

## The Evidence in Perception

Ali Hasan

**Abstract:** It is commonly thought that we depend fundamentally on the “evidence of the senses” for our empirical beliefs, including and most directly, our beliefs about our local environment, the spatial world around us. The ultimate evidence we have for our perceptual beliefs is provided in some way by perception or perceptual experience. But what is this evidence? There seem to be three main options: external factualism allows that the evidence include facts about the external world; internal factualism takes facts that involve only the internal, mental world—like facts about one’s perceptual experiences or appearances—to count as one’s perceptual evidence; and non-factualism takes propositions, including false ones, to count as evidence—for example, propositional contents of appearances or seemings. We shall see that all these options face significant challenges. Some might respond by accepting skepticism: our perceptual beliefs are not epistemically justified. Others might conclude that perceptual beliefs can be justified without depending on evidence. I shall end, however, by tentatively suggesting that there is a sort of internal fact that is a plausible candidate for perceptual evidence that has been overlooked.

According to evidentialism, as I will understand it here, whether one’s belief is rational or (epistemically) justified depends on whether one has evidence that supports the proposition believed.<sup>1</sup> What do I mean here by “evidence” in support of a proposition? I’ll say more about this shortly, but roughly, it is something that makes that proposition’s truth more probable, or that serves as a sign or indicator of its truth. Note that, so understood, evidentialism says more than that one has justification to believe something only if one has evidence for it. For the evidentialist, evidence is prior to or independent of justified belief, and a belief’s being justified depends on or is explained by the believer’s having supporting evidence.<sup>2</sup> As even some of its critics admit, this theory has undeniable intuitive appeal.<sup>3</sup>

Let us distinguish between something’s being evidence for a proposition and its being a mere part of one’s evidence for the proposition. We often use “evidence” loosely so that it applies to salient parts of one’s evidence that don’t count as evidence on their own. For example, a pregnancy test’s turning blue would be evidence of pregnancy; but strictly speaking, it is only that together

---

<sup>1</sup> Like many evidentialists, I treat ‘rational’ and ‘justified’ as synonyms.

<sup>2</sup> We can leave open whether this dependence on evidence is a matter of analysis or meaning (i.e., part of the meaning of the term “justified belief” is that one has evidence for the belief), or is part of a theory or account of justification that provides substantive conditions for justification. Either way, the rationality or justification of any belief of yours depends on the evidence you have for it.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, McGrath (2018: 24). Many other philosophers would deny this evidentialist claim, however, especially as applied to perceptual knowledge or justification, including McGinn (2012), Millar (2019), LittleJohn (2018), Brewer (2011), and Lyons (2009). See Beddor’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of evidentialism. Tucker’s chapter in the present volume discusses a topic that is closely connected to our topic of perceptual evidence: the question of whether and when experience can provide evidence.

with various other facts, like the general reliability of such tests, or details about how the test works and how it was used, that makes more probable the test taker's being pregnant.

Let us also distinguish between something's being basic and non-basic evidence for one. One's evidence is non-basic when having or possessing it involves or depends on one's having justification to believe it. One's evidence is basic when having that evidence does not involve or depend on one's having justification to believe it. For the evidentialist, while much of our evidence may be derived or non-basic, some of it must be basic if we have any evidence at all. Otherwise, the evidentialist faces a vicious regress. If one is justified in believing proposition P then, given evidentialism, one must have evidence in support of P. If this evidence is non-basic for one, having it must involve or depend on one's having justification to believe it. We cannot appeal to one's having justification to believe P to explain one's having justification to believe P, so there must be some *other* evidence one possesses for P. But if this further evidence is also non-basic, then one must have justification to believe yet other propositions, which would require evidence, and so on, ad infinitum.

But if having something as basic evidence cannot involve or depend on having justification to believing it, what is our basic evidence, and how do we have it? In this chapter we focus on this question as applied to our perceptual beliefs—roughly, beliefs about the world we sensorily perceive. It is commonly thought that we depend fundamentally on the “evidence of the senses” for our empirical beliefs, including and most directly, beliefs about our local environment, the spatial or spatio-temporal world around us; the ultimate evidence we have for our empirical beliefs is provided in some way by perception or perceptual experience. However, as we shall see, the main options for the evidentialist to make sense of the basic evidence we have for our perceptual beliefs—let's call it basic perceptual evidence—all face significant challenges. Some might conclude with skepticism: our perceptual beliefs just aren't justified. Or they might say we should give up evidentialism and hold that our perceptual beliefs can be justified without depending on evidence. I shall end, however, by tentatively suggesting that there is a plausible candidate for basic perceptual evidence that has been overlooked.

### **Having and Appreciating Evidence**

Let's distinguish between two things we might mean by “evidence”.<sup>4</sup> What we might call “scientific evidence,” or perhaps better, “reliable evidence” for some proposition P is something that reliably indicates that P, a reliable sign or indicator of P's truth, or something that raises the probability of P. It seems that at least some forms of reliable evidence can exist “out there” and be evidence for certain propositions even if we do not possess this evidence. Moreover, it is possible to possess reliable evidence without appreciating what it reliably indicates. This is in line with what we often say in scientific, legal, and other contexts; we talk of discovering new evidence, and realizing that some of the evidence already possessed supports a specific hypothesis. But we are not (or not merely) interested in reliable evidence; we are interested in

---

<sup>4</sup> This is essentially Kelly's (2016) distinction between indicator evidence and normative evidence. See also Conee and Feldman's (2008) discussion of scientific evidence and justifying evidence.

what we might call “justifying evidence”—roughly, evidence one might have for some belief, and in virtue of which one can be justified in believing it.

