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PHENOMENALLY-GROUNDED INTENTIONALITY FOR NAÏVE REALISTS¹

abstract

In this paper, I outline a disjunctivist proposal for understanding the intentionality of perceptions and hallucinations within a naïve realist framework. For the case of genuine perceptual experience, naïve realists can endorse a version of the view that their intentionality is phenomenally-grounded: perceptual experiences have intentionality in virtue of being relations of conscious acquaintance to aspects of the mind-independent environment. By contrast, hallucinations have intentionality dependently or derivatively, in virtue of their indiscriminability from, or similarity with respect to, perceptual experiences. Within this proposal, naïve realists can allow that perceptions and hallucinations have a property in common – that of being intentionally directed at apparently mind-independent entities – whilst having wholly different metaphysical natures.

keywords

Phenomenal intentionality; Naïve realism; Perceptual experience

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1. Naïve Realism and Intentionality

Perceptual experiences are taken by many philosophers to have both intentional and phenomenal aspects or properties: they are about, of, or directed towards objects, and they have a qualitative or phenomenal character. In the debate on the relation between these two supposed aspects of perceptual experience, a number of philosophers has recently argued for the following thesis:

Phenomenal Intentionality (PI): perceptual experiences have intentionality in virtue of their phenomenal character.¹

In this paper, I explore a neglected question: whether someone who is a naïve realist about perceptual experience can take PI on board, and what they might gain from doing so. Naïve realism is a view concerning the nature of perceptual experiences, i.e. experiences involved in episodes of genuine perception – such as my seeing the green apple on the table before me. We can characterise naïve realism in terms of the following core thesis:

Relation (R): perceptual experiences are fundamentally relations of awareness or acquaintance between a perceiver and aspects of the mind-independent environment, such as external objects and their properties or property-instances.²

According to R, for instance, the visual experience I have in seeing the apple before me fundamentally consists in my perceptual relation of awareness or acquaintance to the apple and its shape, texture, and colour. In addition to being a claim about the metaphysics of perceptual experiences, R is also relevant to explanations of their phenomenal or qualitative character. Naïve realists hold that perceptual experiences have the phenomenology they do in part in virtue of presenting the external objects and properties (or property instances) they do, where these presented entities are constituents of the experience (e.g. Martin, 2004; French & Gomes, 2019).

1 Versions of PI are defended by e.g. Loar (2003), Kriegel (2011), Farkas (2013), Mendelovici (2018).

2 Versions of R are defended e.g. by Martin (2004; 2006), Campbell (2002), Fish (2009), Brewer (2011), French & Gomes (2019), French & Phillips (2020).

Discussions of intentionality within the naïve realist framework usually focus on resisting or criticising an alternative view on which perceptual experiences are fundamentally representational – as opposed to relational, as per R. On this alternative conception, the most fundamental characterisation of a perceptual experience is as a state representing things as being a certain way, whether or not they are that way. For instance, my experience represents that a green apple is before me, and it is accurate or veridical insofar as things in my environment are as the content specifies.

An interesting question, though, is whether perceptual experiences as conceived by the naïve realist, i.e. as fundamentally relations of awareness to the mind-independent world, also have intentionality. Logue (2013), for example, proposes that naïve realists could answer the question positively, holding that perceptual experiences have representational contents in virtue of being relations of awareness.³ However, various naïve realists argue that we should not attribute, or that we have no good reason to attribute, representational content and more generally accuracy conditions to perceptual experiences. For instance, Travis (2004) argues that perceptual experiences are mere presentations of worldly items and that they do not represent things as being a certain way.⁴ An option for these philosophers is to hold that perceptual experiences have no intentionality, and that intentionality comes in only at the level of post-perceptual judgements, which are plausibly endowed with representational content. The option I will consider is, instead, to focus on a more basic or minimal notion of intentionality that could potentially be accepted without committing one to the claim that experiences have accuracy conditions.

