
ROBERTA LOCATELLI

University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

locatelli.robe@gmail.com

IN DEFENCE OF PHENOMENAL DISJUNCTIVISM: AN ELUCIDATION

abstract

The aim of the present paper is to provide an elucidation of the commitments and motivations of phenomenal disjunctivism. Such an elucidation is very much needed, for, as far as I can see, the view, originally introduced by M.G.F. Martin, is often misconstrued. Even though what follows is not a direct defence of the view, this elucidation will dispel some objections, as these will turn out to simply misconceive their target.

keywords

Perception, hallucination, phenomenal disjunctivism, M.G.F. Martin, phenomenal character, consciousness, naïve realism

1.
Challenging
the Common
View

'Disjunctivism' is the name of a variety of accounts of experience that share a broad aim and a common polemical target. The common aim is the defence of Naïve Realism (NR), the view according to which perceiving is being acquainted with mind-independent objects. The shared negative thesis is the rejection of the Common Kind Assumption (CKA), namely the claim that veridical perceptions, illusions and hallucinations are mental events of the same fundamental kind. The two points are connected, for the CKA seems incompatible with NR: in fact, the well-known argument from hallucination against NR hinges on the CKA. The argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* of NR and runs as follows:

1. NR claims that experiencing (at least in certain cases) is being sensorially conscious of mind-independent objects.
2. In a case of perfect hallucination, one has an experience that is introspectively indistinguishable from an experience one may have in a veridical case.
3. In a case of perfect hallucination, there is no mind-independent object one is aware of.

Hence:

4. In the case of perfect hallucination, one is not conscious of mind-independent objects.
5. Two experiences which introspectively appear the same must be fundamentally identical and require the same account.

Hence:

6. NR cannot be true.

The crucial step is premise 5, where the CKA allows a generalisation from the intermediate conclusion that NR cannot be true for hallucinations to all cases of perceptual experience, on the basis of the idea that, if two experiences are indistinguishable, as a perception and a hallucination might be, they must require the same account.

Disjunctivism contends that the argument from hallucination is fallacious because the CKA is unmotivated, as indistinguishability doesn't imply identity. Even if a perception and a hallucination might be introspectively indistinguishable, they do not need to share any essential core, or be identical in any fundamental way.¹

1 Notice that what disjunctivism denies as common between perception and hallucination is not physiological (see Hinton 1973, 75), so a disjunctivist is willing to accept that sometimes a perception and a hallucination can be realized by the same physiological brain state.

2. Indiscriminability without Sameness of Phenomenal Character

It is possible to spell out this refusal of the CKA in different ways. According to a familiar taxonomy, disjunctivism comes in both epistemological and metaphysical varieties (see Byrne and Logue 2008). Epistemological disjunctivism, chiefly proposed by McDowell, claims that veridical perception provides perceptual evidence which isn't available in the case of a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination.

Metaphysical disjunctivism comes in at least two further sub-varieties (see Haddock and Macpherson 2008; Soteriou 2009): experiential disjunctivism, propounded by Snowdon,² and phenomenological disjunctivism, most famously proposed by M.G.F. Martin.³ Experiential disjunctivism challenges the widespread assumption (supporting the causal theory of perception, Snowdon's target) whereby the object of perception (whether veridical or illusory) is always extrinsic to the inherent nature of experience. By contrast, Snowdon claims that an experience is either a state of which the intrinsic nature is not possible to characterise without mentioning the object perceived or a state which is "intrinsically independent of the surrounding objects" (Snowdon 1980-1, 186). This paper will focus on phenomenal disjunctivism, which is generally deemed more radical than the other versions of disjunctivism and, as such, more exposed to criticism. Phenomenal disjunctivism (PD) casts the difference between perception and a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination in terms of a difference in their phenomenal character, while epistemic and experiential disjunctivism more modestly claim respectively that perception and hallucination have different epistemic roles, or that they are distinct concepts which cannot be explained by reference to a more fundamental common concept.

PD has provoked puzzlement and criticism. Many find disjunctivism committed to self-contradiction. It grants that a perception and hallucination be indistinguishable and yet still have different phenomenal characters. However, it is widely assumed that, by definition, if two experiences are subjectively indistinguishable⁴ then they must have the same phenomenal character.

² Also Hinton, hailed as the inventor of disjunctivism, could be seen as a proponent of this variety of disjunctivism.