These two senses of evidence seem to be intimately related. One very natural evidentialist account understands justifying evidence for believing P in terms of there being some reliable evidence E for P, and one’s having E.<sup>5</sup> Building this into an account of justification<sup>6</sup>, we can say that S has justification to believe that P *only if*:

1. There is some evidence E that reliably indicates or makes probable that P. (Probability Condition)
2. S possesses E. (Possession Condition)

Most epistemologists find it intuitive that epistemic justification is truth-conducive, or in some way connected to truth or probable truth, and an account of justification in terms something that raises the probability of the belief is a natural way to capture that connection.<sup>7</sup>

These two conditions are not sufficient for having justification to believe that P. One reason for this is that one might have a “defeater”: other evidence that defeats or undermines one’s justification, the clearest example of which is having strong counter-evidence, evidence against P or for not-P.

Some would argue that adding that one has no such defeater is still not enough for justification. Something I possesses might be reliable evidence or make probable that P without providing me with justification for P even in the absence of a defeater. The total evidence a scientist or detective possesses might include evidence that makes highly probable, independently of any further empirical fact, that some particular hypothesis is true, but that is not sufficient for having reason or justification to believe the hypothesis. The relevance of the evidence to what it is evidence for might not be noticed or appreciated by them. They might not even be in a position to notice the connection; they might not be disposed to see or even be capable of seeing the connection. What seems to be missing in such cases is an appreciation of the relevance of the evidence to the proposition believed.

3. S is aware of or appreciates (or is at least in a position to appreciate) the relevance of E to P—that E reliably indicates or makes probable that P. (Appreciation Condition)

---

<sup>5</sup> As Schroeder (2014) points out, “having” something cannot always be understood in this way; having a father is not factorizable into there being a father and one’s having that person. Still, it seems plausible that having justifying evidence *is* factorizable into there being evidence and one’s having it. Schroeder argues against taking “having reasons” to be “factorizable” in this way, though I cannot discuss his argument here.

<sup>6</sup> I focus here on what epistemologists call propositional justification (roughly, what it is to have justification to believe a proposition), though much of what I say will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to doxastic justification (roughly, what it is to be justified in believing a proposition; the standard view is that this requires believing the proposition, and believing it on a good basis).

<sup>7</sup> Many would deny that justified belief requires that the belief be produced by a belief-forming process that is reliable in the sense defended by reliabilists (e.g., Goldman 1979)—roughly, that it is a produced by process that tends to leads to true beliefs. I understand the probability condition more broadly, so that it allows various interpretations of reliability or probability at play, including those that reject reliabilism.

Perhaps no person can count as having evidence *E* for some proposition *P* without appreciating (or at least being in a position to appreciate) the relevant connection of *E* to *P*. But whether we understand “having evidence” as requiring this appreciation or not, the appreciation condition requires it for justified belief.

Although I have motivated accepting the appreciation condition, and am inclined to accept it myself, I will not insist on it here. The appreciation condition is controversial. Some worry that it requires too much, and that it leads to a vicious regress.<sup>8</sup> They might insist instead that, at least at a fundamental level, all that is required is that one’s evidence make the proposition probable (independently of any further empirical fact), though the subject need not grasp the probability relation. I will therefore not depend on it in my critique of different attempts to make sense of perceptual evidence, but will occasionally indicate whether and how some of the views might accommodate it.

I propose to take the probability and possession conditions as a point of departure within the evidentialist framework. They are intuitively plausible requirements that help us make sense of differences in epistemic status of subjects in all sorts of ordinary and scientific contexts. Any evidentialist account of perceptual justification, at least any that aims to reject skepticism, should be able to explain how these conditions or something like them can be satisfied by our perceptual beliefs.

### **Factualism and Non-factualism**

Let us distinguish between a factualist and nonfactualist about basic perceptual evidence. According to the nonfactualist, basic evidence provided by perception for propositions about the external world always takes the form of propositions, including false ones. Indeed, the truth or falsity of the proposition does not make a difference to whether it can serve as evidence. According to the factualist, on the other hand, the basic evidence takes the form of facts (or obtaining states of affairs, or property instantiations) or true propositions. Some factualists might take our basic perceptual evidence to consist of facts; some might take it to consist of true propositions; and some might make no distinction between facts and true propositions. Though I believe that there is a real and important distinction between facts and true propositions that is tied to questions about the sorts of evidence we can possess, I won’t be relying on that here.

We can also distinguish between external and internal factualism about basic evidence. According to external factualism, our basic evidence takes the form of facts that are about or at least partly involve the external, mind-independent world. According to the internal factualist, basic perceptual evidence takes the form of facts that involve only the internal or mental world, not the external world.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion of the principle of inferential justification in Hasan and Fumerton (2018).

<sup>9</sup> These are parallel to Comesaña and McGrath’s (2016) distinction between “factualism” and “phenomenalism” about basic perceptual reasons.

Philosophers disagree about whether perceptual experiences have representational or propositional content, and even if in some sense they do, whether or not they have conceptual content.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not one holds that experiences have content might make a difference to the kind of evidence experience can provide. Moreover, philosophers disagree about how “high level” these representational contents are (e.g., whether they include contents like being a tomato, and not just contents like being red, round and bulgy) and this might make a difference to the sorts of propositions that perceptual experiences can provide direct evidence for.<sup>11</sup>

It might seem that factualists must be non-representationalists about perceptual experience. But that’s not right. As we’ll see, one might, for example, be a factualist about perceptual evidence and take one’s perceptual evidence for P to be the fact that one has an experience with content P.

