

PERCEPTION AS ACTION

MATTHEW D. CONDUCT

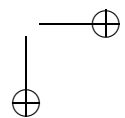
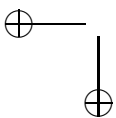
Abstract

In this paper I take seriously the idea that perceptual experiences, the sensory experiences that we enjoy when perceiving, are mental actions. I provide a picture that identifies them as a species of basic action and in so doing combine disjunctive accounts of experience and action. Disjunctivism about sensory experience is usually put forward to defend naïve realism and I argue that a view of perception as a form of action can help the naïve realist position. It does so in three ways. First, it offers an account of the determination of phenomenal character that is in accord with the key commitments of naïve realism but that is less susceptible to the argument from illusion. Second, it provides an account of the relation between hallucinatory experience and perceptual experience. Third, it takes two different debates about disjunctivism as a thesis about action, and disjunctivism as a thesis about perception, and reduces the latter to just a special case of the former.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly popular to emphasise the connections between perception and action. Indeed, on some enactive accounts of perception the sensory experiences that we enjoy when perceiving (perceptual experiences) are a kind of action.

Enactive theories of perception are intended to challenge a certain picture of the nature of perception, and its relation to bodily action. Perception is not to be conceived of as a mental state that is underpinned by processes in the brain that serve to represent the environment. While these may indeed be involved in visual perception, it is the dynamic interaction between brain, body and world that is the physical basis for our conscious experiences. We are to reject a view of the relation between perception and action that sees them only as instrumentally related. Rather than perceptual states causally



affecting bodily actions, which can then in turn bring about changes in perceptual states, perceptual states themselves involve bodily activity.

As well as this account of the physical basis of perception and perceptual experience, enactive theories also try to tell a story about the nature of perceptual experiences *qua* psychological episode in the experiencing subject's conscious life. According to this account, the contents of the sensory experiences that we enjoy when perceiving cannot be understood without appeal to action. More specifically, we cannot understand the ways in which the world appears to us in sensory experience without appealing to our understanding of how our actions can bring about changes in those sensory experiences. So, for example, for something to visually appear spherical to a subject is for that subject to understand how their sensory experiences will change with movement of the object, viewing point or sensory organs.¹

This is a very brief outline of the enactive theory of perception, but I take it that what I have sketched above represents the basic idea behind it. The account of the determination of experiential content according to which it involves essential reference to action is sometimes glossed as the view that our visual sensory experiences are actions of ours; that they are things that we do, rather than have done to us. We enact the ways in which the world appears to us in experience.² Upon reading the authors who talk like this, however, it is not at all clear that the details of their account commits them to the view that sensory experiences are actions, rather than just occurrences that essentially depend upon capacities for action. Indeed, there is not much said at all about what they take actions to be, or what the distinction between action and non-action consists in.

In this paper I want to take seriously the idea that perceptual experiences, the sensory experiences that we enjoy when perceiving, are mental actions (for if they are actions at all, they must surely be mental, rather than bodily, actions.) I also want to try and combine disjunctive accounts of experience and action. Disjunctivism about sensory experience is usually put forward to defend naïve realism, which regards perceptual experiences as having worldly objects as their constituents, which are immediately present to the mind of the experiencing subject. My hope is that a view of perception as a form of action can help the naïve realist position. It can do so in three ways. First, it offers an account of the determination of phenomenal character that is in accord with the key commitments of naïve realism but that is less susceptible to the argument from illusion. Second, it provides an

¹ For more details on this enactive approaches to perception and perceptual experience see Noë (2004).

² Here are some sample comments to this effect: 'Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It something we do.' (Noë, 2004, p. 1); 'The sensory feel of an experience is not a thing that happens to us, but a thing we do: a skill we exercise.' (O'Regan, Myin & Noë, 2005, p. 369)

account of the relation between hallucinatory experience and perceptual experience. Third, it takes two different debates about disjunctivism as a thesis about action, and disjunctivism as a thesis about perception, and reduces the latter to just a special case of the former.

