

Are There Irrational Perceptual Experiences?

Abstract

I argue that there are no irrational visual experiences, if we mean just the experiences that one is having now, but there are irrational visual experiences, if we mean also the experiences that one has had in the past. In other words, I will be arguing that perceptual irrationality is a retrospective phenomenon. So as to further support the first conjunct of my thesis, and to contextualize it among contemporary discussions, I also critique Susanna Siegel's proposal that one could be having an irrational experience, in the sense of a hijacked experience that has inherited a sub-threshold epistemic charge from a corrupt outlook. The present discussion is conducted from a Husserlian point of view, according to which perception is rational, rather than arational. I am, however, in this paper, not undertaking to defend the Husserlian view or the rationality of perception, or even to argue that the view I refer to as Husserlian is, in all aspects, the view that Edmund Husserl actually held. I aim merely to provide certain clarifications concerning the more specific topic of irrational visual experiences.

Keywords: perception, rationality, evidence, Edmund Husserl

1. Introduction

Our beliefs are regarded as paradigmatically rational, rather than arational, mental states. The beliefs that one is having can sometimes turn out to be irrational, and should, in that case, be rejected. It is much more controversial whether our perceptual experiences, too, can be regarded as rational, rather than arational—a view that naturally raises the question as to whether there are irrational perceptual experiences. This very natural question will be my focus in the present paper, as I address it by defending the following disambiguating thesis: there are no irrational visual experiences, if we mean just the experiences that one is having now; there are irrational visual experiences, if we mean also the experiences that one has had in the past. In other words, I will be arguing that perceptual irrationality is a retrospective phenomenon. I hope that my discussion of this question and this conjunctive thesis may be of current interest, insofar as it pertains to the burgeoning debate about the rationality of perception.¹ The present discussion is conducted from a Husserlian point of view, according to which perception is rational. I am, however, in this paper,

¹ So far, the debate has mainly focused on Siegel 2017.

not undertaking to defend the Husserlian view or the rationality of perception, or even to argue that the view I refer to as Husserlian is, in all aspects, the view that Edmund Husserl actually held.² I aim merely to provide certain clarifications concerning the more specific topic of irrational visual experiences.

To sketch the core of the Husserlian view, I would invite the reader to accept, if only for the argument's sake, that when I am looking at an apple in front of me, I am visually experiencing it as a whole, front side and back. To mark the difference between the experience of the front side and the back, let us label the experience of the front side as "full" and that of the back side as "empty". According to the present view, the empty experience of the apple's back side is due entirely to perceptual anticipations. When I turn the apple around, however, and discover that the back side is as expected, my experience of it transitions from empty to full, a transition that we shall call "fulfillment". By contrast, when the view of the back side conflicts with the anticipations, we shall say that a "disappointment" has transpired. Our talk of perceptual fulfillments and disappointments thus connects with ordinary talk about the fulfillment and disappointment of anticipations, but should primarily be understood by recourse to the notions of emptiness and fullness. This is important because, from the Husserlian viewpoint, to experience something in the mode of fullness is to experience it with evidence, and to experience it in the mode of emptiness is to experience it without evidence. Fulfillment, therefore, is the attainment of evidence, which, in this case, is conceived in non-inferential and non-propositional terms, not in terms of propositionally articulated reasons. According to Husserl, "*Evidence ... designates that performance on the part of intentionality which consists in the giving of something-itself [die*

² Hanne Jacobs has explicitly argued that Husserl undertakes "[t]o account for the rationality of the intentionality of both predicative judgments and concrete perceptions", and that the notion of fulfillment is at the core of his account (Jacobs 2016, pp. 259-260).

intentionale Leistung der Selbstgebung]” (Husserl 1969, p. 158). Yet, despite being thus associated with the object’s presence or self-givenness, evidence is not conceived as a factive notion, even if, on the other hand, it is not a mere subjective feeling either (Ibid., p. 157). While evidence is, as we shall soon see, a notion of very broad application, Husserl accords a certain primacy to perceptual evidence, as he asserts that “[t]he primitive mode of the giving of something-itself is perception” (Ibid., p. 158).

We have spoken about the object’s back side, but all features and properties of an object are, in fact, experienced by us in terms of live possibilities of fulfillment, i.e., in terms of certain pertinent fulfillment conditions—e.g., concerning the ways we might move in relation to the object or the ways in which the lighting might change. We may therefore say that, from the Husserlian perspective, the contents of visual experience are fulfillment conditions, not accuracy conditions, as a certain mainstream view would have it (Citation suppressed; Siegel 2010, Ch. 2). That is to say, we conceive of visual contents by recourse to the idea of evidence, instead of accuracy. The fulfillment conditions, which are instantiated by anticipations and which can be either expressed, or else merely spoken of, in terms of indicative or counterfactual conditionals, set forth what it may take for one to obtain fullness or evidence with regard to some aspect of the object, so that the modulating self-givenness can support one’s taking the object to be possessed of this aspect. E.g., if I shield the apple from the over-bright lighting, it will reveal itself as uniformly red on the front side. Or, if I move to the left among the tourists, I will see where Laocoön’s left arm has been refixed to his body. If such fulfillment conditions are satisfied, e.g., if I do step to the left and do, indeed, come to see this detail of the sculpted figure of Laocoön, then there is fulfillment, and I come to experience the object with more fullness, or evidence, enabling me to be more confident that I am, e.g., actually seeing the famous sculpture that I took myself to be seeing. This is not the

case if the fulfillment conditions are frustrated, instead of satisfied, or if I have not pursued such fulfillments at all, but, as it may be, simply moved on to the next exhibit. However, keep in mind that in order to be having a perceptual experience at all, one must be in possession of at least *some* fullness—it is not enough to have one’s mind populated with mere empty possibilities, as when I am still queueing to enter the Vatican, and anticipating which artworks I might see there.

