

The common kind theory and the concept of perceptual experience

Abstract: In this paper, I advance a new hypothesis about what the ordinary concept of perceptual experience might be. To a first approximation, my hypothesis is that it is the concept of something that seems to present mind-independent objects. Along the way, I reveal two important errors in Michael Martin's argument for the very different view that the ordinary concept of perceptual experience is the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception. This conceptual work is significant because it provides three pieces of good news for the common kind theorist.

In this paper, I will advance a new hypothesis about what the concept of perceptual experience might be. To a first approximation, my hypothesis is that the ordinary concept of perceptual experience is the concept of something that seems to present mind-independent objects (§7-§8).

However, the starting point for my discussion, and indeed my foil throughout, will be Michael Martin's famous *negative semantic view* that the ordinary concept of a perceptual experience is just the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception (§1).¹ Martin has given a complex and influential argument for this view,² but I will highlight what I believe to be two serious errors in that argument (§2-§5).

Why does any of this matter, though? Because it bears in three ways on the debate between *common kind theorists*, who hold that any perception and any matching hallucination

¹ Martin (2004, p. 37).

² I will be focusing on Martin's most detailed presentation of the argument, which is in his (2004, pp. 47-52). But see also Martin (2006), which briefly revisits parts of this argument.

belong to the same fundamental kind,^{3,4} and *metaphysical disjunctivists*, who say that they belong to different fundamental kinds.⁵

For one thing, Martin thinks that if the negative semantic view is true, then metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view; the burden of proof would be on the common kind theorist to dislodge us from this default position. By blocking Martin's argument for the negative semantic view, I also block this further argument (§6, §9).

In addition, a standard metaphysical disjunctivist view is that what it is to be a matching hallucination is simply to be something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception. The presentational semantic view will turn out to entail that this is false. Finally, the presentational semantic view will end up supporting the conclusion that if perceptual experiences exist, then they all share a reasonably natural property; equivalently, they belong to a reasonably natural kind (§9).⁶

None of this entails the common kind theory, but all of it is good news for the common kind theorist.

1. The positive and negative semantic views introduced

³ The common kind theory has so many advocates that it would be tedious to cite them all. Still, for some paradigms, see Tye (1995); Schellenberg (2018).

⁴ The notion of a fundamental kind has been developed in several subtly different ways. See for example Martin (2006, pp. 360-361); Brewer (2011, p. 3); Logue (2012b, p. 174) and (2013, p. 109).

⁵ Metaphysical disjunctivists (or those who accept some nearby view) include Hinton (1967); Campbell (2002); Martin (2004) and (2006); Snowdon (2005); Fish (2009); Nudds (2009); Brewer (2011); Logue (2012); Allen (2015); Genone (2016); Miracchi (2017); Moran (2018); French and Gomes (2019). For a bracingly clear overview of different forms of metaphysical disjunctivism, see Soteriou (2016).

⁶ I use the expressions *reasonably natural property* and *natural kind* in the sense of Lewis (1983).

Let an *experience-grounding property* be any property such that, if an entity⁷ has that property, then, purely in virtue of having the property, the entity is a perceptual experience. And let us say that for a property to be *perception-dependent* is for its essence to be characterized in terms of perception. Now consider this obvious, if schematic, view about what the ordinary concept of perceptual experience is:

The *positive semantic view*: The ordinary concept of a perceptual experience is the concept of something that has a certain property *E* that is introspectible, experience-grounding, and not perception-dependent.⁸

This schema can be completed in various ways. For example, a sense-datum theorist might say that *E* is the property of presenting certain qualities of sense-data, and a representationalist might say that *E* is the property of being a perceptual representation of your environment. (I think that both of these particular suggestions are implausible, but later I will make what I hope is a much better suggestion.)

Now, put the positive semantic view together with the obvious truth that perceptual experiences exist, and you get the conclusion that there is a property *E* that is introspectible, experience-grounding, and not perception-dependent. Some philosophers have thought that this conclusion lends some support to the *common kind theory*, which says that any veridical perception

⁷ I use the term “entity” as an especially broad sortal that includes properties, objects, events, states, etc.