Simple actions

The account of perceptual experience that I will be sketching makes use of the notion of a simple action. To introduce the idea, I will (briefly) describe how simple actions come to be appealed to in explaining basic actions. Basic actions are those actions of an agent that are not brought about by the agent doing anything else. The notion of a basic action is invoked in order to stop a worrisome infinite regress from developing. The regress is generated the following way.

An intrinsic event, or action result, is an event whose occurrence is necessary for the occurrence of an action. So for example if Smith kills the Queen, then the Queen must die. Events that are intrinsic to actions of a certain kind can, however, occur without any action of that kind occurring, or, indeed, any action at all occurring. The Queen can die without there being any action for which this event is the result, or intrinsic event. She could have a heart attack.

When an agent performs an action, and that action has an event intrinsic to it, we can often ask how it is that the agent brought this event about. If Smith kills the Queen, then Smith brings about the death of the Queen, and we can ask how it is that Smith brought about this death. And we would typically respond by citing another action of Smith, such as, say, his shooting of the gun. And it looks like this action has an event intrinsic to it, namely, the bullet leaving the barrel of the gun at extreme velocity. And we can ask how Smith brought about this event. And we might again cite another action of Smith's such as his pulling of the trigger, which again has an event intrinsic to it, of which we can again ask how he brought it about.

If an infinite regress is not to develop, resulting in an infinite number of actions being involved in Smith's shooting of the Queen, then there must be actions of Smith of which we cannot say that they have results that are brought about by other actions of Smith. There are some actions that are not done by doing anything else; there are *basic* actions. They are basic either because:

- 1) These actions have no intrinsic events/results

- 2) These actions have intrinsic events, but these events are not brought about by any action of the agent — they are either caused by the agent themselves or some state or event in the agent

I am not going to take a stance upon which model of basic actions is correct. But what I am going to make use of is the idea of a *simple action* that is appealed to by advocates of the first strategy in order to stop the regress. According to this strategy basic actions are simple, in that they have no internal causal structure. (Ginet, 1991) What this means is that they are not the causing of anything. So for example volitionists, who adopt this strategy, claim that basic actions are mental actions of willing, which are not themselves the causing of anything. If Smith wills to move his finger, there is no event intrinsic to this act of willing, of which it can be asked how Smith caused it. Of course, while acts of will, or volitions, do not have events that are their results, they can cause things to happen. And so, ordinarily, Smith's willing to move his finger will cause a movement of his finger, which will be the event intrinsic to the action of Smith moving his finger.

It is not my intention to advocate this view of basic actions, but I want to appeal to the idea of there being simple actions.

A disjunctive theory of basic actions

David Ruben has recently advocated a disjunctive account of bodily movements, which he takes to be basic actions in the sense described above. That is, he takes the act of moving one's body to have no intrinsic event. If someone raises their arm this is not to be understood as their causing their arm to rise. Rather, there is no event that occurs when someone raises their arm which is the same kind of event that occurs when their arm simply goes up, say as a consequence of someone stimulating their brain. We have two situations, each of which can be correctly described as a case in which someone's arm went up, but there is nothing fundamentally in common to the two situations which makes it correct to say this. One is a raising of the arm, the other is an arm's rising, and they are fundamentally different kinds of occurrence. The first is an act, while the latter is a 'mere' event. A 'mere' event is passive, in the sense that its occurrence is not sufficient for the occurrence of any action. And, according to Ruben, it is false to say that such events occur for basic bodily movements — movements of the body that are not brought about by any other bodily movement.

There is, on this view, a sense of 'event', and of specific event descriptions (like, 'the moving of his hand'), in which an *exclusive*

disjunction is true in the case of basic actions: either a person moves his hand or his hand moves. The first is an action; the second is a (mere) event. So if I move my hand, it is false (in one sense) that my hand moved or that it changed place, only true that I moved it or that I changed its place. (Ruben, 2003 pp. 178–9)

Regardless of whether we find this account credible for bodily actions, it seems much more plausible when considering mental actions.

