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A Processive View of Perceptual Experience

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Abstract

The goal of this piece is to put some pressure on Brian O'Shaughnessy's claim that perceptual experiences are necessarily mental processes. The author targets two motivations behind the development of that view. First, O'Shaughnessy resorts to pure conceptual analysis to argue that perceptual experiences are processes. The author argues that this line of reasoning is inconclusive. Secondly, he repeatedly invokes a thought experiment concerning the total freeze of a subject's experiential life. Even if this case is coherent, however, it does not show that perceptual experiences are processes.

Keywords

O'Shaughnessy – perceptual experience – process – state – mental freeze

Although philosophical discussions concerning perceptual experiences are currently in good shape, it is still unclear what we talk about when we talk about perceptual experiences – that is, what kind of entities they are. Philosophers of perception are traditionally inclined to conceive them as mental processes, but explicit reasons to endorse a processive view are hard to come across. An exception to this rule is Brian O'Shaughnessy, who argues for the claim that our perceptual experiences have to be analysed as irreducibly processive mental events. In this piece, I argue that two notorious motivations underpinning his processive stance are inconclusive. Although O'Shaughnessy also discusses a third and crucial set of considerations to the effect that perceptual experience acquaints us with the passage of time, I shall bypass it here: his remarks based on the temporal phenomenology of experience deserve a subtler and more extended discussion than the one I could provide within the limits of this piece. In this sense, my present goal is considerably more

modest: instead of developing an exhaustive critique, all I aim to do here is to address two sets of considerations from which O'Shaughnessy's processive view gains much of its intuitive appeal.

The present task is divided into four sections. First, I turn to Zeno Vendler's seminal work on the ontology of seeing, so as, first, to bring the notion of perceptual experience a bit more into focus; secondly, to introduce an ontological framework like the one at stake in O'Shaughnessy's discussion; and, thirdly, to frame my discussion of O'Shaughnessy's work against the backdrop of a challenge posed by Vendler about the need of mental processes within an account of perceptual experiences. Secondly, I outline the core elements of O'Shaughnessy's processive view of perceptual experiences. Thirdly, I move on to examine one motivation behind that position, namely, that pure conceptual analysis reveals that perceptual experiences must be understood as processes rather than states. I argue that this line of reasoning is inconclusive. Finally, I turn to an illustrative thought experiment concerning the total freeze of a mental life: as far as I can see, O'Shaughnessy takes this fiction precisely to illustrate that, since perceptual experiences fail to exist in circumstances where processes would fail to do so, it is extremely reasonable to conceive perceptual experiences as mental processes. But I shall argue that this case does not entail that perceptual experiences are processes, but only highlights the dynamic character of perceptual phenomena.

1 Setting up the Ontological Question

As just anticipated, this section aims to set up the notion of perceptual experiences within the context of a categorial framework exploited by Zeno Vendler (cf. Vendler 1957). Set against the background of a *stative* ontology of perception inspired by Vendler's work, the import of O'Shaughnessy's *processive* stance will become more transparent. To keep things relatively simple, I shall focus the present discussion on perceptual experiences in their visual modality and those experiential phenomena underpinning cases of veridical perception, not illusion or hallucination.

This piece is fundamentally concerned with the basic conscious or experiential component at the heart of perception, as opposed to more cognitive-laden phenomena, such as perceptual attention or perceptual judgements. To begin putting this experiential ingredient into focus, consider an example inspired by the closing lines of Vendler's seminal piece on verbs and times (cf. Vendler 1957, 159–160). Imagine that a vigilant sailor (call him Jim) stands on deck and looks out for a particular star on a cloudy night: as the sky clears up, Jim spots the

celestial body, his gaze thereby remaining fixed on it from t_1 to t_{10} . If Jim uninterruptedly sees a star from t_1 to t_{10} , he must visually experience it or be aware of it during that period of time:¹ that is, if his visual field remains fixed during that time, the relevant star will look or visually appear a certain way to him.

In the philosophical literature, it is customary to draw a line between *seeing* an object and *being visually aware of* an object. Sometimes, the following semantic fact is stressed: while a construction of the form ‘S sees O’ or ‘S sees that p ’ is supposed to be *factive* in the sense that, if S sees O/that p , it follows that O exists/ p is true; the more technical constructions ‘S visually experiences O’ and ‘S visually experiences that p ’ do not entail O’s existence or p ’s truth (cf. Crane 2005/2011, 2.1). Over and above this semantic difference, it has also been noted that a subject may have visual experiences of a given feature without seeing it (cf. Wolgast 1960, Lowe 1996, 92f.). The thought behind this remark is, I think, that visual experiences constitute a necessary but non-sufficient part of seeing. Perceptual experiences no doubt play a paramount role in our understanding of perception insofar as they pick up on the distinctive conscious component of perceptual phenomena. But, at the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that they could be either veridical or hallucinatory, whereas perception is by definition a veridical or successful informational transaction between a subject and her actual surroundings.²

The previous distinction is relevant because Vendler is not as concerned with visual experiences as with seeing. In particular, he writes as follows:

A sailor on deck looking ahead remarks, “It is pitch dark, I don’t see anything.” After a while, “Now I see a star.” We ask him, “What has happened?”

1 A terminological note. In this essay, I take ‘experiencing’ and ‘being aware of’ to be equivalent: that is, I shall assume that having perceptual experiences of O consists in being aware of O, and vice versa.