⁸ Martin dubs this the “immodest view” (2004, pp. 47-48), but I prefer the more neutral label given above. In addition, Martin does not speak of just one property *E*; he speaks of a whole host of properties $E_1 \dots E_n$. But you can think of *E* as the conjunction of $E_1 \dots E_n$.

and matching hallucination belong to the same fundamental kind.⁹ (*Some* support, not *decisive* support: perhaps entities that possess *E* could belong to different fundamental kinds.)

So suppose that you are a *metaphysical disjunctivist* – suppose that you think that any veridical perception and matching hallucination belong to different fundamental kinds.¹⁰ Then you might be in the market for a different view of the concept of perceptual experience. The most popular view of this sort has been:

The negative semantic view: The ordinary concept of a perceptual experience is the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception.¹¹

The qualifier *impersonal* is intended to account for the fact that some creatures (e.g., dogs) can hallucinate despite being too cognitively simple to discriminate any experience from any other. The idea is to appeal to what can be discriminated via introspection in general, rather than by any particular subject.¹²

There is an argument for the negative semantic view, developed by Michael Martin, that has been enormously influential. In overview, it goes like this. Recall that the positive semantic theorist posits a property *E* that is introspectible, experience-grounding, and not perception-dependent. Martin first argues that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is

⁹ For a few advocates of the common kind theory, see fn. 3.

¹⁰ For advocates of metaphysical disjunctivism, see fn. 4.

¹¹ Again, see Martin (2004, pp. 75-76) and (2006, §5). Martin takes inspiration from Hinton (1967). I have departed from Martin's presentation in a few minor ways, however. First, Martin dubs this the "modest view," but I prefer the more informative label given in the text. Second, Martin inquires into the ordinary concept of a *perceptual experience of a street scene*, but for our purposes I find it more helpful to inquire quite generally into the ordinary concept of *perceptual experience*.

¹² See Martin (2004, pp. 74-81) and (2006, pp. 379-96).

infallible at telling when *E* is *absent*. Martin then argues separately that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is also infallible at telling when *E* is *present*. These conclusions, taken together, are supposed to reveal that the positive semantic theorist must attribute extravagant epistemic powers to introspection. Thus Martin thinks that, at least as a default, we should accept the negative semantic view.

As a prelude to developing the positive semantic view, I will spend the next several sections showing that Martin's argument contains at least two serious errors. But because his argument is unusually intricate, I will be using a wide-angle lens for the most part. I will zoom in only as required for our critical discussion.

2. The first part of Martin's argument

The first part of Martin's argument is intended to show that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when *E* is *absent*. Martin begins this part of the argument by making the following supposition, just for the sake of argument:

1. There exists an event *A* that (i) does not have *E* but (ii) is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception of a street scene.¹³

Now, the positive semantic view tells us that the commonsense concept of a perceptual experience of a street scene is simply the concept of an event that has *E*. But 1 tells us that *A* does not have *E*. Thus:

¹³ Martin (2004, p. 49).

2. If the positive semantic view is correct, then commonsense does not classify *A* as a perceptual experience of a street scene.¹⁴

Next, Martin observes that whether or not the *naïve realist* theory of perception is true, it at least best reflects how a veridical experience of a street scene *introspectively seems* to be. That is, it *introspectively seems* that a veridical perception of a street scene is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting certain mind-independent things: say, lampposts, mailboxes, and so on. Hence:

3. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it introspectively seems that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc.¹⁵

Now, consider the contrasting claim that it introspectively seems that a veridical perception of a street scene is the kind of experience that it is *in virtue of having E*. Martin suggests that this claim would contradict 3, since it will no longer introspectively seem that the event is a veridical perception of a street scene in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc. So:

4. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it does not introspectively seem that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of having *E*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 49.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In addition, a hallucination of a street scene will introspectively seem to be just like a perception of a street scene. So, given 3:

5. If an event is a hallucination of a street scene, then it introspectively seems that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc.¹⁷

In light of 3, 4, and 5, Martin finds it plausible that:

6. If it introspectively seems that an event presents lampposts, mailboxes, etc., then commonsense classifies this event as a perceptual experience of a street scene.¹⁸