To contextualize this view within a larger picture, Husserl does, in fact, conceive of all the different kinds of intentional experiences by recourse to the pertinent evidence, “*The concept of any intentionality whatever—any life-process of consciousness-of something or other—and the concept of evidence, the intentionality that is the giving of something-itself, are essentially correlative*” (Husserl 1969, p. 160). Relatedly,

Category of objectivity and category of evidence are perfect correlates. To every fundamental species of objectivities—as intentional unities maintainable throughout an intentional synthesis and, ultimately, as unities belonging to a possible "experience"—a fundamental species of "experience", of evidence, corresponds, and likewise a fundamental species of intentionally indicated evidential style in the possible enhancement of the perfection of the having of an objectivity itself (Ibid., p. 161).

These are statements of what I would refer to as evidentialism about intentionality and intentional content. Husserl also conceives of rationality by recourse to the idea of evidence, especially what could be referred to as immediate, non-inferential evidence.³ We might articulate the idea by saying that rationality is a responsiveness to evidence. But this means that, unless we are to regard visual experience as an anomalous outlier, we should also, as part of the larger Husserlian perspective, regard it with a view to the evidence that bears on it, and that the experience gains, by degrees, as it unfolds. Visual experiences are, therefore, rational in the sense of being self-justifying, viz., by fulfillment. The evidential basis of perceptual experiences consists, accordingly, of perceptual experiences—I do not take it to include beliefs or judgments.

³ See Wiltsche 2022, including for how it might be desirable to qualify Husserl’s view.

This sets the stage for the present discussion of irrational visual experiences, to be carried out in the following three sections of my paper. In Section 2, I will argue that there are no irrational visual experiences, in the sense that one is never having an irrational visual experience. I will do this by considering a kind of experience that I shall call “marooned”. Next, in Section 3, I will argue that there, nevertheless, are irrational visual experiences, if we mean the experiences that one has had in the past, and is considering retrospectively. Finally, in Section 4, I will contend that one is never having an irrational visual experience in Susanna Siegel’s sense, viz., an experience with a sub-threshold “epistemic charge”—a possibility that would militate against the first conjunct of my thesis.

2.

I will now argue that there are no irrational visual experiences, in the sense that one is never having an irrational visual experience, an idea that I will consider in relation to the Husserlian notion of disappointment, as well as a relevant kind of experience that I shall call a “marooned” experience.

Prima facie, it might seem that a disappointment is something that happens in one stroke, as the emergence of an experiential conflict between the anticipations and the subsequent view just shatters the content of the visual experience. However, if we reflect upon the phenomenon of disappointment, it will appear as comprised of various aspects, making room for the possibility that each of these aspects could sometimes mark a distinct stage in a process of disappointment. We shall therefore set forth these aspects and possible stages, and make some pertinent clarificatory comments, so as to then consider whether one’s having an irrational experience could

form part of a process of disappointment that has not yet completely run its course. Let us try to think of disappointment in terms of the following aspects, and stages:

- (a) a potential experiential (evidential) conflict;
- (b) a proximal experiential conflict;
- (c) an appreciation of its significance (scope);
- (d) an assessment of the evidence on both sides;
- (e) the end of the experience that runs counter to the preponderant evidence;
- (f) the beginning of an experience that is in line with the preponderant evidence.

At stage (a), we have a live possibility of an experiential (evidential) conflict. For example, I have been experiencing the apple as red, and doing so, in part, in terms of anticipations of encountering more red on the back side. However, as I take the apple in hand and turn it around, I encounter a spot of brown rot on the otherwise red back side. At this point, I may be undecided as to whether the experience of this small brown spot conflicts with my anticipations, or whether there is, instead, no such conflict, but merely what Husserl refers to as a closer determination of the visual experience.⁴ As Michael Madary has emphasized, perceptual anticipations (themselves) come in degrees of indeterminacy, thereby contributing an element of indeterminacy to visual experiences (Madary 2017, p. 48). Thus, it may well be that my visual experience was indeterminate with regard to the brown spot, and its discovery therefore means that an experiential conflict is now a live possibility, but is not yet upon me, so long as I have not settled the issue of what exactly I was anticipating, or while I am still in the process of construing my anticipations.

⁴ Closer determination happens when we come by hitherto unanticipated aspects of an object. It is, accordingly, not a case of either fulfillment or disappointment (Husserl 1997, § 29). What it does is to add complexity to the fulfillment conditions, in terms of which the object is manifested to the perceiver, in that she now anticipates fulfillments also with regard to the newly revealed details.