2 Two points of clarification. First, I take an informational or causal understanding of perception to be something of a commonplace in the philosophical literature (cf. Armstrong 1968, 209, 255; Pitcher 1971, 64, 113–130; Dretske 1981, O’Shaughnessy 2000, 38), this stance not being equivalent to a causal theory of perception (cf. Grice 1961, Steward 2011): after all, it is not committed to a reductive analysis of perception in purely causal terms. Secondly, the distinction at hand between experiencing and perceiving is not intended to clash with a disjunctivist view of experience. Conceiving visual experience as a necessary but non-sufficient component of seeing does not amount to conceiving it as a common psychological kind underpinning visual perception and hallucination. Or, to look at it the other way round, Disjunctivism does not deny that there is some description which may be satisfied by an episode of veridical perception and by its hallucinatory counterpart: it only challenges the thought that what makes that description true is a fundamental kind of mental phenomena common to perception and hallucination (cf. Crane 2005/2011, 3.4).

“The cloud’s gone.” “But what else happened?” “Nothing else.” Of course many things happened in the world and in the sailor. But his seeing is not one of them.

VENDLER 1957, 160

In a nutshell, the thought seems to be that a description of a temporally protracted perceptual scenario – say, Jim’s seeing of a bright star from t_1 to t_{10} – need not rely on the notion of a process of a *special mental kind*: in principle, it could make do with mental states, that is, the instantiation of a given property or relation.³ To begin with, Vendler explicitly recognizes that the existence of very complex physical and neuro-biological stories underlie the relevant description. To describe what happens when Jim perceives a star, one certainly has to identify the material substances and properties thus involved: Jim himself, a star, the latter’s luminous quality, etc. It is also necessary to provide a physical story concerning how information about an object far away and possibly long gone may reach our planet in general and Jim in particular. Again, a neuro-biological description should specify how that information is processed by Jim’s retinae down into his primary visual cortex. Vendler does not deliver such stories, for it is not his philosophical duty to do so. In the present context, his main concern is our understanding of conscious perception in terms of general metaphysical categories familiar to philosophers, e.g. those of process and state. When he says that nothing happens in the sailor’s mind while perceiving the star, Vendler is by no means denying that Jim sees the star: what he contests is the propriety of conceiving Jim’s (or anybody’s) temporally extended seeing as a mental happening of a processive kind – in other words, as a mental *process*. According to Vendler, temporally extended seeing – that is, being perceptually aware of worldly items or states of affairs – should be understood as the obtaining of a mental *state* (cf. Vendler 1957, 155–157).

Hence, Vendler’s remarks primarily concern the perceptual phenomenon of seeing. But, to the extent that there is an intimate relationship between seeing and visual experiences, those remarks could well have a bearing on our philosophical understanding of the core conscious or experiential component underpinning that phenomenon. As Michael Tye puts it, it is natural to suppose that ‘[s]eeing something entails the presence of a visual experience. I cannot see x unless x looks some way to me; and for x to look some way to me, it must cause in me a visual experience.’ (Tye 2003, 34–35) Since perceptual experiences typically involve a key component of perceptual phenomena, it is

3 It is worth stressing that seeing in this temporally extended sense is not Ryle’s sense of seeing as an achievement – that is, as an instantaneous or punctual occurrence (cf. Ryle 1954). Vendler refers to the latter as seeing in the ‘spotting’ sense.

natural to suppose that, to a greater or a lesser extent, a philosophical description of seeing will constrain a philosophical description of visual awareness. Now, whatever shape this deep and delicate link turns out to take, I shall depart from Vendler's work at this point so as to focus the present discussion on visual experiences rather than seeing. More specifically, I am concerned with the basic ontological question *what we talk about when we talk about perceptual experiences*, or *what kind of items perceptual experiences are*. To use the previous example, what is involved in Jim's being aware of the star during t_1 – t_{10} ? What exactly happens or obtains when Jim is perceptually conscious of his surroundings? Or again, to put the same question more bluntly, what kind of things (in the broadest possible sense of the term) are Jim's visual experiences?

In spite of my departure from Vendler's work, I think it is a helpful starting-point for at least two reasons. First, it highlights the possibility of addressing the above ontological question as a question about the *temporal structure* of perceptual experience. Secondly, it suggests an interesting challenge not only against a processive view of seeing, but also against one of visual experience. I say a bit more about both points next.

To begin with, then, processes and states pick up on worldly items with different temporal structures: that is, items which persist or fill time in different ways (cf. Vendler 1957, 143–149; Steward 1997, 73). This point is more delicate than it seems, for it is by no means obvious how both categories should be set apart: clean and heavy-duty criteria for the relevant distinction are hard to come by. For the time being, I shall rely on a widely known and shared formulation of the relevant distinction: whereas processes *occur*, *unfold*, or *take time*, states only *obtain* or *continue to obtain*; whereas there are only parts of a process at each moment before its completion, states exist wholly present, not only as parts, throughout the moments of time they obtain.

Vendler himself latches onto the relevant categories mainly via examples: in particular, he compares the processes of running and writing, on the one hand, and, on the other, the state of knowing (cf. Vendler 1957, 144–145). Indeed, running and writing are uncontroversially processes: they are temporally protracted in the sense that they go on, unfold, or take time. This point may also be put by saying that such processes have temporal phases or parts, parts which come into existence successively: when a subject runs or writes, her running or writing is not given as a whole at each of the instants throughout which she runs or writes; such processes come into existence successively until they terminate when the subject stops running or writing. States, by contrast, do not share the same mode of existence. Vendler grants that they are temporally protracted: 'one can know or believe something, love or dominate somebody, for a

short or long period.' (Vendler 1957, 146) Hence, the distinction between processes and states is not a matter of temporal duration. For Vendler, instances of both categories may be temporally extended: but, while only processes go on, states obtain at a time and exist over time by being wholly present at each moment they obtain.⁴