The most basic conception of intentionality is in terms of directedness or aboutness: to have intentionality is to be of, about, or directed at some entity or entities (see, e.g., Crane, 2003; Farkas, 2013; Kriegel, 2013; Frey, 2013; Mendelovici, 2018). The basic notion is often enriched with the claims that an intentional state or event is about something other than itself, and that it always presents the entity it is about from a certain point of view or under a certain aspect. For the case of perceptual experiences, moreover, Farkas characterises their intentionality as their apparently presenting in a sensory mode objects and qualities that seem to exist independently of our experiences (2013, pp. 99-101). A perceptual experience can be intentional in this sense by being of, or directed at, a green apple, or this particular green apple, even if it does not represent that there is an apple, or that there is a green, round, and smooth thing before me. The intentional object of the experience, then, is not understood as what the accuracy of the experience turns on, but rather as what the experience apparently presents, enables attending to (at least apparently) and thinking of.⁵ On the face of it, naïve realists can allow that perceptual experiences have intentionality in the sense outlined. The experience I have in seeing the apple, relational as it is, is naturally characterised as being an experience of an apple, or of green-ness and roundness. One could even argue that, once we allow that experiences are relations to mind-independent objects – as per R –, their being intentionally directed at objects comes ‘for free’. Allen, for instance, observes that naïve realists would accept that perceptual experiences have intentionality understood as directedness: for the naïve realist, ‘our perceptual experiences are ‘about’ (‘of’, or ‘directed at’) those things in our environment that we are consciously

3 On Logue’s proposal, the representational content of perceptual experience, albeit explained by their relational nature, accounts for the phenomenal aspects of the experience; for this reason, her view is not compatible with PI, which is my focus in this paper.

4 See also Brewer (2011; 2018), French (2019). For discussion of Travis’ arguments, see Raleigh (2013), Wilson (2018).

5 The qualification ‘apparently’ is needed because experiences that are not genuine perceptual experiences, such as hallucinations, plausibly also have intentionality. I will discuss hallucinations in Section 2.

acquainted with' (Allen 2016, p. 9). Similarly, Bourget (2019) notes that both naïve realists and those proponents of PI who take intentionality to be a relation hold that at least some experiences have an 'aboutness-underpinning relational structure'.⁶

Moreover, naïve realists can account for various properties of intentionality discussed in the literature. Perceptual experiences are not simply instances of awareness of something, but of awareness of something other than themselves, which, as Farkas' characterisation highlights, seems to be independent of our experience: worldly objects and the perceivable properties they instantiate. Further, naïve realists emphasise that standing in a perceptual relation to the world as per R consists in having a partial perspective on the world. One is related to a scene from a certain point of view and in certain conditions of perception – potentially specific to different sense modalities – which constrain what is manifest to one as well as how that is perceptually manifest (e.g. Brewer, 2011; French & Phillips, 2020). This allows naïve realists to capture the notion of 'aspectual shape', i.e. the idea that the intentional object is always given under an aspect.

Notably, many proponents of PI within the phenomenal intentionality research programme start precisely from the above notion of intentionality as directedness: the explanatorily basic, phenomenally grounded intentionality, which we are motivated to ascribe based simply on reflection on how our experiences seem to us (e.g. Farkas, 2013; Mendelovici, 2018). Since naïve realists can allow that perceptual experiences have intentionality in this sense, adopting PI is a natural option. As Allen's observation above suggests, naïve realists can hold that perceptual experiences have intentionality in virtue of their fundamental metaphysical structure, i.e. in virtue of being relations of acquaintance or awareness.

PI_{NR}: genuine perceptual experiences have intentionality in virtue of their being fundamentally relations of awareness or acquaintance between a perceiver and aspects of the mind-independent environment.

PI_{NR} counts as a version of PI, the view that the intentionality of perceptual experiences is phenomenally grounded. First, the relation of awareness or acquaintance is an inherently phenomenally conscious property, as it characterises perceptual *experience*. Second, it is in virtue of one's standing in that relation of awareness to certain aspects of the mind-independent environment that one's experience has the phenomenology or qualitative character it has. For instance, according to PI_{NR}, the experience I have in seeing the green apple has intentionality in virtue of being a relation of awareness to the apple, its colour, shape, and texture (among other things). My being in such a relation to those things, i.e. my being acquainted with them from a certain partial perspective, explains why the experience has the phenomenology it does. The resulting view differs in important respects from those standardly endorsed by proponents of PI. The most obvious difference is that proponents of PI typically hold that phenomenology, and thus the intentionality it grounds, is 'narrow', i.e. that it does not constitutively depend on the environment external to the perceiver (e.g. Kriegel, 2013). On naïve realism, by contrast, the phenomenal or qualitative aspects of perceptual experiences are partly explained by the mind-independent objects and properties that the experience is a relation to, where these are often understood as constituents of the experience. As Niikawa (2020) argues, this significant difference does not make naïve realism incompatible with PI

