-sensitive thought<sup>1</sup>.

The paper is organised as follows. I first sketch the main claims made by deontological models of justification and briefly examine some of the arguments against them (Section 2). In Section 3, I analyse the notion of control and its relation to the notion of responsibility. I then turn (Section 4) to the notion of belief itself. First, the notion of semantic responsibility is spelled out. 'Being semantically responsible' is shown to involve the fulfilment of cognitive duties which allow the agent to engage in the kind of reason-laden discourse which renders her appropriately sensitive to correction —a

condition I'll call 'tuneability'. Second, I offer a taxonomy of types of belief based on whether (and how) the conditions of semantic responsibility are met. The main distinction is between what I label *mindful*, and *mindless* beliefs. *Mindful* belief requires that the agent be semantically responsible for embracing the belief. Appreciation of the semantic commitments undertaken when entertaining a specific belief is thus essential for membership in this category of beliefs. *Mindless* beliefs are the beliefs of a well functioning adaptive agent who is, however, not semantically responsible. Finally (Section 5) I briefly sketch some possible implications of this notion of *semantic* responsibility. I suggest that core issues concerning naturalisation projects in semantics can be clarified using this notion, and that the proposed taxonomy of beliefs offers a new and interesting angle on debates concerning the (putative) non-conceptual content of perceptual experiences.

## 2. EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

Even though general agreement about the precise characterisation of knowledge as a form of justified true belief looks to be unobtainable in the post-Gettier epistemological world (cf. Gettier, 1963), there still remains a broad consensus concerning an intimate relationship between knowledge and the justification of belief. The nature of the required notion of justification is, unfortunately, a controversial matter. Reliabilist and responsibilist conceptions of epistemic justification emerge as the strongest competitors in the debate, with reliabilists stressing the need for truth-conduciveness and responsibilists stressing the fulfilment of epistemic duties<sup>2</sup>.

The defining characteristic of epistemic responsibilism seems to be the idea that epistemological terms such as justification, evidence, warrant, etc. are best understood in some very strongly normative fashion, i.e., as relating to notions of requirement, duty, blame, obligation, and the like. This normative dimension can be seen in the following passage (Chisholm, 1982, p. 7):

The simplest way of setting forth the vocabulary of the theory of evidence, or epistemology, is to take as undefined the locution, "\_\_\_ is more reasonable than \_\_\_ for S at t" (or alternatively, "\_\_\_ is epistemically preferable to \_\_\_ for S at t"). Epistemic reasonability could be understood in terms of the general requirement to try to have the largest possible set of logically independent beliefs that is such that the true beliefs outnumber the false beliefs. The principles of epistemic preferability are the principles one should follow if one is to fulfill this requirement.

Being justified in believing that *p* is thus a matter of degree but also, and most importantly, a matter of fulfilling certain epistemic duties so that we tend to accept only those beliefs that are most likely to be true. To reach what Chisholm calls 'positive epistemic status' is for an agent to fulfil a certain epistemic responsibility, that of trying to succeed in achieving a certain state of intellectual excellence by bringing about a situation in which one's beliefs are mostly true<sup>3</sup>. This connection between epistemic justification and epistemic responsibility is sometimes cashed out in terms of (un)blameworthiness. 'A subject (S) is justified in believing that *p*' is presented as having the same truth-conditions as 'S deserves not to be blamed for

believing that  $p$ ' (see e.g. Bedford Naylor, 1988). The subject, in turn, deserves (not) to be blamed for believing that  $p$  only if she has voluntary control over the entertainment of her belief. Deontological accounts thus seem to require the truth of doxastic voluntarism, i.e., the truth of the idea that believing or not believing that  $p$  is within the agent's *power*. It is this notion of voluntary control and, in particular, its relationship to (epistemic and other kinds of) responsibility that interests me here. To better see what's at issue, I shall focus on one particular version of the anti-deontologist argument, that of William Alston (1988).

According to Alston, we can distinguish two fundamental categories within the notion of voluntary control: direct (or basic) and indirect (or non-basic) control<sup>4</sup>. To say that we have *direct* voluntary control over our beliefs would be equivalent to saying that our beliefs are the result of an act of will, in the same way that raising my arm is the result of an act of will<sup>5</sup>. The general agreement though is that we do not in this sense have direct voluntary control over *any* of our beliefs. All beliefs, but especially perceptual beliefs, impose themselves upon us without such direct mediation from the will. Forming the belief that it's raining is just not comparable to the raising of one's arm. No matter how much effort I put into it when I perceive rain through my window, I cannot help but believe that it's raining, whether I want to believe it or not. There are many beliefs which the subject can't help but form in her dealings with the environment; beliefs which are, very often, unconscious. For Alston, most of our beliefs are of this kind.

So, we don't seem to have direct control over any of our beliefs, but do we have indirect control over some of them? The only kind of indirect control that Alston accepts is what he calls 'indirect voluntary influence', which is

control over, not the belief itself, but the processes which lead to the forming of a belief. The activities that seem relevant as *controllable* activities are those that either influence particular episodes of belief fixation (e.g., for how long and with which methods I pursue a given matter) or that affect our belief forming habits in general (e.g. checking as many sources as possible for any given belief. See Alston, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-279). Again, perceptual beliefs are presented as paradigm cases of beliefs over which we don't have *this* kind of indirect control *either*, as opposed to the beliefs that we form when we engage in more sophisticated activities such as discussing art, politics, or philosophy. Over these more sophisticated beliefs, we do seem to have indirect voluntary influence, and as long as we thus have indirect voluntary influence over the actions or activities which bring about the beliefs, then we can be held responsible for them (*Ibid.*, p. 278). The idea is that, if after having properly engaged in all these indirect activities we come to believe that *p*, we are justified in our belief. However, even if we could thus be held responsible for the views we come to believe in e.g. philosophy or politics or art, we cannot be considered responsible for most of our beliefs since most of our beliefs are perceptual (*Ibid.*, pp. 265-266).

