



# Extending The Realm of Reason: On The Epistemic Profile of Perceptual Experience

Paweł Grad<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Are perceptual experiences epistemically appraisable? In this paper, I argue, *contra* Siegel (*Rationality of perception*, Oxford 2017) that they are not (§§ 2–3). I also show how the problem of hijacked experience can be solved without endorsing the view that perceptual experience is epistemically appraisable (§§ 4–5). A key idea behind my proposal is a disjunctivist view on rationalising and epistemic powers of perceptual experience.

**Keywords** Rationality of perception · Problem of hijacked experience · Phenomenal conservatism · Epistemological disjunctivism

## 1 Introduction

Are perceptual experiences epistemically appraisable? In this paper, I argue that they are not (§§ 2–3). I also show how the problem of hijacked experience can be solved without endorsing the view that perceptual experience is epistemically appraisable (§§ 4–5). A key idea behind my proposal is a disjunctivist view on rationalising and epistemic powers of perceptual experience. Although I frame my argument within the discussion of the problem of hijacked experience formulated by Siegel (2017), I believe that the disjunctivist view that I defend here is of more general interest. Before I start my argument, let me introduce the problem in greater detail.

According to the orthodox empiricist story, perception is epistemically passive: perceptual experiences provide subject with cognitive access to the environment but

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✉ Paweł Grad  
pawelgrad@uw.edu.pl

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

do not represent epistemic achievement for their own.<sup>1</sup> The proper epistemic activity starts at the level of rational elaboration of deliverances of perception by higher, epistemically appraisable doxastic states. Here experiential deliverances enter the realm of reason. The realm of reason is a domain of epistemic activity or—to use the Kantian phrase—‘spontaneity’.

According to this view, perceptual experiences are stopped at the threshold of the house of reason. They contribute to the rational and epistemic standing of the subject by justifying her beliefs and, at the same time, remaining unjustified and non-epistemically appraisable in themselves. The ‘threshold’ metaphor purports to capture the feature of perceptual experience, which is important for all epistemologists dissatisfied by the purely causal account of perceptual contribution to the formation of doxastic states, but who at the same time treat seriously the difference between perception and cognition.<sup>2</sup> They say that perceptual experience has an essential epistemic role in grounding perceptual belief, even if it is not itself an epistemic state. To express this claim in terminology maximally resembling Siegel’s notions: perceptual experiences have epistemic *power* insofar as they can justify epistemic states; however, they are not epistemically appraisable states themselves. Note that having *epistemic force* and being able to play an epistemic role can both be rightly understood as *epistemic* properties. Therefore, epistemic properties are not attributable only to the epistemically appraisable mental states.<sup>3</sup>

Siegel shares Wilfrid Sellars’ (1956), John McDowell’s (1994), and Anil Gupta’s (2019) motivations to shorten the distance between perceptual experience and rational capacities. She tries to extend the house of reason in such a way as to embrace perception. Her thesis is:

*The rationality of perception:* Both perceptual experiences and the processes by which they arise can be rational or irrational (Siegel, 2017, p. 15).

This thesis is, according to Siegel, indispensable to providing a correct answer to the problem of hijacked experience. But what is the hijacked experience?

*Hijacked experience:* perceptual experience is hijacked when its content is modified by processes (e.g., inference) that modulate perceptual input in the

<sup>1</sup> This traditional view is still quite attractive as you can see from such different examples as Travis (2013) and Block (2022).

<sup>2</sup> Respecting the difference does not exclude the fact that they interfere, just like in cognitive penetration, which is a phenomenon that motivates Siegel’s investigations (see Siegel, 2017, preface).

<sup>3</sup> Ori Beck (2018) in his discussion of *the rationality of experience* claims that perceptual experiences can be epistemically appraisable, but they cannot redound on the perceiver’s rationality, so they lack the constitutive feature of *rational qua epistemically appraisable* experiences in Siegel’s sense (pp. 175–176). I claim that experiences have epistemic properties (most notably epistemic force to justify beliefs); however, they do not manifest epistemic appraisability characteristic of distinctively *epistemic* states. Beck seems to construe the notion of ‘epistemic appraisability’ in a more relaxed way, as ‘having positive epistemic properties’, such as epistemic charge. The difference between us is rather terminological, yet our terminological decisions in this matter should be guided by a clear distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic states in terms of having different kinds of epistemic properties. I also think that the dialectics of Siegel’s argument require a more restricted understanding of *epistemic appraisability*.

light of other epistemically ill-founded mental state of the perceiver (e.g., irrational belief). (see Siegel, 2017, p. 5)

To give the example extensively used by Siegel: Vivek, a vain performer, has hijacked experience that facial expressions of his auditory indicate that auditory is pleased (where in fact facial expressions are neutral), because his antecedent vanity (i.e., the belief that he is admirable) *hijacks* the content of the experience of the faces.

One may observe that perceptual hijacking appears, at first glance, to be closely related to the concept of cognitive penetration of perception (for an overview of the different interpretations of the latter, see Raftopoulos & Zeimbekis, 2015). This raises the question of whether there are any substantial differences between perceptual hijacking and cognitive penetration. In response, I see two differences. Firstly, the epistemic effects of hijacking are invariably negative, whereas, as Siegel observes, cognitive penetration can sometimes be epistemically beneficial (Siegel, 2017, p. xx). For instance, the perception of RTG images by professional radiologists is significantly enhanced by their medical expertise, ultimately providing cognitive advantages essential for accurate medical diagnosis (see Ivy et al., 2023). Secondly, according to Siegel's view of perceptual experience, perceptual hijacking may occur without narrowly defined cognitive penetration. Cognitive penetration is the top-down influence from cognitive states on perceptual processing. Meanwhile, at least in Siegel's framework, perceptual experience is defined as "the conscious part of perception" to which the subject responds rationally by forming beliefs (Siegel, 2017, p. 4). Siegel suggests that this conscious aspect may be modified without affecting the core perceptual processing (Siegel, 2012, 2017, p. 9). That said, paradigmatic cases of hijacked experience can be viewed as instances where other mental states of the subject penetrate the conscious character of perception. I remain officially neutral on whether perceptual hijacking can be reduced to cognitive penetration. However, to keep my discussion of Siegel's epistemological claims clear, I adhere to her terminology.

