

## The Arationality of Perception: Comments on Susanna Siegel\*

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Susanna Siegel's *The Rationality of Perception* flies in the face of orthodoxy, proposing a revolution in our understanding of perceptual justification. It is both creative and rigorous. She first defends what she calls the *Downgrade Thesis* about perceptual justification. Then she suggests a bold explanation of Downgrade: experiences themselves can be rational or irrational.

I will pursue a question about her foundational Downgrade Thesis. In closing, I will briefly address her bold proposed explanation of it.

### 1. A Question about the Downgrade Thesis

The Downgrade Thesis (DT) concerns cognitive penetration, which Siegel calls “hijacking”. To avoid controversies about whether it actually occurs, let's focus on a hypothetical case, the *hijacked hallucination*. Suppose you have an irrational expectation that there will be a red and round tomato on the table in the next room. You enter the room, and you magically have a perfect hallucination as of a red and round tomato on the table, in response to your prior expectation (see Figure 1 below).

Suppose you also magically forget about your prior expectation. So you have no idea this is a hallucination originating from your expectation – in general, no idea anything is amiss. Do you have the ordinary level of justification for believing that a red and round thing is there?

DT says No (14, 67). In this case, even though you have a vivid experience as of a red and round thing *right there* and you have no idea that your experience is nonveridical, you have *less than* the ordinary, base-line (propositional) justification for believing that a red and round thing is on the table, the level of justification you would get from a non-hijacked tomato-experience. This is because, *unknown to you*, your experience is *cognitively tainted*: it is a response to your own prior irrational expectation that a red, round thing is on table. DT says that this applies to every “core” hijack case.

In fact, Siegel goes further. She says that in this case your resulting perceptual belief that a red and round thing is there is “*irrational*”, and (although you don't know it) the “*reasonable*” response for you is to suspend judgment (xxiv, 14, 21, 22).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Siegel, then, explicitly ties DT to *rationality* and *reasonableness* (16, penultimate paragraph; xxiv, 14, 21, 22). Cohen (2014, 844-847) persuasively argues that, if we instead totally divorced ‘epistemic justification’ from our ordinary concepts of reasons and rationality, it would become unclear what it means, making debates in

Opponents of DT – for instance, Pryor (2000, 541), Huemer (2013, 743), and I would add myself here – say: “Wait, this is totally counterintuitive! There you are, having a vivid experience as of a red and round thing *right there*. You have no reason to think it’s nonveridical. Surely, you have a reason to believe that a red and round thing is there – no less than if your experience had been an ordinary hallucination *not* caused by cognitive hijacking. And, since your belief that such a thing is there is responsive to your sufficient reasons, it’s a paradigmatic example of a *rational* (though false) belief.”

Here is my question. At start of her book, Siegel candidly acknowledges the force of such intuitions against DT (6). Yet in chapter 2 she suddenly, and without explanation, leaps for DT (14). My question is: *why?* I’ll consider some potential answers in the next two sections.

## 2. Intuitions about Cases

Siegel sometimes seems to suggest that pro-DT intuitions “win out” over anti-DT intuitions:

Of all the hijacked experiences I’ve discussed, the pressure to say that the experience’s epistemic role is compromised [i. e. that it can no longer support rational belief] is perhaps strongest in the case of the racial attitude. These examples therefore have an especially powerful dialectical role. (170)

The Downgrade Thesis is motivated by the idea that in the core cases of hijacked experiences, [even] where the subjects are unaware of the influence of their [prior beliefs] on their experiences, they don’t *seem* to be in a position to rationally strengthen [their beliefs] on the basis of those experiences. (67; my italics)

[Opponents of DT] allow that it is *rational* to strengthen the outlook behind the influence on the experience [e. g. rational to believe that a red and round thing present on the basis of a vivid experience as of one – AP]. It therefore does little to explain away *the sense that* [this] is epistemically problematic [that is, *not* rational]. (69; my italics)

Here Siegel’s only criticism of opponents of DT amounts to this: “we have the sense or intuition that it’s *irrational* for hijack victims to believe the content of their experience.”

But I found this odd because, as Siegel herself acknowledged earlier in the book, opponents of DT do not share this intuition. For instance, in the hijacked tomato-

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epistemology (including the debate over DT) totally unclear. (Of course, the ordinary terms “reason” and “rational” are themselves somewhat vague and unclear, as are all ordinary epistemic terms – “knows”, “evidence”, etc. But we still understand what they mean and so can assess claims framed in terms of them.)

hallucination case, believing the content of your tomato-experience is intuitively totally rational in the circumstances.

