

IDIOSYNCRATIC PERCEPTION

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Some have argued that we can put pressure on a relational view of experience with reference to the fact that the idiosyncrasies of perceivers can affect the qualitative characters of their experiences. Quassim Cassam calls this the problem of idiosyncratic perception. I defend the relational view in response to this problem.

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I. THE RELATIONAL VIEW

A recent manifestation of the relational view of experience comes in the contribution by John Campbell to Campbell & Cassam (2014). The view is about what the sensory experiences we have in cases of genuine perception consist in, and the nature of their qualitative characters. Let's focus just on visual experience.

Campbell says that on the relational view, such sensory experience is characterized as a three-place relation holding between:

- (i) the observer
- (ii) the point of view from which the scene is observed, and
- (iii) the scene observed

This three-place relation is 'x experiencing y from point of view z', and it may itself be adverbially modified (that is, you might use such qualifiers as experiencing *watchfully* or other adverbs) (pp. 27–8).

And this is all supposed to matter for what constitutes the qualitative character of a given experience in the following way:

the qualitative character of your experience is constituted by the point of view from which you are observing the scene, any relevant adverbial modification of the relation of experience, and the relevant qualitative aspects of the external scene. (p. 28)

This, in brief, is the relational view. What, then, is the problem of idiosyncratic perception?

II. THE PROBLEM OF IDIOSYNCRATIC PERCEPTION

In general terms the problem comes from the fact that idiosyncrasies or '[p]eculiarities of one's perceptual apparatus cannot fail to have a bearing on what one's sensory experience is like [qualitative character]' (Cassam, in Campbell and Cassam 2014: 141). But it seems that this cannot always be accommodated in the relationalist framework.

Cassam puts the problem more specifically in terms of the following example, call it the *eye chart case*

[Consider] two people having their eyes tested by looking at the same eye chart from the same distance and angle. There is no difference in the qualitative character of the scenes observed by the individuals—they are one and the same scene—yet the letters look blurry to one but not the other. This is a difference in the qualitative character of their sensory experiences that is not matched by a difference in the qualitative characters of the objects and properties in the scene observed. How, then, can it be true, [as the relational view claims], that the latter constitutes the qualitative character of an individual's sensory experience? (p. 141)

And Cassam is not alone in thinking that seeing blurrily poses some such challenge for relational views (see also Pace 2007; Smith 2008 and Allen 2013).

Call this instance of the problem of idiosyncratic perception *the challenge from blurriness*. The challenge from blurriness is initially appealing, I think, because when we reflect upon what it is like to see in a blurry way, we are not willing to admit that the *blurriness* which characterizes our experience comes, as it were, from 'out there'. The blurriness which characterizes the character of seeing the letter E on an eye chart blurrily is not like the redness which characterizes the character of seeing the E as red in colour. In the latter case, redness seems to be an aspect of the environment presented to us. It seems to be a feature which shows up in experience but which inheres in the letter out there which is also presented to us. Blurriness doesn't even *seem to be* like that.

Of course one can see things *as fuzzy*, e.g., jagged text on a low-resolution screen, but this is not the same as *seeing blurrily* (c.f., Smith 2008). One can see such fuzzy text in a perfectly sharp way. From now on when I talk about blurriness, I mean the blurriness which characterizes the character of seeing blurrily, *not* the fuzziness which might (seem to) inhere in entities out there.

The challenge from blurriness can be construed like this: given how blurriness strikes us, it is difficult to see how it could possibly be an aspect of the character of experience constituted by the qualitative character of *the external scene being observed*. As Cassam quickly realizes, however, this is not necessarily

problematic for the relational view of experience, because on the relational view there is more that goes into constituting the qualitative character of an experience than the qualitative character of an external scene. Cassam acknowledges this and notes that we need to consider the role of the point of view, and adverbial modification (p. 144). But Cassam suggests that this won't help.

First, we are granting that in the eye chart case our two subjects have *the same point of view*—they see the E from the same position and angle. So the difference in qualitative character cannot be traced to a difference in point of view (p. 145).