But why are the categories of process and state supposed to have a bearing on an ontological analysis of perceptual experiences? As I previously mentioned, Vendler's categories intend to pick up on different temporal schemata or structures: that is, they distinguish different ways in which an occurrence may exist or persist through time. The temporal character of the Vendlerian framework neatly links up with a venerable philosophical thought according to which our psychological lives allow for temporal categorization, an idea particularly salient in Kant's understanding of time as a pure form of inner sense (cf. Kant 1781–1787/2003, A33/B49). Helen Steward rehearsed the latter point in terms of what she terms a *temporal strategy* for the study of mental ontology:

There is room for dispute about whether or not, and in what sense, mental phenomena are physical, whether they are spatially located, and whether they have subjects, and if so, what those subjects might be. [...] But there is no controversy about the temporality of mental phenomena – about the fact that they take place in, or persist through, time.'

STEWART 1997, 75–76

While the ascription of temporal features to psychological phenomena may also turn out to be controversial, it seems the safest starting-point for describing our mental reality in the most general ontological terms. Against

4 Apart from Vendler's discussion, these notions have a venerable history in the philosophical literature. There is a precedent at least in Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics* (cf. Barnes 1984). In modern times, interest in the process-state divide has been renewed by the seminal contributions of Ryle, Vendler, and Anthony Kenny in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of action (cf. Ryle 1954, Vendler 1957, Kenny 1963, ch. 8). Since then, there has been a wave of contributions at the interface of linguistics and philosophy (cf. Comrie 1976, Taylor 1977, Mourelatos 1978, Dowty 1979, Rothstein 2004, among many others). Meanwhile, the distinction has slowly made its come-back into hard-core philosophies of mind, of perception, and action (cf. Steward 1997, Soteriou 2007, 2011, 2013; Crowther 2009a, 2009b). That said, how one should set the category of process apart from that of states is a far from uncontroversial question. As far as I know, this is still an ongoing issue. For the time being, I have relied on Vendler's broad characterization and examples of the relevant categories insofar as, at that level of generality, they do seem to provide a common ground among the different players in the current debate concerning the ontology of perception.

this background, Vendler's framework seems useful precisely because it provides an elegant tool for undertaking that temporal analysis. Perceptual experiences are those conscious phenomena at the heart of perceptual episodes like seeing, hearing, etc.: when I see a bright star, I typically mean that I am visually aware of that distant object. Since a subject may perceive (i.e. see, hear, etc.) an object for a shorter or longer period of time, it is natural to think that the conscious or experiential phenomena at the heart of those episodes are temporally protracted too. Vendler's framework is thus relevant in the present context because it provides a neat set of temporal concepts for the analysis of experiential items which, if nothing else, at least seem to exist through time.

Vendler's remarks also suggest an interesting challenge against a processive view of visual experience. As previously mentioned, Vendler develops a story where temporally extended seeing is conceived as a condition instantiated by a subject for a certain period of time, or, in other words, as a state obtaining (as opposed to unfolding) in a determinate subject.⁵ Since he takes the notions of process and state to be mutually exclusive, Vendler naturally criticizes a processive view of seeing. In this piece, I shall not engage with Vendler's reasons for a stative view of seeing or against its processive counterpart. What I wish to take on board here is the following idea: even if a processive view of seeing is internally coherent or otherwise appealing, it faces the question *whether processes of a special mental kind need be invoked in order to describe a temporally extended perceptual scenario*. Recall that a key motivation behind Vendler's analysis of seeing is the belief that nothing need happen in a subject's mind when she is perceptually aware of her surroundings, in the sense that no special mental processes have to be invoked to describe the mental life of someone like Jim during t_1 – t_{10} (cf. Vendler 1957, 159–160).⁶ True: many things happen in the world and in Jim's head. Complex physical processes bridge the space

5 With the process-state distinction at hand, another quick word on the relationship between seeing and experiencing. Suppose one holds Vendler's view that seeing is a stative relation that obtains in a subject and one also holds that visual experiences constitute a necessary but non-sufficient part of seeing. Could one hold that seeing is stative but affirm that visual experiences are processive? As far as I can see, one could. In fact, Matthew Soteriou, whose work I discuss elsewhere, endorses a hybrid position along such lines (cf. Soteriou 2011, 2013). But, while I thus concede that moves from ontological claims about seeing to ontological claims about visual experiences are not straightforward, I think it is plausible to read Vendler's stative analysis as being mainly concerned with relations of visual awareness, that is, visual experiences.

6 This motivation seems to be a natural extension of Wittgenstein's and Ryle's attempts to undermine the unnecessary introduction of mental particulars into an ontology of the mind in order to account for thoughts, among other mental items (cf. Ryle 1949, Wittgenstein 1953). For other descendants of such critiques, cf. Ayer 1963, Kenny 1989, Travis 2001.

and time between a bright star and Jim. Equally complex neurobiological or subpersonal processes come into play when Jim processes the relevant visual information. In addition to all of this, however, it is unclear that the very perceptual phenomenon of Jim's temporally extended seeing should be understood as a processive item apart from those already invoked. To borrow D.M. Armstrong's notion of state of affair (cf. Armstrong 1997, Thau 2002), for example, one could expand on Vendler's stative story saying that Jim's seeing simply consists in the instantiation of an informational relation between Jim and the relevant star – no special perceptual processes needed! On grounds of ontological – or at the very least categorial – simplicity, Vendler thus poses a challenge against the need for introducing special perceptual processes within a story of seeing.