In fact, I think that our intuitions strongly count *against* DT. Consider what I call *seamless hijacking* (a variant on the case of Pautz 2011, fn. 19; and White 2014, 312). Here you seamlessly transition from a hijack situation into a non-hijack situation. In particular, the case starts off just like the hijacked hallucination case. You unwittingly have a perfect hallucination of a tomato on the table in response to your prior irrational expectation. Then something even odder happens. After you have the experience for thirty seconds, it starts being caused by an evil scientist in control of your brain, rather than by your prior expectation. So it's no longer cognitively tainted. You continue to have the experience in this way for another thirty seconds. Then you leave the room.

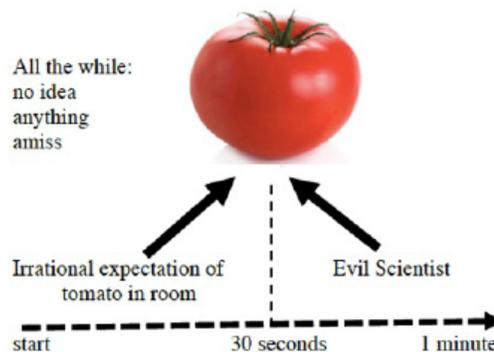


Figure 1

DT has a very surprising implication here:

**Justification Increase:** Thirty seconds into your one-minute long tomato-experience, you suddenly have *more justification* for believing that a red, round thing is present. This is so even though there's no change in your tomato-experience, you have no idea anything is amiss, and you acquire no new information,

Here is why DT implies this. Before the midpoint, your hallucination was a result of hijacking, though you had no idea. So, by DT, before the midpoint, your justification for believing that a red and round thing is present is *less than* the ordinary, base-line justification. But after the midpoint, your experience is no longer a result of hijacking; it's no longer *cognitively tainted*. So, according to Siegel, your justification for believing that a red and round thing is there goes back *up* to the ordinary, baseline level.

Since here we are considering a single subject through time, we can ask what kind of doxastic changes the subject has a justification for.<sup>2</sup> **More Justification** implies:

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<sup>2</sup> According to White (2014, 312) and myself (Pautz 2011, fn. 19), this makes such diachronic, single-subject cases even more persuasive than standard between-subject cases. In my view, however, between-subject cases would be enough to show DT to be deeply counterintuitive.

**Justification of Confidence Increase:** If while having your tomato-like experience you capriciously increase your credence in the proposition that a red and round thing is there after thirty seconds, you have a (propositional) justification for doing that – even though you learn no information supporting this.

Analogy: if you have more justification for (outright) believing that all ravens are black because you see more and more black ravens, you have a justification for increasing your credence in this proposition.

In fact, Siegel's position implies:

**Rationality Shift:** At the midpoint of your having the tomato-experience, your belief that there is a red and round thing there suddenly goes from being *irrational* to being *rational* – *even though there's no change in your experience, you gain no new information.*

This is because Siegel holds that believing the content of experience is irrational when the experience results from bad cognitive hijacking even if you have no idea (14, xxiv, 14, 21, 22). But (unlike certain radical externalists) she thinks that doing so *is* rational in cases of unwitting illusion and hallucination *not* produced by cognitive hijacking. And, in my example, you seamlessly transition from the one case to the other.

I find Justification Increase and these other implications of DT to be clearly false. Here I'm not relying on a simple form of internalism, the transparency of rationality, a principle linking justification with blamelessness, Huemer's Premise 6 (2013, 746), or dogmatism (Pryor 2000). In the next section, I'll invoke other principles. But now I'm just relying on my gut reaction.<sup>3</sup>

In the first passage quoted above, Siegel says that other cases involving racial attitude provide more convincing support for DT. Consider, for instance, the shootings resulting in the 1964 Harlem riots, the 1973 riots in Queens, and the Ferguson unrest in 2014. In all these cases, the massive intuitive reaction was that the shooters *didn't* have a good reason to believe that their victims were menacing or were posing imminent bodily danger. Now, as Siegel acknowledges, this doesn't support DT, because these cases don't involve hijacked hallucinations of guns or knives where nothing like guns or knives were really