Now, the question is this:

*The Problem of Hijacked Experience:* is it *rational* for the perceiver to have a perceptual belief with content C based on the hijacked experience with content C?

The problem of hijacked experience has the form of a dilemma. There are two opposing intuitions guiding the answer to the question. On the one hand, there is a pressure to answer 'yes', if we accept the intuition that it is always rational to 'believe our eyes' when no defeaters are known to the perceiver. Vivek is not self-conscious about his vanity. We cannot blame the perceiver for not being aware of the aetiology of perceptual experiences. This answer is, according to Siegel, motivated by the natural appeal of phenomenal conservatism:

*Phenomenal conservatism*: having an experience with content C suffices, due to the phenomenal character of the experience, to provide *prima facie* justification to believe C.<sup>4</sup>

However, there is also a pressure to say ‘no’ since we have an intuition that there is something epistemically and rationally wrong with believing hijacked experiences, especially when hijacking is a result of adopting suspicious or prejudicial beliefs. The negative answer is Siegel’s answer. Siegel criticises *phenomenal conservatism* for giving a positive answer to *the problem of hijacked experience* and leaving the pressure to the negative answer without a response. Siegel also tries to mitigate the intuition that favours positive answer by arguing for *the rationality of perception*.

Siegel’s argumentative strategy is that *the rationality of perception* is true because at least some perceptual experiences are rational by being epistemically appraisable AKA ‘epistemically charged’, just like beliefs and other epistemic states. They inherit — *via* inference — this property from their psychological precursors, like prior beliefs or desires. They are also able to confer the property to further states like perceptual belief.

*The rationality of perception* is in fact the conjunction of two claims: that perceptual experiences can be rational or irrational *and* that processes by which perceptual experiences arise can be rational or irrational. If we ask primarily about the rationality of perception itself (as the name of the claim suggests), why do the processes by which it arises matter? They matter for Siegel because her argument for the rationality of perceptual experiences is based on the account of processes leading to these experiences. Specifically, she focuses on the inferential route to perceptual experience. Hence, the formulation of *the rationality of perception* implicitly reflects Siegel’s argumentative strategy for this claim. The dual character of *the rationality of perception* results in two levels of Siegel’s epistemological investigations: the level of rationality of perceptual experiences themselves and the level of influence of the aetiology of these experiences on their rationality.

In the next two sections, I argue against *the rationality of perception* on both of these levels. Then I will provide an alternative solution for the problem of hijacked experience.

## 2 Rationality of Perceptual States

Siegel uses at least two different concepts to spell out the claim that perceptual states are rational: she says that perceptual experiences are *epistemically appraisable* and that they have *epistemic charge*.

After pointing to several examples of epistemic norms for doxastic states (she mentions belief, disbelief, judgement, and credal states), Siegel claims that ‘*The Rationality of Perception* articulates the assumption of appraisability that underlies

<sup>4</sup> This is a combination of characteristics of *phenomenal conservatism* given by Siegel (2017, pp. xv, 45). Following Siegel, I ignore here the question how well *Phenomenal conservatism* captures the position mastered by Huemer (2007).

the specific norms of rationality described above, and applies that assumption to perceptual experiences' (2017, p. 16). The view is that perceptual experiences manifest the same epistemic appraisability, in virtue of which doxastic states are taken to be rational. Typical examples of doxastic states are knowledge, belief, or prediction—this is at least suggested by Siegel's introduction of the notion of epistemic appraisability, which involves generalisation from the epistemic profile of these states. Siegel is explicit about her intention to keep experiences and beliefs apart on the level of metaphysics of mental states; however, she claims that they 'share an epistemic profile' (2017, p. 41).

What is Siegel's argument for the claim that perceptual experiences are like epistemic states? I will approach an answer to this question by analysing the notion of *epistemic charge*.

*Epistemic charge* is a property of experience:

- (i) that can be modulated by psychological precursors of the experience.
- (ii) that can be transmitted to subsequent beliefs.
- (iii) in virtue of which a subject's experience manifests an epistemic status (Siegel, 2017, p. 41).

*Epistemic charge* is a property of perceptual experiences that is an experiential realisation of *epistemic appraisability* realised also by epistemic states like belief or knowledge. However, the problem is that nothing in Siegel's argument for *the rationality of perception* vindicates her claim that *epistemic charge* is a form of epistemic appraisability. The whole theoretical work of *epistemic charge* in Siegel's analysis is done by its justificatory *role* that can be played also by states or factors that are not epistemically appraisable for themselves.

To see this, let us take a closer look at Siegel's analysis of epistemic charge. Features (i) and (ii) correspond to three of four claims of *the epistemic charge analysis* of hijacked experience provided by Siegel:

*Inference*: The perceptual experience with content C results from inference that modulates its epistemic charge.

*Power*: The perceptual experience, in having content C, has less epistemic power to support a belief with content C than it could have if it weren't influenced by the psychological precursor.

*Ill-foundedness*: The subsequent belief in C and strengthening of psychological precursor are ill-founded because experience is negatively charged (Siegel, 2017, pp. 53–54).

*Inference* is not about the epistemic status of perceptual experience, but rather about the work done by other mental factors to yield the perceptual experience and modulate its epistemic charge. *Power* and *ill-foundedness* concern epistemic role played by perceptual experience in justifying other mental states like belief. All these claims say nothing about the epistemic status of perceptual experience itself. Rather, they

answer the question of how this status can be modulated by mental precursors of perceptual experience and how perceptual experiences support other epistemically appraisable epistemic states.

