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IS PRESENCE PERCEPTUAL?[1]

abstract

Perceptual experience and visual imagination both offer a first-person perspective on visible objects. But these perspectives are strikingly different. For it is distinctive of ordinary perceptual intentionality that objects seem to be present to the perceiver. I term this phenomenal property of experience 'presence'. This paper introduces a positive definition of presence. Dokic and Martin (2017) argue that presence is not a genuine property of perceptual experience, appealing to empirical research on derealisation disorders, Parkinson's disease, virtual reality and hallucination. I demonstrate that their arguments fall short of establishing that presence is not perceptual.

keywords

Perceptual presence; Sense of reality; Perceptual experience; Phenomenology; Intentionality

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Introduction

Perceptual experience and visual imagination both offer a first-person perspective on visible objects and their sensible properties. But these perspectives are strikingly different. For it is distinctive of ordinary perceptual experience that objects seem to be present to the perceiver. Take a visual perceptual experience of a yellow iris. When you have such an experience, the iris seems to be there; a material object occupying mind-independent reality, which your experience grants access to. Compare this to an experience in which you visually imagine the iris. In this case, the curve of the petals, their distinctive yellowness, the position of the plant relative to your own viewpoint might all be brought to mind, perhaps in all of the detail of the original perceptual experience. But there is no accompanying sense that the actual object and its properties are being revealed to you. I term this phenomenal property that is distinctive of ordinary visual perceptual experience *presence*.[1]

This paper has two objectives, one corresponding to each of the two main sections. The first is to introduce a substantive definition of presence. I propose that this phenomenal property can only be adequately theorised by describing both the way an object is experienced and the experience of that object, when the property is instantiated. This consideration leads to a two-part definition. For presence to be instantiated, (1) the object must be presented as a constituent of mind-independent reality *such that* (2) the experience seems, by the very kind of experience it is, to reveal how things are. My second objective is to argue that presence is a genuine property of perceptual experience. This is not to claim that every perceptual experience instantiates presence, but rather that if presence is instantiated, it is instantiated by a perceptual experience. The view that presence is not strictly perceptual is defended by Dokic and Martin (2017). They appeal to empirical research on derealisation disorders, Parkinson's disease, hallucination and virtual reality to motivate the view that presence is 'two-way independent' (Dokic & Martin 2017, p. 299) of both perceptual content and attitude. Rather, they propose that presence is a metacognitive feeling, a state distinct from (though usually correlated with) perceptual states. Presence [in their terms *the sense of reality*] 'is

1 Crane (2005) also uses the term 'presence'. Similarly, O'Conaill (2017) and Riccardi (2019) term it 'perceptual presence', while Dokic and Martin (2017) employ 'the sense of presence' and Matthen (2005; 2010) writes of 'the feeling of presence'. Sturgeon (2000) terms this characteristic 'scene immediacy', Millar (2014) terms it 'phenomenological directness' and Husserl (1998) dubs this feature of perceptual experience *leibhaftigkeit* [givenness 'in person' or 'in the flesh']. In this paper, I refrain from using the term 'perceptual presence' as it is precisely whether presence is perceptual that I set out to address.

extrinsic to perceptual experience' (2017, p. 303). In Section 2, I demonstrate that Dokic and Martin's arguments fail to show against the basic claim that presence is instantiated by perceptual states or experiences. For this reason, their own positive metacognitive account of presence is insufficiently motivated, while there is little reason to think that the phenomenal property so distinctive of perceptual experience is not indeed a perceptual property.

1. Defining Presence

It is important to be precise from the start about what I mean by presence. It is a phenomenal property of experience – a property that contributes to what an experience is like for the consciously perceiving subject. I suggest that to describe this property adequately, we must approach it from two vantage points, namely in terms of the object of experience and the experience of the object. Beginning with the object of experience, I suggest that when presence is instantiated the object seems real. It is presented as part of mind-independent reality. Now of course, one might complain that in visual imagination objects can also be experienced as real. It is a real, mind-independent yellow iris you are visualising, after all. To qualify this point, we must introduce our second vantage point: the experience of the object. My proposal is that in an experience that instantiates presence, the experience itself seems to reveal how things are. In looking at the iris, how things are in current reality seems to be disclosed to you. Things are such that there exists an iris with just that colour and that shape.[2] By contrast, when you close your eyes and picture the iris, even in the knowledge that the plant is still in front of you, your imaginative experience does not seem to disclose this state of affairs. In visual imagination, objects are experienced in a manner that would be perfectly consistent with 'how things are' being another way entirely.[3]

Note that these two emphases helpfully delimit one another. For it is exactly by giving an object as a part of mind-independent reality, that the experience seems to reveal how things are. Conversely, what it means to 'seem to reveal' is exactly that the experience appears to grant access to mind-independent reality. The two vantage points are intimately connected and together offer a fuller description of the phenomenal property under discussion. So, we have two mutually dependent, jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for the instantiation of presence.