Taking the previous line of reasoning one step farther, I think it suggests a structurally similar challenge against processive views of perceptual experiences. Also taking the process-state distinction to be a mutually exclusive one within the realm of experiences, O'Shaughnessy sides with the processive camp. Furthermore, O'Shaughnessy's view is precisely driven by the idea that a philosophical description of perceptual experiences cannot make do without a key processive component.

Vendler's work thus provides two helpful resources for the critical assessment of O'Shaughnessy's process-based ontology of experience: on the one hand, it grounds the ontological question what kind of items perceptual experiences are on a temporal framework apparently shared by O'Shaughnessy; and, on the other, it highlights a challenge from economy which the processive view of experience has to address sooner or later. Thus framing the present dialectic between both writers, my aim is to put some pressure on O'Shaughnessy's stance by questioning the need for introducing mental processes into an ontological characterization of perceptual experiences. In the next section, I unpack the gist of O'Shaughnessy's position. Later on, I shall unpack and critically assess two reasons why he might intuitively take experiential processes to be necessary within a story of perceptual phenomena.

2 O'Shaughnessy on the Necessity of Experiential Flux

For O'Shaughnessy, perception and action are varieties of experience (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 38): as such, he does not think that all experiences are perceptual. This essay is only concerned with the perceptual variety. Within this context, a good starting point is the fact that, according to O'Shaughnessy, a crucial feature of perceptual experiences qua experiential is their essential or necessary dynamic character. Thus, he claims that, '[c]haracteristically the

contents of experience are in flux, and necessarily experience itself is in flux, being essentially occurrent in nature' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 43); or again, that '[i]t is not the mere existence of flux [...] in the case of experience that is distinctive: it is the *necessity* of flux.' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 44) This characterization highlights two things: first, the dynamic or changing nature of perceptual experiences; and, secondly, the necessity of that character.

The relevant dynamic component translates into a processive conception of perceptual experiences, a view which O'Shaughnessy formulates as follows:

Yet even when experience is not changing in type or content, it still changes in another respect: it is constantly *renewed*, a new sector of itself is there and then *taking place*. This is because experiences are events (glimpsing, picture-painting) or processes (walking, picture-painting), and each momentary new element of any given experience is a further happening or *occurrence* (by contrast with (say) the steady continuation through time of one's knowing that 9 and 5 make 14). Thus, even if I am staring fixedly at some unchanging material object, such staring is not merely a *continuous existent* across time, it is an activity and therefore also a *process*, and thus occurrently renewed in each instant in which it continues to exist. In short, the domain of experience is essentially a domain of occurrences, of processes and events.

O'SHAUGHNESSY 2000, 42

This statement aligns with what I have already said about the processive view. According to O'Shaughnessy, perceptual experiences are temporally extended events or happenings: such events are temporally structured in the sense that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. More importantly, these happenings are of a processive kind, that is, they go on for a certain period of time. Thus, if Jim sees a bright star from t_1 to t_{10} , a perceptual event constituted by a mental process extending from t_1 to t_{10} takes place in his mind.

In the previous quote, it is also clear that O'Shaughnessy takes the notion of perceptual process to be intimately related to that of perceptual event: after all, he claims that perceptual awareness may be conceived in terms of processes and events. Both ontological categories are not equivalent, but they are closely related. Expanding on this relationship, he writes:

[...] when a process comes to a halt (at whatever point) an event is at that moment realized (a dissolving, a skid, an ascent), so that we may say at each new instant tx of an unfolding process that a potential event enduring from t_0 – tx has occurred by the time tx . [...] Thus, the process

'lays down' more and more of an event the same in kind as itself, and may in this regard be taken to be the very stuff or phenomenal matter of events the same in kind as itself.

O'SHAUGHNESSY 2000, 44⁷

According to this passage, events are complete only when processes conclude. Since parts of a potential event come into existence – that is, are realized – as its constituting process unfolds, one might actually say that an ongoing process is an incomplete event. A complete event is, in turn, a process that has already stopped. Indeed, it seems natural to claim that a certain event, the Battle of Trafalgar, began at 11:45 on Oct. 21, 1805 and ended five hours later: at each moment, the fighting through which the battle was successfully realized was going on. This suggests that, although intimately related, events and processes constitute different ontological categories.

A fairly popular take on the present point is that events are related to processes via the notion of constitution: just as count-quantifiable, spatial entities (e.g. a statue, a tree, etc.) are constituted or realized by mass-quantifiable stuff (e.g. wood, bronze, etc.), certain events should be conceived as count-quantifiable, temporally extended items which are made of or constituted by mass-quantifiable processes (cf. Armstrong 1968, 131; Steward 1997, 94–97; Crowther 2011). While temporally extended events may be understood as temporal particulars – that is, they exist in time, are temporally structured and count-quantifiable – processes may be conceived as the matter or stuff out of which such particulars are constituted. This suggestion is attractive because it captures intuitive contrasts between the notions of process and event: processes, not events, go on; process-talk allows for adjective or adverbial qualifications which event-talk does not – for example, the humming of my computer may be persistent or continuous (cf. Steward 1997, 95); unlike processes, events do not stop but only come to an end (cf. Steward 1997, 95); events are count-quantifiable – we can speak, for example, of one or two songs, of one or two battles – whereas processes are only mass-quantifiable – there is not one or two hummings, one or two runnings, but only more or less humming, more or less running (cf. Steward 1997, 96–97; Crowther 2011). In line with these remarks, O'Shaughnessy himself caps the previously quoted passage by saying that perceptual processes are 'the very stuff or phenomenal matter of events'.