For another pertinent scenario, consider that anticipations, as such, are, of course, future-directed, but the visual experience presents the object as it is taken to be at present. It is therefore possible that an anticipation is disappointed, but one is not sure as to whether this actually compromises one's *visual experience*, insofar as one has the sense that the object may have changed between the formation of the anticipation and the *anticipation's* disappointment. To what extent there is room for such doubts, depends on one's sense of the object's visual style (Meacham 2013), including the timing of its possible changes within a perceptual situation. Anticipations might not be entirely clear as to the possible timing of objectual changes—even if we are unlikely to encounter such a problem in the case of the brown spot on the apple.

But suppose that the perceiver, eventually, gets the sense that there is, indeed, an experiential conflict. Now, at stage (b), we are dealing with a proximal experiential conflict, one that provides the source and focus of what the perceiver may later come to experience as the fully-blown, definitive conflict. E.g., it may be that the apple's back side reveals an unexpected and utterly baffling blue color, or a curiously regular angular shape. The perceiver may, for a period of time, be undecided as to the significance of this: might it be that the object in front of her is not an apple, or a fruit of any kind, at all? So, assuming, in this case, that perceivers can visually experience kind properties, her proximal disappointment is compatible with indecision as to the significance and ultimate scope of the disappointment.

At stage (c), however, the perceiver has attained a complete appreciation of the significance and scope of the conflict, e.g., realizing that such color and shape features are indeed incompatible with the object's being an apple. But before she came upon this color and and this shape, she underwent a stretch of experience revealing colors and shapes which were strongly suggestive of

the object's being an apple. So now there is evidence on both sides, leaving her with the further task of assessing it.

It is only when the evidence has been assessed, and there is a verdict, that the perceiver attains stage (d) in the process of disappointment. The perceiver can now let go of the experience that runs counter to the preponderant evidence. But now, consider that there might be experiences that have been condemned at the epistemic tribunal, as it were, but that still persist. We know of cases where a visual experience is recalcitrant in the face of one's better judgment, as in the case of the famous Müller-Lyer illusion, where two lines will continue to look to be of different lengths, despite one's judging them to be of equal length. In a similar way, we may also conceive of a visual experience that goes against the preponderant evidence from other visual experiences, yet still persists. Consider an analogue of the Müller-Lyer illusion among material objects—as opposed to two-dimensional geometric ones—where one experiences the two arrow-like objects as being of different lengths, but is then able to take and move them right next to each other, so that they look to be the same length; or perhaps also to cut a third object to the length of one of the two, so as to then move it next to the other, to appraise the two arrow-like objects as being of the same length. However, when one has done that, and later again experiences the two arrow-like objects at a suitable distance from each other, they will again strike one as being of different lengths. Such an illusory experience will be isolated from other experiences by evidential conflicts—in this case, by the conflict between the experiences revealing the objects as being the same length and as being different lengths—and will persist despite being deprived of external (evidential) sustenance—similar to the desolate existence of some Joseph Conradian insular outcast. Let us therefore call it a marooned experience.

However, suppose that, consequent upon the appraisal of the evidential conflict and the assessment of the evidence on both sides, the problematic experience does cease. This brings us to stage (e). We may still regard the process of disappointment as not quite complete, insofar as it is possible that the experience does not immediately crystallize into a new, more or less determinate experience, but, instead, leaves an intervening period of experiential confusion. The process is only complete at stage (f), when the confusion has, in its turn, made way for a new determinate experience that aligns with the preponderant evidence.

To come back to our main issue, when might one be having an irrational visual experience? As I have indicated in the *Introduction*, the Husserlian conception of rationality is one of a responsiveness to evidence. Therefore, the mere emergence of an experiential conflict, in phases (b) and (c), does not suffice to render any visual experience irrational, since we are not yet clear as to what might be the appropriate response to the evidence (fullness) accumulated by the perceiver. It is only when this verdict has been reached, as is the case in phase (d), that we may speak of a visual experience as irrational, insofar as it manifests a failure to appropriately respond to the evidence. So, one is having an irrational visual experience, when one is having a marooned experience that persists at stage (d), and does not go away, despite being taken—in a suitably low-level, un-intellectual way—to be unwarranted by the evidence.

However, I will argue that stages (d) and (e) cannot thus come apart; i.e., once there is a verdict against an experience, it necessarily ceases. Here is my argument:

- (1) The disappointment of a visual experience (in the paradigmatic cases) is abrupt and temporally asymmetric.
- (2) It consists in an undercutting, not a rebuttal, of the experience. (1)
- (3) It deprives the experience of (all) the evidence in its favor. (2)

- (4) The evidence (the fullness) ceases to perform its constitutive role. (3)
- (5) The experience ends. (4)
- (6) The verdict at stage (d) already involves an undercutting. (the above discussion), (2)
- (7) One is never having an irrational experience. (5), (6)
- (8) There are no irrational experiences, if we mean just the visual experiences that one is having now. (7)
- (9) One can be having a marooned experience. (the above discussion)
- (10) A marooned experience is not irrational. (7) or (8), (9)

As I have indicated, most steps in this argument are conceived as following from the immediately preceding step, while some also depend upon aspects of the above discussion. (8) is the main conclusion, and (10) is an upshot of it. I will now go through this, step by step.

