

Disjunctivism and the puzzle of phenomenal character

Disjunctivism about experience (which is generally introduced in defence of naïve realism) denies that a veridical perception and a matching hallucination (which is subjectively indistinguishable from the former) must have a common intrinsic nature. However, it is a matter of dispute how to characterise their difference. According to an influential interpretation (see Langsam, 1997), it has to be characterised in terms of a difference in phenomenal character. However, this view can hardly explain how two experiences can possibly be indistinguishable while having different phenomenal characters. Micheal Martin (1997, 2004, 2006) tried to get over this difficulty through a negative view of hallucination, according to which a perception and a matching hallucination don't share the same phenomenal character only because the latter has none: it has only the negative epistemological condition of not being distinguishable through introspective reflection from veridical perception.

There are a number of objections which have been raised against the negative view of hallucination. Among them, two (both voiced by Smith 2002, 2008) are most compelling. The first one points out something seriously lacking in the descriptive powers of ED: as the negative criterion is an epistemological one, it can only highlight the cognitive content of hallucination, failing to grasp its phenomenology, and hence does not allow distinguishing hallucinations from other mental states which have the same cognitive content as a perceptual experience but are not sensory, such as dreams and post-hypnotic suggestions.

According to Martin, this criticism springs from a misleading view of self-consciousness, according to which being self-aware of one's conscious state is a response to its phenomenal character, which is hence fixed independently and prior to one's higher-order perspective on these conscious states. In such a framework, it is logical to maintain that Martin's account of hallucination designates only the cognitive aspect of consciousness, the higher-order self-awareness of the state, while being unable to grasp the level of phenomenal consciousness itself. For Martin (2006, p. 393–5), this observational picture of consciousness is misleading: there is no sharp distinction between the phenomenal level and the cognitive one. Being phenomenally conscious is a matter of having a perspective on the world, not a matter of endorsing some phenomenal properties of the experience.

However, the sharp distinction between a purely phenomenal and a cognitive level criticised by Martin seems reestablished when he introduces the idea of impersonal (in)discriminability in response to the second objection toward the negative view of hallucinations. This objection claims that subjective (in)discriminability cannot be a reliable criterion to distinguish kinds of experiences, because it is relative to a subject and certain conditions. If two experiences are different or the same to the extent they are discriminable or indiscriminable through introspective reflection, we should say that subjects who lack higher-order reflection (animals and newborn babies) always have the same kind of experiences. Furthermore, Martin seems committed to say of a person momentarily unable to distinguish through reflection two samples of colours that she has two identical experiences. In order to avoid these difficulties, Martin specifies that the relevant

discrimination here is an impersonal one. However, if the notion of impersonal (in) distinguishability makes sense when we speak of intersubjective observable objects, it seems instead entirely unsound to use it in a domain where intersubjectivity plays no role, as the introspective character of experience. Martin may retort that the notion of indiscriminability is «impersonal» in a special sense: two things are impersonally indiscriminable if the inability of a subject to discriminate them is not influenced by any contingency related to the current situation, the conditions of the subject and so on. But to require that a power of discrimination is not influenced by the current situation means that one has to discriminate the two experiences only on the basis of what one knows through introspection, which presupposes that one can isolate the level of phenomenal apprehension from any perspective on it or any influence our knowledge can have on it – i.e. precisely what Martin contested in response to the first line of criticism.

There is hence a mutual incompatibility between these two lines of response, which reflects an inner tension in Martin's general approach: on the one hand, his claim to secure naïve realism is based on the externalist assumption that the presence or absence of a perceived object is a necessary condition in order to type one's perceptual states; on the other hand, he believes that this has to be justified only on the basis of the introspective data (phenomenal characters). The latter is an internalist perspective, from which an externalist aim can never be met. If we want hence to preserve disjunctivism, we have to abandon all these residual internalist notions. This will lead to a minimal disjunctivism (not in se), which will exclusively operate on the level of conceptual analysis and is closer to Hinton's (1967, 1973) seminal intuitions.

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