### **External Factualism**

According to external factualism, our basic perceptual evidence takes the form of facts that (at least partly) involve the external world—such facts as that there is a red, round, bulgy thing (a tomato) present. The idea that our basic perceptual evidence consists of external-world facts, coupled with evidentialism, accommodates the commonsense idea that sensory perception provides direct access to the world, and preserves a very strong connection between perceptual justification and truth.<sup>12</sup>

What does it take for a subject to have or possess an external fact? The external factualist might take the fundamental state in virtue of which one possesses the facts to be a state of seeing or perceiving, where “see” is understood as a success-term: one cannot see an object that doesn’t exist, see an event that doesn’t happen, or see that something is the case unless it is the case. Or it might involve being acquainted with or directly aware of these facts (some might analyze perceiving in terms of acquaintance), where acquaintance is fundamental relation that one can stand in to these facts—a most immediate or direct form awareness.<sup>13</sup> For those who also accept the appreciation condition: if we can see or be acquainted with these facts or obtaining states of

---

<sup>10</sup> See Siegel (2016) for an overview of perceptual content. Brewer (2011) and McDowell (1994), among others, affirm that perception has content—indeed, conceptual content—while Travis (2004) denies it.

<sup>11</sup> See Siegel (2010) for an argument that perceptual experiences have high-level contents.

<sup>12</sup> See McDowell (1994) and Brewer (1999) for defenses of this sort of view, though they do not put things in in terms of evidence. See also, Shellenberg’s (2013) discussion of “factive evidence”.

<sup>13</sup> See Hasan and Fumerton (2018) for a discussion of acquaintance theories. Ram Neta (2008) criticizes attempts to identify one’s evidence with property instantiations with which one is acquainted. I do not think Neta’s argument is sound, though I cannot discuss it in detail here. However, I will indicate where I think the problem lies. Neta’s argument is basically that (i) two individuals can be acquainted with the same property instantiations and yet be different in terms of what it is rational for them to believe; and (ii) two individuals cannot share the same evidence and yet be different in terms of what it is rational for them to believe. Neta’s example is that two individuals can both be acquainted with a knife’s having liquid with composition C, which (let us suppose) is identical to the state of the knife’s being bloody, but the belief that the knife is bloody can be rational only for one who has a reason to accept the identity. Evidentialists who accept the appreciation condition as necessary condition for rational belief might deny (ii). Alternatively, some might identify our evidence for a belief that P with property instantiations with which one is acquainted *and whose relevance to P one can appreciate*. On this view the two individuals would have different evidence. Either way, we can resist Neta’s conclusion that property instantiations with which one is acquainted can’t serve as evidence.

affairs themselves (e.g. not merely be acquainted with the tomato, but with the tomato's being red), then appreciating their relevance might be straightforward. Perhaps one can grasp the correspondence or descriptive fit between an external fact and a proposition or thought describing it.

Alternatively, one might hold that one can possess a fact as basic evidence by *knowing* it, where this knowledge is foundational or basic in the sense that it does not depend on any other knowledge or justified belief. While on this view one would know that P only if one has evidence for P, this does not imply the evidentialist view that one's having justified belief that P *depends on* one's having evidence for P. If one accepts the traditional view that knowledge must be defined or analyzed in terms of justified belief, then this evidence could not count as basic in our sense. However, some philosophers would deny that knowledge, or at least perceptual knowledge of the most fundamental kind, involves or depends on justification. They might hold that perceptual knowledge that P is primitive or unanalyzable, or that it can be identified with seeing or perceiving that P, and combine this with the view that one's justification for believing that P should be understood in terms of, or depends on, one's knowledge that P.<sup>14</sup> If P is known and this knowledge doesn't depend on any other knowledge or justified belief, then the fact that P is part of one's basic evidence; and if this fact is part of one's basic evidence, and it makes it probable (indeed, it entails) that P, then the fact that P is evidence for P. (If we accept the appreciation condition, that too is easy to satisfy: we can grasp that P entails P!) If we take justified belief that P to be reducible to or depend on knowledge that P, and we take knowledge that P to amount to possession of the fact that P as evidence, then we get the evidentialist result: justified belief that P depends on one's having evidence that P.

Thus, whether via a state of acquaintance or direct awareness, perception, or primitive sort of knowledge (and perhaps we can understand one of these in terms of the others), the external factualist could hold onto evidentialism and take external facts to constitute our ultimate evidence for perceptual belief. Either way, the view is that we have a kind of fundamental or direct access to these facts, and by virtue of that we have them as evidence for our perceptual beliefs.

It can sound odd for someone to claim to have evidence to believe that there's a tomato on the table in a normal, clear case of perceiving a tomato. But that is arguably because we ordinarily talk of "evidence" for some claim only in contexts where access to the facts is considered problematic; it seems at least as odd for one to say, "there is a tomato here, but I have no evidence to think so."<sup>15</sup> What causes trouble for the external factualist, however, is that it is also odd to say that one has no evidence to think there is a tomato on the table in a case in which one is (unknowingly) hallucinating a tomato. Intuitively, two individuals who are internally exactly alike have equal justification, even if one is hallucinating and the other isn't; if my belief that there is a tomato in front of me is justified in the good case of veridical perception, it is just as justified in the corresponding, internally alike, bad case of hallucination. But the external

---

<sup>14</sup> For more on such views, see Silva's "Knowledge-First Theories of Justification" in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>15</sup> See Kelly (2016) for a discussion of this point.

factualist about evidence must apparently deny this, since in the bad case there is no fact like the tomato's being present or my seeing the tomato to serve as the basic evidence. This is, of course, just a version of the "new evil demon problem," applied to an evidentialist who takes external facts to be among one's perceptual evidence.<sup>16</sup>