It seems reasonably clear that there are such things as mental actions (even if we can't provide clear criteria for deciding what is an action and what is not.) So I can think about a maths problem, reminisce about my summer vacation, imagine what the Eiffel Tower looks like in the snow, and say a word in my head. All of these appear, on the face of it, to be things that are genuine actions of mine.³ They do not happen to me. But things are not as simple as this. I will focus here on the act of imagining. While it is true to say that sometimes imagining the Eiffel Tower is an action of mine, on other occasions it is not at all clear that it is such. Sometimes the imagining of the Eiffel Tower can just happen — sometimes an image of the Eiffel Tower can just pop into my head.

We must be careful, however, to distinguish between those imaginings of the Eiffel Tower that we can think of as happening to me, and those that just happen. Actions can be spontaneous, or unbidden, seemingly coming from nowhere even for the agent of that action. Someone can just do something, spontaneously, on the spur of the moment. It may be the case, for example, that I just suddenly raise my leg, and in response to the question 'Why did you do that?' give the answer 'I don't know.' In so doing I am not committing myself to having performed no action. Spontaneity is not conclusive evidence for there not being an action in such a case. So actions can 'just happen.' What is distinctive of actions is not that they don't 'just happen' but that they do not happen *to me*.

I propose, then, that a distinction can be made between the considered act of imagining, the spontaneous act of imagining, and the event of an image coming before my mind's eye. (I should point out that I am not taking any particular stance here on how we should understand the expression 'an image of x in the mind's eye', as either pictorially or descriptively.) Just as a distinction can be made between the considered act of my raising my leg, the spontaneous act of my raising my leg, and the event of my leg rising.

³ Some philosophers disagree over whether all of these cases count as genuine action. See, for example, Mele (2009) and Strawson (2009). I regard the failure to acknowledge these phenomena as being at least sometimes cases of mental action to be a point against the conception of action that these philosophers are operating with. If our account of action has the consequence that imagining a person's face or remembering the name of a capital city are not actions, then so much the worse for our account of actions.

Actions such as imagining can certainly be basic. When I actively imagine something I need not do this by doing anything else. And so, on the view of basic actions according to which they are simple, mental actions such as imaginings will lack a causal structure — they will not have events intrinsic to them that are necessary but not sufficient for their occurrence.

And then if we accept that there are imaginings that are not actions of ours, we will accept that there are imaginings that are ‘mere’ events — events that are not the results of any action.

And so we will end up with a disjunctive conception of the mental phenomenon of imagining. States of affairs that are truthfully described as imaginings of the Eiffel Tower need not have the same fundamental nature. Some may be simple acts, lacking any intrinsic event, and some may be mere events. Some occurrences of mental images (whatever this means) are acts, and others are just mere occurrences — mere events. But these mere events are not components of the occurrences of mental images that are acts. For if they were, such acts would not be simple. (I realise, of course, that people will take issue with the thought that basic actions are basic in virtue of being simple. I am assuming this for the purpose of combining disjunctivisms of perception and action.)

Some reasons to think of perception as a form of action

I want to sketch here some reasons for why it is at least plausible that perception is a mental action. More precisely, I want to give reasons for thinking that it is at least plausible that *perceptual experience* is a mental action. If we think of perception as the relation that holds between a subject and things in the world such that those things are available for the subject to think about and act towards, perceptual experience is the subjective aspect of this relation in virtue of which the world is made available — it is the appearance of the world to the subject. So it is perceptual experience, the peculiar way in which we are appeared to by things in the world, that I want to talk about.

My aim here is not to provide conclusive reasons for thinking that perceptual experience is an action. It is notoriously difficult to provide criteria for demarcating actions from non-actions. Instead, what I want to do is give reasons for why it is not at all obvious that perceptual experience is *not* an action, and that it is at least possible to think of it as an action.