⁶ This is not to say that the relation of acquaintance characterised by R can be identified with intentionality, or vice-versa — even if intentionality is conceived as a relation. As we will see in Section 2, experiences to which R does not apply can also be intentional.

per se.⁷ Rather, in endorsing PI_{NR} , naïve realists would endorse an externalist view of the phenomenally-grounded intentionality of perceptual experience.

Suppose that PI_{NR} is a natural way for naïve realists to understand how intentionality fits within their picture of perceptual experience. A substantive question is what reasons they may have to endorse PI_{NR} . The question arises because it is not obvious what aspects of perceptual experience intentionality can explain which are not already explained in terms of the core naïve realist thesis R.

Obviously, like standard defenders of PI, naïve realists do not appeal to intentionality in order to account for the phenomenal aspects of perceptual experience. On the face of it, supposing that our perceptual experiences are intentionally directed at certain objects would seem capable of explaining why our experiences put us in a position to form certain beliefs or make certain judgements. That my experience is directed at an apple and its green-ness, one might think, allows us to understand why the experience supports the judgements that there is a green apple and that the apple looks green. However, intentionality will not be what explains our beliefs and judgements concerning particular objects or our demonstrative reference to particular objects, because naïve realists can claim that these are explained by the fact that our perceptual experiences are relations of acquaintance to those particular objects (e.g. Campbell, 2002). Moreover, some naïve realists argue that the general aspects of our perceptual beliefs and judgments – e.g. their being about a green object, or about green-ness – can also be explained by the relational nature of perceptual experience, by appealing to the fact that our experiences relate us to properties or property instances in our environment. While a story will have to be given to explain how a subject can get from being visually acquainted with the green-ness of the apple to judgements about green things and green-ness, some such stories are being offered by naïve realists (e.g. Brewer, 2018; French, 2019). Because the fundamental relational nature of perceptual experiences allows naïve realists to account for so many phenomena, it may seem that attributing intentionality to those experiences, while possible, would be explanatorily idle, and thus that there would be little interest in adopting PI_{NR} .

To see what role intentionality could play within a naïve realist account, and what can be gained by adopting PI_{NR} , I suggest we consider experiences that are clearly not genuine perceptual experiences: hallucinations. Suppose I have an experience where things look to me just like in the case of seeing the green apple, but where neither apples nor green-ness are there; indeed, there is nothing I perceive. Plausibly, my hallucinatory experience has intentionality: it is intentionally directed at an apple, or at a green, round, smooth object. This is not merely a natural description of my hallucination, motivated by how we would talk about it – for instance, by the fact that we can ask ‘what did you hallucinate?’. That hallucinations have intentionality is motivated when we consider the psychological impact of hallucinations, or their overall effects on our mental life. Recall the notion of intentionality presented in Sec. 1 for perceptual experiences: our experiences are apparently directed at objects and properties that seem to be independent of our experience, and which are presented from a certain partial perspective. As Farkas points out, this notion applies just as well to hallucinations: in hallucinating, I seem to be presented with a mind-independent green, round, and smooth object before me from a certain point of view (Farkas, 2013, p. 100). This is an aspect of how hallucinations strike us

2. The Intentionality of Hallucinations

⁷ Niikawa also defends a stronger claim: that defenders of PI *should* endorse naïve realism. I do not intend to defend this claim here.

that can be present even in those hallucinations – the likely majority – that are not really indiscriminable from a genuine perception.⁸

In addition to these considerations about the way hallucinations can strike us, we have reasons to attribute intentionality to hallucinations because of their connection to our other mental states, our reports, and behaviour. My hallucinatory experience puts me in a position to attend to what I am hallucinating, think about it, report on it, and remember it (see, e.g., Johnston, 2004). Moreover, it makes it rational for me to judge that there is an apple or a green and round object before me in the absence of evidence to the contrary. A straightforward explanation of why my hallucinatory experience has this impact on other aspects of my mental life and behaviour, where this impact is similar in many respects to the one that my perception of the apple has, is that my hallucinatory experience has intentionality, and in particular that it is intentionally directed at an apple or a round and green object.