Some external factualists allow that other things can also count as evidence for perceptual beliefs—whether they be internal facts, or propositional contents of internal states—so these views need not say that there is no evidence for the perceptual belief in the bad case.<sup>17</sup> But they are committed to saying that those in the bad case have significantly less evidence, or evidence of a weaker kind, and so it remains that the two individuals who are internally alike are not alike in terms of justification.<sup>18</sup>

### **Internal Factualism**

Finding external factualism problematic, the evidentialist might say that one's basic evidence is some internal fact, such as some fact about one's perceptual experiences. As the previous section already reveals, it is plausible that one's basic perceptual evidence must be internal. This can be motivated further by natural responses to a series of questions about reasons for one's perceptual beliefs.<sup>19</sup> Consider my belief that "there is a tomato before me." If you ask me what reason I have for thinking this, I might say "I see a tomato." If you ask me why I think this, I might say that "it looks as though that is tomato." And if you ask me why I think this, I would likely say something like: "I have a visual experience of a red, round, bulgy shape, and this is characteristic of tomatoes." If you ask me why I should think that I am having a visual experience of a red, round, and bulgy thing, it is natural to respond, "I can tell directly that I'm having such an experience, in a way that I cannot just tell directly that this is a (real) tomato. Maybe there's no 'thing' really there. But it still *seems or appears* to me as though there is something red, round, and bulgy." The intuitiveness and naturalness of this response suggests that we can in some sense directly grasp at least some internal facts, such as the fact that it seems or appears to one as though there's something red, round, and bulgy present.

Some philosophers say that experiences and mental states can count as one's evidence. The internal factualist might say that's more or less right—but there is something specific about one's overall experience in virtue of which it counts as evidence for a particular proposition. It is these more specific aspects of an experience, or specific facts about them, that provide evidence for our beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> See Cohen (1984). This problem also applies to views that identify one's evidence with what one knows, as well as the simple reliabilist view that one's justifying evidence is the reliable indicator causally responsible for the belief.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Williamson (2000) and Schellenberg (2013).

<sup>18</sup> It's worth nothing, though, that a number of externalists deny that the new evil demon problem has the force that its proponents take it to have, including Brewer (1999), Sutton (2005), and LittleJohn (2009). They might also point out that the alternatives have serious problems of their own, as we are about to see.

<sup>19</sup> See also Conee and Feldman (2008: 91-92).

<sup>20</sup> Something similar can be said of the external factualist's treatment of external evidence: even if perceiving or being acquainted with an object counts as having it as part of one's evidence, that is not fine-grained enough to provide evidence to think that there's a tomato present, that there is a red and round object present, etc.

What does satisfying the possession condition look like for the internal factualist? It is implausible that every fact about our mental states is part of our evidence for our beliefs. But when it comes to all sorts of facts about our own experiences, including various facts about how things perceptually seem or appear to us, we have no problem being able to “just tell” that they hold—they are facts with which we are acquainted, or of which we are directly aware. Perhaps only such internal facts can count as our (basic) evidence.<sup>21</sup>

As already discussed in relation to external factualism, some might prefer to say that we can possess facts as evidence by knowing them (or perhaps by being in a position to know them), where this knowledge is not understood in terms of justified belief. The internal factualist might similarly hold that one’s evidence for believing that *P* is simply that it appears to one that *P*, and one possesses the fact that it appears that *P* as evidence in virtue of knowing it (or being in a position to know it). The internal factualist can accept evidentialism by taking one’s having justification to believe that *P* to depend essentially on having evidence for *P* by knowing that it appears to one that *P*.

Either way, the view is that we have a kind of fundamental or direct access—via acquaintance or direct awareness or primitive sort of knowledge—to internal facts, and by virtue of that we have these facts as potential evidence for our perceptual beliefs.

Many understand perceptual experiences or appearances as states with propositional or representational contents (i.e., they can be true or false, accurate or inaccurate), where the experience’s having this content does not depend on what one believes or what concepts one has. Others deny this, holding that our perceptual experiences are experiences of sense data, qualia, ways of being appeared-to, complex universals, objects or facts, or something of the sort.<sup>22</sup> We can describe perceptual experiences using propositions (e.g., “I see that the car is in the driveway”; “it appears that it is raining”), as I will sometimes do below, but this does not trivially imply that the perceptual experience itself has propositional content. Let’s leave open for now exactly how to understand perceptual experiences. Whatever they involve, the internal factualist could hold that the fact, for example, that it appears to me that there is a round object is evidence for the belief that there is a round object present. Typically, any particular experience involves a lot more; an appearance that there is a round object present typically involves many other elements—qualitative, representational, or both. But the internal factualist we are now considering says that it’s specifically that I’m having an appearance that there is a round thing present that provides evidence to think that there is a round thing present.

The internal factualist runs into trouble, however, in trying to bridge the internal and the external. By the probability condition, it is not enough that I be aware of the fact that it perceptually appears that *P* in order for this fact to serve as evidence for me that *P*; this fact must raise the probability that *P*. But the mere fact that I have this appearance does not—on its own—make it very probable (if at all) that *P*; it gives me little or no reason, a priori, to think that

---

<sup>21</sup> Views that affirm that we have acquaintance with internal facts have been the subject of various objections, from multiple directions, for many decades. For a review of some of the main objections and responses to them, see Hasan and Fumerton (2018).

<sup>22</sup> Hybrid views are also possible, e.g., the view that experiences have representational content, and there having this depends partly on their involving sense data, qualia, etc.