But 1 tells us that event *A* is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception of a street scene. So, presumably, it introspectively seems that *A* presents lampposts, mailboxes, etc. Putting this together with 6, we get:

7. Commonsense classifies *A* as a perceptual experience of a street scene.¹⁹

But given 2, this entails that the positive semantic view is incorrect. So the positive semantic theorist must reject our starting assumption, 1: she must say that an event like *A* cannot exist. In other words, she must say that if an event does not have *E*, then it *can* be told apart, by

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 49-50.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 50.

introspection alone, from a veridical perception of a street scene. But if you can know that, then surely you can know that this event is not a perceptual experience of a street scene! So:

8. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event does not have *E*, then it can be known by introspection alone that this event does not have *E*.²⁰

And this is the conclusion of the first part of Martin's argument: if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when *E* is absent.

However, I believe that this argument goes wrong at an early stage.

3. An objection

Return to Martin's inference from 3 to 4:

3. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it introspectively seems that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc.
4. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it does not introspectively seem that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of having *E*.

Recall Martin's justification: it would contradict 3 to say that it introspectively seems that an event is a veridical perception of a street scene *in virtue of having E*.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 51.

I submit that this reasoning is mistaken. My concern is that there can be *contradictory seemings*: it can simultaneously seem to be the case that p and that *not- p* . This can happen in all sorts of domains, and for all sorts of reasons.

For example, there is the waterfall illusion, in which it simultaneously seems that a body of water is moving and is still; or, for a quite different example, there have been times when it has simultaneously seemed to me that my conscious experiences *must* be physical and that they *could not possibly* be physical. Most saliently for our purposes, there can be contradictory seemings about what makes something the kind of thing that it is: for instance, it has simultaneously seemed true to some philosophers that I am the person that I am purely in virtue of having a particular body and, incompatibly, purely in virtue of having a particular brain.²¹

Thus, there is no obstacle, in principle, to its seeming to be the case that an event is a veridical perception of a street scene *both* in virtue of having E *and, incompatibly*, in virtue presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc. This would just be a case of contradictory seemings.

Indeed, it is not hard to see how such seemings might arise here. For suppose that you think that your veridical perception of a street scene is the kind of event that it is in virtue of having a certain introspectible property F . Now, it might happen when you introspect on this veridical perception, it seems to you that anything with F must *really* present lampposts, mailboxes, etc. But at the same time, it might happen that when you reflect on the possibility of hallucinations, it seems to you, incompatibly with the previous seeming, that these experiences – which do not *really* present lampposts or mailboxes, but merely *seem* to do so – can have F as well.

In any case, this is just one suggestion about how we might end up with contradictory seemings regarding our perceptual experiences. I am sure that you can think of others.

²¹ [Acknowledgment removed.]

From this, I conclude that 3 does not support 4. However, for the sake of philosophical investigation, I will bracket this problem and consider the remainder of Martin's argument.

4. The second part of Martin's argument

Martin continues his argument with the following claim:

9. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event has *E*, then it can be known by introspection alone that this event has *E*.²²

The idea is that it is just built into the positive semantic view that *E* is introspectible. Martin takes 9 to be a straightforward consequence of this fact.

Now, the first part of Martin's argument concluded that the positive semantic view must treat introspection as infallible at detecting the *absence* of *E*, and 9 tells us that the positive semantic view must likewise treat introspection as infallible at detecting the *presence* of *E*. Putting this together, we get:

10. If the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at detecting both the presence and the absence of *E*.²³

²² Martin (2004, pp. 50-51).

²³ Ibid, pp. 50-51.

On the basis of 10, Martin thinks that the positive semantic view must attribute extravagant epistemic powers to introspection.²⁴ Of course, this would be a significant theoretical cost. But there is no need to pay this cost if we accept the negative semantic view. Thus, Martin arrives at:

11. If 10 is true, then the negative semantic view should be our default view.²⁵

And, obviously, 10 and 11 entail:

12. The negative semantic view should be our default view.

And this, at last, is the conclusion of Martin's entire argument.

But I believe that this second part of Martin's argument contains another serious error.

5. Another objection

Return to:

9. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event has *E*, then it can be known by introspection alone that this event has *E*.