Alston's position can thus be reconstructed as follows: we have no direct control over any of our beliefs, but we do have indirect control over a small subset of them. We can thus be held accountable for this subset. This is a limited result which fails to deliver a *general* notion of justification in deontological terms. A responsibilist notion of justification is thus deemed inappropriate for general epistemological purposes. Behind this conclusion lies the implicit assumption that we *are* justified in believing most of our beliefs (let's call this assumption P0) and that as a result the failure of the

responsibilist treatment to justify the majority of our beliefs counts against that treatment itself. To rehearse the argument in a bit more detail:

- (P1) A subject is justified in believing  $p$  only if she fulfils her epistemic responsibility regarding  $p$ <sup>6</sup>.
- (P2) A subject fulfils her epistemic responsibility regarding  $p$  only if believing  $p$  is under her (direct or indirect) voluntary control.
- (P3) Subjects do not have (direct) voluntary control over *any* their beliefs.
- (P4) Subjects do not have (indirect) voluntary control over *most* of their beliefs.

Now, at this point the conclusion ought to be:

- (C1) Subjects are not (deontologically) justified in believing most of their beliefs.

However, given the implicit premise:

- (P0) we *are* justified in believing most of our beliefs,

we reach Alston's own conclusion:

- (C2) A responsibilist notion of justification is not appropriate for general epistemological purposes.



I believe instead in the truth of C1 (more about this below), but regardless of my intuitions at this point, what is surely true is that C1, in itself, is not enough to get Alston what he wants. It's only against the background of P0 that the argument becomes the kind of *reductio* that Alston intended, a *reductio* of the view that epistemic responsibility constitutes the key element in epistemic justification. Belief in P0, in turn, probably flows from the reliabilism inherent to Alston's position: perceptual beliefs are, under normal circumstances, highly reliable, i.e. highly truth-conducive. Most of our beliefs are perceptual. Therefore we are justified in believing most of our beliefs. In the next sections I'll try to show that the worries about voluntary control subtly mislocate the real issues, at least regarding the most semantically interesting sub-class of beliefs<sup>7</sup>. The first step in my argument is a further analysis of the notion of control that lies behind Alston's position.

### 3. VOLUNTARY CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Alston argues that we have no *direct* control over *any* of our beliefs and no *indirect* control over *the majority* of our beliefs. Interestingly though, he says very little, if anything, about the notion of control itself. While clarifying the relevant concept of control may not matter for some purposes<sup>8</sup>, I believe such an analysis can help bring to the fore key assumptions, not only about the notion of control itself, but about the explanatory links between the notions of control and responsibility.

The main component of Alston's notion of control seems to be *free choice* (1988, p. 261):

The basic point to be noted here is that one has control over a given type of state only if one also has control over some field of incompatible alternatives. To have control over believing that *p* is to have control over whether one believes that *p* or not.

We do not have direct voluntary control over any of our beliefs because we *do not* believe at will that propositions of any kind are true (or false)<sup>9</sup>. It is not up to me to freely choose to believe that I am not in pain when I am suffering a headache. It is not up to me to freely choose to believe that the moon is or is not made of green cheese. One can imagine such things or even freely choose to look for evidence for them. Yet, when one chooses to look for evidence of the truth of a particular proposition, what is freely chosen, what is *controlled*, are not the beliefs themselves, but the actions that affect the processes which produce the beliefs. We thus enter the realm of indirect influence. This is a limited realm since we do not have even this indirect voluntary control over *most* of our beliefs: most of them —perceptual beliefs, especially— are just not the *kind* of beliefs for which we have much choice over methods, techniques or habits.

Alston's understanding of both the notion of direct and of indirect control thus turns on the idea of the agent having *free choice* over what to believe. Yet, such an idea of free choice is not an essential feature of the concept of control in most everyday contexts where this concept plays an important role. We don't think of the moon as having any free choice in the way it controls the tide. We don't think of a thermostat as having any free choice in the way it controls the temperature. Even in cybernetics and automata theory, where the

notion of control has been technically elaborated<sup>10</sup>, the idea of being able to freely choose among alternatives does not play any role.

Of course, it could be argued that such observations are germane only when 'control' means more or less something like 'cause', and that this notion of control is not the one we are talking about when we talk about voluntary control over action or over the holding or withholding of a belief<sup>11</sup>. In a sense, I accept this. My view is that it is only when control gets tied up with *responsibility* that free choice suddenly matters. The thermostatic or cybernetic sense is invoked precisely to stress the difference between a merely *mechanistic* understanding of the notion of control and the notion which plays a central role in historically central epistemological debates<sup>12</sup> or in discourses involving moral agency. These latter discourses are the natural home of this freedom-oriented understanding of control. It is in this domain that the notion of control gets uncomfortably enmeshed with the metaphysical problem of free will. Deontological considerations in general seem to be deeply intertwined with this problem (Steup, 1988, p. 68):

Questions of this [deontological] kind arise only if the agent was responsible for the act under consideration. If it wasn't within the agent's power to refrain from doing what he did, then he can't be blamed for what he did, and then his act would be an improper object for deontic evaluation. Hence an act is a proper object for deontic evaluation only if it is a 'free' act in the sense that it was within the agent's power to refrain from performing it.

Moral responsibility and free will are issues I don't plan to engage here<sup>13</sup>, but there is one point I would like to discuss: it concerns the shape of the explanatory links between control and responsibility. For it seems to me that Alston and others have got the explanatory direction between control and responsibility wrong. The idea of an agent freely choosing between some set of alternatives for action in a particular situation is itself applicable only *once the conditions for responsibility have been met*. It is not so much that responsibility depends on control, as that control exists when (other) conditions for responsibility are met. Actions belong in the space of praise and blame when they already belong to situations where the notion of responsibility gets a grip. All the legal systems in (at least) the western world are based precisely on this idea. For a person to be legally responsible is for her to be involved in a situation where blame, in the form of punishment, makes sense. It is for her to meet whatever conditions are deemed necessary for being judged (blamed or exonerated) in a court of law. The court of law then decides whether she lacked control over her actions in any way that affects her legal status. In the moral domain, we encounter the same scenario. We are responsible for e.g. the child that someone has abandoned at our doorstep, for the people injured in a car accident, or for the future of Kosovo, not because we have (direct or indirect) voluntary control over those situations or over the processes that ended up producing those situations, but because the actions by which we engage those situations are properly subject to praise or blame. In general, we do not have responsibility because we freely choose to do x or y. Rather, we are said to freely choose to do x or y *because we meet other conditions for responsibility*<sup>14</sup>.

