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EXPERIENCE, PHENOMENAL CHARACTER AND EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

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The Question

Suppose that, while looking at a red strawberry under normal conditions, I form the judgment that there is something red in front of me. We may stipulate that my judgment is based on my experience of the red strawberry. As a result, my judgment is justified by my experience. In virtue of what aspects of my experience is my judgment justified? In particular:

> (The Question) Does the *phenomenal character* of my experience of something red play an important role in the justification of my judgment?

I want to examine this question by looking at an interesting and provocative attempt by David Sosa (2015) to answer it in the negative. I will argue that the failure of Sosa's attempt to defend a negative answer to the Question stands to teach us important lessons about the relation between experience and epistemic justification.

Sosa's Account of Experiential Justification

An influential conception of experience has it that experiences have not only phenomenal properties but representational properties as well. An experience has both representational and phenomenal properties: my experience of the red strawberry has both the phenomenal property that is characteristic of looking at something red and strawberry-shaped under adequate lighting conditions as well as the representational content that there is a red strawberry before me. In addition, some of these phenomenal properties are the

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means by which the experience has some of its representational properties. I will call this the Standard View of experience (SV).

On the SV, the answer to our Question has be to 'yes.' Since the representational properties of experience are clearly relevant to the justification of judgment, and since some of those representational properties depend on the experience's phenomenal properties, there is no avoiding a positive answer.

Sosa doesn't see things this way because he rejects the SV and favors instead a view he labels SAJ, which stands for Sensation, Apprehension Judgment. And it does follow from SAJ that the answer to our Question is 'no.' So, in this particular debate, what matters is whether we should prefer SAJ to the SV. I shall argue that we shouldn't.

According to SAJ, there are *three* types of mental state involved in the justification of judgment by experience, rather than the two postulated by the SV. The first layer is occupied by *sensation*; the second by an *apprehension* or *seeming*; and the final layer by the *judgment* whose justification is to be explained.

According to SAJ, sensations are individuated solely by their phenomenal characters. In addition, they do not involve the deployment of concepts: creatures incapable of thought can enjoy sensations. Finally, they are passively received.

As a result of these facts, sensations are thoroughly *non-epistemic* in nature. They cannot be assessed for rationality. And, more importantly, they are not capable of justifying judgment. They are incapable of making normative demands or issuing normative permissions.

What sensations can do is *cause* apprehensions or seemings (I shall use these terms interchangeably). My visual sensation of a red strawberry causes its seeming to me that there is something red in front of me.

Apprehensions, then, are like sensations in being experiential and predoxastic. Unlike sensations, however, they do have conceptual contents. They are what justify judgments (in conjunction with the rest of the subject's belief system). But they have no intrinsic sensory phenomenology. (The question whether they have some other sort of phenomenal character is set aside.)

In contrast with sensations, Sosa says, apprehensions *are* subject to rational assessment. What determines their rationality is not their relations to the sensations that cause them: as we have already noted, sensations don't demand or permit any particular apprehension, they merely cause them. However, apprehensions can be irrational if they don't cohere appropriately with the rest of the subject's cognitive states. Since the rational evaluability of a state requires that we have some sort of control over that state, apprehensions are not merely passively received; they are said by Sosa to be subject to some sort of rational control.

Since, on this picture, apprehensions are the only things that matter to the justification of judgments, and since those apprehensions have no proprietary sensory phenomenology whatever, SAJ returns a negative answer

to our Question: the sensory phenomenology of visual experiences cannot matter to the justification of judgment.

That's the essence of Sosa's argument.

Critical Discussion of the Argument for SAJ

There are two key claims in this argument for the irrelevance of the phenomenal character of an experience for the purposes of epistemic justification.

(1) That the apprehension of a red strawberry is a distinct type of mental state from the sensation of a red strawberry, and that there is, at most, a causal relation between them.