What about the feature (iii)? It concerns *explicitly* the ‘epistemic status’ of perceptual experience manifested in virtue of its epistemic charge. So maybe epistemic charge itself would help to explain how perceptual experience can be epistemically appraisable? The last claim of *the epistemic charge analysis* is:

*Charge:* The perceptual experience, in having content C, is negatively charged (Siegel, 2017, p. 54).

But merely having unspecified representational content C is not enough to be *epistemically appraisable* like beliefs. Epistemic commitments of belief vastly exceed merely having some (presumably propositional) content. Much more is needed for a state to be a properly epistemic one. So what can explain the epistemic appraisability of perceptual experience?

Siegel subscribes to the claim that the epistemic charge of perceptual experience is grounded in the ‘presentational phenomenal character’, in virtue of which experiences belong to one’s outlook on the world.<sup>5</sup> She calls this claim *phenomenal ground* and the resulting view about justificatory powers of perceptual experience *perceptual conservatism* (more on this position later). So maybe perceptual experiences are epistemically appraisable in virtue of having presentational phenomenal character and belonging to the subject’s outlook on the world?

I claim that for a state to have content C and to *present* it *phenomenally* as perceptual experiences do, it is not enough to be an *epistemically appraisable* state. Not every way of belonging to the ‘outlook on the world’ involves *epistemic appraisability*, which is a property attributed to the epistemic states, which in principle are capable of being instances of knowledge. Epistemic states present their contents under the guise of truth, while perceptual experiences do not. For sure, the *presentational phenomenal character* of perceptions makes them *prima facie* a good basis for corresponding perceptual beliefs. On the one hand, presentational *force* is more epistemically binding than ‘merely thinking’ about something or ‘imagining’ something. On the other hand, it is not as binding as believing or judging. This feature makes experiences distinct from mere exercises of imagination, which usually have no presentational force.

However, the *presentational* force of experiences and the *assertoric* force of epistemic states are two different things. Perception in the sense of *perceiving that*, namely *perceptual judgement*, has assertoric force, propositional content and can be epistemically appraisable. It is highly controversial, however, to claim that perceptual experiences themselves have assertoric force (i.e., that to *perceive something* is in a non-trivial sense like to *know* or to *believe something*).

It is easily visible by the following comparison. It is rational in some cases to not believe that *p* while having perceptual experience with content *p*. E.g., it is not rational in certain contexts, when informed about the nature of the Müller-Lyer illusion,

<sup>5</sup> Siegel (2017, pp. 44–51).

to believe that two lines are of different length, even if perceptual experience presents them as being so. In contrast, it is never rational to believe (or know, or make a judgement) that  $p$  and at the same time not to believe that  $p$ .<sup>6</sup> This very observation shows that norms of epistemic rationality do not apply to perceptual experience. Perceptual experience does not share the epistemic profile with doxastic states.

This is because the content of perceptual experience is not truth evaluable. Hence, having perceptual experiences and perceptual beliefs of contradictory contents does not violate the law of non-contradiction. But assertoric force might be attached only to the truth-evaluable, propositional contents. Note that Siegel herself seems to adopt a view (2010, p. 4, ch. 2; 2017, p. 39) that perceptual contents have accuracy conditions rather than truth conditions.

Siegel is silent about this difference between doxastic and perceptual states. In fact, she says nothing about epistemic properties other than epistemic charge. The actual role of ‘epistemic charge’ in Siegel’s theory is restricted to the role suggested by the very electric metaphor of the charge: perceptual experiences have epistemic charge because they have the modulable *power* to justify (or defeat) perceptual beliefs based on them. It seems, against Siegel’s intention in *the epistemic charge analysis*, that *epistemic charge* collapses into *epistemic power*. If *this* is the rationality of perceptual experience, then no proponent of the ‘threshold view’ would have any problem with accepting the claim that perceptual experience is ‘rational’. It seems that Siegel promises to argue for more than her argument really supports.

### 3 Inferential Aetiology and Epistemic Appraisability of Perception

For the same reasons, the role played by the *inferential modulation thesis* in the explanation of the rationality of experience is substantially restricted.

*Inferential Modulation Thesis*: Experiences can be formed by inferences that can modulate their epistemic charge (Siegel, 2017, p. 107).

Note that the thesis does not entail that epistemic charge is grounded in inference. Siegel prefers the *phenomenal ground* thesis, according to which the epistemic profile (or epistemic appraisability AKA epistemic charge) of perceptual experience is *grounded* in its presentational phenomenal character. Siegel’s official claim is that aetiology (e.g., inference) can only *modulate* this profile. This modulation consists in changing—downgrading or upgrading—epistemic powers to support subsequent beliefs (and sometimes strengthening psychological precursors of experience).

In fact, the purported role of *the inferential modulation thesis* in Siegel’s argumentative strategy seems to require *more* than a merely modulatory function of inference. If inferential aetiology matters for the claim that perceptual experience is rational *qua*

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I ignore here the fact that non-propositional content  $p$  cannot be simply *the same* as propositional content  $p^*$ . I feel free to ignore this fact for the reasons pointed out by Siegel (2017), namely that ‘even if contents of experiences and beliefs cannot be shared, there will be some contents of beliefs that are closer to the contents of experience than others’ (p. 63).

epistemically appraisable, then inference should modulate very epistemic appraisability, not only epistemic power. Everything hangs here on the ‘epistemic status’ condition (iii) of the characterisation of epistemic charge. Because the *epistemic charge* is *epistemic appraisability* instantiated by perceptual experience, then affecting *epistemic charge* by inference (as *the inferential modulation thesis* says) also affects the epistemic appraisability of perceptual experience. Siegel is also explicit about the necessary relationship between standing in inferential relation and being epistemically appraisable: ‘If experiences didn’t manifest any such status, then they could not stand in the relations of epistemic dependence characteristic of inference’ (2017, p. 108).

My contention is that given Siegel’s liberal view on inference, this strong condition for ‘epistemic dependence’ is undermotivated. Siegel characterises the inference in terms of response-relation between informational states (2017, pp. 77–106). An informational state is not necessarily a state with assertoric force characteristic for epistemic states. Therefore being an informational state formed in response to another informational state says nothing about the epistemic appraisability of any of these two states.