My claim is thus that the kind of control relevant to our discussion exists precisely where certain *other* conditions for responsibility are met. In the next Section I lay out these *other* conditions for the notion of, in particular, *semantic* responsibility. They comprise both the idea of a properly functioning subject and of a subject that is capable of fulfilling certain intellectual obligations. It's only when these conditions are met that issues about voluntary control regarding the holding or withholding of belief make sense. Alston is thus right to present perceptual beliefs as having little relevance to a deontological conception of epistemic justification, but for the wrong reasons. It is not because we do not have control over them. It is because we don't have intellectual obligations toward them, or, as I would like to put it, because the conditions for *semantic responsibility* have not been met.

The hypothetical commitment to the truth of a belief that occurs when the conditions of semantic responsibility are met brings with it the idea that the subject could have, if prompted, modified some of the processes involved in coming to her beliefs. Being semantically responsible for a belief thus involves the idea that the subject could have changed the actions affecting those belief-forming processes. To say that the agent could have done that is to say only that the agent is capable of what we can call *forward-looking tuneability by reasons*. The idea here is very close to Dennett's take on the issue of control in relation to what he calls the 'could have done otherwise' principle in discussions of free will (cf. Dennett, 1984). The 'could have done otherwise' principle can only be sensibly interpreted, Dennett claims, as the possibility of a properly functioning agent modifying her actions in the future as the result of being prompted to corrections by the provision of training or feedback. Learning is thus of the essence. Someone 'could have done otherwise' only if

she is able to learn from the particular outcome of her actions; only if she is 'cognitively tuneable' so as to act differently when facing the 'same' situation in the future (cf. Dennett, 1984, pp. 139-144). This Dennettian view lies behind the idea expressed here by the phrase 'the agent should have known better' used to characterise semantic responsibility. What is perhaps less explicitly Dennettian is just the further insistence on the inferential, *reason-laden* character of the requisite tuneability. The requisite *kind* of tuneability, to be clear, is tuneability, not by the administration of drugs or hypnosis, but by the exchange of reasons and arguments.

Despite getting the explanatory links between the notions of control and responsibility wrong, there is a lesson to be learnt from Alston's criticisms. By pointing out where a deontological conception of epistemic justification works and where it does not work, he provides useful information, not only about epistemic justification but also about the *nature* of the *beliefs* involved in the epistemic process. There emerge two distinct groups: those (the fewest) susceptible to a deontological treatment, and those (the majority) not susceptible to such a treatment: in the main, perceptual beliefs. I find this taxonomy revealing though still somewhat too austere, as I shall argue in the next Section.

#### 4. A TAXONOMY OF BELIEFS

Let me start by providing a rough characterisation of what I'd like to call *semantic responsibility*. A subject S is semantically responsible for believing that p iff the following two conditions are met: i) S is a properly functioning cognitive system and ii) S could reasonably have been expected to fulfil her

intellectual obligations. To fulfil one's intellectual obligations is, in this context, to appreciate the semantic commitments that one undertakes when holding or withholding a belief and to be ready to engage in reason-giving discourses concerning that belief. When these conditions for semantic responsibility are met, then praise or blame become appropriate.

A word or two about why the conditions above pertain to the semantic and not to the epistemological domain. To talk about *semantic* responsibility does indeed suggest that there is something about the contents of the beliefs which implies commitments or obligations. One could understand this normative status as pertaining to the concepts through which the beliefs are articulated, and perhaps through the meaning of the words that express these concepts. Certain versions of conceptual role semantics, e.g. Brandom's account in *Making it Explicit*, do indeed suggest something of this kind<sup>15</sup>. However, the view I defend remains neutral concerning whether the deontological component of beliefs comes from the concepts involved in them, or the meanings of the words that express them. The normativity captured by the notion of semantic responsibility doesn't *necessarily* involve, on my account, any kind of linguistic articulation and therefore it is not necessarily linked to a conceptual role view of the inferential structures among concepts. Even though my proposal does invoke normative commitments for mental states such as belief, it doesn't require —as e.g. Brandom's proposal does— a linguistic characterisation of the content of such mental states. This is largely because the notion of intellectual obligations invoked in (ii) has to be understood against the background of a paradigmatically non-propositional ability; the ability to realise that a particular situation requires of the agent to

step back and critically appraise the situation. This, hopefully, will become clearer below, as I develop this notion of intellectual obligations.

A related caveat. The notion of *semantic* responsibility should not be interpreted as a species of *epistemic* responsibility. As I said at the beginning of the paper, the detour through the epistemological views discussed in the previous sections was necessary only to properly locate this deontological notion within the realm of belief. There may be further developments of this notion which could affect the relationships between the notion of (different kinds of) belief and knowledge, but that issue is certainly one which lies beyond the scope of this paper<sup>16</sup>.

With these clarifications in place, we can now start exploiting some of Alston's epistemologically oriented examples to illustrate the kind of taxonomy that results if we take the notion of semantic responsibility as our key criterion for distinguishing between varieties of belief. The first situation I'd like to look at involves a clear-cut case of 'cognitive deficiency'. Take, for example, a person suffering from senile dementia who falsely believes her neighbour's dog is a dangerous animal. It seems likely that she cannot be blamed for the *wrongness* of this belief because at least one of the two conditions for semantic responsibility has not been met: the subject is not a *properly functioning* cognitive system. In a case like this, we can talk of *pathological* beliefs, i.e., beliefs which are the outcome of some physical malfunction in the subject and for which therefore the subject is not semantically responsible<sup>17</sup>.