These considerations make it difficult to deny that hallucinations have intentionality, and that they have intentionality in the very same sense as perceptions do. I suggest that naïve realists do not need to deny this, and can thus allow that perceptions and hallucinations have a common property, compatibly with their commitments and without adopting especially controversial views of hallucination. Moreover, adopting PI_{NR} for the case of genuine perceptual experiences can help them do so.

Here is why one might think that naïve realists cannot accept the very plausible claim that hallucinations have intentionality. Those familiar with the literature of naïve realism will know that admitting common properties between a perception and an indiscriminable hallucination threatens the claim that the phenomenal character of genuine perceptual experiences is explained by their being fundamentally relations of awareness or acquaintance to the mind-independent environment.⁹ If there are properties of the hallucinatory experience that are sufficient to explain the way things seem to the subject of the experience, and these properties are also present in the perception case, the worry is that these common properties would screen off the perceptual relation from explaining the phenomenal aspects of the experience in the perception case. The assumption in the background is that hallucinations, unlike perceptions, are not fundamentally relations of awareness, and so the core naïve realist thesis R does not apply to them; if so, whatever holds in common between a perception and hallucination is something that can be present independently of the subject's perceptual relation to the mind-independent environment.¹⁰ To avoid the screening-off worry, it has been argued that naïve realists should refrain from attributing any 'positive mental characteristics' to hallucinatory experiences (Martin, 2004; 2006). On this negative epistemic account, hallucinations are characterised purely in terms of their being subjectively indiscriminable from genuine perceptual experiences.¹¹ My hallucination, then, can only be characterised as an experience that I cannot tell apart by introspection from the perceptual experience I have in seeing a green apple before me.

Whether or not the screening-off argument is ultimately convincing, intentionality is a positive characteristic that can be shared by perceptual and hallucinatory experiences without giving rise to screening-off worries. Suppose that perceptual experiences have intentionality in virtue of being relations of awareness to aspects of the mind-independent world, as per

8 See, e.g., Dorsch (2010) for a discussion of the phenomenology of hallucinations.

9 The worry applies to causally matching hallucinations. See Martin (2004, 2006), Nudds (2013), and Moran (2019) for discussion.

10 Not all naïve realists are disjunctivists and will accept this claim, see, e.g., Raleigh (2014), Masrour (2020).

11 See, e.g., Niikawa (2017) for a critical discussion of the options available to naïve realists who aim at giving a positive account of hallucination.

PI_{NR} (Section 1). Intentionality, then, does not play any role in accounting for the phenomenal or qualitative aspects of the perception; on the contrary, intentionality is grounded in the relation of conscious acquaintance, which explains the phenomenology of the perceptual experience. On this proposal then, intentionality is not the kind of mental characteristic that could screen off the relational nature of perceptual experiences from explaining their phenomenal aspects.

Moreover, naïve realists who adopt PI_{NR} can give an account of how hallucinations come to have intentionality on which perceptual experiences enjoy an explanatory priority. It is plausible that hallucinations, however exactly construed, are such that the core naïve realist thesis R does not apply to them: they are not relations of awareness or acquaintance to aspects of the mind-independent environment, and quite possibly they are not relations of awareness or acquaintance at all. Given this, if hallucinations have intentionality, they cannot have it in virtue of being fundamentally relations of awareness: the intentionality of hallucinations is not phenomenally grounded, and in particular it is not grounded in accordance to PI_{NR}. So while hallucinations and perceptions may have the same property of intentionality, they will have this property in virtue of different things.

A natural strategy for a naïve realist is to hold that hallucinations have their intentionality dependently or derivatively, in virtue of a relation they stand in with respect to genuine perceptions, which in turn have intentionality in virtue of being relations of acquaintance to mind-independent aspects of the environment. Suppose that hallucinatory experiences stand in the negative epistemic relation of indiscriminability with respect to perceptual experiences, or that they are relevantly similar to perceptual experiences in how they strike us. On these grounds, they become endowed with intentionality: we take hallucinatory experiences to have objective purport, and to be intentionally directed at things just like perceptual experiences are.