³ The label "phenomenal disjunctivism" is not due to Martin himself, who has often expressed discontent with it. Martin (2013) proposes the label "evidential disjunctivism". However, here I will conform to the widespread and better known label "phenomenal disjunctivism". Brewer (2011, 110), Campbell (2002, 116) and Fish (2008 and 2009) have endorsed similar views, and Sturgeon (2008) claimed that disjunctivism is better formulated in these terms. However, unlike Martin, in Fish and Sturgeon's accounts, hallucination doesn't simply have a different phenomenal character from perception, it has no phenomenal character at all. Moreover, instead of characterizing hallucination in terms of its indistinguishability from perception, they characterise it in terms of the cognitive effect that they share with a relevant perception. In order to avoid complications, here I will focus solely on Martin's approach.

⁴ This in virtue of the widespread equation of phenomenal character and "what-it-is-likeness", whose mark is being accessible through introspection. See for instance Levine (2003, 57) and Chalmers (2006, 50).

An easy response available for the phenomenal disjunctivist is to reduce the disagreement to a disagreement over terminology. When she claims that the phenomenal character of a hallucination is indistinguishable from a perception, of course she does not take “phenomenal character” to mean just “what it is like to have an experience”, but something different, something in which the presence of the relevant object of experience matters and makes the difference. After all, “phenomenal disjunctivism” is a term of art and its definition is a matter open to decision.

But this reply is surely too swift. Clearly phenomenal disjunctivists don’t accept the assumption that, if two experiences are indistinguishable, then they must *ipso facto* share the same phenomenal character. If this is really a consequence of the definition of phenomenal character, then they can nothing but reject it. However, this cannot be reduced to a terminological issue. A different definition of “phenomenal character” would reflect a substantial disagreement in the way this important feature of perception is understood. This disagreement about the nature of phenomenal character is indeed the real core of the phenomenal disjunctivists’ proposal and hence must be motivated and argued for.

We cannot understand the sense of phenomenal character proposed by PD without considering a further claim within Martin’s proposal: the negative view of hallucination (NVH), whereby at least some possible hallucinations have no positive psychological or mental features that account for their phenomenal character. This addition may make Martin’s view appear even more extreme and implausible.⁵

I will argue that NVH is not an oddity added to an already odd enough view, as it is often depicted. On the contrary, it is inseparable from PD, and it is what ultimately allows us to understand that PD is not committed to any self-contradictory claim.

3. The Negative View of Hallucination

Why does Martin specify the difference between perception and hallucination in terms of a difference in their phenomenal characters? To him, this is a direct consequence of what he takes to be NR, a thesis that he describes as follows: “According to NR, the actual objects of perception [...] partly constitute one’s conscious experience, and hence determine the phenomenal character of one’s experience” (Martin 2004, 93)

Martin conceives NR in phenomenological terms, that is to say as a claim about “how experience seems to us to be just through introspection”. In this sense NR is, for him, the default view (Martin 2004, 46) because it’s based on a conception

⁵ The combination of PD and NVH has come to be known as “extreme disjunctivism”, after a label introduced in Smith (2008).

of perception we acquire just through reflection upon it, with no further assumption or reasoning.

We intuitively take our experience to be an experience of worldly objects, and the changes in what it is like to have an experience seem to vary according to how the scene presented varies:

“When one reflects on one’s experience it seems to one as if one is [...] presented with some experience-independent elements of the scene before one as constituents of one’s experience and not merely as represented to one as in imagination.” (Martin 2004, 49).

The objects are said to constitute and determine the experience not in the way that bricks compose a wall, but in the sense that being aware of mind-independent objects and their properties is part of what it is like to have an experience.

NR is therefore the default view because it simply endorses the way in which experience subjectively strikes us. Being the default view, NR doesn’t really need to be argued for; all we need is to show that NR doesn’t fall under the pressure of arguments aimed at proving it false. Moreover, for Martin, a theory which takes at face value the way in which experience strikes us has a strong advantage over theories which take a different approach. Conversely, any theory that denies that experience is the way in which it strikes us is liable to lead to Humean skepticism about the senses. According to Humean skepticism about the senses, if the knowledge of the world is based on a conception of experience which turns out to be false, then one’s claim to that knowledge seems to be undermined. As a result, we seem to be cut off from the world because we lack the kind of contact that we supposed ourselves to have with it.

