

Perceptual evidence and the capacity view

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Abstract Susanna Schellenberg defends what she calls a “capacity view” concerning perceptual evidence. In this paper, I raise six challenges to Schellenberg’s argument.

(1) Our two fictional protagonists—call them Roderick and Alvin—are arguing about the epistemology of perceptual belief.

Roderick: Our perceptual beliefs are justified by our perceptual experiences. If you were a brain in a vat that had precisely the same perceptual experiences that you’ve had so far in your life, then you would be empirically justified in holding precisely the same empirical beliefs that you now hold.

Alvin: But in virtue of what feature do those perceptual experiences justify you in holding those empirical beliefs? It is not in virtue of any feature that you could know about simply by having or introspecting those experiences: it is rather in virtue of what *explains* your having those experiences. It is something about the nature of your perceptual faculties, and their functional role in your overall cognitive system, which explains why the experiences generated by those faculties confer justification.

Roderick: But such facts about your perceptual experiences cannot suffice for them to confer justification, for then a clairvoyant whose clairvoyant powers were functionally explainable in the same way as our perceptual powers are explainable, but who had no clue at all about this explanation, would be justified in accepting the deliverances of her clairvoyant powers as accurate. And furthermore, these facts about the explanation of our perceptual experiences cannot be necessary for them to

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confer justification, for then a cognitive faculty could produce justification-conferring states even in an agent who has compelling and undefeated reason to distrust the deliverances of that faculty. So what accounts for the justificatory power of our perceptual experiences cannot be some fact about what explains those experiences—such a fact is not accessible in the way it would need to be in order to be relevant to the justificatory power of those experiences.

Alvin: If the clairvoyant has reason to suspect that she is not clairvoyant—if, say, clairvoyance is inexplicable given the rest of her justified beliefs the world—then she ought to not to trust the deliverances of her clairvoyance. But if the clairvoyant has no such reason, then why think that her clairvoyant beliefs are less justified than our perceptual beliefs? Similarly, if an agent has compelling reason to distrust her perceptual experiences, then she is not justified in forming perceptual beliefs on their basis. But this is just to say that the justificatory power of perceptual experiences is defeasible, not that it is always fully accessible to the perceiver herself.

This is just a fragment: Roderick and Alvin pursue this dispute in much more depth and detail. But recently, a number of philosophers have wanted to find a way to reconcile this dispute by locating the insight that animates each side of this dispute, and finding a way to conjoin it with the insight that animates the other side. Schellenberg (forthcoming) provides an outstanding recent example of this effort at reconciliation. According to Schellenberg, Roderick is right to claim that victims of radically misleading perceptual experiences can nonetheless have some justification for ordinary empirical beliefs about the world around them, but Alvin is right to claim that such justification obtains in virtue of what explains our having those perceptual experiences. These explanatory facts, though perhaps not fully accessible to the perceiver herself, are discoverable empirically, but such empirical discovery—and empirical knowledge generally—depends on the fact that some of our perceptual experiences (specifically, the factive ones) are of greater evidential value than mere appearances.

More specifically, Schellenberg defends the following claims:

“[perceptual capacities] function to... discriminate and single out particulars in the environment” (3)

“perceptual capacities... are individuated by the types of particulars [“natural kinds in the environment”] they function to single out” (3)

“[perceptual] representations are understood as yielded by employing perceptual capacities” (2)

“the nature of sensory states is best understood in terms of employing perceptual capacities” (3)

“the sensory character of experience is grounded in the content of experience” (2)

“perceptual states...[provide] evidence for what they are of in the good case, since, by their nature, they function for this purpose” (2)

In what follows, I want to raise five questions about Schellenberg’s overall view, what she calls the “Capacity View” of perceptual evidence. My aim is to provoke Schellenberg to offer elaboration.

(2) Schellenberg follows most philosophers and psychologists in thinking of perceptual states as representational states. But is this widely held view correct? Charles Travis has argued that it is not. Travis considers those constructions that are commonly thought to report the representational content of perceptual states, viz., constructions that employ such verbs as “looks” or “sounds” or “feels”. He notes that such constructions fall into two categories. In the first category (which Roderick Chisholm called the “comparative” uses of “appears” verbs) are such cases as “Saul Kripke looks like Walter Matthau” or “Reno looks a bit like Las Vegas”. In the second category (which Chisholm called the “epistemic” uses of “appears” verbs) are such cases as “Reno looks deserted today” or “Kripke looks like he’s having fun”. Constructions of the first kind report some similarity between the way that two different things look, or more generally, appear. Constructions of the second kind report that the appearance in question provides a (potentially misleading) indication of some further fact. In order to serve these functions, neither kind of construction need be understood as reporting the representational content (if any) of a perceptual state: appearances can be indicators without being representations, just as smoke can indicate fire without representing fire, or representing anything. But if neither kind of construction need be so understood, and there is no other ordinary construction that is so understood, then on what grounds, Travis pointedly asks, can we regard perceptual states as representational? Why think that they have representational content at all? Our ordinary thought and talk provides no basis for a positive answer to this question, according to Travis.