This strategy bears some similarities to interpretivist accounts given by some proponents of PI for the intentionality of states or events that are not phenomenally conscious: these states or events have intentionality derivatively because an ideal interpreter is disposed to ascribe a certain intentional object or content to them (e.g. Kriegel, 2011). In the present application of this idea to the case of hallucination, the suggestion is that our basis for interpreting hallucinations as intentionally directed at certain things is their indiscriminability from, or similarity with respect to, genuine perceptions. Metaphysically, hallucinations may be 'inner events' (e.g. Martin, 2004, p. 59) or mere modifications of our consciousness, with no intrinsic connection with objects and properties in the mind-independent world. It is in virtue of their relation to perceptual experiences that they come to have intentionality, in keeping with the explanatory priority of perceptual experiences with respect to the psychological impact of hallucinations.

The proposal outlined allows naïve realists to give a positive characterisation of an aspect of the psychological impact that hallucinatory experiences have on us, without any potentially worrisome consequences for their view of genuine perceptual experience. As we have seen, there are various reasons to think that hallucinations exhibit intentionality: they seem to present us with mind-independent entities (e.g. a green apple or a green, round and smooth object), and thus put us in a position to apparently attend to some entities, think about them and make judgements about them.

The negative epistemic account of hallucination has an explanation of the fact that hallucinatory experiences have a similar psychological impact as perceptual experiences. As Dorsch (2010) points out, hallucinations can have the same motivational and rational impact on our mental lives as perceptions because they are subjectively indiscriminable from perceptions (see also Fish, 2009). However, indiscriminability is a negative epistemic

feature, and for this reason this view has been deemed unsatisfactory.¹² For one, one may find it plausible that hallucinatory experiences have a phenomenal or qualitative character (e.g. Logue, 2012; Niikawa, 2017). Whether naïve realists can allow this, and whether they can allow that there is a sense in which a perception and an indiscriminable hallucination can be phenomenally similar without threatening the claim that the phenomenal character of genuine perceptions constitutively depends on the mind-independent environment, is a complex question. Whatever the answer to that question is, my suggestion is that naïve realists can allow that hallucinations have a positive feature – intentionality – and that doing so increases the explanatory power of a purely negative account at a very low cost. On the proposal outlined, we can vindicate the idea that my hallucination is not just indiscriminable from a perception of a green apple: it is similar to that perception in a certain respect, namely in apparently presenting an apple or being directed at an apple – or at least at a round, green, smooth object. Because it is intentionally directed in this way, my hallucinatory experience has the connections it has with respect to my beliefs, judgements, and dispositions to behave. Even if my experience was metaphysically nothing like my perception, it could still have this positive feature, which characterises its impact on me.

3. Open Questions: Which Objects?

I have outlined a disjunctivist approach that naïve realists could pursue to explain how both perceptual experiences and hallucinations have intentionality, thus accounting for some common aspects of their psychological impact in terms of a common feature. The approach leaves open various issues concerning the kind of intentional objects that these experiences can have. Suppose we wanted to allow that a perception and a hallucination can be about the very same entity. An option would be to hold that neither genuine perceptions nor hallucinations have particular intentional objects, and are instead about property complexes (e.g. roundness, green-ness, and smoothness).¹³ As Johnston (2004) argues, this is plausible for hallucinations. If I hallucinate a spider, a creaky sound, or a burnt smell, what is the reason to think that my hallucination is about a particular spider, creaky sound, or burnt smell rather than another, identically-seeming one? In the case of genuine perceptual experiences, naïve realists could hold that the intentional object is the property complex in fact instantiated by the particulars that the experience is a relation of awareness to. Perceptual experiences play explanatory roles that would motivate attributing a particular intentional object to them (e.g. Soteriou, 2000), but these could be accounted for by appealing to the core naïve realist thesis that these experiences are relations of awareness to particulars.