So can the relationalist conceive of blurriness in terms of the 'adverbial modification' aspect of their view? Blurriness would thus come in not *merely* at the level of the scene presented and the qualitative character of that scene, but as an aspect of the *way* in which the scene is experienced. The relationalist could say that the subjects in the eye chart case have experiences with different characters, despite sameness of presented scene and point of view, because they experience in *different ways*. (See also Crane 2000.)

But Cassam doesn't seem happy with this either. His objection first draws on how Campbell understands *ways of experiencing*, and then highlights how this won't help deliver the result that the subjects in the eye chart case experience in different ways.

One approach to accounting for ways of experiencing scenes would be to posit introspectible subjective or inner features of experience which are non-presentational and non-representational—qualia in one sense—and add that such features are constitutive of *ways* of experiencing. Experiencing in a blurry way will then be accounted for in terms of the instantiation of such inner features. It is not at all clear how to make sense of this, but in any case Campbell disavows such an approach to ways of experiencing (p. 51). What then is the alternative which Campbell offers and which feeds into Cassam's criticism?

Campbell says that we need to recognize in the visual experience of an object the dimension to do with

how you grab the object visually in the first place; how, in vision, you snatch it out from the rest of the visual array as something on which you are going to focus. This is not a matter of you representing the object in experience; it is not a matter of experiential representation at all. It has to do with the relation between you and the object. It makes a constitutive difference to your visual experience. (p. 51)

Campbell's idea is that some properties of perceived objects function in a special *selective way*. That is, the experience of such properties is what makes it possible to experience the object (p. 53). Experience of such properties enables the selection of the object. If the experience of a property *F* of *O* (e.g., redness) makes it possible to experience *O* then experience of *F* is playing a selective

role with respect to O , and ‘property F will constitute the visual ‘mode of presentation’ of the object O ’ (p. 53).

Campbell uses this to characterize *ways* of experiencing: ‘we can characterize the way in which you are conscious of the object in terms of the properties of the object that are being used to select it’ (p. 56). If the visual experience of a figure is made possible by the experience of its colour, then ‘we can regard colour as specifying the *way* in which’ it is experienced (p. 60).

In an experience an external scene is presented to a subject (call this the ‘external scene dimension’), and that very scene, for the relationalist, is part constitutive of the character of the experience. The *way* some object in the scene is experienced is a further aspect to the experience (call this the ‘way dimension’). The way dimension is constituted by the presentation of some aspect of the external scene (some property of the object). It might seem, then, like the way dimension just collapses into the external scene dimension. But this is not quite right. What makes it the case that the experience has such-and-such a way dimension is understood *partly* in terms of the presentation of some property in the external scene, but that is not all that it involves: the property must also play the sort of *selective role* described above.

What we want to account for in the eye chart case is the idea that there is a *difference* in the way our subjects, call them A and B , experience the letter E. But if we try to apply Campbell’s suggestion, we’ll have to say that A experiences a property of the scene which enables her to see the E, yet B experiences a *different* property of the scene which enables her to see the letter. But, as Cassam says,

there is no difference in the properties that make the letter visible to them. There is, in this sense, no difference in the ‘way’ the letter is given. . . . (p. 146)

There is a difference in blurriness across the cases, A sees the scene blurrily, B sees it sharply. But it is not that A picks up on the *blurriness of the letter* and B doesn’t. Blurriness is not in the external scene. I take it that this, along with the fact that the eye chart case involves A and B being presented with the *same* external scene, is why Cassam claims that ‘there is no difference in the properties that make the letter visible to them’. Call this *Cassam’s Verdict*.

How can the relationalist respond to this form of the problem of idiosyncratic perception?

III. RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

We cannot forget the (i) dimension of the relational view as outlined above. That is, experience is part constituted by an *observer* or *subject*. Perhaps, then, the relationalist can allow that the difference in the character of A and B ’s

experience can be accounted for by relevant differences between *A* and *B*. That is, not merely the fact that *A* and *B* are distinct, but relevant differences in their perceptual conditions. For instance, *A* has a deficiency in visual acuity which *B* doesn't have. (Logue 2012: 180 highlights the importance of the subject dimension.)