Of course, the concept of cognitive deficiency has many faces. It is interesting to see how Alston presents it in a very mild form, namely, as whatever cognitive property a college student who can't correctly understand Locke's



views possesses. The case is supposed to illustrate the ultimate *insufficiency* of epistemic responsibility for epistemic justification<sup>18</sup>. As Alston depicts the situation, the suggestion is that the student can't help but believe something false. In particular, the student believes:

(L) According to Locke, everything is a matter of opinion,

instead of believing

(K) According to Locke, one's knowledge is restricted to one's ideas.

Even though it is not clear exactly what 'cognitive deficiency' means in this situation, the case is presented as one of neurally-based cognitive difference or malfunction<sup>19</sup>. Alston insists that there is nothing the student can do to improve his understanding of Locke. The student " ... doesn't have what it takes to follow abstract philosophical exposition or reasoning" (*op. cit.*, p. 287). This seems to suggest an interpretation of the case as indeed an example of (mild) cognitive disorder. One worry is Alston's further claim that the student's confidence in the correctness of his understanding will eventually be shaken when he gets a bad grade in the final exam. It could be argued that if we are to regard the student as a rational agent, we should at least insist on the possibility that he'll learn to withhold his belief in (L), even if he never comes to believe (K) (see Steup, 1988, p. 80). However, what matters here is not so much that the student learns to withhold belief in (L), since he can be taught to do that by sheer force (a few electric shocks might do it!). Rather,

what counts is that he actually comes to understand (K). The latter, however, is ruled out by Alston's depiction of the case.

But now consider a different reading of the student's cognitive deficiency: one involving what might be better dubbed cognitive *lassitude* or cognitive *thoughtlessness*. Here we are assuming that the student has the potential to get things right, but (for whatever reasons) he simply fails to use this potential.

Here, we can claim that in some concrete sense the student *should have known better*. It now makes sense to place the student within the space of responsibility, expecting him to be capable of *learning* that (K) *by way of reasoned discourse*. It is this notion of engaging the agent with reasons for believing (or not believing) that is important for the notion of learning I have in mind. When I claim that we expect the student to *improve his performance*, the idea is that we expect him to do so, not through some method of physical conditioning, but via the understanding of the reasons that would justify such a change.

The underlying assumption for this second scenario is thus that i) there is no physical malfunction that completely prevents improvements in the student's understanding and ii) that if the student had indeed fulfilled all his intellectual obligations —i.e., if he had carefully read and thought about Locke's text and about the professor's explanations—, then he would have believed (K) and not (L). We thus place the student within the space of *culpable* error for it seems that ultimately there is something he should have done and hasn't. The student's belief, on this scenario, belongs to the category of what I will now call *mindful* beliefs. A belief belongs to this category if and only if the subject who holds the belief can be held semantically responsible for holding it, i.e., if both conditions for semantic responsibility are met.

So far I have portrayed cases of pathological beliefs, i.e., cases in which subjects *cannot* be held semantically responsible because they are malfunctioning cognitive systems and cases of mindful beliefs, i.e., situations involving subjects who *can* be held semantically responsible because the two conditions of semantic responsibility are clearly met. I next introduce a third category, which I'll call *mindless* beliefs. Mindless beliefs are those held by subjects who are properly functioning cognitive systems but who fail to meet the other condition of semantic responsibility. Most, but certainly not all, perceptual beliefs belong to this category. Think, for example, of forming the perceptual belief that there are three steps in front of you as you walk out of your front door. Your body movements adjust accordingly, but you fall *on the fourth step*. Some kind of perceptual illusion has taken place. The environment has played a 'trick' on you. This is the kind of situation in which, despite normal functioning, you accrue no semantic responsibility for your belief. You are not semantically responsible because there is nothing that you could reasonably have been expected to do to avoid forming the belief that led to the fall.

But wait! Surely, you may say, the person who suffered this particular kind of perceptual illusion has done *everything* that could reasonably have been expected of her to fulfil her intellectual obligations. Yet, I claim, she accrues no semantic responsibility for her perceptual belief which thus belongs to the *mindless* category. How are we to resolve this apparent tension? The tension reveals itself as merely apparent once we spell out in more detail the notion of intellectual obligations involved in the second of the two conditions for semantic responsibility. First of all, notice that the idea of an agent's fulfilling her *intellectual* obligations cannot and should not be assimilated to something

like the agent —or better, the agent’s sub-personal mechanisms— merely meeting some kind of computational or inferential constraints. “Intellectual” here has a stronger, *reason-laden* character, that demands more than the idea of inferentially —but sub-personal— articulated transitions between mental states.

At the same time, however, it is essential to realise that what is required of the mindfully believing agent is *not* that she/he be constantly ready to engage in a critical revision of all her/his beliefs. Nor should the agent be continuously critically assessing all her/his *mindful* beliefs. What is required is that the agent be capable of (personal level) critical engagement and possessed of an additional, and quite specific, kind of know-how, ability or skill, namely, the ability to automatically (courtesy of well-trained sub-personal processes) recognise a situation as one requiring her to step back and exercise some critical appraisal.

This knowing-how —knowing how to spot the kinds of situation in which one needs to step back and critically appraise one’s beliefs— cannot itself be —unlike the intellectual processes it triggers— reason-laden. My account would then involve an infinite regress. The situations which require an exercise of the agent’s intellectual obligations must simply *pop-out* to the agent in a non-reasoned, unmediated way. I thus like to call that necessary —but wholly sub-personal— component of the notion of semantic responsibility ‘critical pop-out’. As a kind of know-how, we deploy it in an automatic fashion and it thus belongs —to repeat— to the sub-personal level. The capacity to effectively fulfil our intellectual obligations requires that certain situations (sub-personally) pop-out to the agent as situations requiring of a certain critical reflection. This notion of pop-out should thus be viewed as the

*rule-stopper* which triggers the rule-following personal level activity courtesy of which an agent fulfils her intellectual obligations. The point is that only agents possessing the sub-personal skill of ‘critical pop-out’ and capable (once this has occurred) of understanding and responding to reasons (the personal level component) can be treated as “responsible believers”.

