*Rationality of Perception* by Susanna Siegel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. xxv, 221, £ 35

On July 6, 2016, in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, Philandro Castile, a 32 year old nutrition service supervisor was pulled over by police officer Jeronimo Yanez. The following conversation ensued, which was recorded:

Yanez: Do you have your license and insurance?

Castile: Sir, I have to tell you I do have a…

Yanez: OK.

Castile: … firearm on me.

Yanez OK. Don’t reach for it then!

Castile: I’m, I’m

Yanez: Don’t pull it out!

Castile: I’m not pulling it out.

Diamond Reynolds (Yanez’s girlfriend): He’s not

Yanez: Don’t pull it out!

And then Yanez shot Castile seven times. Castile died twenty minutes later.

You may not think of this example as having particular relevance for philosophy of perception, but it is extremely relevant. Castile was reaching for his driver’s license but Yanez took this to be reaching for a gun. As he later said: “I thought I was gonna die” (Minnesota Department of public Safety Bureau of Criminal Apprehension transcript of the interview of Yanez and his attorneys, July 7, 2016).

Yanez was looking at Castile, having a perceptual experience. This perceptual experience gave rise to the thought that he was gonna die. Which part of this chain of mental processes is the one that can be pinpointed as the cause of killing an innocent man?

The standard picture is that Yanez formed his belief on the basis of a nonveridical perceptual experience. It seemed to Yanez as if Castile was reaching for a gun. And he took this experience at face value: he believed his eyes – that’s what we’re supposed to do. There is nothing wrong (epistemically or morally) with the transition from this nonveridical perceptual experience to the belief that he was gonna die. You or I would have made the same transition to the same belief given the experience. What is wrong is the experience itself: that it is nonveridical. But the reasonable thing for Yanez to do was to take this experience at face value: to trust his eyes. So Yanez was behaving responsibly: he really didn’t do anything wrong.

Disturbingly, this was in fact the jury’s decision as Yanez was acquitted of charges of manslaughter on June 16, 2017. The jury saw the video that recorded the conversation quoted above. Nonetheless, they decided that Yanez was not guilty. And this itself should make us really care about how this standard picture of perceptual justification could be questioned.

One way of resisting this standard picture is to move away from epistemic internalism: the question about whether having the belief that he was gonna die was justified from Yanez’s point of view. If we go epistemic externalist, Yanez’s point of view is of no relevance. His belief that he was gonna die was justified if it was formed reliably. And it was not. So he was not justified to hold this belief – let alone to fire those seven shots. If we are externalist, Yanez should not be acquitted. The problem with reliabilism and other forms of epistemic externalism in this specific context is that it is unlikely to move members of the jury who needs to decide what Yanez was (legally, ethically, epistemically) responsible for. The jury cares about Yanez’s point of view, not about how reliable his belief-forming mechanisms are.

The aim of Susanna Siegel’s book is to question the standard picture, but do so without giving up on internalism. While her examples are a little less high stakes than the one I use here (which happened after the book went to print), they are structurally similar to it. The central example is of Jill suspecting that Jack may be angry with her, which can influence his perceptual experience of Jack in a way that she sees him as angry (which then reinforces her suspicion that he was angry at her).

Siegel’s main claim is that perceptual experience is not an unjustified justifier. It is not epistemically innocent. As she put it, it has epistemic charge. As a result, there may be something epistemically fishy about Jill’s perceptual experience of Jack’s face. And there may be something epistemically fishy about Yanez’s perceptual experience of Castile.

But what is it that’s epictemically fishy about Yanes’s perceptual experience of Castile? Here I need to add two pieces of relevant information. First, Castile was black. Second, before pulling Castile over, Yanez told his partner that the driver may resemble a robbery suspect because of his ‘wide-set nose’. So Yanez’s possible racial bias as well as his more specific suspicions about Castile are part of what his perceptual experience was influenced by – in the same way as Jill’s perceptual experience of Jack’s face is influenced by her own suspicion that Jack might be angry.