Consider the difference between *epistemic power* and *epistemic appraisability* in an uncontroversial case of inferential justification of belief B’ based on belief B. Let’s accept—for the sake of discussion—Siegel’s minimal account of inference as a distinctive kind of response to an informational state.

If someone infers belief B’ from another belief B, then in some important sense B’ is positively epistemically appraisable *because* it is inferred from a positively epistemically appraisable belief B. In the case of beliefs, rules of inference are truth-preserving: if the input belief is true and inference is valid, *then* the output belief (conclusion) is true as well. Moreover, it is true *because* the antecedent was true and the inference valid. The inference has the power to confer epistemic appraisability from premises to conclusions. Note that it does not mean that the epistemic appraisability of beliefs is in any sense grounded or even epistemically explicable in terms of inference. Valid inference can result in epistemically appraisable belief B’ *because* beliefs as such are epistemically appraisable as epistemic states. This is a proper explanation of the epistemic appraisability of inferred beliefs, not merely an explanation of why certain belief B has a positive epistemic charge to inferentially support belief B’. If the nature of beliefs were different, then no inference would be able to make them epistemically appraisable. In other words, the character of epistemic properties conferred from inputs to outputs by inference is relativised to the epistemic profile of the very states that they can possess independently from a contingent fact that they are formed in an inferential way.

For this reason, although I am sympathetic to Siegel’s liberal view on inferential transitions, I see no role of inference in explaining the very epistemic appraisability of perceptual experience. For sure, if a given perceptual experience is inferred from other mental states, then inference affects the epistemic properties of this particular experience. However, as Siegel once observed, this is a contingent fact about perceptual states (2017, p. 44). If perceptual experiences as such are not epistemically appraisable, no psychological precursor is able to make them so.



At best, given perceptual experiences are not epistemically appraisable, perceptual experience can be a ‘conclusion’ of reasoning, but practical rather than theoretical one (see Anscombe, 2000, p. 60). The result is not a true proposition or propositional attitude, but rather a mental action: forming perceptual experience. This would open a space for some sort of normative evaluation of perceptual experience, but not in epistemic terms.

In the next two sections, I will show how the problem of hijacked experience can be solved if we reject the view that perceptual experiences are epistemically appraisable.

#### 4 The Epistemic Power of Phenomenal Character

As I said, Siegel accepts *phenomenal ground*, which is one of the motivations behind *phenomenal conservatism*. To avoid the pitfalls of this position, she proposes her own version of epistemological conservatism based on *phenomenal ground*, namely *perceptual conservatism*.<sup>7</sup>

*Perceptual Conservatism*: perceptual experience has, due to the phenomenal character of the experience, epistemic charge, which can be modulated by the aetiology of the experience.<sup>8</sup>

The consequence of the critique of the concept of *epistemic charge* (§ 2) was that it collapses into the concept of *epistemic power*: the real *epistemic charge* is *epistemic charge* as construed by Siegel minus (iii) the *epistemic status* condition. Perception can inherit and transmit some epistemic properties (e.g., justification), but cannot be a manifestation of epistemic status of the subject, in the sense in which, e.g., belief can be. Similarly, the critique of inferential modulation (§ 3) results in the claim that the effects of such modulation are constrained by the epistemic value of experience that is ultimately grounded solely in its phenomenal character. For example, in the case of inferentially based experiences, the inference affects the epistemic power of experience by transmitting good or poor epistemic properties of a psychological precursor, but *what* epistemic properties perceptual experience *can* have (and ‘receive’ from inference) is fully determined by its phenomenal character. Therefore, it seems that there is no important difference between *hijacked experiences* and phenomenally indistinguishable illusions in terms of epistemic properties of perceptual experience.

However, after these modifications, Siegel’s *perceptual conservatism* starts to uncannily resemble *phenomenal conservatism*.

<sup>7</sup> Siegel (2017) suggests that *perceptual conservatism* is not the only option, which ‘can do justice to the cases that motivate the Rationality Perception’; however, she thinks that this position provides ‘a fuller story of how epistemic charge impacts the global structure of justification’ (p. 51). However, in her response to Ghijssen, she explicitly states that she prefers the *phenomenal ground* hypothesis (Siegel, 2018, p. 530).

<sup>8</sup> This is a characterisation extracted from Siegel’s description of three variants of *perceptual conservatism*: strong, intermediate, and weak. For more see Siegel (2017, pp. 46–47).

*Modified Perceptual Conservatism:* perceptual experience with content P has, due to the phenomenal character of the experience, epistemic power to justify belief P.

My suggestion is that this uncanny resemblance is a consequence of formulating both *phenomenal and perceptual conservatism* in a way in which they are silent about the deep reason for which *perceptual ground* holds.

The reason why *phenomenal conservatism* gives wrong predictions about the rationality of beliefs based on hijacked experiences is that it is a form of traditional experientialism.<sup>9</sup> According to *phenomenal conservatism*, the phenomenal character of experience just has *prima facie* epistemic power, because in experience things seem to be in a certain way. All contents of experience, no matter if it is veridical or not, provide a *prima facie* justification for believing corresponding content. This view predicts that a belief based on a hijacked experience is equally justified as a belief based on phenomenally indistinguishable veridical and well-formed experience.

Adopting a more ‘post-modern’<sup>10</sup> or disjunctivist experientialism enables us to avoid the pitfalls of this view and embrace insights of *phenomenal conservatism*.

*Disjunctivist Phenomenal Conservatism:* In the good case, veridical perceptual experience with content P has, due to its phenomenal character, epistemic power to justify belief that P. Experience in the bad case has no such epistemic power.