Presence is instantiated when:

(1) The object is presented as a constituent of mind-independent reality *such that*
(2) the experience seems, by the very kind of experience it is, to reveal how things are.

Both the object- and experience-conditions are required to pick out presence and so rule out certain counterexamples. We have seen that visual imagination might be said to satisfy (1) but not (2). The key point here is that each of the two conditions is stated quite generally, so that taken alone, numerous kinds of experience might be said to satisfy one of them. In this case, both perceptual experience and visual imagination present their objects as constituents of

2 Of course, experiences that instantiate presence can be non-veridical. Things needn't be the way they seem.

3 There are alternative senses in which visual imagination can be said to disclose how things are. In visual imagination, the colour and shape of the iris will become phenomenally available in imagination in a way that they would not in imageless thought. Indeed, for the gifted imaginer (a painter for instance) these phenomenal properties might even be represented in near-perfect analogue to the way that they appear in perceptual experience. My claim is that even if this were the case, the visual imagination would not seem to open onto how things are right now. It is part of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience that it seems to track reality at the moment of the experience, where this is not distinctive of visual imagination. It is not my aim to say anything substantive about the phenomenology of visual imagination, except that it doesn't instantiate presence.

mind-independent reality. So (2) is required to specify what kind of presentation is involved, namely presentation whereby the experience seems, by the very kind of experience it is, to reveal how things are. There is a gulf between the generality of the language used to formulate the conditions and the specific phenomenology they try to capture. To begin to bridge the gulf, the same phenomenal feature must be articulated in terms of the way both the object and the experience are characterised when it is instantiated. It is not that each condition identifies a separate phenomenal feature that is conjoined with the other to instantiate presence. Rather there is a single phenomenal feature, presence, which can only be specified by appeal to two mutually delimiting conditions. A single phenomenal feature described first in terms of the object of experience and second in terms of the experience of the object.

The experience of speaking to a colleague on a videocall offers another example that might be said to meet (1) but not when it has been delimited by (2). I have no experience of presence in seeing my colleague's face on the screen. Nonetheless, my colleague is presented as a constituent of mind-independent reality (1). Now, the videocall experience also seems to reveal how things are, but it is not 'by the very kind of experience it is' that it does so. For I could just as well be seeing something on a screen which is not taken to reflect how things are. I propose that screen experiences are fundamentally pictorial experiences, and while pictures can reveal how things are (videocalls, photographs, live television), they need not. It is no part of the phenomenology of pictorial experience *per se* that it is revelatory, so the videocall does not meet condition (2).

An example of an experience that ostensibly satisfies (2) but not (1) is that of intuitions or insight experiences (Bonjour, 2014, pp. 178-179; Chudnoff, 2013; Laukkonen, 2018). These are experiences of 'the penny dropping', i.e., when one realises that something is the case. The experience of realising the answer to a mathematical problem (or realising that you are late for a meeting) seems, by the very kind of experience it is, to reveal how things are. (1) is needed to specify that the relevant notion of *reveal* involves seemingly having mind-independent objects appear before the experiencer. Insight experiences are not presentational in this literal sense.

From the foregoing discussion it should be clear that (1) and (2) have interchangeable positions around the 'such that' clause. If (1) such that (2), (2) such that (1). They are equivalent ways to pick out the property of presence. Note also that (1) and (2) are non-committal as to which kinds of experience instantiate presence. Though I have used the contrast between perceptual and imaginary experience to motivate this definition, it may turn out that other kinds of experience or state also meet these conditions, or that on closer inspection some or all of our perceptual experiences do not. In a companion paper (Minden Ribeiro, ms) I assume that presence is a property of perceptual states, and this allows me to say more about how presence characterises experience, as well as how well metaphysical theories of perceptual experience fare in explaining (1) and (2). In defence of that assumption, I owe a response to Dokic and Martin's (2017) paper, which denies that presence is instantiated by perceptual states.