Regarding (1), when I say that the disappointment is abrupt, I mean that when some conflicting evidence has emerged and we have appreciated its significance, the assessment can be made and the verdict issued without further ado, i.e., without needing to wait, to see how much more evidence could be accumulated and what difference it might make. Also, a disappointment involves a temporal asymmetry: e.g., a mere present glimpse can typically outweigh a considerable stretch of past experience, but not vice versa. When I say that disappointment has these features in the paradigmatic cases, I mean that, where counterexamples can be produced, I would expect to be able to point to some specific factors accounting for why the aberrant situation obtains, and for these factors likely to involve an element of cognitive penetration and complexity.

Moving on to premise (2), I believe that, for these two reasons, a disappointment must be regarded as an undercutting, not a rebuttal of the evidence (E) that one had previously accumulated for one's visual experience (V), say, of a red apple. That is to say, we are not dealing with a

situation where some new evidence (E^*) supports a different visual experience V^* , such that $(E^* \rightarrow V^*) \& \sim (V^* \& V)$. Instead, we have $E^* \rightarrow \sim (E \rightarrow V)$, meaning that the new evidence has compromised the evidence that was previously taken to support V . Thus is it possible for the new evidence to abruptly destroy the legitimacy of the visual experience that one has been having, without one's needing to wait for it to build up and tip the scales by degrees. Similarly, if someone believes that there is a desert oasis before him, this belief will be abruptly deprived of all support once he realizes that the experience that so gripped him was a mere mirage, brought about by certain atmospheric conditions. In our case, the undercutting, to be sure, is not occasioned by one's learning how the prevailing atmospheric conditions can deceive his eyes. It is, instead, due to the fact that the appearances attained have, necessarily, been construed in a presumptive fashion, as combined with appearances yet to be attained, and so forming a series that continues into the future. Indeed, if we abstract away from perceivers' limited attention spans—and, indeed, their limited life spans—and consider the infinity of possible perspectives of an object, we can, in principle, conceive of this series as continuing infinitely. E.g., the fulfillment conditions for redness yield a set of structured infinite series of color appearances, ways in which one's experience of red can go, and any finite series of color experiences constitutes evidence for redness insofar as it forms part of any such infinite series. But once an appearance turns up that does not fit into such an infinite series, the support from the foregoing appearances is lost. Indeed, they are typically incorporated into another series, e.g., one consistent with the fulfillment conditions for greenness. Thus, Husserl argues that, in such a situation, a modification “takes place *retroactively* in the totality of the preceding series”, e.g., as “the earlier apprehension, which was attuned to the harmonious development of the “red and uniformly round”, is implicitly “reinterpreted” to “green on one side and dented” (Husserl 1973, p. 89). In sum, when a series of appearances is interrupted

by other appearances (or, indeed, *an* appearance) that do not fit into it, the evidence from the series is compromised in its pretensions—as envisioned by premise (3).

Next, in order to get from (3) to (4) and (5), we need to provide another clarification concerning the Husserlian view of evidence. Namely, on this view, epistemological and metaphysical issues are intertwined, insofar as the experiential constitution of objectivity implicates the pertinent evidential possibilities—this is the of evidentialist or verificationist perspective already limned in the *Introduction*. Thus, the sense of my empirical judgment is unpacked by recourse to possible perceptual experiences that can provide evidence for or against it, by fulfilling or disappointing it. Such an empirical judgment can, nevertheless, be had completely emptily, but this is emphatically not the case with perceptual, including visual, experiences, which necessarily constitute an object with a certain amount of fullness—there is, obviously, no sense in talking about an ongoing visual experience of an apple if no part of it is actually appearing to me! Moreover, to underscore, we are not just appealing to some items, e.g., appearances, that could also, optionally, be taken to be evidence for the presence of a certain object. Instead, we require fullness, or evidence, albeit necessarily inconclusive, for the experiential constitution of the object. But if all this evidence is compromised, i.e., lost, it must, by the same token, cease to perform its constitutive function, as stated in (4)—which just brings the experience to a close, yielding premise (5).

However, the verdict that is given at stage (d) already involves an undercutting. As I have clarified in my discussion of (2), the assessment of the evidence concerns precisely whether one strand of evidence undercuts another, and at stage (d) the assessment is complete. But this means that there cannot, in fact, be a stage at which one is having an irrational experience, i.e., one that persists despite being taken to run counter to the preponderant line of evidence. From this idea (7),

the first conjunct of our main thesis (8) trivially follows. However, since one can be having a marooned experience (9), as exemplified by our version of the Müller-Lyer illusion, it must be that such a marooned experience is not really irrational (10). It does not belong at stage (d), but must, instead, belong at (b) or (c)—even if, at an intellectual level, one has already passed judgment against the experience, and on good evidence. In other words, if we take a case like the above version of the Müller-Lyer illusion, we will be bound to conclude that it is *not* a case where, at the experiential level, the evidence on both sides has already been assessed and a verdict reached, viz., that the arrow-like objects are the same length. Instead, we are experiencing a still undecided conflict, whether having already appreciated its full scope (c) or not (b). The reason why we might be inclined to relegate the experience, of the lengths' being different, to the status of irrationality, is that very likely we would have already passed judgment against it at the intellectual level. Yet, our having done so compatible with the experience's still standing within its rights, its supporting fullnesses undefeated.