²⁴ At least, assuming that there are any perceptual experiences at all. (If not, then there are no events that instantiate *E*, so telling whether or not an event instantiates these properties might turn out to be very easy.)

²⁵ Martin (2004, pp. 51-52).

The underlined phrase is crucial, for I see two relevant readings of it. I will argue that on the first reading, Martin's argument for 9 is fallacious, while on the second reading, it is instead Martin's argument for 11 that is fallacious.

To begin with, suppose that we take the phrase "can be known by introspection alone" to have its ordinary meaning. Then Martin's argument for 9 is no good. For the positive semantic view just says that *E* is *introspectible*. From this, Martin arrives at 9, which effectively says that it can *always* be known by introspection alone that an event has *E* – but this is a much stronger claim!

By analogy, observe that I might truly say that the color red is visible (by contrast with, say, the invisible colors in the infrared and ultraviolet parts of the spectrum). This does not commit me to the claim that if an object is red, then it can *always* be known by sight alone that it is red. After all, the object might be in the dark, or covered with cloth, or illuminated by trick lighting. Similarly, all that the positive semantic theorist has to say is that, in *typical, normal, or good* conditions, it can be known by introspection alone that an event has *E*. The positive semantic theorist does not have to say that in *all* conditions, it can be known by introspection alone that an event has *E*.²⁶

But perhaps Martin will reply that if an object is red, then *in a certain impersonal sense*, it really can *always* be known by sight alone that it is red – even if the object is in the dark or covered with cloth. After all, you can put the object in the light or remove the cloth, and then you can see that it is red. So if we use a similarly impersonal reading of the phrase "can be known by introspection alone," then Martin might insist that 9 is in good shape after all.

²⁶ On this point, see Byrne and Logue (2008, p. 78) – but, as you will see, I think more needs to be said to press this objection home.

Fair enough! But notice that this maneuver would leave Martin with a *very* attenuated understanding of what it is to be able to know that something is red by sight alone. Indeed, *if this is how we are speaking*, then it is even plausible to say that vision is *infallible* at detecting the presence or absence of redness. For, again, Martin is now counting a red object in the dark or covered by cloth as something that can be known to be red by sight alone, even though a perfectly rational, attentive, and keen-eyed subject might be looking directly at such an object without having the slightest clue that it is red.

Thus, on this approach, Martin's claims are defensible only if he has in mind a similarly attenuated sense of what it is to be able to know by introspection alone that an event has *E*. Bearing that in mind, return to these claims:

10. If the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at detecting both the presence and the absence of *E*.
11. If 10 is true, then the negative semantic view should be our default view.

I have no objection to 10, but focus for a moment on its consequent – the claim that introspection is infallible at detecting the presence or absence of *E*. *Given how we are currently speaking*, this claim is not particularly bold. After all, it allows that a perfectly rational and attentive subject might carefully introspect a mental event without having the slightest clue whether or not it has *E*.

Once we understand this, we can appreciate that 11 is no longer supported. For Martin arrives at 11 by claiming that given 10, the positive semantic theorist must attribute extravagant epistemic powers to introspection. But, on the current reading of the argument, this is not the case! The epistemic power to detect *E* that the positive semantic theorist attributes to

introspection is no more extravagant than the epistemic power to detect redness that we ordinarily attribute to vision.

Thus, no matter how we interpret the crucial phrase “can be known by introspection alone,” Martin’s argument does not go through.

6. Taking stock

That concludes my assessment of Martin’s argument for the negative semantic view. This argument, I have claimed, has at least two serious errors. First, Martin argues that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when *E* is *absent*. But this part of the argument relies on the false assumption that there cannot be contradictory seemings. Second, Martin argues that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is also infallible at telling when *E* is *present*. But on one reading, this part of the argument misunderstands what the positive semantic theorist means when she says that *E* is introspectible. And on another reading, the claim that introspection is infallible with respect to *E* turns out to be perfectly benign.

Suppose that this is right. Why is this significant?