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<sup>3</sup> I note in passing that Siegel herself would (rightly I think) reject Justification Increase in a case where you seamlessly transition from an ordinary hallucination of a tomato to a veridical experience of a tomato (Pautz 2011, fn. 19; and White 2014, 312). This goes against a form externalism on which your evidence is just what you know (since eventually you'd safely *since eventually you'd safely TRULY believe* believe and know that a red and round thing is there, increasing the probability that such a thing is there given your evidence). If Siegel rejects Justification Increase in such a case because intuition counts against it, doesn't consistency demand that she place equal weight on our parallel intuition against Justification Increase in the seamless hijacking case, which runs counter to DT?

present (this kind of cognitive penetration is not actual). But Siegel has suggested that science fiction variants in which there is such cognitive penetration do support DT (in discussion; also xviii).

Let's look at such a case – a twist on one of Siegel's central cases. Suppose that Jill has an irrational racist belief that people of a certain race are angry and menacing. She sees Jack, who belongs to that race. His actual facial expression is neutral (Figure 2b). But, in response to her racist belief, Jill has a massively illusory experience that represents his face as having low-level features (furling of brow, white of teeth) that it does not really have (Figure 2a). However, suppose she has no idea: this is a one-off occurrence and *she has no reason to suspect her experience is illusory*.

Let us also suppose that, at a certain time *t*, Jill's illusory experience of anger-features starts being caused by an *evil scientist*, rather than being a response to her racist belief. It stops being cognitively tainted. Again, she has no idea.

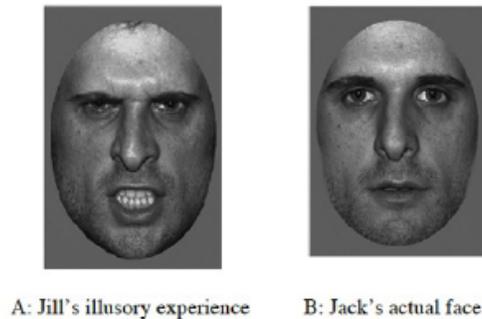


Figure 2: Jill's illusory experience is at first a response to her prior racist belief. At time *t*, it starts being caused by an evil scientist instead. Throughout she has no idea.

As before, DT implies:

**Justification Increase:** As Jill has the anger-experience (Figure 2b), she starts off having *less-than-base-line justification* for believing that Jack's face exhibits anger-features, even though she has no reason to think her experience is anything but veridical. (Indeed, her belief that he has an anger-face is *irrational*.) But at time *t*, *even though she continues to have the same anger-experience (Figure 2a) and acquires no new information*, she suddenly has *greater, base-line justification* for believing this. (Indeed, her anger-belief suddenly becomes *rational*.)

Is Justification Increase any less counterintuitive here than in the tomato-experience example? I don't think so. I don't think many would protest that *in these circumstances* Jill's belief that Jack's face has the anger-features initially enjoyed *less-than-baseline justification* and indeed was *irrational*. Those are just the wrong concepts to use in characterizing what's problematic about her belief. And I don't think many would say that at *t* her anger-belief suddenly goes from being irrational to being rational *even*

*though her experience (Figure 2a) doesn't change and she learns nothing new, as Siegel's view requires.*

A couple of clarifications. (i) It would be wrong to suggest that opponents of DT must accept the obviously false claim that in these circumstances Jill would be justified in shooting Jack. They only say that her *believing that Jack's face has the anger-features* (the content of her experience) is rational in her circumstances. (ii) We opponents of DT can allow that, in such hijack cases, subjects have an epistemic problem. That's uncontroversial. We just reject Siegel's DT, which characterizes the problem with the subjects' perceptual beliefs (e. g. that there is a red, round thing there, or an angry-face) in such cases in terms of *decreased justification* and *irrationality*. Instead, we just say that those perceptual beliefs are *unsafe* and cannot constitute *knowledge*.

### 3. An Argument for the Downgrade Thesis?

So, intuitions about cases cannot support acceptance of DT. In fact, DT has deeply *counterintuitive* implications in some cases (e. g. Justification Increase in the seamless hijacking case involving the tomato-hallucination).

Maybe, though, Siegel would say that there is a strong *argument* for DT founded on more basic premises or principles.