When philosophers try and make clear the distinction between actions and those things that just happen to us, it is common to find perceptual experience listed amongst the latter. From an internal perspective, perceptual experiences seem to ‘just happen.’ They are unbidden. I turn my head, open my eyes, and in so doing enjoy incredibly rich and detailed visual experiences of the world around me. I do not need to intend for this to happen,

nor to want, desire or believe that this will happen — it just does. It may be the case that our beliefs, memories, expectations and so on affect the way in which the world appears to us, but this does not change the fact that I have no choice in the matter of whether the world appears to me, or what appears to me. And so we should think of perceptual experience as passive, as something that happens to us. We can, however, be sceptical about drawing this conclusion from these observations.

First, the accepted spontaneity of perceptual experience does not guarantee that it is not an action. As has previously been mentioned, actions can be spontaneous, or unbidden, seemingly coming from nowhere even for the agent of that action. Experience certainly has the property that, from our perspective, it just happens. It is not up to us whether we experience the world. But there can be actions even if it is not up to us that these actions occur — even if they are unbidden. For an action to take place it does not have to be the case that whether we acted or not was up to us.

Second, perceptual experience has *some* of the properties that we associate with paradigm examples of agency. Perceptual experience has the hallmarks of trying, of striving, and we can be more or less successful at it (illusory experience and so on). If my mind is on other things I can completely fail to see things that are right in front of me, and are presumably reflecting light that impacts upon my sensory organs. I can *fail* to experience things. The same thing can happen when I attend to certain regions of the visual field and not others. With conscious effort I can change my experience without changing the stimulus to my eye, as in cases of aspect shifting. I can *try* to experience the world in different ways. I can get better at experiencing things. When I purchase a pair of spectacles with a new prescription things appear slightly distorted. This distortion disappears over time. Were I to be given left-right inverting goggles the world would at first appear a chaotic mess, but I would gradually master my experience and start to make sense of the world again.⁴ I can get *better* at experiencing the world.

In experiencing the world we could think of ourselves as trying to have the world available to us in thought and action. A successful experience is one which results in the world being so available. And so we could think of the difference between illusion and veridical perception as the difference between a successful and a non-successful action (rather than, say, an accurate rather than an inaccurate representation.) Experience can go *wrong*.

I do not have control over whether I experience things when I open my eyes in the right circumstances, and I do not have control over what I experience when I look at the world. But this is compatible with perceptual experience not being passive, as not being something just given to me, as it

⁴ See Noë (2004, pp. 7–10).

were, by the world. The fact that we can experience badly, that we can improve our experiences, and that our experiences can go wrong, gives some support to the idea that it is something we do, as these are all hallmarks of agency.

Nothing that I have said demonstrates that perceptual experience is an action. All of the claims I made above can be denied, and an alternative construal given in which my experiences are just something that happen to me, once I orient my head, open my eyes, and focus. But as long as the interpretation I gave has some support, and is not straightforwardly at odds with what we know about perception, then I propose that it is a position that can be appealed to in theorising about wider issues in the philosophy of perception. I will argue that it *could* play important work in naïve realist accounts of perception and perceptual experience.

Naïve realism and disjunctivism

Naïve realism is a view about the nature of perceptual experiences according to which they are, in some sense, presentational of the objects of perception. In enjoying a perceptual experience a subject stands in a relation to the thing that they perceive, such that the subjective aspect of their experience, the peculiar way in which the subject is appeared to on such an occasion, is constituted by that which they perceive.

Here are some descriptions of this conception of the nature of such experience:

That which gives sensory character to perceptual consciousness is a public quality of some physical object. (Smith, 2002, pp. 43–44)

The core claim of naïve realism is that, when we see, external objects and their properties “shape the contours of the subject’s conscious experience.” (Fish, 2009, p. 6)

It is frequently argued that this naïve realist view of the nature of perceptual experience requires one to adopt disjunctivism about experience. In order to accommodate the possibility of hallucinatory experiences that are subjectively indiscriminable from perceptual experiences the naïve realist must maintain that such experiences are of a fundamentally different nature to those that occur when perceiving.⁵

⁵ See, for example, Martin (2004).