7 A bit earlier, he also writes: 'when a process terminates, an event of the same type is its necessary residue. If I have been looking steadily at a painting for ninety seconds, if for ninety seconds such a processive activity was going on, then at the end of that interval it became true that I had looked at that painting, it became true that an act-event of that type and duration had occurred.' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 43).

That said, the relevant processive view also contains a modal qualification which is crucial for understanding what kind of perceptual processes, and hence events, are at stake. As stated at the beginning of this section, O'Shaughnessy thinks that perceptual experiences are necessarily or essentially processive. Why? Because he conceives them as processive or occurrent 'to the core' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 49). To highlight this point, he draws a line between experiences, on the one hand, and, on the other, non-experiences or 'the sector that encompasses the relatively stable unexperienced mental foundation (e.g. cognitive, evaluative, etc.) upon which experience occurs.' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 42–43) The relevant contrast is not one between a dynamic and a static sector of the mind. After all, changes can take place among non-experiential states: for example, our beliefs or memories can change over time. The crucial point is not merely that perceptual experiences involve change, for non-experiential states do so as well. The thought is that experiences are processive down to their ultimate parts: no matter how you go about analysing perceptual awareness, you always end up with processes. By thus expanding on the processive view, O'Shaughnessy comes to share a claim suggested by Vendler, namely, that perceptual processes and perceptual states are mutually incompatible. Let me expand on this point.

Throughout the defence of his processive stance, O'Shaughnessy raises the question whether perceptual experiences could allow for a dual ontological analysis, that is, whether they could be analysed in stative as well as processive terms (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 46). This possibility is suggested by the fact that physical as well as psychological but non-experiential processes may be so analysed (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 44–47). For example, O'Shaughnessy concedes that certain movements across space may be conceived as processes constituted by objects standing in certain states: 'constituting a process like moving out of states like being at a position in space at a particular time, is not *in competition with* constituting such a process out of parts the same in kind as itself.' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 45) The point is not that either analysis is acceptable, but that it is necessary to invoke both process-parts and state-parts in order to capture the kind of events or changes that certain movements across space are. Again, some psychological albeit non-experiential phenomena (e.g. certain instances of forgetting, coming to understand, or deciding) also seem to be processes with states at their core. O'Shaughnessy by no means thinks that physical and psychological but non-experiential change will always be processive: according to him, processes in general are changes always exhibiting some form of continuity among their constituting parts (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 47), but instances of changes like movement across space, forgetting, and deciding, may be either continuous or discontinuous. Physical and psychological but non-experiential changes involve a processive and a stative analysis only when they are temporally continuous.

But what about experiential processes? Could they also be analysed in terms of processes involving temporally continuous state-parts? According to O'Shaughnessy, they could not: he argues that psychological states cannot be constitutive components of perceptual experiences (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 44, 47), and it should be relatively clear that this negative claim is related to the irreducibly processive character of experiential flux: after all, if experiences are irreducibly processive – that is, if they are processive or occurrent to the core – they could not be analysed into stative components; mental states cannot underpin experiences because these psychological phenomena are necessarily processive. O'Shaughnessy goes as far as saying that the absence of such underpinning states constitutes 'a fundamental *differentia* of the whole experience genus' (O'Shaughnessy 2000, 44). Indeed, states may lie at the heart of physical and non-experiential processes, but that is so only because such changes are not processive through and through. According to O'Shaughnessy, however, there are no experiential states.

To motivate his view on perceptual experiences, O'Shaughnessy relies to a greater or a lesser extent on at least two motivations: on the one hand, he thinks that a head-on analysis of the concept of experience vindicates experiential processes over experiential states; and, on the other, he invokes a thought-experiment – viz. a case of 'total mental freeze' – the purpose of which is to highlight the necessary dynamic character of perceptual phenomena and, accordingly, the obvious appeal of a processive view. O'Shaughnessy takes the correctness of his processive view to count against a stative position. As I have previously noted, the goal of this piece is not to argue for a stative view, but only to show that the previous motivations are far from uncontroversial.

3 The Anatomy of Experience

To begin with, O'Shaughnessy argues that perceptual experiences *could not* be conceptually analysed or anatomized in terms of temporally continuous transitions from state to state, but only in terms of processes. The modal qualification of this statement is important: O'Shaughnessy's claim is not just that perceptual experiences may be analysed along processive lines, but that they have to insofar as they are occurrent to the core. Since my target is only the modally stronger claim, the present section strives to show that O'Shaughnessy has not said enough to rule out an alternative analysis of perceptual experiences.

Since O'Shaughnessy focuses on undermining the stative view, his argumentative strategy is to a good extent negative. He writes:

[...] one is inclined to believe that (say) hearing a sound consists in the obtaining of a relation, that of awareness, between a mind and a sound. Accordingly, one might suppose that there exists an experience which is the realization in time of a state, viz. the relation of awareness between a mind and a sound. This is to strictly model 'He hears the sound' upon 'He touches the wall'. But 'He touches the wall' is ambiguous between an event consisting in the establishing of a relation, and the relation itself. By contrast, 'He hears the sound' exhibits no such ambiguity: it describes an event, and never designates a relation. *A fortiori* the event of hearing a sound does not consist in the realization at or over a time of a relation of hearing the sound. This event occurs at an instant if the sound is instantaneous, and over an interval if the sound is temporally extended; then in the latter case it will need to be renewed instant by succeeding instant, as happens when listening is going on.

O'SHAUGHNESSY 2000, 49

In the present context, O'Shaughnessy conceives 'relations of awareness' as states in which subjects may stand relative to their surroundings: this is, I suspect, why he denies that perceptual experiences pick up on such relations. As such, the question to evaluate here is whether O'Shaughnessy conclusively shows that the notion of perceptual experience should necessarily be analysed in terms of mental processes, as opposed to relations of perceptual awareness. My answer will be negative, and, as a result of that, I conclude that the present motivation is unsatisfactory.