If we now revisit the example about falling down the stairs, we can appreciate what is missing, and hence, what makes the belief that led to the fall *mindless* despite appearances to the contrary. It is that the pre-requisite critical pop-out, that grounds the practical fulfilment of the subject’s intellectual obligations, is unavailable. The situation does not pop-out to the agent as one requiring of any further appraisal. Under such circumstances the subject accrues no responsibility, semantic or otherwise.

A possible worry at this stage is that the division between mindless and mindful beliefs now seems too close to the familiar distinction between tacit and explicit beliefs (see e.g. Dennett, 1987). However, this worry disappears if we rehearse the terms in which each pair of notions have been characterised. Let us say that a belief is tacit if it is neither explicitly tokened, nor implied by beliefs that are explicitly tokened, but is in a sense emergent out of patterns in systemic behaviour (e.g. Dennett’s example in which a chess-playing program ‘thinks it should get its queen out early’, despite this proposition not being explicitly tokened anywhere in the program. See Dennett, 1981, p. 107. See also Davies, 1986 and 1989). And let us call a belief ‘explicit’ if it is both tokened and *occurrent*. Then a belief *may be mindless yet explicit*. Such a belief could be a consciously held one, but one that I am in no way disposed to critically appraise. Without further learning on my part, such a belief will never be the object of an episode of critical pop-out. Could a belief be *mindful*

*yet tacit?* By the same token, yes. If, without further learning, the system could, under some circumstances, both make the belief explicit and make it an object of critical reflection, then it counts as mindful already (the expert chess-player who has never yet remarked her tendency to get her queen out early, but who is quite capable of noticing and scrutinising this tendency if things started to go wrong, may be such a case). The lesson: the notion of mindfulness concerns a *disposition* to make a belief explicit. Thus, the mindful/mindless distinction cannot itself be *equivalent* to the explicit / tacit distinction, the latter distinction being not in the least a dispositional one. Notice also that although the self-critical conduct essential to semantic responsibility occurs at the *personal* level, it needs to be triggered by the sub-personal ability which I've called 'critical pop-out'. The distinction between mindful and mindless beliefs built upon the notion of semantic responsibility thus straddles the personal / sub-personal arena. As a result *some* of our perceptual beliefs should be considered *mindful* according to the present taxonomy. It would thus be a misinterpretation of my proposal to view it as an attempt to preserve some kind of (semantic) responsibility for non-perceptual beliefs while giving it up for perceptual beliefs.

There are, indeed, cases in which the formation of a perceptual belief is the result of having engaged in some rather complex inferential process. If we could reasonably be expected to alter those processes so as to become 'better perceivers', then the resulting perceptual beliefs would not count as *mindless*, but rather *mindful* beliefs, according to my taxonomy. Becoming a better *perceiver* thus means acquiring the ability to spot those situations which require critical appraisal. Such a recognition may not alter the content of a belief itself, but it does affect the functional poise and *normative status* of that

content. Unless we want to divorce the notions of content, functional poise, and content-normativity, the resulting picture is one that belongs naturally to the realm of semantics. Think, for instance, of all those people who claim they *just don't see* (and hence don't form the belief) that the trash bag is full, and consequently never come to believe that the trash needs to be taken out. It is possible to imagine a training program for these subjects (some of whom I happen to know) such that they might learn to better detect full trash bags in their environment. The content of the representation before and after this training program would, in one sense, be the same since we are assuming that the subjects were actually able to *see* the full trash bags before the program. What the training does is to change the functional poise and normative status of such a content by inculcating a new inferential link, and engendering a new skill which allows those situations to pop-out to the subject.

Such examples suggest further nuances to the taxonomy presented here. I take this to be a good sign, since controversial situations as regards the status of different kinds of belief can thus be illuminated using these criteria of semantic responsibility. I would like to look briefly at two puzzling cases again due to Alston. In the first one, we are asked to imagine an isolated primitive community where subjects have no opportunity whatsoever to gather any other evidence than the evidence provided by the rigid network of cultural structures and traditions of the tribe. As a result of this, they end up believing many false things. The point Alston wants to make is that, even when a subject thus complies with whatever standards of intellectual obligation it is reasonable to expect *in that community*, it is often the case that the subject will end up with a belief that looks epistemically unjustified.

From the point of view of the current taxonomy, the interest of this example lies in the fact that it displays a situation in which, depending on how we understand the modality involved in the second of our conditions for semantic responsibility, we can end up with either a case of *mindless* or *mindful* belief. When understood in a restricted fashion, the 'could' in the expression 'the subject *could* reasonably have been expected to fulfil her intellectual obligations' is interpreted as indicating that the subject's capabilities are constrained by the particular features of her social, historical and material environment. If the environment doesn't provide whatever is necessary to e.g. become critical of one's tradition, what one 'could reasonably expect' as the fulfilment of someone's intellectual obligations is just the acceptance of the tribe's doctrine. Hence, under this restricted understanding of 'could', the answer to whether, given the circumstances, it is *reasonable* to expect the subject to fulfil her intellectual duties is 'no'<sup>20</sup>. The subject is thus in no position to be semantically blamed for her beliefs.

The *wrongness* of the belief is here depicted as closer to the wrongness of a belief based on a perceptual illusion: in each case there is nothing the agent could have done to alter her belief states. In fact, the main difference between this case (thus construed) and that of a perceptual illusion is that we now have a wider understanding of the notion of 'environment' when we speak of the environment playing a 'trick' on the subject: for we now include the social environment. A restricted interpretation of the second condition for semantic responsibility thus assigns the tribe's members' beliefs to the *mindless* category.