2. Is Presence Perceptual?

In their paper, Dokic and Martin advance a number of empirical considerations to motivate their view that presence is neither "essential to [n]or constitutive of" (2017, p. 300) perceptual experience. They propose instead that the phenomenology of presence is a metacognitive feeling arising from certain reality monitoring and source monitoring processes. This feeling is typically associated with perceptual states only because the metacognitive monitoring process registers that these states' content is externally generated (and so not produced by the subject). On the authors' view then, the phenomenology of presence is not properly speaking the phenomenology of the perceptual state itself. Presence is not instantiated by perceptual experience, but by an extrinsic metacognitive feeling. In this section, I don't assess this positive

proposal. Rather I argue that if they are to demonstrate that presence is not perceptual (as they must in order to motivate their view) they must argue against a significantly weaker claim than that which they explicitly attack. Dokic and Martin's arguments are deployed against the strong claim that perceptual experience always instantiates presence.[4] The weaker claim is simply that presence (in their terms 'the sense of reality') is a genuine property of perceptual experiences or states. That is, when presence is instantiated, it is instantiated by a perceptual experience. I find that their empirical arguments do not touch this weaker claim.

Dokic and Martin begin by distinguishing two senses of presence. The sense of reality is a subject's "sense that the perceptual object is *real*, i.e., belongs to the actual world" (2017, p. 300). By contrast, the sense of acquaintance is the "sense that we are *acquainted* with the object itself rather than a surrogate or representation of them... [it] involves the sense that our experiential access is *unmediated*" (2012, p. 2). Note that these two senses roughly correspond with (1) and (2), the core features of presence as I outline it in Section 1. Dokic and Martin don't offer an extensive argument that the two are distinct senses. They simply claim as their focus the sense of reality and whether it is essentially or constitutively perceptual. In any case, I take it that their 'sense of reality' picks out the same phenomenon I have been terming presence. Still, for ease of exposition, I will adopt their 'sense of reality' terminology for the remainder of this section.

The first empirical case Dokic and Martin consider is that of derealisation disorders. Patients with derealisation disorders experience an affective distance from or flattening of their surroundings (Gerrans, 2019; Medford, 2012). It is often described as the experience that the perceptual world is lacking reality. Dokic and Martin cite a patient's testimony from Shorvon et al.'s (1946) study: "[...] the people and things around you seem as unreal to you as if you were only dreaming about them". The authors begin from the assumption that what is lacking in derealised experiences is the same sense of reality associated with ordinary perceptual experience. One might be doubtful of this claim and the authors offer no arguments in its favour. But assuming that derealised patients' experiences lack the sense of reality, the central question is whether this provides reason to think that the sense of reality is not properly perceptual.

The first thing to say is that nothing in Dokic and Martin's description suggests that the sense of reality is lacking entirely in derealised experiences. An alternative proposal is that it is largely suppressed or subdued – a hypothesis which fits better with the gradual manner in which patients often develop or recover from derealisation disorders.[5] On this alternative, it would be a mistake to assume that patients with derealisation disorders undergo perceptual experiences without any sense of reality. Rather, it is instantiated in a minimal, depleted or distorted form. The authors offer no reason to favour their interpretation over this one. On top of this, one should bear in mind that derealised experiences are manifestations of mental disorders – a disruption of normal functioning. The perceptual state is not operating as it should. But the malfunction of an aspect of perceptual experience is not in itself a reason to think that such an aspect is not properly perceptual. After all, it is plausible that in derealised experiences the sense of reality is absent (or suppressed) while when such a state is functioning normally, that phenomenology is a property of the perceptual experience itself.

Dokic and Martin might respond that this description does indeed disprove the claim they take to be their main target: that the sense of reality is "essential to, or constitutive of" perceptual

4 Dokic and Martin are alive to the fact that this claim could be realised in one of two ways. Either presence could be an essential feature of perceptual content, or it could be an essential feature of the perceptual attitude, in their terms the 'psychological mode' of perception. The authors reject both of these possibilities (2017, p. 303). My aim is to argue that when presence is instantiated, it is indeed instantiated by perceptual experience, without thereby committing myself to which of these options is correct. The latter would take me beyond the scope of this paper.