Because NR “seeks to give an account of phenomenal consciousness” (Martin 1997, 97), disjunctivism “is intended to have a direct bearing on one’s account of what it is like for the subject to be perceiving.” (Martin 1997, 97). If the phenomenal character of an experience is partly constituted by objects, and in a hallucination *ex hypothesi* there is no object one can be aware of, then the phenomenal character of hallucination cannot be determined and constituted by the objects perceived.

But what then does determine and constitute the phenomenal character of a hallucination? Martin’s response is, strictly speaking, nothing (hence the negative view). Or, better: the fact that what it is like to have such an experience is indiscriminable from what it is like to have a corresponding veridical perception. The phenomenal consciousness of subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations is provided by their being “essentially failure they purport to relate us to the world while failing to do so” (Martin 2006, 372); and this is the most specific thing one can say about hallucinations.

4. A Modest View of Phenomenal Character

Again, this has provoked no little perplexity. How can the phenomenal character of a hallucination be determined only by an epistemic condition, such as being indiscriminable from another experience? Siegel (2004) and Smith (2008) have objected that the epistemic conception is enough to highlight the cognitive content of hallucination, but it is completely useless for explaining its sensory, felt character, that is to say its phenomenal consciousness. A more intrinsic feature is needed in order to explain phenomenal consciousness.

According to Martin, this line of objection arises only within a certain way of conceiving phenomenal consciousness as

some special stuff which gets added to the thoughts and other mental elements in order to engender subjectivity [...] Something conceivable independently [and] prior to [...] self-consciousness which acts as the ground for it (Martin 1998).

Under this understanding of phenomenal consciousness, Martin's NVH seems to introduce a form of philosophical zombie, who may have thoughts and possess the ability to make judgments about phenomenal consciousness, but lacks phenomenal consciousness *per se*. But, for Martin, this is a misleading way of thinking of phenomenal character. The real matter of disagreement between Martin and his opponents is not whether we have to count one (just experience as a common kind) or two (perception and hallucination) in the taxonomy of mental states. Their deepest disagreement concerns the nature of phenomenal consciousness and the role of introspection.

For the "special stuff" view,⁶ the phenomenal character is typically something added to the representational content of an experience, or to its functional and cognitive role, a mental ingredient or property of the experience which gives it its distinct "flavour", its "what it is like", which only the experiencer can know

6 This tentative label "special stuff" might lead one to think that only proponents of qualia (special properties of experience) can be credited with this view, while people who deny the existence of qualia, like strong representationalists, aren't are liable to this criticism. However, the fundamental feature of the special stuff view isn't a metaphysical claim about what constitutes phenomenal character, rather it is the idea that phenomenal character is something that can be tracked through introspection and whose existence and nature is independent from reflection upon it. I am inclined to think that the debate on qualia arises in the context of representationalism precisely because representationalists think of phenomenal character in this way, as something that introspection can track in the same way that we track external objects. This induces the idea that in order to account for this trackable stuff something more than the representational content is needed, and as such qualia were introduced. Alternatively, representationalists are forced to explain how this stuff could be "absorbed" by representational content. Of course this diagnosis would need to be supported by textual evidence and argued for, but this will hopefully be material for another paper.

through introspection. In this view, the nature of phenomenal character is reified and we seem to have to indicate some “special stuff” in the mind that generates phenomenal consciousness.

This conception of phenomenal character is generally introduced through arguments that appeal to the reader’s common sense. When one perceives, one doesn’t only come to know facts about the world, but one also acquires awareness about what it is like to be in the experiential state one is in. This further information must be due to certain special properties of experience, or phenomenal properties. Phenomenal consciousness is therefore conceived as an “objectivity tracked through introspection” (Martin 2006, 393). This understanding of phenomenal character is presented as something obvious, something that everybody should acknowledge only on the basis of reflection on their conscious life.

Let us concede that there is indeed an intuitive understanding of phenomenal character we can start from. Let us also assume that we can spell out this intuitive understanding in terms of “what-it-is-likeness”, or of what is in the reach of introspection (whatever this might mean). Still, this doesn’t support the substantial understanding of phenomenal character assumed here, as requiring some special mental glow.