One reason is that Martin goes on to argue that if the negative semantic view is true, then metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view; the burden of proof would be on the common kind theorist to dislodge us from this default position. His reasoning is that if the negative semantic view is true, then when you say that you have a perceptual experience of a street scene, you are committed to nothing more than a disjunctive claim: the claim that *either* you are having a veridical perception of a street scene, *or* you are in a mental situation that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from such a perception, even though it is not in fact such a perception. It would be an act of metaphysical boldness, requiring substantial further

justification, to say that there must be a single fundamental kind of mental situation across both of these cases.²⁷

By showing that the negative semantic view is currently unsupported, I have also removed the support for Martin's further argument that metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view.

To be clear, though, all that I have done so far is undermine the central argument *for* the negative semantic view. I have not argued, and indeed will not argue, that the negative semantic view is *false*. But I will observe that others have raised direct objections to the negative semantic view that strike me as powerful.

In particular, it has been argued: first, that the negative semantic view is incompatible with the existence of perceptual experiences of the impossible, such as Escher staircases or supersaturated red;²⁸ second, that if this view were true, then a hallucination could not ground *positive* knowledge about one's experience;²⁹ third, that the view falsely predicts that a zombie could hallucinate;³⁰ and fourth, that the very notion of impersonal introspective indiscriminability is problematic.³¹

Thus, once Martin's argument for the negative semantic view has been washed away, I myself think that the prospects for the view are poor. And even if you do not agree, it is surely worth understanding what alternatives there might be before you settle on your final view. In the remainder of this paper, I develop one such alternative.

²⁷ See Martin (2004, pp. 37-38).

²⁸ See Siegel (2004, p. 94). For a response, see Martin (2004, pp. 80-81). For what it is worth, I believe that Martin's response does not handle all of the problematic cases.

²⁹ See Siegel (2008, pp. 218-223). For responses, see Nudds (2009, pp. 342-343); Soteriou (2016, ch. 6).

³⁰ See Sturgeon (2008, p. 134). For a response, see Nudds (2009, p. 342).

³¹ See Siegel (2008, pp. 211-214). For a response, see Nudds (2009, pp. 342-343). For the record, I believe that Siegel's objection is correct.

7. The presentational semantic view introduced

It is high time to try to fill out the positive semantic view. This view posits a property, *E*, that has several key features. First, *E* is introspectible in much the same sense that redness is visible: *in good cases*, we are capable of introspectively detecting the presence or absence of *E*. In addition, *E* is experience-grounding: if something has *E*, then purely in virtue of that it is a perceptual experience. Finally, *E* is not perception-dependent: the essence of *E* is not characterized in terms of perception. What property might fit this bill?

Here is an idea. Suppose that you see a mango in front of you. But then you close your eyes. Now, although you no longer see the mango, you still *believe* that the mango is in front of you, and perhaps you also *visually remember* what the mango looks like. You might even *visually imagine*, in great detail, just what the mango would look like from different perspectives. But there is an obvious difference between your visual experience, on the one hand, and your belief, visual memory, and visual imagining, on the other hand. In a certain obvious sense, the mango seems to be *really there* for you, or *just given* to you, when you have the visual experience, but not when you have the belief, the visual memory, or the visual imagining. While it is hard to say precisely what this difference amounts to, it is perfectly evident that there is such a difference. I will refer to this by saying that only your visual experience *seems to present* the mango.³²

What is important is that this phenomenon is found not only in ordinary perceptions, but also in ordinary hallucinations. There is the same important and obvious difference between

³² This phenomenon is well-known, though it has been called many different things – Millar (2014, p. 240) gives an especially perspicuous description of it under the heading of *object-immediacy*. For other influential descriptions of this phenomenon, see Broad (1952, p. 6); Alston (1999, p. 182); Sturgeon (2000, p. 9); Martin (2002, p. 413); Levine (2006, p. 179); and Brewer (2011, p. 2).

merely hallucinating a mango, on the one hand, and abstractly believing, sensorily remembering, or sensorily imagining that there is a mango, on the other hand: all of these states or events have something to do with a mango, but only the hallucination *seems to present* a mango.

Now, it is not only perceptual experiences that seem to present objects. Mere sensations also seem to present objects, e.g., phosphenes and afterimages. Still, there is an obvious further difference between sensations and perceptual experiences: when you experience a phosphene or an afterimage, the phosphene or afterimage seems to depend on your mind, but when you see or even just hallucinate a mango, the mango does not seem to depend on your mind.

