

More thoughts on attention and perception

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1 Do we perceptually represent perceptual prominence?

Last time we discussed three apparent counterexamples to the weakest form of intentionalism (intrapersonal, intramodal, local intentionalism). One way of handling these counterexamples would be to say that we perceptually represent objects or properties *as perceptually prominent*. This would be to represent these objects and properties as bearing a certain relation to the subject of the perceptual experience. But if we allow representation of relative distance and relative orientation, as it seems we should, then there can be no in-principle objection to this sort of egocentric representation.

The problem in my view is rather that the claim that we perceptually represent relations of perceptual prominence is just a relabeling of an aspect of the phenomenal character of the experience in representational terms. I tried to make the case for this by arguing that the relationship between perceptual experience and the relation of perceptual prominence is not what one would expect of the relationship between an experience and a property (or relation) that that experience represents. I suggested the following two principles about the relationship between experiences and the properties they represent:

Fallibility: if an experience can represent R as instantiated (in the environment of the perceiver), then it can do so even if R is not instantiated (in the relevant environment).

Independence: if an experience can represent R as instantiated, then R can exist unperceived in the environment of the perceiver.

I argued that the relation of perceptual prominence fails both of these conditions. The worry raised in class was that other properties or relations, which plausibly are perceptually represented, also fail one or both of these conditions.

Let's talk about a few of the examples mentioned:

- *existence*. This fails the first condition but not the second. But the reason why it fails the first condition is different than the reason why perceptual prominence does; existence fails this condition because of its ubiquity rather than because we can't make mistakes in representing it. This suggests that the first condition should be modified as follows:

*Fallibility**: if an experience can represent objects x, y, \dots as instantiating R , then it can do so even if x, y, \dots do not instantiate R .

I think that this solves the problem with existence, though there may be more complicated counterexamples in the vicinity.

- *other egocentric perception-involving properties*. One might also try to find counterexamples in other properties which people have thought are perceptually represented, but which are also egocentric and which also involve a perceptual representation of some property of the perceptual experience. Here are some possible candidates:

- a. *causation of experiences*. Searle (1983) thinks that we represent objects and properties as causing our experience.
- b. *subject-independence*. Siegel (2006) argues that we perceptually represent properties like the property of being such that if change my perspective on x , then x will not thereby move.
- c. *being perceptually represented by me*. This came up last time.

(a) passes both: a property can cause an experience without being represented as such, and in illusory experiences a property will be represented as causing an experience without being around to do so.

(b) obviously passes Independence. But it also seems to pass Fallibility*. An after-image, for example, could really seem to be the color of the wall.

(c) is trickier. Suppose we hold that whenever I perceptually represent F as instantiated, I also perceptually represent my perceptual experience as representing F as instantiated. Then we have a failure of Independence; and it seems that Fallibility* fails too, since it is hard to imagine what it would be like to (e.g.) visually represent yourself as visually representing redness as instantiated without visually representing redness as instantiated.

But there are also some obvious worries about this view of perceptual experience. One is a worry about motivation. Another is a worry about regress.

We could modify the view to say that sometimes, but not always, when we perceptually represent F , we also perceptually represent ourselves as perceptually representing F . Then (c) would pass Independence, but would still fail Fallibility*. Does this cast doubt on Fallibility*?

I'm inclined to say that it does not, since I'm skeptical about the motivations for the view that we sometimes do and sometimes do not perceptually represent ourselves as

perceptually representing F as instantiated. What would be the difference between the two sorts of cases? Would there be a phenomenal difference?

If the view could be motivated, we would still have an argument against perceptual representation of perceptual prominence from Independence. But this would weaken the case a bit.

2 The case for attention as a distinct state-type

Last time we talked about how the three counterexamples we talked about last time can be handled if we think of attention as a non-perceptual state with its own unique phenomenal character. The question is whether thinking of attention in this way is a plausible view, or an ad hoc attempt to save intentionalism.

Let's get a little bit clearer on the class of cases that would count as shifts in attention, and what they are supposed to have in common. The cases include: shifting attention from one point of intersection to another in the cross-hairs case; shifting attention from one instrument to another when listening to music; shifting attention from the pain in your tooth to the pain in your hand. These seem to have the following things in common:

- We would naturally call them all 'shifts in attention' (or some similar thing). Hard to know how much this sort of ordinary language evidence/pre-theoretical classification should count for.
- All are phenomenal changes that can be brought about at will.
- There is a certain phenomenal similarity between them, which is hard to describe without using 'attend', 'focus', or its cognates. I think that this is true but I could just be talking myself into this, or it could be a relabeling of the fact that these are all phenomenal changes that can be brought about at will. On the other hand, it is hard to explain the type phenomenal character that all visual experiences have in common; perhaps one could say something about the phenomenology of color perception. But why is this clearer than talk about the phenomenology of focus-change?

One worry that Caleb brought up last time concerned the inference from the cross-modal character of attention shifts to their being a distinct state type. We don't think that we can't visually represent shape just because it can also be represented in tactile experience.

I agree that this kind of case shows the need to be clearer about the grounds for thinking that attention is a distinct sort of state. I'm not completely satisfied with the kind of case I can make for this, but here is a try.

Think about our grounds for thinking that visual experience are distinct from auditory experiences. It seems that we have a grip on a certain phenomenology essential to visual experience, and a certain phenomenology essential to auditory experience, and recognize that these are separable: one could be having an experience with one sort of phenomenal character but not the other.

An analogous argument for the case of attention: there is a distinct focus-changing phenomenology. Moreover, we can see that this type of phenomenal character is distinct from visual, auditory, et. al. phenomenal character because they are separable: one can have this sort of focus-changing phenomenal character without having a visual experience, or an auditory experience, or whatever.

(I'm not sure whether the relevant sort of phenomenal character should include these shifts happening at will, though I think in the standard case that is a part of the phenomenal character; attention shifts are not always at will, so any disanalogy here with visual experience would depend upon its being an essential feature of the phenomenal character of visual experience that it not be able to be changed at will. I'm tempted to say that this is an essential feature of the phenomenal character of visual experience, but I don't think that this is at all clear.)

References

- John Searle, 1983. *Intentionality*. New York: Cambridge U.P.
- Susanna Siegel, 2006. Subject and Object in the Contents of Visual Experience. *Philosophical Review* 115(3):355–388.