This contrasts with the SV. On the latter, it is partly *in virtue of* an experience's having certain sensational (or phenomenal) properties that it has the representational properties that it has. The second claim is:

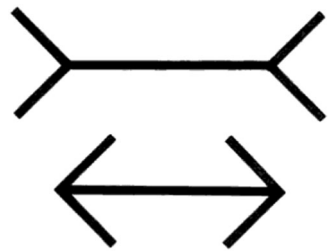
(2) That it is the apprehensions that do the heavy lifting when it comes to the justification of judgment, and not sensations.

For (1) to be plausible, we need to be able to show

(3) That it is possible to have the phenomenology of experiencing a red strawberry even as one doesn't have the associated apprehension.
(4) That it is possible to have an apprehension of a red strawberry even as one doesn't experience any associated phenomenology.

Sosa offers the case of the Müller-Lyer Illusion in support of (3), and the case of the superblindsighter for (4). About the first, he says:

> Consider the Müller-Lyer illusion. When we first confront the illusion, the lines seem to be different lengths. There's a sensory presentation and that sensation leads to a perceptual state "according to which" the line with the arrows pointing in looks longer—an apprehension that conceives the lines as of different lengths.



> With the right sort of further experience (testimony, *etc*.), eventually, that same sensory state does not lead to that apprehension—we no longer see the lines as of different lengths.

Sosa's idea is that this case illustrates that a visual sensation can remain the same even while the associated seeming or apprehension changes. I find this argument problematic.

First, it seems to me wrong, as a matter of phenomenological fact, to claim that after we learn that the lines are of (approximately) equal length, they come *to seem to be* of (approximately) equal length. I was surprised to find Sosa making this claim because, in my philosophical upbringing, the Müller-Lyer illusion was always cited as proof that the visual system is, at least in certain respects, modular, and not subject to cognitive penetration. It was supposed to be obvious that the seeming stayed the same even as one discovered that it was misleading (see Fodor (1983) on modularity of mind). Could Sosa's experience really be different from everyone else's?[1]

In defense of (4), Sosa invokes Block (1995)'s super-blindsighter. Real blindsight patients can guess accurately only when given a choice between a binary set of alternatives. The super-blindsighter is able to prompt himself at will to guess what is in the blind field without being told to guess. He says spontaneously "Now I see that there is a horizontal line in my blind field even though I can't actually see it." Sosa says:

> The view on offer here would describe super blindsight subjects as undergoing perceptual states, apprehensions, but no sensory states (of the visual sort, at least). In their case, unlike with most people, the apprehension of an object as red proceeds not from their so sensing it. The causal process involved is different; but it results in the same apprehension.

The ordinary blindsighter *guesses* about what is in his blind field. And it turns out his guesses are better than chance. The super-blindsighter also guesses, but he doesn't need to be prompted. Does the possibility of a super-blindsighter show what Sosa takes it to show, namely that we can have apprehensions of facts in our environment without sensory experiences of those facts?

Of course, a blindsighter of either the ordinary or the super kind doesn't have anything like a phenomenal visual take on what is in his blind field: that is constitutive of what it is to be a blindsighter. But does it make sense to describe him as having nonsensory *apprehensions* of the contents of his blind field?

Clearly, the blindsighter must have some representation at the sub-personal level that is keeping track of the objects in his environment and which is enabling his guesses to be better than chance. But one shouldn't

conflate these subpersonal representations with person-level conscious apprehensions. If the blindsighter had such apprehensions, his 'guesses' wouldn't be guesses: a guess, I take it, is precisely a stab at a judgment that isn't based on that judgment's seeming true.

In further support of his picture, Sosa invokes the case of a field sobriety test performed with eyes closed:

> Move the tip of your index finger in the direction of the tip of your nose. You can see your finger moving. And you naturally apprehend the approach of your fingertip to your nose. Now try it again with your eyes closed. There too, you will apprehend that your finger is getting closer. But little sensory phenomenology is involved in the purely proprioceptive case. The apprehension of the increasing proximity is almost *magical*. Still, we are not inclined to deny that this awareness is apt to justify a belief about the circumstances.