Although it is clear that Schellenberg, like many other philosophers, would reject this argument, and its conclusion, what is less clear is why. Why should we think of perceptual states as representational, rather than merely indicational? Schellenberg does not address this question in her paper—so far as I can see, she simply assumes that perceptual states are representational. I would like to find out why.

(3) Schellenberg makes one claim about the function of perceptual capacities—viz., that they function to discriminate and single out particulars in the environment. And she makes another claim about the function of perceptual states—viz., that, in virtue of their metaphysical structure, they function to provide evidence for what they are of in the good case. Is one of these claims supposed to help explain the other? It might seem that the former is supposed to help explain the latter: perceptual capacities function to discriminate and single out particulars in the environment—and they function to do so by generating perceptual states, which typically (“in the good case”) do single out particulars in the environment. But to single out a particular in the environment—this line of thinking goes—is to provide evidence for that particular (or, more precisely, for some perceptually ascertainable facts concerning that particular).

If this is how Schellenberg is thinking about the relation between the function of perceptual capacities and the function of perceptual states (and is it?), then I want to know: why should we accept that the “singling out” of particulars that perceptual states do has anything to do with “providing evidence” concerning those particulars? To make this question a bit more vivid, consider the primal sketch which, in Marr’s theory of vision, represents (and so, presumably, “singles out”) edges and shapes in the visible array by detecting differences in illumination

intensity. The primal sketch represents edges and shapes to the rest of the visual system, which can process those representations and create new representations, but it does not provide any evidence of anything *to the viewer herself*, who typically cannot understand the content of the primal sketch (the content of which is therefore “non-conceptual”), and is in any case not at all conscious of the content of the primal sketch. Primal sketches function to single out particulars in the environment, but they do not, and do not function to, constitute evidence of anything at all to the viewer. Of course, we who know about the primal sketch, and who know that it exists and what it is doing, can treat it as evidence of a visible particular—but we are not the viewer.

Could we object that, even if the primal sketch does not constitute the viewer’s evidence, it nonetheless functions to *provide* evidence to the viewer, by virtue of helping to construct the viewer’s overall visual experience? Of course, the primal sketch does function to provide evidence in that sense, but then so does every other functional feature of the visual system, including states and processes that do not single out particulars at all (e.g., the mechanisms of photoexcitation in retinal rod cells). So when Schellenberg says that the function of perceptual states is to provide evidence, I assume that the provision of which she speaks is constitution. My question, then, is this: even granted that perceptual states are representational, why think that having those perceptual states constitutes the viewer’s having evidence concerning the particulars singled out, or represented, by those states? Why not think that, in so far as perceptual states constitute the viewer’s evidence, they do so not merely in virtue of the viewer’s having those states, but rather in virtue of the viewer’s knowing, first, that she has those states, and second, that those states are reliably correlated with features of the environment?

(4) Putting aside these questions, let’s grant that perceptual states are representational, and that being in a perceptual state constitutes the perceiver’s having evidence concerning the particulars represented by that state. This leaves us with a further question concerning the kind of evidence that the perceiver possesses in what Schellenberg calls “the bad case”, the case in which the perceiver is in a perceptual state that fails to single out any particular, though it introspectively seems to do so. Here’s what Schellenberg says about the bad case:

“perceptual capacities can be employed while failing to single out any particular of the type they function to single out.”

“To illustrate this, compare Percy, who perceives a white cup, with Hallie, who hallucinates a white cup. While perceiving Percy is perceptually related to a white cup, hallucinating Hallie is not. It seems to Hallie that she is perceiving a white cup, but of course she is not. We can analyze the perceptual capacities Hallie employs with respect to the conditions for which they function (good cases), despite the fact that Hallie is not currently in such a condition. There is nothing wrong with Hallie’s perceptual system. The problem is that her environment is not playing along. Since her perceptual capacities are working well with respect to the conditions for which they function, Hallie’s perceptual state has at least some merit: It is a product of employing her perceptual capacities. The way in which Hallie is failing is simply that she is not singling out relevant particulars.”

“So both Percy and Hallie employ perceptual capacities, and both of their perceptual capacities are systematically linked to what they are of in the good case in that they function to single out particulars (even though only Percy is in fact in the good case). For this reason both Percy and Hallie’s perceptual states have some evidential merit. But only Percy is actually singling out relevant particulars. By singling out the relevant particulars, Percy has additional evidence.” (4)

So if Percy has “additional” evidence, then Hallie must have at least some evidence, in virtue of having her hallucinatory perceptual state. But what evidence does she have, simply in virtue of having this hallucinatory state? The answer to this question will depend on how we think of having evidence.