What else is contained in the intuitive grasp of the notion of phenomenal character? What can we safely say about what it is subjectively like to have an experience? The answer to this question brings us to the feature of transparency:⁷ if we are to describe how our experience strikes us, we will have to pay attention to the features of the objects we see. In other words, our introspective knowledge of what it is like to have an experience is derivative of our knowledge of what the things we perceive look like.

The “special stuff” view of phenomenal character overlooks this indissolubility between what we come to know about the properties of the objects and what we come to know about the properties of the experience itself when it claims that any phenomenally conscious state must possess some special feature, something eminently subjective and private, without which the subject couldn’t be said to be sensorily conscious.

Now, Martin suggests that nothing like that is required for a subject to be sensorily conscious. Phenomenal consciousness is just a matter of “having a point of view on the world”, and having a point of view on the world is a matter of both being sensorily conscious and being aware of what one is conscious of. There is no need to postulate further mental qualities that constitute this phenomenal character.

7 See Martin (2002).

Of course, this doesn't yet dispel the problem faced by the disjunctivist, since, even if one can accept this account of phenomenal experience for the good case, this doesn't seem plausible when it comes to hallucinations: in a perfect hallucination there is no relevant physical object, no part of the world on which one can have a perspective. However, it is important to notice that the disagreement about the way we make sense of phenomenal consciousness is prior to this specific problem about hallucination, and only if we appreciate the scope of this disagreement about phenomenal character in the veridical case can we make sense of the NVH.

When it comes to hallucinations, subjects also have a perspective on the world "precisely [in virtue of] meeting the relevant condition for the negative epistemological property" (Martin 2006, 378). In this case the perspective on the world fails "since *ex hypothesi* perfect hallucination does not provide one with any awareness of the environment." (Martin 2006, 378). We don't need anything else than the negative property of being indiscriminable from the relevant perceptual situation for having an (alleged) perspective on the world and hence a phenomenology: "Appeal to further facts over and above those which provide for their subjectivity and for there to be something it is like for them to be so would thereby be redundant." (Martin 2006, 378).

5. **The Negative View of Experience** We can better appreciate this point if we consider that, in Martin's proposal, the NVH is first of all a negative view of experience as a common kind: not only the notion of hallucination, but also the notion of experience can be characterised only by reference to perception. Having a phenomenal experience, according to Martin, is being in a state which is subjectively indistinguishable from a state in which mind-independent objects are made manifest. This feature can apply both to perception (this is tautological, as a perception is always indistinguishable from itself) and to hallucination (which is defined only by reference to perception). However, even if indistinguishability from perception is a common feature across perception and hallucination, it is not the most fundamental feature of both states: it is the fundamental characteristic of hallucination, but it is not the most fundamental characteristic of perception, whose most fundamental feature is its phenomenal character being partly constituted by external objects. In other words, having a phenomenally conscious experiential state is either being related to an object or being in a state which is *as if* one were related to an object.

The core idea here is that the notion of experience lacks any autonomous explanatory role and depends on the notion of perception: if we are to

understand what it is to have an experience, we don't have to indicate some special property or occurrence of the mind, we simply think of all those states we treat as perceptions. Sensory consciousness is not a matter of having some inner glow that one is aware of in introspection, it is rather, in Martin's words, a matter of having a perspective on the world. And having a perspective on the world is either being in contact with objects (perception) or being in a state which is indistinguishable from the latter (hallucination). If one considers the negative view this way, saying that hallucination has no positive psychological feature doesn't have to lead us to the idea that perception, on the contrary, has some intrinsic and mysterious psychological feature that is responsible for our being conscious. If this were so, the lack of this property in hallucination would indeed make its conscious character inexplicable. But the positive mental character of veridical experience is just being related to the world: a mental feature which is directed outwards.

6. Conclusion We can now come back to our initial worry: whether Martin's proposal is committed to a self-contradictory claim. Given the negative view of experience, it is conceivable for a perception and a hallucination to be phenomenally indistinguishable while not sharing the same phenomenal character.