Siegel often suggests that the belief-formation process in hijacking cases is analogous to circular or otherwise irrational inferences (xiv, 6, 7). An inferential process that starts with an irrational belief cannot end with a strengthening of that very belief. This suggests an informal argument by analogy for DT in hijacking cases. However, there is a disanalogy. Hijacking cases don't just involve moving from belief to belief; they involve moving from belief to experience to belief. And opponents of DT will say that experiences, unlike beliefs, are intuitively no less of a source of new reasons in hijack cases. Proponents of DT may deny this, but then we are back to intuition-swapping.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, I think that there is an argument *against* DT. It's inconsistent with plausible epistemic principles. I'll first state the principles, and then reveal the inconsistency.

First, consider:

*Probability Increase:* If there is an increase in your (overall) justification for believing  $p$  between time  $t$  and time  $t^*$ , then the conditional probability of  $p$  given your total evidence at  $t^*$  must be greater than the

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<sup>4</sup> Siegel very briefly suggests (xv) a different argument from analogy: beliefs formed on the basis of hijacked experience are like beliefs influenced by *confirmation bias*. But in typical cases of confirmation bias you know (in a dispositional sense) things that count against some proposition  $p$  but you ignore them you attend only to things that support  $p$ . By contrast, in a hijack case (e. g. the hijacked hallucination case I started with), you don't know *anything* that counts against your perceptual belief. So there's not the same reason to think that your perceptual belief is irrational here.

conditional probability of  $p$  given your total evidence at  $t$  (according to a rational prior probability function).<sup>5</sup>

This intuitive and fits examples. (i) Suppose a dog acquires a justification for believing that a squirrel-shaped thing is around. This might be because the dog has an experience as of a squirrel-shaped thing. The probability that there is a squirrel shaped thing given the dog's evidence is now greater than it was a moment ago.<sup>6</sup> (ii) Suppose you acquire a higher level of justification for believing that all ravens are black. This might be because you learned that more ravens (in a random sample) are black. The probability that all raven are black given your new total evidence is now greater than it was. (iii) If you are in pain, your evidence now includes that you are in pain, which trivially raises the probability that you are in pain.

Here's another plausible principle:

*Weak Availability:* If there is a difference in (propositional) justification between two subjects (or different time-slices of the same subject at different times), then there is a difference in what is available to them.

After all, propositional justification (*ex ante* rationality) depends on your *possessed reasons* or *evidence*, which are available to you. Some (e. g. proponents of a "knowledge-first" approach) would favor an interpretation on which a difference in justification requires a difference what subjects know or are in a position to know. Others would favor a different interpretation of "available". For instance, the experiences of an animal or child incapable of introspection are available to her in the weak sense that it's possible for her beliefs to stand in the *basing relation* to those experiences (Pryor 2005, 215).<sup>7</sup> Weak Availability is neutral here.

Siegel's DT violates Weak Availability and Probability Increase. It implies Justification Increase in the seamless hijacking case (Figure 1): after thirty seconds, you suddenly have greater justification for believing that a red and round thing is there, even though your experience doesn't change and there's no change in what you know. True, in this case, you go from the complex state *having a tomato-experience as a result of cognitive hijacking* to the complex state *having a tomato-experience caused by an evil scientist*. But

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance White 2014, 309. The principle is neutral on what evidence is: what you know, or your experiences (or propositions characterizing your experiences), or something else.

<sup>6</sup> As this example illustrates, Probability Increase doesn't imply that having a justification to believe things about the external world depends on first believing propositions about one's experiences. In fact, "dogmatists" – who would reject this claim – can and should accept Probability Increase (Pryor 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Probability Increase and Weak Availability are generally accepted. In fact, proponents of "knowledge-first" epistemology accept them, even though they are epistemic externalists *in the sense that* they hold that phenomenal duplicates can differ in justification. For they hold that in such cases the difference in justification between phenomenal duplicates is grounded in a difference in what they know and hence what's available to them as evidence (see my footnote 3 above).

you don't know that you are in these states. They're also not available in a different sense: they aren't available as possible bases for your belief (since your beliefs cannot be suitably sensitive to them). So DT's verdict of Justification Increase violates Weak Availability under any interpretation.