Now, what about the unrestricted version of the 'could' in the phrase '*could* reasonably have been expected to fulfil her intellectual obligations'? When



thus interpreted, there is an implicit reference to a less tightly constrained standard of inquiry that any human subject, regardless of her contextual, historical and material conditions, should meet in order to count as a semantically responsible agent. Under this interpretation, the member of Alston's tribe failed to fulfil her true intellectual obligations and *is* thus semantically responsible for her false beliefs. She is thus in a position to be fully blamed for their *wrongness* since there are better methods of inquiry that such an agent could have followed in order to form beliefs. This interpretation of the second condition of semantic responsibility assigns the tribe's members' beliefs squarely to our category of *mindful* beliefs<sup>21</sup>.

To acknowledge these two different readings does not require us to fix on one of them as *the right* understanding. The notion of 'fulfilling one's intellectual obligations' can thus be understood as the following of the rules of the community or as critical thinking about these rules, depending on one's interpretation of the modality expressed by 'could' in the second condition of the notion of semantic responsibility. In Alston's example and in similar situations, we tend to oscillate in our thinking between the two readings of 'could' without being able to establish which interpretation is the most appropriate, not to mention which of the two gives *the truth of the matter*. I believe this is an inherent part of the thickness and richness of the social, moral and political discourses in which cases like these arise and are discussed. It is thus a virtue of the notion of semantic responsibility that it maintains the moral ambiguity while clarifying the key concerns.

Finally, consider a different kind of puzzle case, one which Alston introduces to show that epistemic responsibility is not a necessary condition for epistemic justification. The situation is depicted as follows: a subject —

Alston— neglects his epistemic duties and uncritically accepts someone's (Broom's) assessment of a candidate for a departmental post. If Alston had fulfilled his epistemic duties —e.g., to satisfy himself that Broom's opinions were trustworthy in these academic matters— he would, as it happens, have been *mised* into believing that Broom's opinions were not trustworthy, and he wouldn't have accepted Broom's advice. However, the evidence of Broom's unreliability is itself misleading and he (Broom) is perfectly trustworthy. So, all the available evidence would have supported the idea that Broom shouldn't be trusted in these matters, and would have undermined his assessment of the candidate. However, by luckily ignoring it, Alston ends up believing that which is true. According to Alston, this is a case in which the subject is epistemically justified in believing something while neglecting key epistemic duties —indeed, he is justified precisely because he neglects to fulfil them<sup>22</sup>.

Looking at the example from the point of view of the present treatment, we can see that, regardless of whether or not the subject is epistemically justified, he —Alston, in the example— remains *semantically* responsible for his belief: he is a properly functioning cognitive system who could reasonably have been expected to fulfil his intellectual obligations (although he did not).

Despite getting things right, he can and should be *blamed* for proceeding as he did, since the truth of his belief is now the result of some kind of *lucky* accident. The subject's belief is thus a clear example of *mindful* belief.

What makes the realms of epistemic justification and of semantic responsibility so intimately related is that both involve a *certain* commitment of the subject to the truth of the belief. The important difference runs parallel to Frege's distinction between just thinking, 'the apprehension of a thought',

and actively judging, 'the recognition of the truth of a thought' (cf. Frege, 1956). The recognition of truth involved in epistemic justification—to borrow one of Frege's expressions again—should be the result of 'appropriate investigations' in an empirical domain, whereas the hypothetical commitment to the truth of a belief that is simply entertained does not involve this empirical investigation<sup>23</sup>. Being semantically responsible is also being able to enter Sellars' 'space of reasons' (Sellars, 1963), i.e., being able to engage in an inferential practice of giving and asking for reasons. It's to be subject to a certain 'constitutive ideal of rationality' (cf. Davidson, 1970, p. 98), or to deploy what Brandom (1994, p. 5) calls a "mastery of proprieties of theoretical and practical *inference*". What we are calling *mindful* beliefs are thus the kinds of beliefs that most appropriately belong to the semantic realm, since in entertaining this kind of belief we reveal ourselves as participants in a variety of strongly normative practices. *Mindful* beliefs thus present, as I'll argue in the next Section, the very hardest case for a resolutely naturalistic treatment.

## 5. SEMANTIC RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Let me end by commenting on two possible applications of this notion of semantic responsibility. One concerns the naturalisation of semantics. The other concerns the content of perceptual experience. Both are important issues and I clearly cannot do justice to them here, but let me at least present the outlines of what a fuller treatment might look like<sup>24</sup>.

When assessing naturalisation projects in semantics, one important requirement is that these accounts leave room for the distinction between malfunction and misrepresentation, a distinction that is considered

constitutive of the normativity involved in truth-telling behaviour (see Haugeland, 1998). When trying to establish the plausibility of teleological proposals, in particular, this requirement has special relevance. In such accounts mental representations are understood as 'teleofunctional items', i.e., as items which are produced by biological mechanisms that have been designed or selected during evolutionary history to perform some 'proper function'. Given this characterisation of representation in terms of proper function, it has recently been argued (Haugeland, 1998), teleological views cannot account for the required distinction between malfunction and misrepresentation. Here is how Haugeland (p. 310) presents his case:

Imagine an insectivorous species of bird that evolved in an environment where most of the yellow butterflies are poisonous, and most others not; and suppose it has developed a mechanism for detecting and avoiding yellow butterflies. Then the point can be put this way: if a bird in good working order (with plenty of light, and so on) detects and rejects a (rare) nonpoisonous yellow butterfly, there can be no grounds for suggesting that it mistook that butterfly for a poisonous one; and similarly, if it detects and accepts a (rare) poisonous orange butterfly ... in such cases, ... there is nothing that the response can "mean" other than whatever *actually* elicits it in normal birds in normal conditions.

I agree with Haugeland that we need to embrace a distinction between getting things wrong as the result of a malfunction in the system and getting things wrong when the system works normally. But I disagree about the final

verdict for teleological accounts. The problem is that Haugeland's ontology is rather too austere to accommodate the genuine (but limited) virtues of this kind of naturalisation project. To accommodate the virtues while still displaying the limitations, it is helpful to exploit the taxonomy defended earlier. Here's how it works.