Here, however, is another possible remaining concern. It might be felt that the idea of a drawn-out process of disappointment, involving all the different phases that I have distinguished, is at best adequate of some disappointments, but not of others. In particular, there might be common forms of disappointment that are not drawn-out but momentary—a kind of explosive shattering of the experience's contents, and their equally abrupt reconstellation, e.g., as one suddenly realizes that the patch of color on the tree bark is not an insect but a growth of lichen. Would this possibility of a momentary disappointment be a problem for the argument we are making? Not so. What is at issue is whether one could be having an irrational experience, and I have articulated this possibility in terms of a *prima facie* possible stage in the process of disappointment. So, in a case where none of these stages come apart, there is obviously no room

for such an irrational experience, with the upshot that the first conjunct of our main thesis unproblematically holds.⁵

3.

So, one is never having an irrational visual experience. This, as I have already remarked, is quite different from the case of beliefs, insofar as we could be having irrational beliefs, and should, in that case, reject them. On the Husserlian view, the issue is not that we could not repudiate a visual experience. On the contrary, I believe that to be possible, because a fulfillment-based account of visual experiences is naturally complemented by an account of perceptual attitudes, i.e., ways in which the perceiver pursues fulfillments and, by the same token, opens herself up to disappointments. Perceivers can, and do, assume a variety of different perceptual attitudes, depending, e.g., on their interests, concerns, and circumstances (Cf. Leyendecker 1913. See Mulligan 1995 for a discussion.). One might be seeking to amass fulfillments in great depth, but in rather a narrow fashion, e.g., by focusing on, and thus perceptually privileging, just one feature of one object; or one might do the opposite of that, by covering a broad range of objects in a very superficial fashion. In the former case, one might be engaged in a kind of investigation of the object, while in the latter case, one might be just keeping in perceptual contact with his surroundings. I would suggest that the acceptance and repudiation of a visual experience can also

⁵ Another possible worry is that while, in the above discussion, I seem intent to avoid over-intellectualizing perceptual experiences, and to attribute to them a quite narrowly bounded rationality, I nevertheless speak about fulfillments and disappointments in what are likely to appear as highly intellectual terms, e.g., construal of conditionally-structured anticipations, or decisions concerning the significance of disappointments. Despite any assurances that everything is “low-level”, these may come across as hallmarks of quite complex reasoning. Given that, how could we nevertheless make sense of perceptual experiences as being “low-level”? I believe that such problems arise not just for my view, but also for other broadly similar Husserlian approaches. Also, I am unable to address them, short of sketching the outlines of a larger research project. Lacking the space for this, I will pass over these concerns, while acknowledging their legitimacy.

be fruitfully regarded as perceptual attitudes that one may cultivate in certain specific ways. Characteristically, one may be repudiating a visual experience by seeking to take a closer look where a fundamental kind of disappointment is most likely occasioned. I believe that it is possible to conceive of such perceptual attitudes, including ones of acceptance and repudiation, in abstraction from a more intellectual overlay—they are a manifestation of the fact that the process of fulfillments and disappointments is not entirely passive, but also involves active aspects.

If this is right, it would appear that one can, indeed, repudiate visual experiences, but one is simply never having any irrational visual experiences that one could then repudiate. This might seem a problem for the view that perceptual experiences are rational, rather than arational, insofar as, for that to be the case, the perceiver should at least have a sense of the contrast between the rational and the irrational experiences, i.e., ones that succeed and ones that fail in regard to self-justification. My solution to this problem is to appeal to perceptual irrationality as a retrospective phenomenon. There are irrational perceptual experiences, if by that we mean experiences that have already been disappointed, and that have therefore ceased. In brief, this revelation of past irrationality is a matter of the retroactive experiential modification with regard to which we cited Husserl in our discussion of premise (2) of our ten-step argument: the evidence which seemed to be pointing unequivocally in a certain direction is re-interpreted as never having pointed in this direction, or at least as having also been compatible with, say, “green on one side and dented”, instead of just “red and uniformly round” (Husserl 1973, p. 89). The perceiver’s sense of past disappointments helps account for her sense of possible future disappointments, and thereby shapes the ongoing experience, and whatever perceptual attitudes there may be. While I cannot think of a way to directly argue for this position, I believe it may be helpful if I compare it with a somewhat similar view, to show it to be intuitively compelling and able to avoid certain problems.