This experiment is supposed to show that the proprioceptive information we get when our eyes are closed is too little to explain how we could have the sorts of accurate apprehensions that we have of the increasing proximity of the finger to our nose. Hence, once more, apprehensions are not determined by phenomenal information.

I don't get the same results that Sosa gets. When I conduct this experiment, I am struck by how *inaccurate* our apprehensions are of the distance between the finger and the nose. When the finger eventually hits the nose, there is an element of surprise precisely because we did not apprehend that it was already that close.

Let me turn to Sosa's argument in support of (2), the claim that it is the non-sensory apprehension that is relevant to epistemic justification and not at all any phenomenal aspect of the experience. His argument here is that, unless we distinguish between the sensation and the apprehension in the way that SAJ does but the SV doesn't, we will be unable to do justice to the intuition that there is a sense in which perception is rationally evaluable.

> Put very roughly, cases of cognitive penetration would be cases in which you perceive as you do because of what you believe. The bigot perceives the thief as Hispanic; and a person's facial expression might look different to someone who believes the person is angry with them than to someone who does not believe that. And that difference in belief appears to explain how the facial expression looks to them. At the same time, the phenomenon seems to go (broadly) against the priority and modularity of perception with respect to judgment and cognition.
>
> The account provided here locates the phenomenon comfortably. Cognitive penetration is just the predicted effect, on a rational subject's apprehensions, of their overall belief state. Such penetration is effectively demanded by the coherence among the conceptual states over which the subject has any control (even

> should that control not be immediate or volitional). But the apparent modularity and inflexibility of sensory experience is also validated: sensation is never rationally required to change, not relative to any change in belief state, and it normally does not. With respect to the intrinsic nature of sensory states, we are entirely passive. We *suffer* sensory experience. But an apprehension is not something of which we are merely in patient receipt. We deploy one concept rather than other in response to sensory presentations. Although the sensory presentation does not itself demand any particular apprehension, the subject's overall cognitive state might.

The idea here is that we do want to be able to assess *something* in perception as rational or irrational, whilst also recognizing that people can't be held responsible for the phenomenal states that they passively enjoy.

The SAJ picture seems to give us just the right sort of flexibility. The sensations can't be assessed. But the apprehensions can, if they conflict with the subjects' overall cognitive state.

Sosa is aware that many will consider this to be inadequate. If the bigot's overall cognitive state were in reflective equilibrium, both diachronically and synchronically, this picture wouldn't give us the resources to criticize him.

My worry, though, is of a more fundamental nature, and concerns the extent to which the SAJ picture can make sense of the rational evaluability of an apprehension to begin with. Sosa says:

> If one continues to see the Müller-Lyer lines as of different lengths, no matter how much collateral and inferential information supports the judgment that they are of the same length, there is something rationally amiss.

It seems to me, though, that whatever seemings are operative in perception, they are just as passive and so just as much out of our rational control as the sensations. Since I think a certain degree of freedom, or 'rational control,' is required for rational evaluability, I don't see how seemings or apprehensions could be rationally evaluable.

Sosa sometimes suggests that because apprehensions, but not sensations, involve concepts, that makes them subject to rational assessment.

> We *suffer* sensory experience. But an apprehension is not something of which we are merely in patient receipt. We deploy one concept rather than other in response to sensory presentations. Although the sensory presentation does not itself demand any particular apprehension, the subject's overall cognitive state might.

But do we have rational control over what concepts get deployed in perceptual experience? I don't see that we do.

SAJ vs. the SV

So far I have been questioning whether we have been given adequate justification for SAJ.

Let me now raise a couple of outright objections to it. The first concerns the first-person epistemology of apprehensions, and the second their modal profiles.

To begin with the first, a rational subject, it seems to me, (a) cannot be confused as to whether a seeming state of his is perceptual as opposed to *intellectual;* and (b) given that it is perceptual, cannot be confused about whether it is a visual state as opposed to an olfactory state or an auditory state.