Turning to the previous question, consider a construction of the following form:

(i) S perceives O (as F),

where 'perceives' could be replaced by 'sees', 'hears', 'smells', etc.

If there are any linguistic constructions we use to pick up on perceptual experiences, (i) seems a good candidate.

O'Shaughnessy specifically tries to drive an asymmetry between statements concerning hearing and touch. According to him, the reference of a perceptual statement like

(ii) He touches the wall,

is ambiguous between a durationless event – the touching of a wall at an instant – and a state – that is, the state in which a subject stands vis-à-vis the object (i.e. the wall) he is in direct contact with. Although I think that (ii) could

be read as a statement of tactile perception (cf. Armstrong 1962, Martin 1995, Bermúdez 1998, de Vignemont 2011), the most charitable reading in the present context seems to be that it concerns a physical relation which may obtain even in the absence of tactile perception, as when a plant or a rock touches a wall.

The suggestion which O'Shaughnessy tries to counteract is that one could apply a similar analysis to statements concerning perceptual phenomena. To undercut this move, O'Shaughnessy contends that a statement of auditory perception, such as

(i*) He hears the sound,

is not ambiguous: on the contrary, it unequivocally points to a single reading where, at least as far as hearing temporally extended sounds is concerned, the subject's hearing should be understood in processive terms. Although O'Shaughnessy does not generalize this claim to statements of other sensory modalities, one would expect him to do so for the sake of the processive view.

That said, I do not think that the previous line of reasoning conclusively shows that perceptual experiences have to be analysed along processive lines: for, on the one hand, an alternative (specifically, a stative) analysis of perceptual statements also seems initially plausible; and, on the other, it is unclear that constructions like (i*) actually demand the introduction of a processive component.

Turning to the first point, reflection on our pre-theoretical uses of perceptual verbs actually suggests that (i*) and (ii) resemble each other more than O'Shaughnessy allows. When Jim claims 'I see it [i.e. the star]', he may naturally be taken to refer either to the durationless event of spotting a star or to the temporally extended occurrence of being aware of the star between t_1 and t_{10} . Over and above a description of our ordinary linguistic practices, Vendler's work on seeing also suggests an alternative way of categorizing perceptual experiences. As I previously explained, the basic thought was that visual awareness could be understood as a state obtaining in a determinate subject: or, to use O'Shaughnessy's terminology, one could conceive visual experiences as relations of awareness instantiated by a subject and her surroundings. This conception is, I think, appealing insofar as it draws from a familiar understanding of experiences as *being open to the world*: indeed, experiences are naturally taken to constitute a fundamental means for being in contact with the external world, for retrieving information for cognitive processing downstream perception. Thus conceived, perceptual experiences do not seem to be all that conceptually different from tactile phenomena of the sort expressed in (ii): that is, it does not seem counterintuitive to analyse statements of the form (i) along the stative lines which, as O'Shaughnessy concedes, the analysis of (ii) follows. These brief

remarks are of course not intended to vindicate a stative analysis of (i*): all I thereby aim to show is that O'Shaughnessy's strong modal claim is not obviously true. Recall that he argues for the claim that perceptual experiences necessarily demand a processive account: according to him, they have to be analysed along processive lines. The point I am trying to make now is just that, to the extent that he does not say enough to undermine what is an otherwise intuitive analysis of experience, O'Shaughnessy has to say much more in order to show that statements of perceptual experiences cannot be analysed in any but processive terms.

In addition to the previous point, it is not even obvious that O'Shaughnessy's analysis of (i*) is correct: more specifically, his inference to the claim that statements about auditory perception refer to experiential processes seems problematic. At a crucial point in the above quoted passage, O'Shaughnessy claims that 'the event of hearing a sound [...] occurs at an instant if the sound is instantaneous, and over an interval if the sound is temporally extended'. I am ready to concede a number of things here. To begin with, I grant that a subject may perceive processes, e.g. when she perceives a temporally extended sound. Again, I also admit that a subject's visual experiences tend to be temporally extended. Finally, I could concede that there is a natural if broad sense in which the length of an experience in objective time depends on the length of the perceived item in objective time. But does any of this entail that, in addition to a perceived process (say, a temporally extended sound) and the neuro-biological or sub-personal processes taking place in a subject when she perceives a process over a period of time, there is a process of an entirely different kind – presumably, a phenomenally conscious one – taking place in the subject's mind? I do not think so. Everything O'Shaughnessy has established thus far is that a subject may perceive processes or otherwise temporally extended items, and that, to perceive such objects, she has to be aware of them for as long as they take. But these facts also seem to be compatible with a stative view of experience, for perceptual states no less than perceptual processes can be temporally extended. If hearing a temporally extended sound may be understood in terms of a relation of awareness between a subject and a worldly item, as a way of being in touch with the world, it is thus unclear that hearing something has to be extended in time by unfolding or by taking time.