DT's verdict of Justification Increase also violates Probability Increase. What, according to Siegel, is your evidence before and after the thirty-second mark? Maybe it's your tomato-like experience (or the proposition that you are having this experience)? But, in that case, your evidence *remains the same* (ignoring time), since your experience remains the same in every way (for instance, it's not the case you start being presented with the proposition that a red and round thing is there with greater "phenomenal force"). Perhaps Siegel would say that, even though your evidence remains the same in some sense, it becomes "stronger" after the midpoint, in that it suddenly supports a higher credence in the proposition that a red and round thing is there. But this goes against Probability Increase. For, if your evidence is the same, it just can't be the case that the conditional probability that there is a red and round thing there *given* your evidence after the midpoint is greater than the conditional probability that there is a red and round thing there *given* your evidence before the midpoint.

Siegel might reply by rejecting Probability Increase and Weak Availability. She might point out that Weak Availability is controversial; for instance, some "reliabilists" would reject it.

My response is twofold. (i) Siegel associates DT with claims about *rationality and reasons* (see my footnote 1). Weak Availability is just a truism about reasons and (ex ante) rationality, but Siegel's claims go against it. Likewise for Probability Increase. Reliabilists *don't* reject Weak Availability *so understood*. They are explicit that they talking about *something else*: "epistemic justification" *where this is totally divorced from considerations of rationality* (which leaves it totally unclear what they're talking about). (See Cohen 2014 for these points.) (ii) Rejecting Probability Increase and Weak Availability might be more palatable if there were counterexamples to these principles elsewhere. But what might those be?

To sum up so far. DT has deeply counterintuitive implications (e. g. **More Justification** in the seamless hijacking case). It's not clear that intuitions consistently support its verdicts in *any* cases (e. g. Jack and Jill). It's also not clear that there is a good argument for it. In fact, there is an argument against it: it violates plausible principles that have no clear counterexamples elsewhere.

#### 4. Can Experiences be Rational or Irrational?

Finally, let me turn to Siegel's main idea that experiences themselves can be rational or irrational. Call this the *Rationality Thesis* (RT). This is a startling thesis. In order for us to place credence in it, we would need a strong argument.

In places, Siegel's argument for RT *seems* to be that it provides the best explanation of DT (xxv, 24). For instance, her idea is that, in the hijacked hallucination case, your experience as of a tomato is itself irrational because it's "inferred" from an initial

irrational expectation. That is why it is downgraded in its power to provide you with a reason to believe that a red and round thing is there.

In my view, such an argument for RT would be problematic. It assumes the DT. And we have seen that DT is *itself* very questionable.

However, I don't think that Siegel's aim is to *establish* RT. She is explicit that her goal is more modest: to clarify it and show it is more defensible than you might have thought (30).

Still, I came away with residual questions about RT.

*First*, I wonder how widely Siegel would apply RT (and DT). Would she apply it to *auditory experiences, smell experiences*, and other non-visual experiences?

Siegel applies RT only to *states with content* (39). But there are plenty of well-known non-visual illusions and hallucinations in which (i) a sensory quality seems to be instantiated in a certain region but (ii) it is not really instantiated there. The content view provides the best explanation. True, there are difficulties with locating audible qualities, olfactory qualities and so on in the world. But similar issues arise for color qualities, and this doesn't undermine a content view of color experience. And if Siegel rejects the content view in these cases, what's her alternative? The sense datum view?

So I don't see how Siegel could justify not extending RT (and DT) to auditory experiences, smell experiences, and so on.

*Second*, Siegel rebuts many arguments against the Rationality Thesis derived from controversial principles (31-38). But surely we sometimes have some *immediate* reason to believe a view to be false, a reason that doesn't derive from any principles. So maybe we likewise have at least some immediate *a priori* reason to think RT to be false: that experiences, like the experience of a red and round thing, are just *not* the kinds of things that are assessable for rationality. This would explain why many have assumed this without much argument.

*Third*, *beliefs* are assessable for rationality, and there are many substantive rational norms for believing. If experiences are assessable for rationality, what are the norms for experiencing? Siegel's positive theory implies one:

You are rationally required not to have experiences (or experiences with content) in response to irrational beliefs.

But are there others? One suggestion is:

You are rationally required not to have experiences with inconsistent contents.

But this would imply that, if you had the waterfall illusion (in which something appears to be moving upwards without changing position, **according to one common description**), you'd be violating a rational norm, and rationality would require that you stop having the experience. This doesn't sound right.

I think that the absence of many plausible rational norms for experiences provides more reason to doubt RT.

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