P is true. As Comesaña and McGrath put it: “That one has a certain experience presenting something as being the case just isn’t a strong reason to believe it is the case. It certainly isn’t as strong as the reasons *we* take ourselves to have when we see a tomato in front of us in the grocery store” (2016). Indeed, I think the problem is more serious: why should possessing this fact give me *any* reason to think that P is true than my possessing the fact that I believe or judge that P would? This is a simple, but quite serious, problem. Even granting that seemings or appearances and beliefs are distinct states, why should the former sort of propositional or representational state with P as its content count as evidence that raises the probability of P, whereas the latter does not? The problem is perhaps clearest when we take appearances or seemings to be propositional or representational states, but it also seems to apply just as much views that take the perceptual evidence that (say) there is a round object present to be an appearance of a round object, where this is understood non-representationally. Again: why should having such a mere appearance that there is a round object constitute evidence while having a mere belief that there is a round object present does not? Note that the same problem applies whether the internal factualist takes the possession of the fact that is evidence to involve some fundamental relation of awareness or acquaintance, or some fundamental kind of knowledge.

Perhaps what is needed is some reason to think that my present appearance is trustworthy. The appearance might be part of one’s evidence for a corresponding perceptual belief, but alone it is not evidence. The addition of facts about past perceptual experiences, or experiential regularities, might make a significant difference. Once experiential regularities are added to our total evidence, it is much more plausible that they provide evidence for the reliability of our perceptual appearances, in the form of an inference to the best explanation: that our perceptual appearances are in fact caused by external objects having the spatial properties they appear to us to have provides a powerful explanation of these appearances, and arguably a better explanation than alternative hypotheses like the hypothesis that we are merely dreaming or victims of a Cartesian evil demon.

There have been a number of recent attempts to defend the justification of beliefs about the external world in this way (BonJour 1999, Vogel 2008, McCain 2014). However, they seem to run into a serious problem, at least in combination with evidentialism. We can grant that *if* we have experiential regularities as evidence, then they could serve as evidence for beliefs about the external world. But do we possess such evidence? If we require that the subject actually has had the relevant experiential patterns or regularities, that seems to run into a version of the new evil demon problem: we can imagine a subject S at time t, who has had the relevant experiences in the past, and another S\* who has not, but who is internally just like S at time t. They would share all the same present experiences and other mental states, including any conscious and stored memories about their past experiences. Intuitively, they are equally justified. But only S has actually had the relevant experiential regularities in the past, and so only S is justified according to this view. If one is convinced that the new evil demon problem is a problem for the external factualist, it’s not clear why one should feel any different here.

A possible reply is to take the relevant fundamental evidence to include not facts about past experiences or experiential regularities, but facts about one's present (conscious or stored) memories of past perceptual experiences. But what is required for one to possess these facts as evidence for propositions about the reliability of our perceptual appearances? Suppose we again invoke some kind of direct, introspective access, via some basic form of awareness or knowledge, to these apparent memories. It is implausible that we could access or be conscious of all the relevant detailed facts about apparent memories of past experiences "at once" (let alone appreciate the relevance of this broad evidence base to the reliability of our appearances, if we require that as well). It seems that we would have to depend at the very least on a kind of working memory in order to access and keep track of the contents of our memories of perceptual experiences. But, even setting aside the worry that this may be problematically circular, we would be allowing a possibly false or inaccurate state of working memory to provide evidence. We seem, in other words, to be accepting a form of non-factualism about memorial evidence. Why not, in that case, just accept non-factualism about perceptual evidence?

Perhaps this last argument can be resisted. Some might treat perception and memory as fundamentally different, accept internal factualism about perceptual evidence but reject it for memorial evidence. Some might respond by rejecting the assumption that possessing some E as basic evidence requires being able to access or be conscious of all of E "at once" or without using memory.<sup>23</sup>

Even so, a worry remains: it seems doubtful that we have access to an adequate enough base of perceptual experiences and apparent memories to provide evidence of the sort that supports belief in the reliability of our perceptual experiences (let alone be able to appreciate the connection—grasp that the evidence does indeed support or make probable that our perceptual experiences are reliable). And even if we do have such access, we often form (apparently justified) judgments about what we see without relying on detailed facts about our past experiences.

### **Non-factualism**

According to the non-factualist, the basic perceptual evidence consists not of facts but propositions, including false ones. The view could be motivated as an improvement on the factualist views: like external factualism and unlike the internal factualism, it can resist taking our basic evidence to be *about* what is internal and so avoid the problem of bridging the internal and the external. But unlike the external factualist, it seems better equipped to avoid the new evil demon problem; two individuals might share all the same evidence (by possessing the relevant propositions) even though the evidence is false for one and true for the other.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> But how then shall we extend what counts as evidence one possesses on the internal factualist view? It seems too strong to say that if one possesses each of E1...En as part of one's total evidence (say, because one can be directly aware of each), then one possesses the conjunctive fact that *E1 and E2...and En* as basic evidence as well.

<sup>24</sup>But see Comesaña and McGrath (2016) for a complication. Perhaps the propositions won't be the same across veridical and hallucinatory cases for propositions involving demonstrative content (e.g., "this is a tomato" or "this

What, according to the non-factualist, is one's perceptual evidence, and what might possessing one's perceptual evidence look like? One answer is to take perceptual experiences or appearances to have propositional content, and to take one's basic perceptual evidence to consist of these contents. Its perceptually appearing to S that P counts as a way of possessing P as evidence. And this evidence counts as a reason for the subject to believe P in virtue of the entailment between the content of the seeming and the content of the belief: P entails P (and if we accept the appreciation condition, the subject can appreciate this entailment). On this account, P can be evidence for believing P when you have a propositional appearance that P.

Even granting that perceptual appearances have propositional contents, why should a “non-factive” or possibly false perceptual appearance that P count as a way of possessing P as evidence, whereas other possibly false propositional attitudes like entertaining or believing that P, fearing or hoping that P, don't count? The fact that a proposition figures in the latter states doesn't allow me to acquire justification by inferring obvious entailments from them, so why should it allow me to do so in the case of perceptual appearances?