O'Shaughnessy, meanwhile, asks us to believe something far stronger: the suggestion is that perceptual experiences have the exact same temporal structure as the processes a subject would perceive. In fact, if we bear in mind that experiences are supposed to be processive to the core, he is endowing perceptual experiences with a temporal structure that no physical or sub-personal

process quite shares. Since a subject may be perceptually aware of processes – say, a temporally extended sound or a jogger’s running across the park – O’Shaughnessy assumes that the corresponding episode of temporally extended perceptual awareness must be processive. To reach the desired conclusion, he perhaps presupposes a principle to the effect that the temporal features of represented items have to be ascribed to the corresponding vehicles of representation. This seems unlikely, though. Furthermore, Daniel Dennett has persuasively argued that a principle along such lines is far from uncontroversial (cf. Dennett 1991). O’Shaughnessy’s move is controversial to the extent that all he says about the analysis of temporally extended episodes of perceptual awareness could be accommodated by something like Vendler’s stative view of experience. This is certainly a delicate issue I cannot settle here. For the time being, it is enough to flag it as an important complication in O’Shaughnessy’s line of reasoning. This alone, I think, shows that O’Shaughnessy’s modally strong reliance on perceptual processes is controversial.

In short, O’Shaughnessy’s conceptual analysis of perceptual experiences does not conclusively show that perceptual experiences have to be analysed as mental processes.

4 Freezing our Mental Lives

A second motivation behind O’Shaughnessy’s processive view concerns the alleged difference between ‘the characters and conditions of identity’ (O’Shaughnessy 2000, 44) of experiences and non-experiences. The general thought is, I think, that perceptual experiences fail to exist in circumstances where processes would fail to do so, and so, that it is extremely reasonable to conceive perceptual experiences as mental processes. To spell this point out, O’Shaughnessy invokes the following thought experiment:

[...] the domain of experience is essentially a domain of occurrences, of processes and events. In this regard we should contrast the domain of experience with the other great half of the mind: the non-experiential half. That is, the sector that encompasses the relatively stable unexperienced mental foundation (e.g. cognitive, evaluative, etc.) upon which experience occurs. While many of the non-experiential contents of this domain could continue in existence when all mental phenomena had frozen in their tracks, say (fancifully) in a being in suspended animation at 0° Absolute, those in the experiential domain could not.

O’SHAUGHNESSY 2000, 42–43

According to this fiction, the mental life of a subject is frozen in a way which is intended to highlight different circumstances or conditions under which experiences and non-experiences may exist: unlike experiences (e.g. perceptual experiences), non-experiences (e.g. beliefs) could exist in a frozen mental life, that is, a life where no mental changes take place. In the light of their distinctive dynamic character, experiences are naturally classified as processes. As stressed by O'Shaughnessy, the relevant psychological contrast is one between a sector of the mind irreducible to non-processive components and a sector of the mind ultimately reducible to non-dynamic elements (i.e. state-parts).

An initial worry about this fiction is whether it is actually obvious that one could ascribe non-experiential states (say, beliefs) to a subject in total mental freeze – after all, this fiction comes close to a case of brain death, where it is not implausible to deny cognitive states to the relevant subject. Furthermore, the uses of 'can'-terms are complex enough to raise the question whether the sense in which a subject in total mental freeze *could* have cognitive states is the same sense as that in which a sleeper or otherwise unconscious person *could* do so. I admit, though, that this line of attack is extremely delicate, so I present it only as a tentative suggestion. The line of criticism I shall pursue here is that, since O'Shaughnessy's thought experiment could be accommodated within a stative conception of experience, it is unclear why the idea of mental freeze forces a processive view upon us. That is, I shall grant that a subject in mental freeze could have a non-experiential life while lacking an experiential one. Much more importantly, I agree with O'Shaughnessy that a frozen mental life is one where perceptual experiences cannot exist. Although he grounds this point on the allegedly processive character of experience, one could independently motivate it by recognizing that, if perceptual experiences constitute a key informational channel between mind and world, a frozen mental life – as it were, one in informational lockdown vis-à-vis its environs – is one where a subject does not engage in live transactions with her surroundings; that is, one where perceptual experiences cannot take place. Now, my point is that denying the existence of perceptual experiences in cases of mental freeze does not entail that perceptual experiences are mental processes.⁸

8 An anonymous reviewer suggested that one does not provide a counterexample to O'Shaughnessy's reasoning from mental freeze by simply showing how we can make sense of the idea that there can be states that cannot obtain in the condition of mental freeze: instead, one would rather need to give an example of an experience that would not cease to exist in the condition of mental freeze. This point gives me the opportunity to stress the remarks I have made in the present paragraph: my intention is not to provide counterexamples to the case of mental freeze – I have just conceded that O'Shaughnessy's construction is internally coherent – but to put pressure on the transition from that thought experiment to a

The previous line of objection may be supported in two related ways. First, one could hold that O'Shaughnessy's thought experiment does not show that experiences are ultimately processive, but only that experiences and non-experiences constitute different kinds of states – that is, kinds of states which have different identity conditions. One would certainly have to motivate this line of reasoning, but it seems a promising option.⁹

Secondly, one could hold that O'Shaughnessy's fiction does not show that experiences are mental processes, but only that they somehow depend on processes of different kinds. In a slogan, the relevant case only shows: no changes whatsoever, no experiences. But it fails to show, first, that there is a one-on-one mapping between experiences and processes, and, secondly, that the relevant processes are of a specific mental kind. To secure a processive conception, O'Shaughnessy needs to secure these two points: since his thought experiment fails to do so, he fails to secure a processive view.