The purported incompatibility of these two claims relies on the assumption that being indistinguishable and having the same phenomenal character is one and the same thing. For Martin this equation seems compelling only if we think of phenomenal character as a special stuff that we can track through introspection: if two experiences are indistinguishable there must be *something* (the phenomenal character) which is identical. But if we stick with the intuitive understanding of the phenomenal character as what it is like to be in that state, this substantial view is a further unjustified assumption. It is hence conceivable to give phenomenal character itself a disjunctive understanding: in certain cases the phenomenal character is (partly) determined by the objects one is aware of from a certain point of view, in other cases it is specified by its indistinguishability from the perception one would have if one were presented with an object of that kind. Both cases have a phenomenology, i.e. a phenomenal character, even if these are to be accounted for in different ways. This is not to say that they do not share a phenomenal nature, as far as they are indistinguishable. Still, this indistinguishability doesn't indicate that there is some substantive mental event or property that they share.

I will conclude with a discussion of a possible criticism. The strategy adopted here in order to make sense of PD relies on an understanding of phenomenal

character which overtly assumes a central claim of NR (as understood by Martin): it is assumed that, at least in certain cases, the very singular objects one perceives constitute the phenomenal character of an experience. We know that disjunctivism is generally introduced in defence of NR. It might seem, hence, that our defence of PD begs the question, because it assumes NR, while the latter is precisely what ultimately needs to be justified. This kind of criticism misconstrues the nature of the relation between NR and PD. It is true that PD is introduced in order to defend NR, but this doesn't mean that that disjunctivism figures as a premise in an argument for NR. Disjunctivism is not meant to provide any motivation for NR. Its unique role is blocking a specific line or argument against NR, namely the argument from hallucination.⁸ So, it is true that disjunctivism entirely assumes NR: more than that, disjunctivism should be seen as a consequence of NR. Of course, if NR turns out to be ill-motivated, then disjunctivism will be unnecessary. But the independent reasons for NR⁹ are not to be looked for in the disjunctive approach.

8 To be more precise, PD is introduced in response to a particular causal version of the argument, which is in turn introduced in support of the CKA on which the argument in its general form relies. Here, for the sake of simplicity, we have avoided entering into these details.

9 Some motivations have been mentioned above in relation to the transparency of experience and the desire to avoid an error theory of perception.

REFERENCES

- Byrne, A. & Logue, H. (2008) "Either/Or." In *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. Haddock & Macpherson. OUP;
- Brewer, B. (2011) *Perception and Its Objects*. OUP;
- Campbell, J. (2002) *Reference and Consciousness*. OUP;
- Chalmers, D. J. (2006) "Perception and the Fall from Eden." In *Perceptual Experience*, ed. Gendler & Hawthorne, 49–125. OUP;
- Fish, W. (2009) *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion*. OUP;
- Haddock, A. & Macpherson F. (2008) "Introduction: Varieties of Disjunctivism." In *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. Haddock & Macpherson. OUP;
- Hinton, J. M. (1973). *Experiences: An Inquiry Into Some Ambiguities*. Oxford: Clarendon Press;
- Levine, J. (2003) "Knowing What It's Like." In *Privileged Access: Philosophical Accounts of Self-Knowledge*, ed. Brie Gertler. Ashgate;
- Logue, H. (2011) "The Skeptic and the Naïve Realist." *Philosophical Issues* 21 (1): 268–288.
- Martin, M.G. F. (1997) "The Reality of Appearances." In *Thought and Ontology*, ed. M. Sainsbury, Franco Angeli.
- Martin, M.G. F. (1998) "Setting Things Before the Mind." In *Current Issues in Philosophy of Mind*, ed. O'Hear, 157–179. OUP;
- Martin, M.G. F. (2002) "The Transparency of Experience." *Mind and Language* 4 (4): 376–425.
- Martin, M.G. F. (2004) "The Limits of Self-Awareness." *Philosophical Studies* 120 (1-3): 37–89.
- Martin, M.G. F. (2006) "On Being Alienated." In *Perceptual Experience*, ed. Tamar S Gendler and John Hawthorne. OUP;
- Siegel, S. (2004) "Indiscriminability and the Phenomenal." *Philosophical Studies* 120 (1-3): 91–112;
- Smith, A. D. (2008) "Disjunctivism and Discriminability." In *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. Haddock A. & Macpherson F., OUP;
- Snowdon, P. (2005) "The Formulation of Disjunctivism: A Response to Fish." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (1): 129–141;
- Soteriou, M. (2009) "The Disjunctive Theory of Perception." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta;
- Sturgeon, S. (2008) "Disjunctivism About Visual Experience." In *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. Adrian Haddock and Fiona Macpherson.