The accounts combined

The disjunctive conception of experience takes it that there are two quite different sorts of thing that we refer to as 'experience.' There is perceptual experience, which is the presentation of the world to the perceiving subject in some sort of immediate and direct way. And there is hallucinatory experience, which does not put us into contact with anything in the world, and is of a different nature. The nature of perceptual experience is not such that it is just whatever the nature of hallucinatory experience is *plus* some other factors.

A disjunctive conception of some type of occurrence, G, takes it that there are two quite different sorts of thing that we can refer to as Ging. There is the act of Ging by some agent, and there is the mere event of Ging. The nature of the act of Ging is not such that it is just whatever the nature of the mere event of Ging is *plus* some other factors.

If we think that perceptual experience is a form of action, and we think that it is as the naïve realist conceives it, and so of a fundamentally different nature to hallucinatory experience, we can combine the two forms of disjunctivism in the following way.

Perceptual experience is a mental act, albeit one that is not under our control. It is a simple act, in that it has no event intrinsic to it. It is not the causing of anything, although, of course, it may have effects (the formation of beliefs, bodily actions, onsets of emotional states and so on.) It is the act of making objects in the world available to the subject in thought and action. The phenomenal properties of such experience, those properties that characterise the peculiar way in which a subject is appeared to in such experience, are properties of this act.

Hallucinatory experience, on the other hand, is not a mental action, but a mere mental event. It is something that happens to a subject, but can nevertheless be confused by the subject with the mental act of perceptual experience. The phenomenal properties of such experience are properties of this mental event.

Benefits

Given that there are not compelling reasons to treat perceptual experience as a form of action (my purpose was just to show that there are not compelling reasons to reject such a view), such a picture of the nature of such experience as sketched above must have some other reasons motivating it. What is being encouraged is a shift in perspective, from viewing experience as something passive that we undergo, to viewing it as something that we actively do. What benefits could such a view have?

I am coming at this whole issue from the perspective of the naïve realist. There are a number of problems that can be solved from this perspective, if we regard perceptual experience as an action.

Understanding naïve realism

The account given here provides an understanding of the metaphor used by naïve realists to describe their positive conception of perceptual experience — that of the external world ‘shaping the contours’ of a subject’s conscious life when perceiving some object. The external world does not just impress upon our minds in a causal way, such that how things appear to us are the effects of this world acting upon us. The contours of our conscious life are shaped by the world in the way the contours of a landscape are shaped by the features of the landscape itself.

One way to understand this metaphor is to think that the phenomenal properties of experience consist simply in the awareness of properties of objects in the world. The properties of things in the world ‘give’ experience its character, or ‘shape’ its character, by simply being present in experience. Nothing more is needed to account for the phenomenal character of experience than the properties of the things we see and our standing in the appropriate relation of awareness to them.

This is not to identify the phenomenal properties of experience with properties of the things that we perceive. The phenomenal properties of experience cannot be simply identified with properties of the external objects, because properties of experience are simply not properties of objects. The objects in the world could exist with all their same properties independently of our or any experiencing subject’s existence. There cannot be a simple identity between phenomenal properties and properties of things in the world, because properties of things in the world are not properties of experiences. Rather, the phenomenal properties of experience are a ‘taking in’, or ‘acquaintance with’ properties of objects in the world.

The naïve realist must make clear how the phenomenal properties of sensory experiences can be tied to the objects of perception in the right way for us to be able to say that they constitute the phenomenal character of such experience, or shape the contours of our conscious lives. The account given above is *one* conception of how objects and their properties could feature as constituents of sensory experience and its phenomenal character. It is open to the naïve realist to try and explain their commitment to perceptual experience being immediately presentational of the world in some other way.⁶

⁶This is not widely appreciated. See Conduct (2008).