On some views, evidence consists in propositions, and the evidence that a particular agent *has* at a time consists in just those propositions to which the agent bears a particular kind of relation at that time. (Different theorists will differ on precisely what kind of relation the agent must bear to a proposition in order for that proposition to be in the agent’s “evidence set”: according to Williamson (1997), the relation is knowledge; according to Goldman (2009), the relation is that of non-inferential propositional justification.) On other views, evidence consists in things—e.g., states, events, objects—that do not have propositional structure. On one version of this view, evidence consists in those publicly observable objects or measurements that can be entered as evidence in a court of law or in a scientific laboratory, and an agent’s “having” that evidence would consist in the agent’s being somehow aware of those things. On another version of this view, evidence consists in mental states, and an agent’s having that evidence consists simply in the agent’s occupying those mental states. And there are still other versions of this view, but all these versions have in common the idea that evidence does not consist of propositions, and an agent’s evidence at a time does not consist in the agent’s standing in a particular relation to those propositions at that time.

I’m not sure which of these two mutually exclusive options Schellenberg finds most attractive in thinking about evidence. (I hope to elicit some clarification here.) But whichever she endorses, there seems to be a problem for her view.

Suppose she endorses the former view, according to which evidence is propositional, and an agent’s evidence at a time is just those propositions to which the agent stands in a particular relation at that time. If that is how Schellenberg thinks of evidence, then what evidence does Hallie have in virtue of hallucinating a white cup? Hallie’s hallucination, recall, does not have a complete propositional content, but only a partial content. Her hallucination is not a relation to a proposition, but only a relation to a *proposition type*. So if evidence consists solely of propositions, then a relation to something that is not a proposition cannot give Hallie any evidence at all, on this view.

Let’s assume, then, that Schellenberg endorses the latter view, according to which evidence need not be propositional, and an agent’s evidence at a time need not be just those propositions to which the agent stands in a particular relation. But now if that is how Schellenberg thinks of evidence, then I am puzzled why Schellenberg thinks that there is any relation between a state’s being representational, on the one hand, and its providing evidence to its possessor, on the other. If an agent’s evidence is not exclusively propositions but rather, or also, publicly

observable objects (e.g., footprints) or introspectible mental states (e.g., states of consciousness), then this raises the question: what grounds Schellenberg's inference from the premise that "perceptual capacities function to single out particulars" to the conclusion that perceptual states provide evidence to the perceiver? Of course, when a capacity that functions to perform a particular task is exercised, that very fact constitutes some evidence that the task in question has been performed: but it need not constitute such evidence *to the possessor of the capacity itself*. My respiratory system functions to oxygenate the blood, but this does not mean that the fact of my own respiration provides evidence of blood oxygenation *to the person whose respiratory system it is*: consistently with the fact that she is breathing, that person may have no reason to believe anything at all concerning the oxygenation of her blood. So if Schellenberg wants to infer that perceptual states have evidential merit from the fact that they are exercises of a capacity to single out particulars, this inference will itself require some defense. One line of defense would consist simply in the claim that the evidence an agent has at a time is simply the propositions to which she is related by, among other things, an exercise of her perceptual capacities: but, as we've just seen, this line of defense is not open to Schellenberg. So what defense does she wish to offer instead?

(5) In motivating her view concerning the evidential similarities and differences between Hallie and Percy, here is what Schellenberg says:

"The distinction between two levels of perceptual content gives rise to two levels of perceptual evidence: phenomenal evidence and factive evidence. Phenomenal evidence is individuated by the content type that is in turn individuated by the perceptual capacities employed. Factive evidence is individuated by the token content that ensues from employing these capacities successfully in a particular environment. In the good case, perceptual experience provides us with both phenomenal and factive evidence. In the bad case, perceptual experience provides us only with phenomenal evidence. There is no factive evidence in the bad case because the capacities were not employed successfully and the ensuing token content is defective."

"By introducing the notion of phenomenal evidence, we can explain what evidence Percy and Hallie have in common. Moreover, we can explain in virtue of what hallucinating Hallie is not simply blameworthy for her belief. She has reason for believing that there is a white cup on her desk. After all, for all she can tell, there is a white cup on her desk. She has phenomenal evidence that supports her belief."

"By introducing the notion of factive evidence, we can explain in virtue of what Percy is in a better evidential position than Hallie. While his evidential position may seem to him to be indistinguishable from that of Hallie's, Percy has, unbeknownst to him, additional factive evidence and thus evidence that the particular white cup to which he is perceptually related is in fact before him. Thus, Percy has evidence that supports a singular thought about his environment." (5)

This passage raises a number of questions.