*Phenomenal ground* holds not because the *phenomenal character* is an ultimate source of epistemic power of experience, but because *when experience is veridical*, the perceiver has distinctive epistemic access to the ground of her perceptual knowledge *via* phenomenal presentation in experience. *If* perception is not veridical and its content is inaccurate, then perceptual experience loses this power, even if phenomenal character remains the same (indiscriminable) *from the point of view* of the perceiver. Phenomenal character, therefore, grounds the *epistemic power* of experience because it is a source of distinctive epistemic access offered—when all goes well—by experience, and *not* because the phenomenal character ‘no matter what’ suffices to give experience its epistemic powers. Access offered by good cases of perceptual experience is access to the very mind-independent objects of experience that are made manifest by the phenomenal character of that experience.<sup>11</sup> The idea is

<sup>9</sup> I use here the notion of ‘traditional experientialism’ in the sense of the ‘traditional view on the epistemic significance of experience’ as understood by Byrne (2016): ‘The suspect’s fingerprints on the knife are “epistemically significant”—they play a crucial role in explaining the detective’s knowledge. How, exactly? The obvious answer is that facts about the fingerprints are (part of) the detective’s evidence. (...) On the Traditional View, the epistemic significance of experience is exactly parallel to the epistemic significance of the fingerprints’ (p. 952).

<sup>10</sup> Again, I mimic here Byrne’s (2016) postmodern view: ‘The Postmodernist’s answer is that his experience in the good case is not the same [as in the bad case – P.G.]—specifically, it is epistemically more potent’ (p. 956).

<sup>11</sup> The argument presented (together with its consequences outlined below) can be seen as an attempt to implement McDowell’s (2011, 2019a) insight to solve the problems raised by Siegel’s approach along the lines suggested by McDowell himself (McDowell, 2019b, p. 346). Unfortunately, McDowell seems to

that perceptual experience reveals all its epistemic power only when it presents subject with her environment, but not when it *only* appears to present the environment accurately, like in the hijacked case.

Note, that by calling this conception ‘disjunctivist’ I mean only that this view takes the epistemic power of perceptual experience to be either sufficient to justify belief in the good case, or downgraded in the bad case. There is no commitment to any specific, e.g., access internalist view on justification like in John McDowell’s (2011) or Duncan Pritchard’s (2012) version of epistemological disjunctivism.<sup>12</sup> Neither is there a commitment to metaphysical disjunctivism as in Heather Logue’s (2018) proposal.

My claim is that the epistemic power of perceptual experience is better explicable as a property of experiences, which in paradigmatic cases<sup>13</sup> of perceptual knowledge provide direct, first-person epistemic access to the objects of perceptual beliefs. This epistemic access is guaranteed by the phenomenal character of veridical perceptual experiences.<sup>14</sup> However, they are not rational by being ‘epistemically appraisable’ like epistemic states (like knowledge or belief). Perceptual states are not epistemic states, but, in the case of rational creatures, are of epistemic import for *rational* capacities that are operative in higher, strictly epistemic acts. Perceptual capacities and epistemic capacities cooperate, but perceptual capacities are *not* rational capacities. This moderately disjunctivist view of the epistemic power should be detached from the simple-minded version of ‘phenomenal conservatism’, which is rightly charged by Siegel of making wrong predictions about the epistemic standing of perceptual beliefs based on defective experience.

## 5 Rationalising Role of Appearances

If *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism* were an austere externalist position, then it would be unable to explain the pressure to give a positive answer to the *problem of hijacked experience*. If hijacked experience has *no* epistemic power, how could it be even possible to think that belief based on it is rational? Therefore, to provide a more nuanced solution to the problem of hijacked experience, distinctively disjunctivist externalism about the epistemic power of experience should be combined with internalism about reasons.

To take a step in that direction, it shall be useful to recall Siegel’s distinction between *reason-power* and *forward-looking epistemic power* of experience.

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refuse to engage with *the problem of hijacked experience* and remains silent on the rationalising role of appearances (see below in this paper).

<sup>12</sup> This allows my proposal to avoid the hard problem of access for epistemological disjunctivism, see Grad (forthcomingb).

<sup>13</sup> By paradigmatic cases I mean veridical experiences that are paradigmatic in virtue of having priority in order of epistemic and metaphysical explanation over falsidical experiences (illusions and hallucinations). See more on this in Sect. 5 of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> For arguments that *phenomenal* character (or *phenomenal consciousness*) of perception is necessary for perceptual representation to justify belief, see Smithies (2019, ch. 3). However, I reject Smithies’s accessibilism because it leads to the undesirable luminosity of perceptual knowledge (see Smithies, 2019, ch. 7).

*Reason-power*: In having content C1, *ceteris paribus*, an experience provides the subject with reason to believe content C2.

*Forward-looking Power*: In having content C1, *ceteris paribus*, an experience has the power to make a belief formed on its basis, with content C2, well founded (Siegel, 2017, pp. 63–64).

*Reason-power* is explicitly internalist, since reasons *provided to the subject* are *ex definitione* available from the subject's point of view. They are reasons that a subject has.<sup>15</sup> *Forward-looking power* is not internalist in this sense, at least not explicitly. Belief can be ill-founded, even if there is no defeater. I agree with Siegel (2017) that 'limiting phenomenal conservatism to reason-power waters down the thesis that phenomenal conservatives usually defend' (p. 73). The same applies to *perceptual conservatism*. In both cases, however, *reason-power* and *forward-looking power* cannot be separated. Siegel speaks about the undesirable effects of separation of *reason-power* from *forward-looking power*. She argues that we cannot understand what *reason-power* is if it has no connection with power to make subsequent beliefs well founded. My suggestion is that effects of such separation on *forward-looking power* are equally undesirable. *Forward-looking power* of perceptual experience in the good case should be at least in part explicable in terms of standing in the space of reasons if it is to be able to capture the essential normative and rational dimension of the epistemic standing of the subject.

This can be done by the following disjunctivist thesis that links forward-looking and reasons power of perceptual experience in the good case:

*Conclusive Reasons*: In the good case, perceptual experience, in having content C, has the power to make a belief formed on its basis, with content C, well founded by providing subject with *conclusive* reason to believe content C in virtue of making truth-makers of C available for subject's cognition in perceptual presentation.