To illustrate the previous remarks, let's assume that perceptual experiences are mental states, and then determine whether one could still make sense of O'Shaughnessy's mental-freeze case. The subjects of these experiences have bodies which, in turn, implement sensory systems from which perceptual experiences will ensue: as such, one could reasonably suppose that a complex number of physiological processes take place in the relevant perceivers. On the basis of these stipulations, the suggestion is that the case of total mental freeze could be accommodated by a stative understanding of perceptual experiences. The reason why this is so is that, although perceptual experiences would not be processes, they could be states that in turn depend on processes of a different (specifically, a non-experiential) kind. The sort of dependence at stake would not be causal, or at least not merely causal: crucially, I am inclined to think that such states would constitutively depend on processes; the relevant processes would be constitutive elements of perceptual states.¹⁰ The idea of a process-dependent state is not really exotic, for there are familiar examples of mental states which depend on physiological processes: for instance, being in pain or feeling anxious are mental states that depend on physiological changes. In these cases, no mental processes (say, pain- or anxiety-processes) are involved.

processive view. To show the latter, I shall presently argue that a condition of mental freeze could be made sense of even if perceptual experiences turned out to be mental states.

9 I attempt to provide such a motivation in a different piece. For the time being, the point is only that there could be a conceptual framework within which it would not be compulsory to infer a processive view of experience from the case of total mental freeze, and that the suggestion is not apparently contradictory.

10 A notion of process-dependent states along these lines figures in the writings of Matthew Soteriou and Thomas Crowther (cf. Soteriou 2007, 2011, 2013; Crowther 2009b). I discuss their work elsewhere.

Now, to the extent that the condition of total freeze could obliterate not only subjective processes, but also subjective process-dependent states, a subject could thereby fail to have perceptual experiences not only when the latter are conceived as processes, but also when conceived as process-dependent states. Although O'Shaughnessy is rather obscure on this point, I take it that a world where a perceiver's mental life is frozen has to be one where the psychophysical basis of her experiences is (totally or partially) in standstill too: this is, I presume, what would account for the subject's being experientially cut off from her surroundings. In that world, freezing the physical basis of perceptual phenomena would also undermine the mental states which it grounds. The general notion of process would still have a role to play in the relevant scenario, but it does not follow that experiences have to be happenings of a special processive kind. So, I grant that O'Shaughnessy may illustrate a significant difference by means of the discussed thought experiment, but I do not think it forces a processive view of experience on us.

Before concluding, it is necessary to flag one last, important issue. Could O'Shaughnessy not argue that the case of total mental freeze is supposed to be based on our first-person introspective or otherwise phenomenological intuitions about visual experiences? That being the case, he could go on to argue that even if it is true that perceptual experiences are states which constitutively depend on processes my foregoing remarks would not invalidate the introspective or phenomenological data and the philosophical view of experience thereby derived.¹¹ This suggestion is extremely important, for it leads to a line of reasoning which independently fuels processive accounts of experiences. O'Shaughnessy, for example, apparently grounds his own version of the processive view on the fact that perceptual experience acquaints us with the passage of time or the constant change of the present (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 49f.). Again, Matthew Soteriou argues that phenomenally conscious processes nicely accommodate the *temporal transparency* and the *apparent temporal continuity* of perceptual experiences (cf. Soteriou 2011, 2013). Neither line of reasoning depends on an analysis of the concept of experience or the interpretation of the mental freeze case, so they are not touched by my foregoing critique. That said, they are extremely delicate insofar as they presuppose answers to paramount and extremely difficult questions such as 'What features, if any, are involved in the temporal phenomenology of perceptual experiences?', 'What and how such phenomenal features are introspectively accessible to their subjects?', 'What does the temporal structure of experiential content tell us about the temporal structure of their experiential vehicles – of experiences themselves, as it were?', among others. Since these issues unfortunately escape

11 I thank two anonymous referees for pressing the importance of this issue.

the scope of this piece, I discuss them elsewhere. For the time being, all I can do here is to voice the general stance I aim to pursue in relation to this line of reasoning. In broad lines, I do not think that introspective or phenomenological data could determine how perceptual experiences should be ontologically classified: in principle, those phenomenological features seem to be neutral regarding the question which ontology of perception we should endorse. To support this point, I show elsewhere that a stative view could also accommodate the relevant phenomenological facts. So, just as O'Shaughnessy claims at one point that the notion of experience is not a provider of ontological or categorical status to the psychological tokens falling under that concept (cf. O'Shaughnessy 2000, 41–42), I doubt that introspecting our perceptual experiences actually tells us much about what kind of things they are. It is already controversial that introspective or phenomenological data tell us something about the worldly items we perceive. Whether they unveil the ontological structure of experiential items themselves – either a processive or a stative structure – is a different, and even more controversial, issue.

To sum up. In this section, I turned to O'Shaughnessy's view of perceptual experience, for it constitutes one of the most systematic and radical defences of the processive stance. After unpacking it, I went on to examine two initial motivations behind that position. Pure conceptual analysis and reflection on the case of total mental freeze seem to have a lot of pull when it comes to motivate the initial plausibility of the view that perceptual experiences are processive through and through. But, as far as I can see, such considerations are far from unproblematic. If my critical remarks are correct, they do not undermine O'Shaughnessy's overall project: after all, as I just explained, it could still fall back on considerations concerning the temporal content of perceptual experiences. However, they do counteract considerations which may naturally predispose us to take a processive view for granted or to deem a stative view as a nonstarter.

5 Conclusion

In this piece, I examined O'Shaughnessy's work so as to seek intuitive reasons in support of a processive view of perceptual experiences. After clarifying the import of the latter position within the ontological landscape outlined by Zeno Vendler, I turned to a critical assessment of two motivations – that is, conceptual analysis and the case of total mental freeze – behind O'Shaughnessy's processive stance. As far as I can see, the intuitive appeal of the target position is far from unproblematic. That being the case, the question I began this essay with stands: what do we talk about when we talk about experiences? Further questions remain open. Throughout this piece, for example, I hinted at the

possibility of conceiving the relevant psychological category in terms of mental states. This suggestion is worth exploring, and I pursue it elsewhere.

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