5 For example, when associated with severe depression (cf. Baker et al., 2003).

experience (2017, p. 300). For if the sense of reality is absent when perceptual experience malfunctions, it cannot be essential to perceptual experience. This 'essential to/constitutive of' claim is very strong, holding that no perceptual experience can occur without the sense of reality. I am happy to concede that derealisation experiences provide some reason to reject it.[6] But it is important to note that Dokic and Martin need to disprove a significantly weaker claim in order to motivate their metacognitive proposal. The weaker claim is simply:

> (WC) The sense of reality is a property of perceptual experiences or states.

If this claim stands, then their metacognitive feeling view cannot. So, it is this weaker claim that their empirical considerations ought to speak against.
The difference between the strong and weak claims is well illustrated by derealisation experiences, which – on the assumption that the sense of reality is what is lacking in these kinds of experience *and* the assumption that the sense of reality is entirely absent, as opposed to subdued or distorted – offer a counterexample to the strong claim without imperilling the weaker one. For the weak claim is consistent with the proposal that *when* the sense of reality is instantiated, it is instantiated by a perceptual state. One way to refute the weaker claim would be to show that the feeling of reality occurs without any perceptual experience. It is to this end that Dokic and Martin introduce their next empirical example.
Their second empirical consideration is the experience of the "false senses of presence" associated with Parkinson's disease (Dokic & Martin 2017, p. 302). The authors cite Fenelon's (2008, p. 19) description of the phenomenon:

> a vivid sensation that somebody is present nearby, when in fact there is no one there. In most cases, the sensation is precisely located, behind or to the side, or occasionally in another room. The perceived presence is that of a person, who is either identified (a living or, less frequently, a deceased relative or spouse) or unidentified.

This is then a sense of presence that does not characterise anything given in the perceptual experience. It is outside or peripheral to the visual field and so not bound up with the presentation of any sensory object. Dokic and Martin appeal to these experiences to demonstrate that the sense of reality can be instantiated independently of perceptual content; that it is intrinsically non-perceptual in contradiction of my weak claim above.
Are these senses of presence experienced by some patients with Parkinson's disease the same sense of reality characteristic of ordinary perceptual experience? There is little reason to think so. After all, the sense of reality we are familiar with in perceptual experience characterises the way that objects *are given*. Things show up for us as actual, mind-independent and directly revealed. In these experiences associated with Parkinson's however, the objects don't 'show up' at all. They remain out of view. Moreover, these false senses of presence are "not bound to sensory objects in normal perception" (Dokic & Martin 2017, p. 302). The authors might suppose it question begging to assume that the sense of reality *has* to be perceptual – this after all is what they are setting out to disprove. Yet regardless of whether *metaphysically* the sense of reality properly pertains to a perceptual state or an extrinsic metacognitive feeling, it certainly seems as though it characterises the sensory givenness of objects. So while it would

6 Dokic and Martin ascribe it to "Husserl, Matthen, and many others" (2017, p. 300). While Husserl's investigations of the essential features of mental acts makes him vulnerable to this kind of criticism, I don't think this stronger claim is a very widespread position and I haven't found it explicitly endorsed in Matthen's work.

indeed be question begging to make a metaphysical claim against their proposal based purely on the phenomenology, it is quite right that we appeal to the phenomenology to specify what it is that we are talking about. After all, the sense of reality is a phenomenological datum. And phenomenologically speaking, it characterises the givenness of sensory objects. I suggest that if we renounce this insight – as Dokic and Martin's example encourages us to – we lose our grip on what the sense of reality is.

At this point one might object that the false senses of presence also count as a givenness. After all, they are experiences of something being there; something being present to one. They are not a sensory givenness, but perhaps they are a kind of cognitive givenness – an immediate judgment that a certain person is just out of view, where that judgment has become imbued by the sense of reality. Couldn't the lesson of the phenomenology of perceptual experience be simply that objects are given – and not that objects are sensorily given – when presence is instantiated?

But even if this is right, I think Dokic and Martin exploit a linguistic ambiguity in the notion of presence. For while the sense of reality involves an experience of material presence, the false senses of presence seem to constitute a primarily *social* presence. They are typically a presentiment of being in somebody's presence or company. As Fenelon (2008, p. 19) puts it in the passage quoted above, "the perceived presence is that of a person". There is an important phenomenal difference between experiencing an object as present to one and feeling oneself to be in the presence of another experiencer.