For Haugeland "there can be no biological basis for understanding a system as functioning properly, but nevertheless misinforming" (*Ibid.*). However, this seems to be too fast. When looking at the bird example, there is surely a sense in which it *does* make sense to say —from a teleological point of view— that the bird 'made a mistake', even though there was no malfunction involved. The bird-species has learnt —although not by the exchange or appreciation of reasons— to use the perception of yellow as a sign of poison and has learnt to apply it appropriately (to avoid it) in a given task (foraging) in a given environment. All the mechanisms whose proper function is to detect yellow and to trigger an avoidance behaviour are working fine. The bird's behaviour follows a pattern predicated upon how the environment has been in the past. But the environment now plays a 'trick' on the bird. We know that something has gone wrong because adaptive success has not been facilitated (perhaps the bird dies of hunger in the first case and from poison in the second), but whatever has gone wrong is not related to the bird's individual mechanisms malfunctioning.

If we now broaden our focus and talk about representation, instead of just belief, it is not difficult to see that Haugeland's example is nicely captured as one of *mindless* misrepresentation. It is perfectly parallel to the case of the perceptual illusion regarding the number of steps at your front door. Remember, in that situation you were —by hypothesis— functioning

normally and you certainly *misrepresented* the world in a specific way, viz. as containing three steps instead of four. Yet you were not *responsible* for the belief that led to your fall. Haugeland's example, likewise, displays a case of misrepresentation without malfunction, and without culpable error: a case of what can now be called *mindless* misrepresentation. And here lies the problem with Haugeland's analysis: he does not leave space for this important category.

A distinction between malfunction and misrepresentation is certainly essential, but it is equally important to acknowledge this further distinction within the space of misrepresentation —between *mindless* and *mindful* ways of misrepresenting. Without this distinction we tend to be blind to the real (but limited) value of these naturalisation projects in semantics. The problem is not that a teleological view of content cannot account for the distinction between malfunction and misrepresentation. Teleological accounts can and do support that distinction. Where they fall short is in relation to a notion, not just of misrepresentation (misinforming), but of *culpable* misrepresentation —error that the system (agent, creature) could reasonably have been expected to avoid. In other words, teleological accounts can and do support the distinction between malfunction and *mindless* misrepresentation, but they fail to account for the more *mindful* ways of going wrong (and right). Since mindful beliefs are the most distinctively human, the spirit of Haugeland's critique remains intact, but the fine print is important because it helps us to appreciate the following: it's not that teleological views cannot account for the normativity of content. It is that they cannot account for the *relevant kind* of normativity, the strong normativity rooted in our participation in reason-laden discourses.

Let me turn finally to a second application of our ideas, one concerning the nature of the content of perceptual experiences, in particular, the idea of non-conceptual content as the characteristic kind of content of perceptual experiences (see e.g. Evans, 1982, Peacocke, 1992, and Cussins, 1992). Notice that one of Evans' main motivations for introducing the notion of non-conceptual content was precisely the idea that the richness and grain of perceptual *experience* cannot be unpacked using the notion of belief, since 'belief' really names a " ... far more sophisticated cognitive state: one that is connected with ... the notion of *judgement*, and so, also, connected with the notion of *reasons*"<sup>25</sup>. Unlike the content of perceptual experiences, beliefs were said to be intrinsically conceptualised.

Now, if our notion of semantic responsibility is correct, then being "connected with the notion of judgement and the notion of reasons" is not criterial for being a *belief*, but only for being a particular *kind* of belief (a mindful belief). This might sound like a mere change of label, but I think there is more to it than that. Thus a subject who already knows about the Müller-Lyer illusion, believes (mindfully believes) the lines to be of equal length. The fact that the subject can't help but still represent one line as longer than the other is distinctive, or so I suggest, not of a more primitive informational state with such-and-such non-conceptual content, but of a different *type of belief*: mindless belief<sup>26</sup>. As a belief, it is conceptualised (and thus subject to the Generality Constraint. See Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 103). Nonetheless, the subject can't help but believe that the lines look the way they look. No amount of learning would stop her from believing (*mindlessly* believing) that one line is longer than the other. If prompted, she might give us a detailed description of her experience and even admit that she just can't stop herself from seeing the

lines as having different lengths, regardless of her knowledge of the illusion. There is thus no room for reason-sensitive tuneability in the case of the perceptual belief and the conditions of semantic responsibility are not met. This, of course, is not the case with *every* perceptual experience. As I mentioned above, one can *learn to perceive*. One can learn e.g. to discern flavours in otherwise exotic foods. One can (and should) learn to look for signs of boredom in one's students' and lovers' faces. To this extent, one can be liable, semantically responsible, for some of one's perceptual beliefs. There may thus be both mindful and mindless perceptual beliefs. However, most perceptual beliefs belong to the mindless category since most are the kind of beliefs "we form about our environment as we move about in it throughout our waking hours, most of them short-lived and many of them unconscious" (Alston, *op. cit.*, p. 265). If this is the case, then we are not semantically responsible for most of our beliefs.

Here, again, the notions of semantic and epistemic responsibility come apart. When reconstructing Alston's argument about deontological justification and control in Section 1, we saw that the immediate conclusion —the conclusion that follows from the explicit premises only— is that subjects are not epistemically responsible (i.e., are not deontologically justified) for believing most of what they believe. We noted that Alston's actual conclusion (involving a kind of *reductio*) depends on an implicit assumption that we *are* epistemically justified in believing most of what we believe. At that point, it was hinted that, despite Alston's intuitions, there may be no real problem in the view that we are simply not justified in believing most of what we believe. Now we can be more explicit about the reasons for feeling comfortable with this position. Since most of our beliefs are perceptual beliefs for which we are



not semantically responsible (since being semantically responsible means being tuneable by reasons), it would surely be rather odd to be held epistemically responsible for them. For we would then be epistemically responsible for items (the bulk of our beliefs) for which we bear no full-blooded semantic responsibility. A finer-grained taxonomy of pathological, mindful, and mindless beliefs is, I claim, a tool that can help us avoid these (and other) traps.