Thus, it is natural to fill out the positive semantic view by saying that *E* is simply the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects. That gives us:

The *presentational semantic view*: It is a conceptual truth that what it is to be a perceptual experience is to seem to present mind-independent objects. (The property of seeming to present mind-independent objects is thus experience-grounding.) In addition, this property is introspectible, and it is not perception-dependent.³³

There is, I think, something deeply appealing about this view. For I find it deeply plausible that what unites perceptions, illusions, and hallucinations is precisely that they *seem* to present mind-independent objects.

Notice that the presentational semantic theory, like the positive semantic theory more broadly, does not entail the common kind theory. Take a particular veridical perception, *V*, of an orange mango. Since any perception is a perceptual experience, the presentational semantic theory does entail that what it is *for V to be a perceptual experience* is for it to seem to present mind-

³³ [Acknowledgment removed.]

independent objects. However, to arrive at the common kind theory, we would need the further assumption that the most fundamental kind to which V belongs is the kind *perceptual experience*. It is open to the metaphysical disjunctivist to accept the presentational semantic theory while denying this assumption. Still, for reasons that I will explain later, the presentational semantic theory rules out one important version of metaphysical disjunctivism, and it also coheres especially well with the common kind theory.

Before we get to that, though, I anticipate some objections to the presentational semantic view.

8. Objections and replies

First objection. You might worry that the presentational semantic view is not really a version of the positive semantic view; you might think that it is just Martin's own view, clothed in different language. Martin's view, recall, is this:

The *negative semantic view*: The concept of a perceptual experience is just the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception.

And you might think that something is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception just in case it seems to present mind-independent objects.

However, even if this last claim is correct, the proper conclusion would only be that the negative semantic view and the presentational semantic view are *extensionally* identical. These two views are certainly not identical *simpliciter*, for there are at least two crucial *intensional* differences between them. First, Martin's negative semantic view relies on a notion of impersonal

introspective indiscriminability. The presentational semantic view does not. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, the presentational semantic view entails that if perceptual experiences exist, then they all share a property – the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects – whose essence is not to be characterized in terms of perception. By contrast, Martin’s view, as he rightly emphasizes, does not entail that there is any such property.

I will observe in passing that I think that both of these differences count in favor of the presentational semantic view. For one bundle of familiar objections to the negative semantic view turns on the fact that it relies on an impersonal notion of introspection; by not using any such notion, the presentational semantic view clearly escapes these objections.³⁴ And another bundle of familiar objections to the negative semantic view turns on the fact that it does not require there to be any positive property common to veridical perceptions and hallucinations.³⁵ The presentational semantic theorist can reasonably escape these objections by claiming that the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects is just such a positive property. However, I repeat that I do not have space here to assess the well-known objections to the negative semantic view; I offer this aside as an invitation for further reflection, not as a firm conclusion.

What I do firmly conclude is that, contra the first objection, the presentational semantic view is very different from Martin’s negative semantic view.

Second objection. The presentational semantic view appeals to the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects, and it says that this property is not perception-dependent; that is, its essence is not to be characterized in terms of perception. But you might think that this

³⁴ See the first and fourth objections mentioned in §6.

³⁵ See the second and third objections mentioned in §6.

is obviously wrong: surely what it is to seem to present mind-independent objects is just to seem to be a *perception*!³⁶

I reply that this is much too fast. Yes, I grant the biconditional claim that something seems to present mind-independent objects *just in case* it seems to be a perception.³⁷ And, yes, *one* way to explain the truth of this biconditional is to say that *what it is* to seem to present mind-independent objects is just to seem to be a perception. But it is also possible to do things the other way around: to explain the truth of the biconditional by characterizing the essence of perception in terms of seeming presentation.

For instance, we might say that what it is to be a perception is to *correctly* seem to present mind-independent objects. This fits nicely with a commitment of the presentational semantic view: that what it is to be a perceptual experience is to seem to present mind-independent objects. And, indeed, we might color in the picture further by saying that what it is to be a sensation is to seem to present mind-dependent objects. Finally, if we wish, we may go on to characterize the essence of seeming presentation in terms of some further property, such as a representational property.