Might there be an explanation as to why Dokic and Martin are led to equivocate between these readings of presence? I suggest there is. Recall that the authors distinguish two senses of presence: the sense of reality and the sense of acquaintance. It might seem odd to call them separate senses. After all these two aspects seem to come together: we are acquainted with how things are in the actual (i.e. real) world. Indeed, as I propose in Section 1, when examining perceptual experience, the concepts of acquaintance (or 'seeming to reveal') and reality helpfully delimit each other. What do we mean by reality? Simply that which perceptual experience acquaints us with. What do we mean by acquaintance? The kind of ostensibly direct access we have to the actual, mind-independent world. This is why in Section 1 I proposed that the two characteristics of presence (1) and (2) were really just differences of emphasis. Dokic and Martin don't consider the senses of reality and acquaintance different aspects of the same awareness but different awarenesses entirely. One consequence of this is that their notion of 'reality' is not limited to that which is given in an experience. Instead, the term is used so loosely that even a non-perceptual, social sense of presence qualifies. In sum, Dokic and Martin have provided no reason to think that these experiences associated with Parkinson's disease bear the same sense of reality that characterises ordinary perceptual experience.

The authors' third and fourth empirical examples concern virtual reality and hallucinations. Both are appealed to as cases where "spatio-sensory realism has no impact on experienced reality" (Dokic & Martin, 2017, p. 303). The argument goes that if (spatio-sensory) perceptual content can be very unrealistic without affecting the sense of reality, then it is not perceptual content that determines the sense of reality. This suggests that the sense of reality is not itself perceptual, in contradiction to the weaker claim I outline above. Focusing on the hallucination case,[7] the authors note that among the hallucinations that do generate a sense of reality, the

7 Dokic and Martin's discussion of virtual reality faces similar difficulties to their discussion of the false senses of presence associated with Parkinson's disease, namely they do not provide reason for identifying the "strong sense of presence" (2017, p. 302) provoked by computer generated environments with the phenomenology that characterises ordinary perceptual experience.

hallucinated object need not be especially realistic. One could "hallucinate a quite unrealistic entity, such as a horrible but two-dimensional creature, while having a strong sense that the entity is real" (2017, p. 303; the authors cite Shanon 2002). It follows for Dokic and Martin that "realistic spatio-sensory contents are not what determines the sense of reality" (2017, p. 303). One line of response is to note how narrow this argument's purview is. If the authors are correct and spatio-sensory content is not what determines the sense of reality, it by no means follows that the sense of reality is not perceptual at all. If perceptual content is more extensive than spatio-sensory content, there may be other non-sensory aspects of perceptual content that are responsible for the sense of reality. As I read him, Millar maintains this kind of view (2014). Alternatively, it may be the perceptual attitude rather than the perceptual content that is responsible for the sense of reality. Matthen holds this kind of position (2005; 2010). Once we admit of these possible accounts of presence, the argument that realistic spatio-sensory content does not determine the sense of reality does not touch my weaker claim that when there is a sense of reality, it is a genuine property of perceptual experiences.

Dokic and Martin draw from the apparently converging evidence of derealisation disorders, false senses of presence, virtual reality and empirical hallucinations that "there is a double dissociation between having a genuine perceptual experience and having a sense of reality with respect to what is experienced" (2017, p. 303). I have argued that a number of questionable assumptions must be in place if derealisation experiences are to be taken to be perceptual experiences without a sense of reality. But even if they are, dissociation in this direction does not show that the sense of reality is not perceptual, nor motivate Dokic and Martin's positive proposal. It would take a sense of reality that was shown to be both associated with a perceptual experience but not strictly a property of that experience to contradict the weaker claim. I have argued that neither the false senses of presence associated with Parkinson's disease or unrealistic hallucinations show this. The former are not the same sense of reality that characterise normal perceptual experience, while the authors' appeal to hallucination is too narrow in scope to challenge the weaker claim. I conclude then that there is no reason to think that the sense of reality is not instantiated by perceptual experiences themselves. Indeed, we should feel secure in our natural assumption that they are.

Conclusion

In the previous section I argued against Dokic and Martin's claim that presence is not instantiated by perceptual experiences themselves. Given the shortcomings of their empirical appeals, and that there is little independent reason to think that the characteristic phenomenology of perceptual experiences does not pertain to those very experiences, I propose that presence is indeed perceptual. More specifically, it is the phenomenal property of perceptual experiences, by which a perceptual object is given as a constituent of mind-independent reality such that the experience seems, by the very kind of experience it is, to reveal how things are.

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