Siegel has a more specific story to tell about the nature of these influences and she describes them as inferences. Her claim is that perceptual experiences can be inferred from other mental states – both from ‘sub-experiences’ and from the person’s ‘outlook’. In the Yanez case, his perceptual experience could be inferred from the sub-experience of, say, Castile’s grip-size (that Yanez later described as too wide for reaching for a wallet) or of the swiftness of Castile’s movement as well as from Yanez’s outlook (which, as we have seen, may have been influenced by his racial bias and his more specific suspicions about the driver’s past).

That this relation between perceptual experiences and these other mental state is an inferential relation is the subject of a large chunk of the book, but I take this to be detachable from Siegel’s main claim that perceptual experiences have epistemic charge. They have epistemic charge as a result of some kind of relation to other mental states that give rise to it (such as one’s sub-experiences and outlook), but this relation may or may not be inference. So those who criticize Siegel’s account by attacking the concept of inference she employs in this argument seem to miss the bigger point.

About this bigger point. Siegel is explicit that the outlook can be unconscious, or, as she says, pre-conscious. If Yanez had racial bias, he may not have been aware of it. And not all aspects of his perceptual state (such as the representation of Castile’s grip size or the swiftness of his movement) had to be conscious. But this poses a dilemma for Siegel.

What is special about Siegel’s approach is that it manages to keep a middle ground between reliabilism and what I described as the ‘standard picture’, which is really a form of phenomenal conservatism: the view that perceptual experiences prima facie justify beliefs by virtue of their phenomenology. But depending on how we think about the unconscious nature of outlooks, Siegel’s view may lose its elegant third way status.

There is a reason why Siegel talks about outlooks as pre-conscious and not as unconscious. It seems important for her that these states can become conscious. And if they can, then in some way in which we can have access to them – which would make her view a form of internalism, keeping it safely away from reliabilism.

But in some of the examples Siegel uses, especially the more politically charged ones (similar to the example I started this book review with) some aspects of the outlook are not mental states that could become accessible to us, not in any interesting sense of ‘could’ anyway. If Yanez had a racial bias, this bias may not be accessible to him at all. But if the antecedents of the perceptual experience – and, importantly, those antecedents that make the perceptual experience fishy – are not just not conscious but not even potentially accessible to the subject, then the position gets dangerously close to the reliabilist alternative.

Philosophy of perception was, for decades, the handmaid of epistemology. The only interesting questions concerning perception were considered to be about how it can lead to knowledge. This changed a at the end of the 20th century when philosophy of perception got more and more emancipated from its epistemological origins and became a genuinely independent philosophical subdiscipline with debates and questions that are interesting and important in their own right.

Siegel’s book is an important indicator of yet another more recent shift, where the roles are somewhat reversed and it is epistemology that follows philosophy of perception. This trend started, arguably, with the late Dretske, and Siegel’s book is in many ways very different from those papers. What they share is a vision according to which we can find out some important truths about the nature of perception without relying on epistemology, but these truths have major consequences for epistemology.

Does this mean that epistemology is becoming the handmaid of philosophy of perception? If only… But it does mean that genuinely philosophy of perception questions (like the question about how the outlook is related to perceptual experience) has far-reaching consequences not only for epistemology, but also for questions about responsibility and even legal issues – as the Castile example shows. Siegel’s book is a big step in this direction.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Bence Nanay

University of Antwerp and University of Cambridge

[bn206@cam.ac.uk](mailto:bn206@cam.ac.uk) or [bence.nanay@ua.ac.be](mailto:bence.nanay@ua.ac.be)

1. This work was supported by the ERC Consolidator grant 726251, the FWO Odysseus grant G.0020.12N and the FWO research grant G0C7416N. I am grateful for comments by Susanna Siegel, Harmen Ghijsen, Jake Berger and Lu Teng. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)