A subject's rationality will depend on his being able to keep these matters straight. If intellectual seemings—intuitions—can justify at all, (and I'll assume for present purposes that they can), they can only justify beliefs with certain subject matters: they are not appropriate for justifying beliefs about whether there is now a red strawberry in front of me, but only for beliefs with abstract subject matter.

Furthermore, we also need to be able to tell purely introspectively whether we are enjoying a *visual* presentation of things being thus and so, or an *auditory* presentation of things being thus and so.

This can matter to rationality because we don't treat all the senses equally at all times. Depending on the subject matter we may privilege one or the other of the sensory modalities, if they come into conflict.

And, anyhow, quite apart from these considerations about rationality, it seems strongly intuitive that we cannot be confused about whether we are being presented to visually or auditorily.

Can the SAJ picture make sense of these observations?

On the SAJ view, the differences among these different kinds of seeming can show up only as a difference in the *etiology of the seemings,* not in any aspect of their phenomenal characters. The seemings themselves have no phenomenal characters. You can't just read off the state itself whether it's a visual state or an auditory state. You have to know something about its causal history.

But this implies that I can be genuinely uncertain about whether I am enjoying a non-sensory intellectual apprehension as opposed to a visual apprehension; and that I can be genuinely uncertain about whether I am enjoying a visual apprehension as opposed to an auditory one.

But it is weird to think that I can be in genuine doubt about whether on a given occasion I am enjoying a visual presentation, an intuition or an auditory impression.[2]

Let me turn to the modal problem.

On the SAJ view, you have to think that it is at best a *contingent* fact that we only see things as red and never hear them as being red.

For remember, seeing something as red, on this view, is just an non-sensory impression of something's being red that happens to be caused by a reddish visual sensation. The content of the non-sensory impression is precisely the same sense-abstracted content—*This is red*—that a judgment could have.

It could be a nomologically deep fact about our cognitive systems that, in creatures like us, only visual sensations give rise to red impressions. But the SAJ picture allows that there are possible creatures that can *hear things as red*, for that would simply mean that in those creatures auditory sensations can give rise to its seeming non-sensorily to them that something is red. And I can see no reason why, on the SAJ picture, there could not be possible creatures who are wired up like that.

But this looks hard to comprehend. The overwhelmingly plausible view is that *red* is an *essentially* visual concept, that you can only acquire by seeing, and that only vision can present.

This doesn't contradict the existence of synesthetes. Synesthetes cannot hear something as red. They are people in whom auditory stimuli cause visual states of seeing color. They see colors when prompted by certain sounds. That's not the same as hearing a sound as red.

On both of these important scores, the SV gets right what the SAJ picture seems to get wrong.

Conclusion

The idea, embodied in SAJ, that we should split up perceptual experiences into sensation states, on the one hand, and apprehensions, on the other, with there being nothing but causal relations between them, is a very interesting proposal. We learn a lot by thinking about the difficulties that it runs into.

I have argued, however, that it is not to be preferred to the Standard View of experiences, according to which experiences have both phenomenal and representational properties, with the phenomenal properties helping to determine some of the representational properties, thereby making both sets of properties relevant to the justification of judgment.[3]

Notes

1. There is, of course, an operation that you can perform on the images (mentally drawing lines down from one end of one straight line to the end of the other one immediately below), which would allow you to conclude that, they are equal. But even after I have in this inferential way concluded that they are equal, they continue visually to look unequal; I need the inference to overcome the visual temptation.

2. It does seem possible to doubt whether an image one is experiencing is the result of an act of imagining or a visual perception. But that is a different phenomenon—it involves being in doubt about the *source* of a given experience not about its phenomenology.
3. This paper was delivered at the SOFIA meeting on Normativity held in Huatulco in January 2015. I am grateful to members of that audience and especially to Susanna Siegel and David Sosa for comments. Thanks to Enrique Villanueva for putting on this excellent series of workshops.

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