One might respond by appealing to the phenomenology of perceptual appearances. The state is not merely propositional or representational, it is “forceful” (Huemer 2001: 77-79), “assertive” (Tucker 2010: 530); it has “the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are” (Tolhurst 1998: 298-9). Appearances essentially involve this presentational phenomenology, while beliefs, fears, desires, etc., do not. But now it seems that it is no longer the propositional content P of the appearance that is the evidence; it is the fact that one has a state with a distinctive phenomenology directed at the propositional content P. If having an appearance that P were only relevant in being a way of possessing evidence for P, but not itself part of one's evidence for P, why couldn't judging or occurrently believing that P count as a way of possessing evidence for P as well? If the phenomenology of the state is not part of the evidence, then why can't a state lacking that specific phenomenology, but still involving the same content and a positive, broadly affirmative or assertoric relation to it provide the same evidence? Saying “one can acquire a proposition as evidence by having an appearance directed at it, but not by having a thought or belief directed at it,” where this is supposed to be a rock-bottom explanation, is ad hoc and unsatisfying.

A second problem is that it's not clear how to get non-conclusive justification that P from this picture.<sup>25</sup> If P is one's evidence—not that it seems that P or that P is probable—then how could one's evidence provide only some, non-conclusive degree of justification for the perceptual belief that P? One way to avoid this problem is to take the evidence to be the fact that we have a seeming or appearance that P, rather than P. But that would be to accept internal factualism.

We have seen that the combination of evidentialism with external factualism, internal factualism, and non-factualism about basic perceptual evidence each face serious difficulties. Some who

---

looks like a tomato”). They argue, however, that one's justification is plausibly the same, even if the propositions are not exactly the same.

<sup>25</sup> McGrath (2018) raises this worry.

wish to allow perceptual appearances to provide foundational justification might give up evidentialism: all non-basic or inferentially justified beliefs require evidence (in the form of other propositions justifiably believed), but foundational or non-inferential justification does not.<sup>26</sup> However, let's try, one more time, to find the evidence in perception.

### **Back to internal factualism**

Recall the problem for the internal factualist: the perceptual evidence we have must make probable our perceptual beliefs, but the internal facts regarding our present perceptual appearances do not make them very probable, if at all. Perhaps the subject's epistemic situation would improve if we include more internal facts in the picture; perhaps facts about my present perceptual experience, together with facts about my memories of past experiences or experiential regularities, do make probable that my present perceptual experience is veridical. It is doubtful, however, that we have access to an adequate enough base of such experiences and apparent memories to provide evidence (let alone be able to appreciate the connection—grasp that the evidence does indeed support or make probable that our perceptual experiences are reliable); and it is arguably a case of overintellectualization to say that our most basic justified perceptual beliefs depend on such evidence.

In this final section, I sketch and motivate a version of internal factualism that expands the sorts of facts that one can be directly aware of, not by including external facts as external factualists do, nor by including facts about past experiences or facts about apparent memories of past experiences as some internal factualists do. Rather, it includes a sort of complex internal fact, suitable to serve as a stronger basis for justification, while being of a sort that could plausibly be grasped without relying on apparent memories of experiential regularities.

So, what is this fact that can serve as evidence for perceptual beliefs? What fact is it that I am acquainted with or directly aware of—or, if you like, what do I have a primitive knowledge of—and in virtue of which I have some evidence to believe that there is a physical or spatial object of some kind – say, a tree – present? Let's focus purely on beliefs about the spatial or spatio-temporal features of such objects as the tree, and set aside beliefs about such things as the age, species, or cell-structure of trees.

I'm acquainted with fact T: *innumerable sensory details arranged tree-ly (or arranged tree-wise)*. To be aware of innumerable sensory details arranged tree-wise is more—much more—than being aware of innumerable sensory details that happen to be so arranged. I can imagine being aware of this but not of T. (This is analogous to one's being aware of various speckles, without being aware of their being 5 speckles, or of their being arranged in a particular pattern.) We've all experienced images that seem to consist only of random splotches of color suddenly come to life once a particular three-dimensional figure or face is recognized. The colors do not disappear or morph into radically different features when this happens; rather, a complex of relations between these elements or aspects in experience, a certain structure, emerges that is partly constituted by those elements.

---

<sup>26</sup> For example, Pryor (2005), Sosa (2007), McGrath (2018), Comesaña and McGrath (2016).

Moreover, the awareness of T is more—much more—than having and being aware of a seeming that there is a tree here. I have been in the dark where it seemed to me that there was a figure standing in front of me, without there being much, if anything, by way of sensory details that fit the seeming. Nor is awareness of T merely being acquainted with both at once. I can imagine being acquainted with a seeming that there is a tree, being acquainted with myriad sensory details, without being acquainted with sensory details being organized tree-ly.

Consider a simple example, that of the Necker cube or wire cube (in the figure below, on the left). Looking at an image of the Necker cube typically evokes an experience of lines arranged cube-wise, lines arranged to form a cube. They could have been arranged differently, such that either they lack any more or less specific spatial structure relative to each other, or perhaps even arranged in incongruous ways, as they are in experiences had when looking at illusions as of impossible objects (including impossible variations on the Necker cube, like the image on the right, or the Penrose triangle below it).