Namely, Andrea Staiti has proposed an analogous view in the context of the conjunctivism-disjunctivism debate concerning perceptual experience. The conjunctivists hold that veridical perceptual experiences and hallucinations are of the same fundamental kind, while the disjunctivists believe that they are of different fundamental kinds, even if indiscriminable from the subject's point of view. While there is also some disagreement as to whether illusions should be grouped with the veridical perceptions or the hallucinations, let us proceed on the basis that they go with the hallucinations, insofar as this, as we shall presently see, is how the debate has thus far played out among certain phenomenologists. Here I am merely bringing up this debate as a backdrop to Staiti's view, without purporting to take sides, or even to give an overview of its course and underlying motivations, whether in mainstream analytic philosophy or in phenomenology. I would merely put it to the reader that, in response to Claude Romano's conjunctivist interpretation of Husserl's view (Romano 2012), Andrea Staiti has argued that, from a Husserlian perspective, both conjunctivism and disjunctivism are untenable, and, in particular, Romano is mistaken in his view "that the experience of illusion can be meaningfully addressed without referring to the temporal dimension, and hence, that it can be compared with perception, as if illusion and perception were two kinds of intentional act on an equal footing" (Staiti 2015, p. 132). Instead, "[i]llusion can be characterized exclusively as a *retrospective phenomenon*. Only a span of experience can qualify as an illusion, and it can qualify as such only after certainty has been restored. Illusion is the way that an invalidated span of experience appears retrospectively" (Ibid.). However, Søren Overgaard has made three objections to Staiti's view that illusoriness consists in retrospective invalidation. First, "insensitivity" to what one knows or believes being an important feature of illusions, one may know that the two lines that give rise to the Müller-Lyer illusion are really of equal length, while nevertheless experiencing them as being of different

lengths, such *prospective* invalidation giving rise to an illusory experience that one is having *now*. Second, even if it is granted that the relevant kind of invalidation can only be retrospective, it seems intuitively compelling that somebody could have an illusory experience even if she walks away from it without its ever being invalidated. Third, Overgaard worries that Staiti's view may be downright incoherent, due to the upshot that an experience's presenting an object to us "in the flesh" seems to suffice for the object's existence, rendering subsequent invalidation impossible (Overgaard 2018, pp. 41-42).⁶

I take no stand as to whether Staiti's view is defensible against these objections. Notice that Staiti's view, while similar to ours, is not the same as ours. What is at stake for us is the nature of irrational experiences, not illusory ones. Thus, in our previous section we spoke of an ongoing Müller-Lyer experience as illusory, so as to raise the question whether such an experience counts as irrational, and answer it in the negative. I would, however, invite the reader to appreciate how natural the present view appears in comparison with Staiti's, insofar as it has no difficulty at all in addressing concerns analogous to Overgaard's three objections. First, we are open to the idea that the illusory status of an experience could be based variously on retrospective or prospective perceptual invalidation, or simply on one's belief or knowledge, e.g., to the effect that the two lines are of an equal length. However, insofar as it is based, say, on beliefs, to which the perceptual experience, by Overgaard's admission, is "insensitive", we cannot regard the illusory experience as irrational. Second, we are also open to the idea that one could have an illusory experience which is never defeated, but this, from our perspective, also means that the experience always stands within its rights, being rational, rather than irrational. Third, the inconsistency worry does not arise, since rationality, with its basis in fullness, should not be conflated with correctness or accuracy,

⁶ Overgaard attributes to Husserl a disjunctivist view, which he also believes to be the correct view (Overgaard 2018, pp. 43-44).

or viewed as guarantor thereof. Rendering correctness temporally relative is, indeed, conceptually problematic, but the same need not be said of the evidentially-based rationality of perceptual experiences. Thus, we are *not* saying: a perceptual experience *is* accurate at time *t*, but later turns out to have been inaccurate at time *t*. We *are* saying: a perceptual experience *is* rational at time *t*, but later turns out to have been irrational at time *t*. Someone might be inclined to counter that this view can only be consistent if our talk of rationality is ambiguous, as when we switch from some internalist view to some externalist view of rationality. But there does not need to be an ambiguity in our notion of rationality: we are thoroughgoingly concerned with the evidence: what unproblematically asserted itself as evidence at time *t*, was trumped and thus *retroactively* undermined at a later time.

We have thus, in Sections 2 and 3 of this paper, articulated a view according to which there are no irrational visual experiences, if we mean just the experiences that one is having now, but there are irrational visual experiences, if we mean also the experiences that one has had in the past. Yet, I can see someone as harboring two kinds of concerns about this view. First, supposing that, at a later time, the evidence obtained at time *t* is, indeed, trumped and undermined by new evidence, should we then not say that that, at time *t*, the perceptual experience merely *seemed* rational, but really was not? Else, notwithstanding our protestations to the contrary, the view may strike the critic as internally inconsistent. Second, why do we insist on the retroactive impact of the undermining—lest it appear as an *ad hoc* device to get us the view we want? E.g., it seems natural to say of a belief that is defeated, whether by rebuttal or undermining, that it was rational to hold it before the introduction of the defeater, but it is not, after. Why depart from this approach?