*Conclusive reasons* thesis makes the rational dimension of *forward-looking power* explicit. When belief is well founded by being based on veridical experience that presents subject with her environment, then it has the highest epistemic status and is supported by the conclusive reasons. This shows that 'reason' and 'forward-looking' as labels for different kinds of epistemic power are misleading since *forward-looking power* of perceptual experience in the good case also is a variety of *reason-power*, namely *conclusive one*.

Following Dretske (1969, Ch. 3; 1971) and McDowell (2013, p. 278; 2019a, p. 39), by "conclusive reason" I mean the type of reason that, given the fixed circumstances of epistemic evaluation (Dretske, 1971, p. 9), guarantees truth of the supported proposition. Conclusive reasons, understood in this way, stand in stark contrast to defeasible or *prima facie* reasons, which rationally support their respective propositions

<sup>15</sup> For the discussion of the internalist consequences of the claim that perceptual experience is a way of having reason, see Schroeder (2008).

without ensuring their truth. For instance, phenomenal conservatism about perceptual justification offers a theory of defeasible justification for empirical propositions, provided by perceptual experience in both good (presentational) and bad (e.g., hallucinatory) cases (see Huemer, 2001, p. 58; Smithies, 2019, p. 94; Berghofer, 2020, p. 175). The *conclusive reasons* thesis goes beyond phenomenal conservatism by asserting that, in good cases, perceptual reasons are conclusive rather than merely defeasible. I assume, following Dretske (1971), that the factive nature of rationally grounded knowledge requires it to be based on conclusive reasons. However, I want to remain neutral here on whether having conclusive reasons is also sufficient for knowledge,<sup>16</sup> as well as on the specifics of the basing relation between conclusive reasons and the corresponding belief.<sup>17</sup>

There is a possibility to construe the notion of ‘well-foundedness’ in an austere externalist way, according to which belief can be in principle well founded *without* providing any reason available for the subject. As a result, *epistemological disjunctivism* would be construed without mentioning the reasons for a belief. But this would be at odds with the intuition, apparently shared also by Siegel, that epistemic justification has a distinctively rational dimension.

Siegel’s verdict about *the problem of hijacked experience* is based on the *downgrade thesis*, which is a thesis precisely about the *forward-looking power* of hijacked experiences.

*Downgrade Thesis:* The core cases of hijacked experiences are epistemically downgraded in forward-looking power, without defeat (Siegel, 2017, p. 67).

The verdict is, recall, that it is irrational to have a belief based on hijacked experience *because* the very experience is irrational and downgraded in its *forward-looking power*. But what about the *reason-power* of hijacked experiences?

Siegel is not very explicit about that, but she seems to suggest that hijacked experiences might have reason-power. This is a crucial issue for *the rationality of perception* and *the problem of hijacked experience*, since to be in the house of reason is to stand in ‘the space of reasons’, to use another well-known metaphor. If hijacked experience can have a reason-power, then why would not we agree that a belief based on such experience is at least minimally rational? And why is not Siegel more explicit about this crucial issue?

The intuition behind the positive answer to *the problem of hijacked experience* is that how things look in perception is usually a good guide to how they are. *Phenomenal conservatism* is a philosophical attempt to capture this intuition. However, it goes too far by suggesting that subject fulfils all her epistemic duties if P is ‘given’ by the phenomenal character of her experience and she believes on the basis of this experience, absent defeaters, that P. The disjunctivist approach to the epistemology of perception puts us in a position to do justice to the intuition that subject in the hijacked case is rational without doubtful epistemological prediction that there is no

<sup>16</sup> Dretske (1971) answered this question affirmatively. For a critique of Dretske’s argument, see Lando (2016).

<sup>17</sup> For a nice comparison between Dretske and McDowell on this point, see Graham and Pedersen (2020).

difference between reasons-power of experience in the good case and reasons-power of experience in the hijacked case. Similarly, according to disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism, subject believing for reasons provided by hijacked experience *is not* in good epistemic standing.

But why does the intuition behind the positive answer (and phenomenal conservatism as well) seem to be plausible? Because the following generalisation seems to be valid: the phenomenal character of good and bad cases of phenomenally identical perceptual experiences is indistinguishable from the point of view of a perceiver. So if we allow following the phenomenal character of veridical experiences with content C in forming related well-founded beliefs with content C, then we should also allow, for the same reason, to follow the phenomenal character of falsidical (e.g., hijacked) experiences in forming corresponding beliefs.

Now, this norm (let's call it the *phenomenal norm*) is grounded in a metaphysical character of perceptual experiences, which determines epistemic properties of experience as well, including those specified by *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism*. Therefore, the *phenomenal norm* for falsidical experiences is grounded in the same properties, which make *only veridical* perceptual experiences capable of making perceptual beliefs well-founded. Perceptual experiences might be disjunctive in their epistemic nature, but experience is not merely a disjunction of good and bad cases. There is an explanatory order between them. Veridical perceptual experiences have explanatory priority over their falsidical counterparts. It is possible to be *misled* by hijacked experience without breaking the *phenomenal norm*, but *phenomenal norm*, even for hijacked experience, is grounded in the distinctive epistemic character of veridical perception described by *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism*.<sup>18</sup>

How things appear to be is some guide to how they are only because in the case of veridical experiences things are exactly how they appear to be. That is the rationalising role of appearances in the epistemic explanation of beliefs. However, the rationalising role is derivative in comparison to the proper rationality of perception described by *epistemological disjunctivism*.

Having a perceptual belief based on a hijacked or falsidical experience is therefore at least minimally rational by conforming to the *phenomenal norm*.<sup>19</sup> However, such a belief is not well founded, since there are other, more basic epistemic norms, like the *truth norm*, conformity to which is required if a belief is to be epistemically appraisable. Bare phenomenal character gives only a residual and defeasible reason

<sup>18</sup> I stick here to a purely teleological explanation of metaphysical priority of veridical over falsidical experiences (see Schellenberg, 2014, 2018, p. 175) rather than an evolutionary explanation (e.g., Peacocke, 2004, ch. 3).