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<sup>1</sup> I shall use the terms 'responsibilism' / 'responsibilist' and 'deontologism' / 'deontologist' as having, roughly, the same sense unless otherwise noted. For a precise characterisation of responsibilism as a subclass of deontologism see Lorraine Code (1987).

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, as many reliabilist and responsibilist views of epistemic justification as advocates of either. The reliabilist group includes, among others, D. M. Armstrong (1973) and Alvin Goldman (1986, 1987, 1988) For responsibilism see e.g. L. BonJour (1985), R. Chisholm (1977, 1982) and S. Cohen (1984). For a very detailed map of current positions, especially of what it is known in the literature as 'virtue epistemology' see G. Axtell (1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Chisholm (1977, 1982). The fact that Chisholm is also well known as an internalist and foundationalist does not mean that the notion of epistemic responsibility is here presented as necessarily connected with those metaepistemological views.

<sup>4</sup> Alston's taxonomy is finer-grained than this since i) he suggests a category of control that is direct, yet non-basic (non-basic immediate control) and ii) he also subdivides the category of indirect, i.e. non-basic control, into two different kinds: long-range control, and indirect influence. These refinements do not affect our discussion.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting issue concerns whether or not the notion of control that applies when characterising intentional action can be applied in the analysis of beliefs. Some philosophers (e.g. M. Steup, 1988) claim that believing is indeed a subclass of human actions. Others (e.g. J. Heil, 1983) regard this idea as a deep mistake. Be this as it may, the general consensus is that there is nothing like *direct* voluntary control over *any* of our beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> For a subject to fulfil her epistemic responsibility is for her to follow some epistemic principles that allow her to form only those beliefs most likely

to be true (*Ibid.*, p. 259). This 'likelihood' can be characterised in either internalist or externalist terms.

<sup>7</sup> If I am right, it could be argued (although I will not do so here) that the analysis of perceptual belief is not relevant to the concept of epistemic justification.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Steup thinks that all that matters is that beliefs are somehow within our control and claims: "All this recent talk about doxastic voluntarism versus doxastic involuntarism, or direct versus indirect belief control, is really ... a storm in a teacup". (Steup (1988), pp. 73-74).

<sup>9</sup> Alston opts for the (weaker) psychological version: 'we do not believe at will'. A stronger (logical) reading of this thesis would be expressed with the phrase 'cannot believe at will'. See Alston, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> As Dennett reminds us. See D. Dennett (1984), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Descartes' view of judgement as subject to the will and Locke's discussion of the voluntariness of judgement in the book IV of the *Essay*.

Thanks again to an anonymous referee for reminding me of these examples.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Dennett's *Elbow Room* (1984) provides an excellent discussion of these problems.

<sup>14</sup> The idea that responsibility is a *precondition* of voluntary control rather than the other way round echoes some of Strawson's views in "Freedom and Resentment" (see Strawson, 1974)). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

<sup>16</sup> If, according to the traditional definition, one takes justification to be the property that should apply to beliefs in order for them to be knowledge, the notion of semantic responsibility could also apply to the concept of justification, at least under a reliabilist interpretation of the concept of justified belief (see e.g. Goldman, 1986, 1987). There could indeed be justified true mindless beliefs as well as justified true mindful beliefs. The first kind would constitute some kind of tacit knowledge, while the latter would be closer to what is known as explicit knowledge (see e.g. Davies 1986, 1989). However, the present account is neutral with regard to such epistemological issues.

<sup>17</sup> This category of belief, although important in itself, does not play a central role in the present paper.

<sup>18</sup> See Steup (1988), pp. 78-81 for a critical discussion of this example within an epistemological framework.

<sup>19</sup> It depends on one's social and political tastes which way to call it.

<sup>20</sup> Hence, a restricted interpretation of the tribe example introduces an interesting gap between the notion of semantic and epistemic responsibility.

<sup>21</sup> Both the setup of Alston's example and my suggestion of considering two different interpretations of the 'could' in 'the subject *could* reasonably have been expected to fulfil her intellectual obligations' may remind the reader of Goldman's distinction between *weak* and *strong* epistemic justification (cf. Goldman, 1988). The resemblance increases if we focus on the notion of blameless and nonculpable beliefs involved in Goldman's processes of weak justification. However, there are also important differences. Let me mention at least one. Goldman's distinction is based on how reliable the processes that lead to the formation of beliefs are and whether the subject can recognise them as reliable. But the reliability of empirical methods for

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establishing the truth of a proposition is definitely not a property that figures in my notion of semantic responsibility.

<sup>22</sup> This clearly shows that Alston's notion of epistemic justification is such that meeting truth-conducivity standards is more important than fulfilling epistemic duties.

<sup>23</sup> A caveat. The fact that the subject can be held responsible for holding a belief does not entail though that the truth-value of the belief must be explicitly known by the subject. Otherwise, being semantically responsible would be far too demanding. It would actually be equivalent to being certain about the truth-value of what one believes. To meet semantic obligations is to engage in inferential practices and, of course, to do this is not a guarantee of truth. While this may be problematic in epistemology where the central concerns involve concepts such as justification, certainty or knowledge, it is not only admissible, but necessary in the semantic domain, since the content of a belief is independent of its truth-value.

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed analysis of the impact of my classification upon the topic of semantic naturalisation see Toribio (forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> Evans (1982), p. 124. I am focusing here on Evans' treatment of the notion of non-conceptual content but this motivation is common among advocates of non-conceptual content. See e.g. Peacocke (1992), and Cussins (1992).

<sup>26</sup> Evans (1982) p. 123 explicitly mentions perceptual illusions as supporting evidence for the non-conceptual character of perceptual experiences.