I will try to address these challenges. Consider, first, that the general purport of Husserlian phenomenology is to pay close heed to the first-personal perspective, or the way the world appears from the subject's point of view—while, crucially, not miring us in an insurmountable relativism of multiple perspectives, but accounting for the possibility of attaining objective truth. In this spirit, Husserl famously counters psychologism about logic as a form of self-defeating skepticism, in his “Prolegomena” to the *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 1970). The same spirit sustains the present view: evidence is relative to a temporally-indexed standpoint, i.e., a phase in the subject's experiential life, but not every temporally-indexed standpoint is equally good. By default, one's epistemic standpoint keeps improving—but I am concerned, quite narrowly, with perceptual experiences, not, say, judgments or any kind of higher plane of intellectual life.⁷

So, to reply to the first concern, if one's experience *seems* rational, from one's current standpoint, then it *is* rational. Allowing for a later (retroactive) defeat does not embroil us in a contradiction, because the seemingly contradictory statement, concerning the rationality of the experience one had at time *t*, does, in fact, combine two different predicates: the experience at time *t* is rational-from-a-*t*-indexed-standpoint and irrational-from-a-*t1*-indexed-standpoint. So, the experience one had at time *t* is rational—i.e., it successfully asserts itself as such—until a better standpoint can be reached. When that happens—and this is my reply to the second concern—the experience one had at time *t* is rendered irrational, because the evidence that one previously had becomes undercut, or undermined. The defeat is retroactive, because the evidence is, indeed, radically, thoroughly undermined: in hindsight, i.e., as it strikes one at *t1*, one never even had the evidence that it previously seemed that one had. We have already seen that this seems to be

⁷ One may, at this point, legitimately ask what makes epistemic standpoints better or worse, or accounts for their incremental improvement, if not just the accumulation of the evidence. An adequate answer to that question would need to involve consideration of Husserl's account of time-consciousness (Husserl 1991).

Husserl's own view (Husserl 1973, p. 89). It is part of the temporal flow of experience that the defeated experience is retained as compromised, forming the basis for any additional recollections or reflections over it.

In sum, there are irrational perceptual experiences, in the sense of ones that we have had in the past, and that have lost their evidential support. This is not a mere extrinsic retrospective characterization of perceptual experiences—as if by a judgment, which one could, indeed, pass against the experience at any time—but a retrospective phenomenon with a basis in the temporality of the experiential flow, and that, in its turn, plays a role in shaping other aspects of the experiential flow.

4.

I will, finally, argue that one is never having an irrational visual experience in the sense of having an experience with a sub-threshold epistemic charge, in Susanna Siegel's sense. Since Siegel's view amounts to a challenge to the first half of my thesis, which I have defended in Section 2, I will, from the Husserlian perspective, argue against the idea that one could be having such an experience. I will not be systematically defending the Husserlian perspective against Siegel's larger perspective, since this is too big a task for me to undertake here. This does not, of course, mean that I am directly begging the question against Siegel; it merely means that any arguments I present against her are bound to be inconclusive, leaving considerable room for the debate to continue.

Indeed, the larger backdrops of the Husserlian view and Siegel's view differ considerably, even though both consider perceptual and other rationality in a very broad and inclusive way. I believe the main difference to be that, unlike Siegel, Husserl is committed to a kind of

foundationalist picture, which bottoms out with fullness, or the immediacy of “intuitions”, as famously encapsulated in his *Principle of All Principles*, according to which “every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, ... *everything originarily* ... offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also *only within the limits in which it is presented there* (Husserl 1982, p. 44)“. This sweeping and complex statement privileges the fullness of intuitions in relation to the mediacy of inferential justification, rendering it fundamental to the edifice of knowledge. As such, it stands in need of considerable clarification and, arguably, qualification, both of which have recently been provided by Harald Wiltsche (Wiltsche 2022).

Siegel, likewise, aims for an account which encompasses very broadly, taking a step back from the details of many current disagreements concerning epistemic rationality, as she considers the basic shared presuppositions of the contending views. Thus, she observes that there are many putative epistemic norms—deemed to capture rationality as such, or its aspects, and of which she brings representative examples—, but then at once indicates that she aims to consider rationality at a higher plain of abstraction. Her main thesis, to which we shall presently return, accordingly “articulates the assumption of appraisability that underlies the specific norms of rationality ..., and applies that assumption to perceptual experiences. It says that they can be rational, in this most abstract sense of being epistemically appraisable....” (Siegel 2017, p. 16). The following brief discussion will thus be considering two fairly broad perspectives, while abstracting from the specifics of many current views and debates.

In *The Rationality of Perception*, Siegel argues for the eponymous thesis, “The Rationality of Perception: Both perceptual experiences and the processes by which they arise can be rational or irrational“ (Ibid., p. 15). To support her thesis, she invites us to consider cases of what she refers

to as “hijacked“ visual experiences. For example, an overconfident performer called Vivek experiences the faces in the audience as expressive of admiration for his performance, because his previous overconfident outlook has hijacked his visual experience. The issue now is whether Vivek should believe his eyes. If yes, it would legitimize a vicious epistemic cycle, with the outlook hijacking the visual experience, and the visual experience, in its turn, bolstering the outlook (Ibid., pp. 3-6). Siegel therefore answers the question in the negative,

My solution is that it is not rational in these cases for the subjects of hijacked experiences to believe their eyes. It is not rational because in each case, the subject’s having the perceptual experiences detracts from his or her rational standing, and it does that because the experience came about through an irrational process. These subjects are not in a position to know, on their own, what the reasonable reaction to their experiences is. If their faulty experiences are the main source of information about the subject-matter of those experiences, then although they’re not in a position (all by themselves) to know it, the reasonable response is to suspend judgment on whether ..., [e.g.,] the audience is pleased... (Ibid., p. 14).