To press the current objection home, my opponent must rule out this alternative explanatory strategy. I leave an open invitation for her to do so.

9. Significance

Our framing question has been: what is the concept of perceptual experience?

³⁶ This is not quite right, since it is possible to hallucinate an impossible object such as an Escher staircase. But, borrowing an idea from Martin (2004, pp. 80-81), the objection could be reformulated into something like this: surely what it is to seem to present mind-independent objects is just to be *exhaustively decomposable into parts* that each seem to be perceptions. I will ignore this nuance in what follows.

³⁷ Well, almost – see the previous footnote.

We started our investigations by considering Michael Martin's complex argument that the negative semantic view should be our default view – but we saw that this argument contains at least two serious flaws. This leaves the negative semantic view unsupported.

This conclusion is already a significant one, for several reasons. For Martin has gone on to argue that if the negative semantic view is true, then metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view; the burden of proof would be on the common kind theorist to dislodge us from this default position. By blocking the argument for the negative semantic view, I have also blocked this particular argument that metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view.

To say that the negative semantic view is as currently unsupported is not to say that it is false. But, since I myself am impressed by the objections that have independently been raised against the negative semantic view, I proposed that we look for an alternative. An especially promising alternative, I suggested, is the presentational semantic view.

But the presentational semantic view is just a view about the *concept* of perceptual experience. Why does this view matter, if it is the *metaphysics* of perceptual experience that we are really interested in? I answer that the presentational semantic view would support two important metaphysical conclusions.

To see what the first important metaphysical conclusion is, remember that either a veridical perception or a matching hallucination will tend to cause similar actions and beliefs. Why so? Many metaphysical disjunctivists want to give a two-part answer. First, they want to explain why veridical perceptions tend to cause certain actions and beliefs. Second, they want to say that what it is to be a matching hallucination is just to be impersonally introspectively

indiscriminable from a veridical perception;³⁸ thus, matching hallucinations tend to result in similar effects.³⁹

However, this view requires matching hallucinations to be perception-dependent. But the presentational semantic view entails that matching hallucinations are not perception-dependent. Thus, the presentational semantic view rules out a commitment held by many metaphysical disjunctivists. That is not to say that the presentational semantic view rules out metaphysical disjunctivism itself. But there is an explanatory lacuna here, at least for those metaphysical disjunctivists who think that matching hallucinations are perception-dependent: it remains to be explained why either a veridical perception or a matching hallucination will tend to cause similar actions and beliefs.⁴⁰

And there is a second metaphysical conclusion that the presentational semantic view would support. For, given that perceptual experiences exist, this view entails that there is a property *E* that is experience-grounding *and that is not perception-dependent*. Especially given the italicized phrase – given that the essence of *E* is not to be characterized in terms of perception – it is plausible that property *E* is a property that carves nature at its joints, so to speak. The idea is that *E* is not like, say, the arbitrary property of being grue. Instead, *E* is a *reasonably natural property*; equivalently, that there is a single *natural kind*, characterized by *E*, that includes all and only perceptual experiences.⁴¹ This metaphysical conclusion would be interesting in its own right.

That said, I want to emphasize that even this second metaphysical conclusion does not entail the common kind theory. After all, even if there is a single natural kind that includes all

³⁸ See Martin (2004, p. 71).

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 68-70.

⁴⁰ For other metaphysical disjunctivist attempts to fill this lacuna, see Alston (1999, p. 191); Fish (2009, p. 94); Allen (2015).

⁴¹ I use the terms *reasonably natural property* and *natural kind* in the sense of Lewis (1983).

and only perceptual experiences, that natural kind does not have to be the *fundamental* kind of every perceptual experience.⁴² However, although the second metaphysical conclusion does not entail the common kind theory, it should at least encourage us to investigate a particular version of the common kind theory: the theory that the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects – or some other common property that grounds it, such as a representational property – determines the fundamental kind of any perceptual experience.

And these results are enough, I say! We should not expect an investigation into a concept, by itself, to answer all of our metaphysical questions about the referent of that concept. I am satisfied if we have a much clearer sense of what we are looking for, and some solid clues for where to start our search.

⁴² [Brief identifying remark removed.]

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