<sup>19</sup> For this reason, I agree to *some extent* with Fumerton's (2013) internalist critique of the earlier version of Siegel's argument. My agreement reaches precisely as far as my claim that the phenomenal character of experience always provides a residual reason for a corresponding belief. However, I do not agree that beliefs based on 'checkered' experience (Siegel's previous term for 'hijacked') *are not epistemically irrational*. They *are epistemically irrational* because hijacked experience does not have the epistemic power to justify a subsequent belief. In this respect, my solution is much closer to what Begby (2018) suggests, namely that there is a need to fill a terminological lacuna in Siegel's 'normative vocabulary': 'We want, quite generally I think, to make room for the notion that people can be 'doing the best that they can' with the epistemic resources available to them, while leaving open the question of whether the product of their doing their epistemic best is a justified belief' (p. 494).

for a belief. The phenomenal character of veridical perception provides a conclusive reason since it guarantees that the belief it supports is true. The phenomenal character of falsidical experiences does not have this feature. This proves that, according to *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism*, phenomenal character is not the ultimate ground of beliefs based on experience.<sup>20</sup> Phenomenal character is a necessary element providing distinctive epistemic access to the grounds of perceptual knowledge, namely mind-independent objects and their properties.<sup>21</sup> This casts a new light on *phenomenal ground* as accepted by *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism*.

Hijacked experience can provide only ‘phenomenal evidence’, to use Schellenberg’s term. Belief based on hijacked experience conforms to the *phenomenal norm*. Veridical experience provides more evidence: not only phenomenal evidence but also ‘factive evidence’ (Schellenberg, 2018, ch. 7). Note, however, that according to *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism*, a subject has access to the factive evidence only *via* the phenomenal character of experience. So, according to the view that I propose here, just like *forward-looking power* is a conclusive variety of *reason-power*, the so-called ‘factive evidence’ is a *factive* variety of phenomenal evidence.

Interestingly, the *disjunctivist’s* verdict on *the problem of hijacked experience* would be on some level the same as Siegel’s: beliefs based on hijacked experience are ill-founded, and their subjects are epistemically responsible for having these ill-founded beliefs (e.g., by endorsing ill-founded beliefs *in response to which* they have hijacked experience). Merely having an experience provides *some* reason for having a corresponding belief, but it is not enough to change the verdict on the overall epistemic standing of the subject. At best, it is enough to make her rational *in following her experience* (even if the overall verdict is that she is irrational by holding mental states that gave rise to the hijacked experience).

However, the explanation provided by *epistemological disjunctivism* is more pluralistic about the norms of rationality than Siegel’s explanation. A belief based on hijacked experience conforms to the *phenomenal norm*, but it violates the *truth norm*. It is also ill-founded. Nevertheless, even in this pluralistic picture of the rationality of perception, the house of empirical reason has the centre, namely veridical perceptual experiences. There could be many norms of rationality that could conflict in some specific cases, such as the *phenomenal norm* and *truth norm* in a case of hijacked experience. However, there is an order of epistemic priority among the norms and a corresponding order of priority among the veridical and falsidical experiences. The *phenomenal norm* holds for reasons that directly ground the *truth norm*, but not vice versa. I think that this answer does more justice to the intuition behind the positive answer to *the problem of hijacked experience* and, in consequence, provides a more

<sup>20</sup> For the extensive argument for this thesis, see Grad (forthcominga).

<sup>21</sup> I think that this is a particularly promising way of articulating the idea expressed by Peacocke (2018) in his discussion of Siegel’s work. The idea is that perception is constitutively ‘produced *au fond*’ by the world, not by the action like the *mental action* involved in judging. I hope that my articulation of the idea saves its important core (the idea of perception as constituted by a relation to the worldly objects) without subscribing to the problematic distinction between perception and belief drawn along the lines of mental passivity vs. activity division. Perceptual states can be actively *formed* by rational capacities and, at the same time, can be constituted by the very mind-independent particulars.

stable response to the problem than Siegel's radical argument. She seems to simply ignore intuitions that favour a positive answer to the problem of hijacked experience.

Siegel already addressed worry that her argument ignores rather than mitigates the pressure to give a positive answer to the problem of hijacked experience. In his commentary on *The rationality of perception*, Pautz (2020) observed that 'at start of her book, Siegel candidly acknowledges the force of such intuitions against D[owngrade] T[hesis]. Yet in Chap. 2 she suddenly, and without explanation, leaps for DT' (p. 756). The intuitions Pautz is talking about are the same intuitions that speak in favour of a positive answer to *the problem of hijacked experience*. Let's call them 'indulgent intuitions'. In response to Pautz, Siegel formulates an argument, which potentially can have bearing on my claim that the *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatist* account of the rationalising role of appearances does more justice to indulgent intuitions than Siegel's approach.

Siegel's argument is based on an observation that some examples of hijacked experiences more firmly incline us to dismiss the indulgent intuitions than others.<sup>22</sup> Let's call them first serious cases and second innocent cases.

The *gun* is a serious case.

*Gun*: After seeing a face of a man who is black as a conscious prime, a participant whose task (in an experiment) is to decide whether a subsequent object he is shown is a tool or a gun has a visual experience of a gun when seeing a pair of pliers. He goes on to believe that the object is a gun, and the outlook which associates between black men and guns is strengthened (Siegel, 2017, p. 67).

The *mustard* is an innocent case.

*Mustard*: Murray is a mustard lover. He is so afraid of having run out of mustard that he constantly opens the fridge to ascertain that there is still some mustard there. When his supply of mustard is running low, he opens the fridge again with an expectation that there is no mustard inside. He assigns a disproportionately high probability to this expectation due to his fear of being devoid of mustard. The fear is in turn proportional to his love. The expectation hijacks his experience after opening the fridge. As a result, he has an experience that there is no mustard in the fridge. In fact, the last jar is standing there.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Siegel (2020, p. 768). In Siegel (2017), she also refers to serious cases to motivate harsh (as opposed to indulgent) intuition and say 'no' to *the problem of hijacked experience* (e.g., p. 24).