In arguing that this is the correct solution to the problem, Siegel appeals to the idea of an epistemic property she calls an epistemic charge, which, resembling an electric charge, is “[a] property of experience that can be modulated by psychological precursors of the experience and transmitted to subsequent beliefs, and in virtue of which a subject’s experience manifests an epistemic status” (Ibid., p. 41). She develops this view in considerable detail, arguing that the ability of a visual experience to bear an epistemic charge is *grounded* in its phenomenal character, and that the epistemic charge is *modulated* by inference (Ibid., pp. 45, 50). According to this view, visual experiences are capable not just of providing, but also receiving epistemic support, viz., by inferential modulation of their epistemic charge. The epistemic charge admits of gradation, and there is a threshold below which it renders a state or experience unsupported and incapable of supporting other states or experiences. Now, a hijacked visual experience is precisely one with a sub-threshold epistemic charge, due to influence from a corrupt outlook, and is therefore irrational.

This interesting view is, in several respects, incompatible with the views I have espoused in the present paper: from the Husserlian perspective, it is therefore mistaken. First of all, as we can glean from the above block quotation, Siegel regards epistemic charge in non-evidential, externalist terms, whereas the Husserlian view is conceived in evidential, internalist terms. So, if we were to try to accommodate Siegel's idea, we would first need to modify it accordingly—and speak of something like an *evidential* “charge”. But now, however one might attempt to flesh out the details of this idea, I believe that we just cannot speak of any such unitary epistemic property, in a Husserlian context. The epistemic role of visual fullness or evidence is, in fact, two-fold. On the one hand, fullness functions towards the self-justification of a visual experience, within what we might call a perceptual situation. The present fullness accomplishes this by radiating, as it were, backwards and forwards in time. E.g., the way the apple is now present to me fulfills the emptinesses associated with anticipations in the past phases of the visual experience. However, it also motivates certain empty anticipations concerning future fullnesses, thereby turning them into live possibilities. Based on the fullnesses of which I am possessed now, and the character and trajectory of the experience, these anticipations are not just a shot into the dark; they already have some evidential support, e.g., even before I proceed to explore the apple's back side. Notice that this kind of evidential “charge” depends crucially on the nuances of the fullness one possesses, and is therefore always changing, as the experience unfolds. On the other hand, the “charge” that functions towards supporting perceptual beliefs must be quite different in nature. Perceptual beliefs are detachable from perceptual situations, and I would argue that they do not normally lose significant evidential support as one forgets the details and nuances of the changeable fullness that is associated with the perceptual situation—unless we are to require the subject to keep an unrealistically cluttered mind. So, it seems to me that there just is no single

property of an epistemic charge, of the kind that Siegel invokes, even if re-interpreted as an evidential “charge” of sorts. To embrace such a unitary property, it would not be enough to say that, details aside, there is an evidential “charge” in the sense that both perceptual experiences and beliefs are supported by fulfillment. The idea of a such a “charge” would have to involve something like a quantity of fullness, which can then be discharged towards the different justificatory ends. But it seems to me, based on the foregoing reflections, that there is no way to quantify fullness with a view to both kinds of justificatory ends at once. But, finally, if we accept this and focus just on the “charge” that is cashed out in terms of fulfillment within the perceptual process, then Siegel has not given us any reason to believe that we can be having experiences with a sub-threshold “charge”—something we have been arguing against in Section 2.

Furthermore, I believe that if we are to regard perceptual experiences as rational, rather than arational, we should be able to do so in abstraction from kinds of cognitive sophistication that complement (and penetrate) *some* subjects’ perceptual experiences, but not others’. In other words, we should be able to make sense of this idea in abstraction from items like outlooks or beliefs, with perceivers who are not believers—something that Siegel clearly cannot do, since her account appeals to upstream outlooks and beliefs as the source of visual experiences’ irrationality, and requires us to quarantine irrational experiences, i.e., bar them from the justification of downstream beliefs. Regarding the idea of quarantining a visual experience, I do not believe that it could be incorporated into the account offered in the present paper. It seems awkward to suggest that, if one has a problematic experience, one could, by an edict from above, as it were, impose a quarantine on the anticipations with which it is shot through, and which bind it with past and future experiences, or past and future phases of the same experience.

In view of these various difficulties concerning the idea of an epistemic charge, I believe, from the Husserlian perspective, that we cannot be having an irrational experience in the sense of one with a sub-threshold epistemic charge. On our view, hijacked experiences are not, per se, irrational.⁸

5. Conclusion

I have argued that there are no irrational visual experiences, if we mean just the experiences that one is having now, but there are irrational visual experiences, if we mean also the experiences that one has had in the past. To put it differently, perceptual irrationality is a retrospective phenomenon. So as to further support the first conjunct of my thesis, and to contextualize it among contemporary discussions, I have also critiqued Susanna Siegel's proposal that one could be having an irrational experience in the sense of a hijacked experience that has inherited a sub-threshold epistemic charge from a corrupt outlook.

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⁸ In her book, Siegel does consider views that “settle for less” than the contention that hijacked experiences are irrational (Siegel 2017, pp. 22-25).

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