

Disjunctivism

There is some irony in the observation that the various views which fall under the heading of ‘disjunctivism’ share a common form. A theory is disjunctive insofar as it distinguishes genuine from non-genuine cases of some phenomenon P on the grounds that no salient feature of cases of one type is common to cases of the other type. Genuine and non-genuine cases of P are, in this sense, fundamentally different. In principle then, there is no restriction on the subject matter about which one might develop a disjunctivist theory. But in fact, those who advocate disjunctivist views have (for the most part) been concerned with perception and perceptual knowledge. Some background is in order.

It is a remarkable fact about our mental life – one that has long preoccupied epistemologists and philosophers of mind alike – that cases of perceptual error can be subjectively indiscriminable from veridical perceptions. In other words, a veridical perception (in which experience accurately captures how an actual object of perception really is) may be phenomenologically indistinguishable from either an illusory experience (in which experience somehow mistakes how an actual object of perception really is) or a hallucinatory experience (in which experience seems to be of an actual object, when in fact there is no such object to be perceived).

This fact has led some to adopt a *representationalist theory of perception* (also known as *intentionalism*). According to this view, perceptual experience is a type of mental representation, where the phenomenal character of a given perceptual experience is determined by the content of the representation (rather than the world itself). On this view, whereas a perceptual experience is veridical if it accurately

represents how the world actually is, an experience is illusory or hallucinatory if it misrepresents how the world actually is. But while contemporary representationalists accept that one can perceive the objective world directly (*viz.* in the case of veridical and illusory experiences), they deny that this is a necessary feature of perceptual experience in general, since in the case of hallucinatory experiences one does not perceive anything in the objective world.

The *disjunctivist theory of experience* rejects this model, and in particular its tacit acceptance of what Hinton called “the doctrine of the ‘experience’ as the common element in a given perception” – what Martin has more recently labeled the ‘common kind assumption’. According to this view – originally presented by Hinton (1973) and subsequently developed by Snowdon (1980-1, 1990, 2004) and Martin (2002, 2004) (among others) – we must distinguish sharply between genuine perceptual experiences, on the one hand, and non-perceptual experiences which may be mistaken for genuine perceptions, on the other hand. (Harbingers of this view may be detected in the work of Cook Wilson and Prichard.) These two types of experience are of fundamentally different natures because only the former take as constituents actual, external aspects of a perceiver’s environment. By contrast, hallucinatory experiences, for instance, are non-perceptual in nature precisely because of their failure to do so. Accordingly, one’s report of a visual experience of some actual object, *o*, is best understood as irreducibly equivalent to a disjunctive statement of the form, ‘Either I am actually seeing *o*, or I am having the perfect illusion of seeing *o*’ – what Hinton called a ‘perception/illusion disjunction’. By understanding perceptual reports in this way, disjunctivists about experience purport to reconcile the possibility of perceptual error with a commitment to naïve realism about perceptual experience.

Even amongst advocates of this view, there is room for disagreement about whether illusory experiences ought to be classified as genuine perceptions or non-perceptual experiences. According to some disjunctivists, most illusory experiences should be counted as genuine perceptions. For instance, about the standard Müller-Lyer illusion (in which two lines of equal length ‘appear’ to be of unequal lengths), Brewer (2004) and Travis (2004) argue that we veridically perceive the lines’ identity in length. On their view, our error is one of judgement, rather than perception.

While those who advocate the disjunctivist theory of experience tend to reject representationalist theories of perception, an alternative disjunctivist theory – one which emerged more or less simultaneously in the work of McDowell (1982, 1994a, 1994b) – embraces the view that perceptual experience ought to be characterized by its representational content. Nor is that the only difference between these two disjunctivist theories. Whereas the disjunctivist theory of experience is a metaphysical thesis about the fundamental nature of experience, McDowell’s view – which might be called the *disjunctivist theory of appearances* – is an epistemological thesis about the way facts about the world are manifest in appearance. Thus, McDowell’s key claim is that an appearance report of the form ‘It appears to me that such and so is the case’ is to be interpreted as a disjunctive statement of the form, ‘I am in a position to know *either* that such and so is the case *or* that it merely appears to me that such and so is the case’.

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