But it is not clear how far this gets us. We want an account of *how* such facts about *A* can make a difference to the character of *A*'s experience. And this pushes us again to the *way* *A* experiences the E. We grant that *A* has low visual acuity, and acknowledge that there will be some underlying explanation for this in the condition of *A*'s visual system, and this is part of what causes *A* to see in a blurry way. But the question is, what does *A*'s seeing blurrily, and the distinctive character of such experience, consist in? If we try to apply the approach to ways of experiencing we extracted from Campbell, Cassam will reassert the objection.

The relationalist should tackle Cassam's objection head on. But I think that there is a way to do this, and a way which does draw out a role for the subject or observer dimension of the view.

Why should a relationalist have a complex view which assigns an important role to the subject and the point of view? This helps to account for what should seem like an obvious datum: the partiality of perception. In a given case of perception we have at best a partial perspective on the observed scene (see Hilbert 1987, Kalderon 2007 and Campbell 2009). As Campbell notes 'visual processing will not sustain experience of absolutely every object and property in your vicinity' (Campbell and Cassam 2014: 28).

Even if we focus on the experience of a single object, experience will still be partial. I see an apple before me. But what do I see of it? I can see its front surface, but not its backside, or its inner core. And suppose my colour vision isn't as good as it was. I cannot see the subtle difference in the shade of red it exhibits between its left and right side. Part of what accounts for the fact that I have a partial perspective, and *the particular* partial perspective I actually have are facts about the environment (the apple's skin and front chunk blocks from view the inner core), but also facts about *me* (my limited colour vision), and my *point of view* (where I am in relation to the apple, and the angle from which I view it). Variation in facts about the observer and the point of view can make a difference to which partial perspective one has on a scene, a difference to which aspects of the external scene are available to one to be perceived. And this matters for how the external scene and its qualitative character bears on sensory consciousness. Suppose the apple is bright red. If *A* sees the apple in conditions of natural daylight from a point of view such that it is clearly in view, will *A* have an experience in which it looks bright red to them? Will *A*'s experience have *that* character? Not if *A* has a severe form of achromatopsia. This condition will determine the sort of perspective on the apple that *A* can

take in perception. In that condition the reddish look of the apple will simply not be available to *A*. Compare *B* who has perfectly normal colour vision. All else being equal, there will be a difference between the character of *A*'s experience and the character of *B*'s experience even holding fixed the point of view, and the fact that in each case the subject is presented with a bright red apple. In *B*'s perception of the apple certain of its features are available to shape the contours of *B*'s conscious experience—its red look—which are not available in *A*'s experience of the apple. How can this help the relationalist with the challenge from blurriness? Owing to a difference in the subjects, that is, *A*'s visual acuity deficiency, *A* and *B* will have different partial perspectives on the E they see. *A* and *B* are presented with exactly the same scene from exactly the same point of view, but still, *what they can make of the scene* differs. And this is phenomenologically relevant. In fact, we can work out the difference in such a way that the relationalist can reject Cassam's Verdict, the claim that in the eye chart case 'there is no difference in the properties that make the letter visible to them'. And thus the relationalist will be in a position to propose that there is, after all, a difference in the *way* the subjects experience the E.

We need to answer two further questions to work this out. (1) Can we understand the case as one in which there is a difference in *the properties that make the letter visible*? And (2) if so, can this difference help us to understand the distinctive character of *seeing blurrily* which is involved in *A*'s experience, but not *B*'s?

The deficiency in visual acuity which characterizes *A*'s perceptual condition places a limit on the spatial properties available to *A* in perceiving the letter. In particular, the edges of the letter are located precisely between points p_1 and p_2 on the eye chart. In virtue of this, a relatively determinate location property the E has is *being there at a particular point between p_1 and p_2* . Call this property L_1 . But the E has, in virtue of having L_1 , a relatively *determinable* location property: *being somewhere or other between p_1 and p_2* . Call this further property L_2 . The relationalist can suppose that when *A* sees E L_1 is *not* visibly manifest to *A*, but just L_2 . So *A*'s perceptual condition makes a difference to the perspective *A* can take on the E. The difference means that in viewing the E some of the letter's relatively determinate spatial aspects are simply not available to shape *A*'s conscious experience, only some of the determinable spatial aspects of it are. In contrast, *B* doesn't have a visual acuity deficiency, and some of the more determinate aspects of the E are present to her, and shape her conscious experience. (For a sophisticated discussion of determinable property perception, see Stazicker 2011.)