<sup>23</sup> This is a variation of the *mustard in the fridge* example from Siegel (2017, pp. xi, xiii–xiv, xviii, 12). In the original version, *mustard in the fridge* was about veridical and not hijacked experience. I decided to make my adaptation because Siegel uses it as an example of an experience, which *seems* to speak in favour of phenomenal conservatism. My version is structurally similar to Pautz's (2020) *tomato* and Huemer's (2013) *banana-gun in a refrigerator* examples. It is worth noting that Siegel suggests that the *downgrade thesis* applies also to the *innocent examples* of perception hijacked by the stored information (Siegel, 2017, pp. 121–122). As far as I understand her, however, the irrationality of experience hijacked by such innocent precursors is not so intuitive as in serious examples. And this is exactly the point made by her in the discussion with Pautz.



According to Siegel, serious cases (like *Gun*) make the irrationality of beliefs based on perceptual experience much more evident than innocent cases (like *Mustard*).<sup>24</sup> What convinced her to give a negative answer to *the problem of hijacked experience* was a consideration of serious cases. Siegel's (2020) conclusion is that the verdict about the rational standing of the subject having *gun* experience is 'at odds with the idea that the perceptual experiences provide justificatory support for thinking the person seen is dangerous, absent defeaters' (p. 770).

I agree. What I disagree with is how it affects the rationalising role of appearances. Apart from being sometimes highly *morally* defective, serious cases seem to show the *irrationality* of some experiences so clearly because experiences under consideration are consequences of irrational and sometimes even pernicious beliefs. Love for mustard is not irrational nor pernicious. In contrast, having an experience hijacked by racist prejudices, like in *Gun*-like cases, is a clear manifestation of epistemic vice and irrationality. However, it does not change the fact that hijacked experience provides a residual, bad reason for subsequent gun belief because a subject has the appearance of a gun. It does not—let me stress again—change the overall verdict about the irrationality of a subject. The parallel, used also by Siegel, to juridical procedures can help here: the fact that the killer was drunk affects our evaluation of some aspects of his or her responsibility, but it cannot make him or her not guilty of a murder. One of the reasons for this is that even if drunkenness (like hijacked experience) diminishes the responsibility, it does not remove it completely. Moreover, the killer is still responsible for *being drunk*, which makes his or her overall fault even greater. The difference between serious cases and innocent cases is that 'serious' precursors of experience, like racial prejudices — contrary to mustard expectations or implicit beliefs based on stored information — are *highly* irrational. Experiences in both serious and innocent cases redound badly on a subject's rationality and transfer irrationality to inferential successors, like hijacked experience. However, in serious cases, irrationality is greater. It has nothing to do with a residual rationalising role of mere appearances, which, as always, provide only *phenomenal* evidence in favour of corresponding beliefs.

## 6 Conclusion

I have argued that neither perceptual experience nor its possible inferential aetiology can be epistemically appraisable. Then I have outlined the alternative view on the epistemic power of perception, according to which only the phenomenal character of *veridical* perceptual experiences has enough epistemic power to make perceptual beliefs well-founded. Next, I have explained how mere appearances can play a

<sup>24</sup> In a particularly striking passage, she writes: 'If a racist hallucinates me as dangerous, I have several reactions. I'm terrified (especially when this person is armed), angry, offended, and I'm more inclined to think the hallucinator has an epistemic problem than I am to think they're being reasonable because their twisted outlook has infiltrated their perception. It redounds poorly on him if the hallucinator can't see an ordinary male young person for what he is, whether he is an ordinary shoplifting teenager, or an ordinary youngster just going about his business' (Siegel, 2020, p. 770).

rationalising role in the epistemic explanation. This have enabled me to give a more balanced answer to *the problem of hijacked experience* raised by Siegel.

But, what is the place of perceptual experiences in the house of reason according to *disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism*? Are they rational?

If ‘rational’ means ‘epistemically appraisable’, the answer will be ‘no’.

If to be an exercise of capacity that cooperates with rational capacities is enough to be rational, the answer will be ‘yes’. Successful acts of perceptual capacities put the subjects in a position to know. Perceptual experiences have an epistemic power to provide conclusive reasons for a perceptual belief. This is a variant of the ‘threshold view’ as construed by Siegel. According to disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism, perceptual experiences reach the threshold of the house of reason to provide reasons for perceptual beliefs. When all goes well, what they bring is of the highest epistemic value. Sadly, when experience is downgraded in epistemic power, what they provide is enough to make corresponding belief rational, but not well-founded. Similarly, basing ill-founded but rational belief on a hijacked experience cannot save the subject from the irrationality that she manifested by endorsing the belief that gave rise to the hijacked experience.

It is worthwhile to compare this solution and what Siegel calls ‘minimal solutions to the problem of hijacked experience’: ‘Other possible solutions to the problem of hijacked experience are more minimal, and don’t allow that perceptual experiences can be irrational. Perhaps the most minimal solution locates the epistemic problem at the level of the epistemic power of the experience to support beliefs’ (Siegel, 2017, p. 23). My solution is minimal since it locates the epistemic problem at the level of *epistemic power*. A problem with minimal solutions is that ‘A differently minimal solution looks under the hood, claims to find at a minimum a causal relationship between the downgraded experience and a psychological precursor, but does not further illuminate the nature of that relationship, and so does not explain any further why epistemic downgrade occurs’ (Siegel, 2017, p. 23). I think that this objection does not apply to my position, since I agree that the epistemic power of perceptual experiences can be downgraded by inference. This illuminates the nature of the epistemic relationship between experience and belief and explains why downgrade occurs. *Disjunctivist phenomenal conservatism* does not exclude the *inferential modulation thesis* with the important restriction that *epistemic charge* modulated by inference does not entail epistemic appraisability of perceptual experience. Perceptual experiences do not belong to the realm of reason.

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## Declarations

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