A more natural option for naïve realists, however, is that the intentional objects of genuine perceptual experiences are the very same particular objects that they are relations of acquaintance to (Allen, 2016, p. 9; Niikawa, 2020). If so, the experience I have in seeing the apple before me will have as its intentional object that particular apple and its visible properties. Given this answer, a perception and an indiscriminable hallucination could not really share their intentional object, and would only share some general aspects of their intentionality. For example, as Johnston proposes, the perception could be about a particular instantiating a property complex (the particular green, round, smooth apple I see) and the hallucination about that property complex.¹⁴

¹² See, e.g., Nudds (2009) for an overview.

¹³ For discussion of this kind of view, see, e.g., Bourget (2019).

¹⁴ Johnston (2004) defends a version of this approach. However, Johnston offers this as an account of what perceptions and hallucinations are: an awareness of particulars and an awareness of sensory profiles, respectively. The suggestion presented here merely concerns the intentionality of these experiences, which on a naïve realist account far from exhausts the nature of the experiences.

A further issue is how the intentional objects of perceptual experiences and hallucinations are determined. In the case of perception, we have an independent way of fixing what the intentional object is – it is the particular that the perceiver is related to, or, on the first option above, the property complex this particular instantiates. In the case of hallucinations, the proposal I sketched does not per se give us an answer. On that proposal, hallucinations have intentionality in virtue of their indiscriminability from, or relevant similarity with respect to, perceptual experiences. Indiscriminability and similarity on their own do not seem to determine the intentional object of a hallucination, even when this is understood as a non-particular intentional object, such as a property complex. The thought is that in being indiscriminable from – or relevantly similar to – a perceptual experience of something green, round, and smooth, my hallucination is also indiscriminable from a perceptual experience of something white and round seen under a green light or through a green translucent screen, from a perceptual experience of a compelling hologram, and many more. This suggests that a full account of the intentionality of hallucinations within the proposal outlined in this paper will appeal to other factors which contribute to determining the intentional object of a hallucination. Relevant potential factors may be the context, the subject's prior perceptual experiences, memories, background knowledge, and expectations, and the environment the subject is normally in.¹⁵ Finally, the proposal outlined in this paper leaves it open whether, in addition to having intentionality understood in the basic sense of directedness, perceptual experiences also have representational contents specifying accuracy conditions.¹⁶

I have argued that a version of the thesis that the intentionality of perceptual experience is phenomenally grounded fits well within a naïve realist view of perceptual experience. On the one hand, the basic notion of intentionality as directedness – often central to discussions of phenomenal intentionality – can naturally be accounted for by appealing to the core naïve realist thesis that perceptual experiences are fundamentally relations of awareness giving us a partial perspective onto the mind-independent world. On the other hand, intentionality is a property that experiences which do not have this fundamental nature, such as hallucinations, also have.

The approach I recommended is a disjunctivist one: naïve realists can endorse PI_{NR} for genuine perceptual experiences, while holding that hallucinations have intentionality dependently or derivatively, insofar as we attribute it to them on the basis of their indiscriminability from, or similarity with respect to, perceptual experiences. We can thus allow that, while being metaphysically completely different, both perceptions and hallucinations can share the property of being intentionally directed at something that is apparently independent of the experience. This would allow us to account for an aspect of the psychological impact of hallucinations by appealing to a positive feature of these experiences, and compatibly with naïve realist commitments.

4. Conclusion

15 In this paper, I have not discussed illusions, i.e. experiences where one is perceptually related to an object in one's environment, but this seems other than it is. For a discussion of how the intentional object of illusions may be determined within a naïve realist framework, see Niikawa (2020).

16 While I mentioned in Sec. 1 that naïve realists have given arguments against the view that perceptual experiences have representational contents, these arguments do not obviously rule out some weak versions of the view, e.g. proposals on which such contents are disjunctive or on which the contents do not play some of the explanatory roles typically assigned to them by critics of naïve realism (see Raleigh, 2013; Wilson, 2018 for discussion). For instance, it may be that in virtue of being intentionally directed at certain objects and property instances, a perceptual experience has a disjunctive representational content involving many different possible ways for the world to be in accordance with how things seem to the subject, where the content is further determined post-perceptually depending on how the subjects takes things to be in judgements or on other contextual factors.

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