The different spatial aspects of the E which *A* and *B* perceive are properties of the E in virtue of which it is visible to them. Those spatial aspects are part of what's involved in both *A* and *B* 'snatching out' the E from the visual array. So the relationalist can reject Cassam's Verdict. In the eye chart case, there is

a difference in the properties which make the letter available to *A* and *B*—it is a difference constituted by variation not in the point of view, or in the actual scene before *A* and *B*, but in the state of each observer.

What about our second question? Suppose we agree that there is this difference across the cases in the spatial properties available to *A* and *B*. This is a difference. But is it a difference which grounds the fact that *A* sees the E in a *blurry way*, and *B* doesn't? To put it in the terms of Campbell's framework, could the fact that *A* selects the E partly in virtue of its merely determinable spatial features ground the idea that *A*'s experience of the E is a *blurry* experience?

In response to this the relationalist may offer an affirmative answer and point out that blurry vision *is* characterized, at least in part, in terms of determinable or at least unspecific spatial features. This seems true to the phenomenology of blurry vision, and is part of what motivates representationalist views which aim to account for the character of blurry vision in similar terms. For instance, Tye holds that

[in seeing blurrily one's experience] makes no comment on where exactly the boundaries lie. Here there is no inaccuracy. . . one simply loses information. . . one undergoes sensory representations that fail to specify just where the boundaries and contours lie. Some information that was present with eyes focused is now missing. In particular, [one gets] less definite information about surface depth, orientation, contours, etc. (Tye 2003: 18)

Tye holds that what constitutes the blurry character of certain visual experiences is a fact about their spatial contents. The idea is that such experiences have *unspecific* spatial locational content, and that's what grounds their blurriness aspect. Tye leaves open *what it is* for the spatial content of an experience to be unspecific (with respect to edge location, say). It may be construed in terms of determinable location properties, but it may not (for further discussion, see French 2014: 404–7). But Nanay (2011) does suggest that the blurry character of some of our visual experiences is to be accounted for in terms of content which attributes merely determinable spatial properties to the things we perceive in a blurry way.

Here, then, is a response to the challenge from blurriness on behalf of the relationalist. The blurry character of *A*'s experience of the letter E is a matter of the *way* in which *A* experiences the letter: she experiences it in a *blurry way*. In line with Campbell's general idea about ways of experiencing, the idea of *A*'s seeing E in a blurry way is to be understood in terms of some of those properties of E which *A* experiences and which make E visible to her. This cannot be as simple as *A* experiencing E's blurriness—there is no such feature of E. It is rather a matter of *A*'s experiencing some of E's merely determinable locational features. These are features of E which make E visible to *A* and which are part of what constitutes the blurry character of *A*'s experience of E.

The relationalist can thus disagree with Cassam that the eye chart case is a case in which there ‘is a difference in the qualitative character of their sensory experiences that is not matched by a difference in the qualitative characters of the objects and properties in the scene observed’ (p. 141). *A* is presented with exactly the same *E* as *B* is. But perception is partial. And if we factor in the different partial perspectives of *A* and *B*, owing to differences in their perceptual systems, we find that the features of the *E* available to *A* are different to those features available to *B*. That difference is a matter of determinate spatial features being available to *B* and merely determinable ones being available to *A*. But this is just the sort of difference which is relevant to accounting for the character of blurry vision, given that the blurriness of blurry vision does strike us as limiting the spatial perception of objects.

IV. CONCLUSION

I’ve sketched a relationalist response to the specific form of the problem of idiosyncratic perception presented by Cassam. Structurally, this response should carry over to other forms of the problem, but there is not space to argue that point here. I certainly don’t think that what I’ve said is the last word regarding the challenge from blurriness. One remaining issue is whether appeal to the *spatial* difference between *A* and *B*’s perspective on *E* is *sufficient* to capture the distinctive character of the blurriness of *A*’s experience. It may be part of what’s involved, but is it the whole story? This is far from clear (for relevant discussion see Smith 2008, Allen 2013 and French 2014). However, it is not obvious that if more is needed that will require us to abandon Campbell’s relationalist framework. In any case, I hope to have shown how one who adopts a relationalist position such as Campbell’s can begin to accommodate issues to do with idiosyncratic perception.¹

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