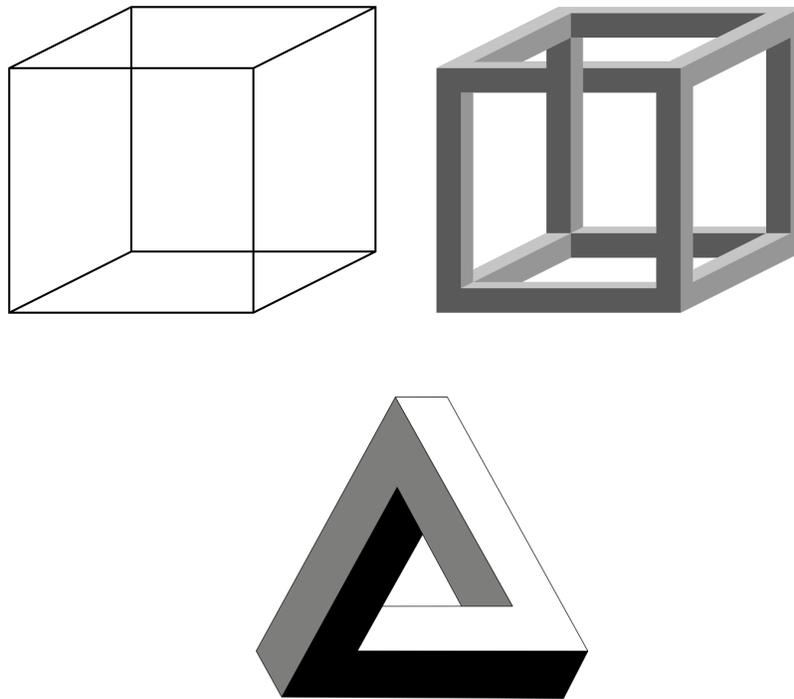


Fig. 1. Necker cube (left), impossible cube (right), and penrose triangle (bottom)

The Necker cube, considered as an illusion of depth, involves minimal detail, and so it is no surprise that it admits of a kind of ambiguity: there's a sense in which we can experience the lines as arranged in one of at least three ways: a cube looked at from above, a cube looked at from below, or (with difficulty) merely as a pattern of lines on a plane (the page).<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Of course, with the Necker cube and other optical illusions drawn or printed on a page, there is an illusion of depth accompanied by a non-illusory experience of flatness or lack of depth. So, already there, we have an example of a kind of experience of incompatible spatial properties (though the multiple cues we receive of the flatness of the page tend to lead to an overall impression of flatness).

My typical experiences are not as minimal; they are manifestly rich with details coherently fitting together as though they were parts of a three-dimensional spatial layout. Why is it that I have an experience as of various elements or aspects manifestly arranged as they would be in a more-or-less specific spatial layout? They need not be so coherently, spatially arranged. I could have had the sort of visual experiences I typically have when my eyes are closed, in pitch dark, or the sort of experiences one might have when looking at static on an old television. Or I might have experiences of sensory details arranged in dissonant or incongruous ways, as when I look at optical illusions of impossible objects. The natural, straightforward explanation is that there is in reality a more complete, determinate spatial layout corresponding to the incomplete, less determinate but still quite specific spatial arrangement I experience. And so, my having an experience of various sensory details being so arranged makes probable that there is something that is so arranged in reality.<sup>28</sup>

Thus far I've been focusing on visual experiences. But our typical experiences involve more. Currently, I am presented with a visual sense of the shape and position of complex surfaces corresponding to parts of what I take to be my hands and fingers, and parts of the keyboard. I have a rough, proprioceptive sense of the shapes and relative positions I take to correspond to parts of my hands and fingers. I also have a tactile-cum-kinesthetic sense of what I take to be my fingers tapping against flat, smooth surfaces. Moreover, the shapes in my visual experience are positioned and moving or changing relative to each other in ways that correspond to my kinesthetic and tactile senses. It takes hardly any time to notice this—much less time than writing the previous sentence, let alone the time it would take to attempt to describe all that I attend to.

What held of visual experience alone holds across the modalities as well: it is not inevitable that the features of my experiences correspond to each other in this way. I could have experiences of visual, proprioceptive, and tactile senses that conflict across these modalities. It is possible to have a visual experience as of a hand reaching out to touch a sphere, while having a proprioceptive-tactile experience as of reaching out and touching a cube. Moreover, I could have experiences that do not conflict in any way, but that also do not cohere with each other. For example, I could have a visual experience as of a tree in front of me and a proprioceptive and tactile experience as of tapping a foot.

My view of myself as an embodied being with hands typing on a keyboard makes it understandable why I experience what I do, understandable why these different features of experience hang together in this way. That these (or at least similar) features are exemplified is a much better explanation of these presentations than one in which their being related in this way is just an accident, or the result of some cause that lacks any such spatial properties.

I have sometimes caught myself looking around for my glasses while wearing them. Our search for evidence in favor of our perceptual beliefs can be like that—so much a part of our perspective on the world that we don't notice it. The typical perceptual experience is quite rich. Virtually every moment of our conscious, waking lives, our view of ourselves as embodied beings in a

---

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed defense of this sort of justification for external world beliefs, focusing just on visual presentations, see Hasan (2018). In that article I do not, however, develop the idea that the evidential basis for a perceptual belief might be available in the present.

spatial world helps us make sense of our experiences and how these experiences—or features in experience—hang together, making it understandable why we experience what we do.

Thinking of the epistemically efficacious perceptual experience as a propositional state, with propositional content corresponding to a perceptual belief, can encourage a rather anemic view of the evidence provided by perceptual experience, where the qualitative aspects disappear or are mere “raw feels” that are set aside as epistemically insignificant. Earlier I said that I wanted to leave open exactly how to understand perceptual appearances. And I still want to leave the matter relatively open. (I still want to allow my reader to insist that experiences have representational or propositional content.) However, it is highly plausible that our perceptual experiences are rich in a way that, for example, a seeming understood as a state with propositional content need not be.