First, does Schellenberg take it to be a datum, in need of explanation, that Hallie and Percy have evidence in common? Or is the claim that they have evidence in common supposed to be something other than a datum, but rather a feature of her view that recommends it in some way?

Second, while one possible explanation of Hallie's blamelessness in believing that there is a white cup before her is that she has evidence in favor of this hypothesis, an alternative explanation of this same fact concerning Hallie's blamelessness is that *it seems to her* exactly as if she does have evidence, even though (in fact) she doesn't. Since this latter thesis can explain Hallie's blamelessness in believing as well as Schellenberg's own thesis can, why should we prefer Schellenberg's own thesis over this alternative? Why think that Hallie has any evidence at all that there is a white cup before her?

Third, why should we think that Percy is in a better evidential position than Hallie? Of course, Percy may know something that Hallie doesn't, but it's controversial whether this difference in what they know constitutes, or depends upon, a difference in their evidence: many internalistically inclined epistemologists might claim that Percy and Hallie are in precisely the same evidentiary situation, but Percy is in a better epistemic position only because her evidence is not misleading with respect to the world around her. What's to recommend Schellenberg's view over this internalist alternative?

(6) Finally, Schellenberg treats evidence as bearing on the justifiedness or the rationality of belief. But she says nothing about how evidence bears on the justifiedness or the rationality of credal states that are not beliefs, e.g., of states of comparative confidence, or of subjective probabilities, or of credal events, e.g., a change in one's degrees of confidence. This is surprising, since evidence that justifies a belief that *p* is often also taken to justify a greater confidence in *p* than in not-*p*. Depending on one's earlier body of evidence, that same evidence might also be taken to justify an increase in one's degree of confidence that *p*. But it's not clear how Schellenberg wants to think of the normative difference between Percy's evidence and Hallie's evidence with respect to these other, non-belief, states. Suppose that Percy, after veridically perceiving a white cup for a while, begins to hallucinate an apparently distinct white cup. So now Percy is perceiving one white cup and also hallucinating an apparently distinct white cup. Now that Percy is hallucinating a second white cup, should she be more confident of the existence of the cup that she veridically perceives than of the existence of the apparently distinct cup that she is hallucinating? That is not plausible, especially if the hallucination came on in some way that appeared utterly normal—e.g., a person coming into her visual field in a seemingly normal way, and apparently placing a second white cup there. Should she instead become less confident of the existence of the veridically perceived cup than she was before, now that she's started to hallucinate another cup? That is also not plausible: since the hallucinated cup seems, in every apparent respect, just as normal as the veridically perceived cup, she's received no defeaters for her original evidence. So what implications does this new hallucination have for the rationality of Percy's states of comparative confidence, or for her rationality of her degrees of confidence? Should she be equally confident in the existence of the two cups, even though she is more justified in believing in one of them than the other? That is also implausible: if she is less justified in believing in one cup than in the other, why shouldn't she be more confident about the one than the other? In short, I find it puzzling what Schellenberg would want to say about the two cups.

(7) I expect that Schellenberg will have characteristically illuminating things to say in response to the questions I've raised above. But if I understand her epistemological motivations correctly, she wants to find a way to achieve some rapprochement between our two disputants, Roderick and Alvin. There have been a number of attempts to achieve such rapprochement in recent years, and I'd like to conclude by asking what Schellenberg takes to recommend her view over the alternatives proposed by others.

According to Sosa (2007), for instance, what Hallie and Percy share is not a particular kind of evidence. Rather, they both exercise a particular perceptual capacity adroitly, i.e., in a way that it is designed to be exercised, and therefore in a way that is reliable in ecologically normal circumstances. Where they differ is that Percy's adroit exercise results in an accurate perceptual representation, whereas Hallie's, through no fault of her own, doesn't. Everything Schellenberg says is logically consistent with (though, I stress, not identical to!) Sosa's account, as just stated, of the epistemological similarity and difference between Percy and Hallie, but then Schellenberg wants to add the further claim that their similarities and differences can also be articulated in terms of what *evidence* they have. What does this last point add? What further data concerning Hallie and Percy's epistemological similarity and difference are left insufficiently well explained by Sosa's view, and need to be explained more fully in terms of Schellenberg's view of perceptual evidence?

Although limits of space prevent me from articulating other alternatives (from Plantinga 1993; McDowell 1998; Williamson 2000; Burge 2003, etc.) to Schellenberg's account of the epistemological similarities and differences between Percy and Hallie, I would welcome any light that she will shed on her reasons for preferring her view to those familiar alternatives. But I have already asked too many questions.

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