And, indeed, one might think that it would be sensible for the naïve realist to do so, given the difficulties that the possibility of illusory experiences presents. In an illusory experience things appear other than they actually are. If the phenomenal properties of experience are just presentations of things in the world and their properties to the experiencing subject, what can explain the illusory phenomenal character of the experience? If something appears black, but is in fact red, what explains how the property of blackness gets into the picture?

On the account being presented here, objects in the world do not stand external to our perceptual experiences because such experiences are acts in which these objects are made immediately available to us for thought and action. The experience is the act of bringing into consciousness of the external world. And this is an intrinsic, essential feature of the act. The phenomenal properties of experience are the properties of the mental action of making objects in the world available for thought and physical action. This action cannot take place in the absence of external objects. Phenomenal properties of experience are properties of the act of experiencing objects, and the act of experiencing objects cannot take place in the absence of such objects. But if the phenomenal properties of experience are properties of an act that essentially involves the objects that we perceive, then we can understand how they are tied to such objects in the right kind of way. The account given here explains why perceptual experience is relational. It provides an understanding of the notion of 'acquaintance' or 'presentation' or 'immediate apprehension.' Perceptual experience is a simple mental act between subject and world. And it also allows the naïve realist to accommodate the possibility of illusion. The act of experience itself contributes to the phenomenal character of experience, and so when something appears other than it is, its so appearing can be explained in terms of properties of the mental act of awareness of it.

The characterisation of hallucination

The disjunctivist must give some sort of explanation of the fundamental difference between perceptual and hallucinatory experience. We could think of hallucinatory experiences as standing in the same relationship to perceptual experiences as imaginings that are 'mere' events stand to imaginings that are acts. Hallucinatory experiences are genuinely passive, but they can have the appearance of activity, and so can be confused for perceptual acts.

Can mere mental events be mistaken for mental acts? It is reasonable to believe that they can be. The following scenario seems very plausible. We know that it is possible to produce mental images through manipulation of

the brain. The occurrence of such mental images will constitute an imagining that is just a mere event. Now imagine that we were asking someone to imagine all sorts of things while we had them on the operating table with their head cut open and our neuroscientist ready to stimulate those areas of the brain sufficient for the occurrence of mental images. It seems very plausible to me that, given the existence of spontaneous, or unbidden imagining acts, that such a subject would confuse some of the image events produced within him for such mental acts.

A simplification of the debate

Disjunctivism about sensory experience can be seen as a specific instance of disjunctivism about action. If some basic mental acts are simple acts, in having no internal causal structure, and some of these acts are indiscriminable from some kind of mental happening, then we will have a disjunctive account of this type of action. This simplifies the debate for the disjunctivist. Instead of there being disparate disjunctive accounts of perception and action there is just a disjunctive account of action, and perceptual experience will just be one amongst a number of basic mental acts.

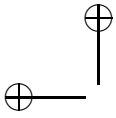
Durham University

United Kingdom

E-mail: m.d.conduct@dur.ac.uk

REFERENCES

- Conduct, M.D. (2008). Naïve realism, adverbialism and perceptual error. *Acta Analytica*, 23, 147–159.
- Fish, W. (2009). *Perception, Hallucination and Illusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ginet, C. (1990). *On Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, M.G.F. (2004). The limits of self-awareness. *Philosophical Studies*, 120, 37–89.
- Mele, A. (2009). Mental action: a case study. In L. O'Brien and M. Soteriou (Eds.), *Mental Actions* (17–37). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Noë, A. (2004). *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- O'Regan, J.K., Myin, E., & Noë, A. (2005). Sensory consciousness explained (better) in terms of 'corporality' and 'alerting capacity.' *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4, 369–387.
- Ruben, D. (2003). *Action and its Explanation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.



- Ruben, D. (2008). Disjunctive theories of perception. In A. Haddock and F. Macpherson (Eds.), *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* (227–243). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, A.D. (2002). *The Problem of Perception*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Strawson, G. (2003). Mental Ballistics or the Involuntariness of Spontaneity. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103, 227–56.