The view tentatively defended here can explain why it is tempting to agree with those who say that a perceptual appearance that P provides (prima facie) justification to believe that P, while avoiding the difficulty of explaining why the mere belief that P does not provide justification. Suppose we take our perceptual appearances to typically involve an awareness of the fact that one is experiencing a rich complex or cluster of spatiotemporal properties, where some core properties are related in just the ways we should expect if they were instantiated. Their being instantiated is a straightforward explanation of the experience. (And so it is plausible that we can satisfy the appreciation condition as well.) This is why it is intuitive to take our typical perceptual appearances at face value, without inviting the question why belief cannot play the same role.

The foregoing is but a sketch of a form of internal factualism that locates the basic evidence for our perceptual beliefs. Much more needs to be said to flesh out the details of the account and defend it against objections. If it can be defended, it promises to provide what some might call the “holy grail” of perceptual epistemology: an account that accepts the intuitive thesis of evidentialism, preserves a strong connection between justification and (probable) truth, avoids the new evil demon problem, and provides a plausible response to radical skepticism about perceptual belief.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for conversations on this topic with Richard Fumerton and Matt McGrath, and for very helpful comments on a draft from Clayton Littlejohn.

## **References**

- Beddor, B. (2021). “Evidentialism.” In Maria Lasonen-Aarnio & Clayton M. Littlejohn (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evidence*. Routledge.
- BonJour, Laurence (1999). “Foundationalism and the external world.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13:229-249.

- Brewer, B. (2011), *Perception and its Objects*. Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, S. (1984). "Justification and Truth." *Philosophical Studies* 46 (3): 279–95.
- Comesaña, J. & McGrath, M. (2016). "Perceptual reasons." *Philosophical Studies* 173 (4):991-1006.
- Conee, E. & Feldman, R. (2008). "Evidence." In Quentin Smith (ed.), *Epistemology: New Essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Fumerton, R. (1995). *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Goldman, Alvin (1979). What is Justified Belief. In George Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge*. Boston: D. Reidel. pp. 1-25.
- Hasan, A. & Fumerton, R. (2018). "Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/justep-foundational/>>.
- Hasan, A. (2011). "Classical Foundationalism and Bergmann's Dilemma for Internalism." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 36:391-410.
- Hasan, A. (2013). "Internalist Foundationalism and the Sellarsian Dilemma." *Res Philosophica* 90 (2):171-184.
- Hasan, A. (2017). "In Defense of Rationalism about Abductive Inference." In Ted Poston & Kevin McCain (eds.), *Best Explanations: New Essays on Inference to the Best Explanation*. Oxford University Press.
- Hasan, A. (2018). "Skepticism and Spatial Objects." *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 8 (2):73-95.
- Huemer, M. (2001). *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Huemer, M. (2018). "The Virtues of Direct Realism." In Robert French & John R. Smythies, (eds.) *Direct versus Indirect Realism: A Neurophilosophical Debate on Consciousness*. Elsevier.
- Kelly, T. (2006). "The Cost of Skepticism: Who Pays?" *Philosophical Studies* 131 (3):695-712.
- Kelly, T. (2016). "Evidence." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/evidence/>>.
- Littlejohn, C. (2018). "Evidence and its Limits." In Conor McHugh Jonathan Way & Daniel Whiting (eds.), *Normativity: Epistemic and Practical*. Oxford University Press.
- Littlejohn, C. (2009). "The Externalist's Demon." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 (3):399-434.

- Lyons, J. (2009). *Perception and Basic Beliefs: Zombies, Modules, and the Problem of the External World*. Oxford University Press.
- Marr, D. (1982). *Vision*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- McCain, K. (2014). *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification*. New York: Routledge.
- McGinn, M. (2012). "Non-inferential Knowledge." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 112 (1pt1):1-28.
- McDowell, J. (1994). *Mind and World*. Oxford University Press.
- McGrath, M. (2018). "The Evidence in Evidentialism." In Kevin McCain (ed.) *Believing in Accordance with the Evidence*. Springer Verlag.
- Millar, A. (2019). *Knowing by Perceiving*. Oxford University Press.
- Moser, P. (1989). *Knowledge and Evidence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Neta, R. (2008). "What evidence do you have?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 59 (1):89-119.
- Pollock, J. (2001). "Nondoxastic Foundationalism." In M. De Paul (ed.), *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pollock, J. and Cruz, J. (1999). *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2nd edn. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Pryor, J. (2005). "There is immediate justification." In Matthias Steup & Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Blackwell. pp. 181-202.
- Schellenberg, S. "Experience and Evidence." *Mind* 122 (487):699-747.
- Schroeder, M. (2008). "Having reasons." *Philosophical Studies* 139 (1):57-71.
- Sellars, W. (1963). *Science, Perception, and Reality*. Humanities Press.
- Silva, P. "Knowledge First Theories of Justification." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, <https://iep.utm.edu/kft-just/>, accessed March 25, 2021.
- Sosa, E. (2007). *A Virtue Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sutton, J. (2005) "Stick To What You Know." *Nous* 39 (3):359–396.
- Tolhurst, W. E. (1998). "Seemings." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (3):293-302.
- Travis, C. (2004). "The Silence of the Senses." *Mind* 113 (449): 57-94.

Tucker, C. (2010). “Why open-minded people should endorse dogmatism.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1):529-545.

Tucker, C. (2021) “Experience as Evidence.” In Maria Lasonen-Aarnio & Clayton M. Littlejohn (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evidence*. Routledge.

Vogel, J. (2008). “Internalist Responses to Skepticism.” In J. Greco (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, 533–556. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.