

Comensana, McGrath – Perceptual Reasons

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§1

Interested specifically in *perceptual* evidence. Two main theories

Phenomenalism perceptual reasons are **facts** about experiences conceived of as phenomenal states, i.e., states individuated by phenomenal character, by what it's like to be in them.¹

- deals well in bad cases, poorly with good cases

Factualism perceptual reasons are instead **facts** about the external objects perceived.

- deals well with good case, poorly with bad cases

Propositionalism perceptual reasons are *propositions* about the external objects perceived (as with Factualism) but are false in bad cases

- deals well with both good and bad cases?

¹ NB assumption that internal/ narrow content is what's relevant to epistemic reasons. Could also be a 'Phenomenalist' where reasons are facts about experience individuated by their contents, where those contents are individuated externally/ broadly.

C&M's taxonomy of views is very coarse-grained.

Goal of the paper: defend propositionalism

§2

Taxonomy:

	Q1: In good cases, are reasons about the object perceived?	Can reasons be false?	Is there an epistemic condition on reason-possession?
Phenomenalism	No	No	No
Factualism	Yes	Yes	No (McD)*, Yes (others)**
Propositionalism	Yes	Yes	Yes

* 'McDowellians think the mere truth of the basic perceptual reason is enough to have it as a reason... [so no epistemic requirement on reason-possession]. Now the mere truth of *there is a tomato before me* does not seem by itself to ensure that I have that reason (in our relevant sense of 'having' on which having reasons allows reasons to bear on justification). McDowellians therefore take basic perceptual

reasons to be [a fact] about the subject and her relation to the world,
[e.g.] *that that one sees that there is a tomato before one.* (994)

** E.g. Williamson, for whom only *known* propositions are evidence.

§3

Point of this section: argue that bad cases (hallucination, illusion) are problematic for Factualism

Good case: Mary believes there is a tomato in front of her on the basis of a perceptual experience as of a tomato in front of her, and there really is one

Good case: Mary believes there is a tomato in front of her on the basis of a perceptual experience as of a tomato in front of her, but there isn't one

C&M assert two principles:

Equal Justification (EJ): Mary's belief that there is a tomato in front of her is justified in the good case; and it is equally justified in the bad case.

Sameness of Basis (SB): The fundamental bases on which Mary believes that there is a tomato in front of her are the same in the good and the bad case.

If EJ and SB are both true, then in both cases Mary's belief is justified by the very same reason.

According to Factualism all reasons are facts.

What fact could justify Mary's belief in both the good and bad cases?

- Can't be the McDowlean *Mary's seeing a tomato in front of her*, as that's not a fact in the bad case
- Can't be any fact that entails that there's a tomato in front of her: in the bad case, there isn't
- Can't be any fact that entails that there's a tomato-looking object in front of her; bad case might involve drugs causing a squirrel (which doesn't look like a tomato) to appear to Mary as if it's a tomato
- Can't be any fact that entails that there's some object of her perception: she might be hallucinating

What's needed is something in common between the good and bad cases?

What is left for a candidate for [the factual reason common to both cases]? It seems the external world can differ as much as you like between the good and bad cases. The one commonality is phenomenal. If facts are to be our perceptual reasons, then given EJ and SB, these facts have to be facts about our phenomenal states. And this gives us Phenomenalism. As long as our perceptual reasons must be facts, EJ and SB constitute a strong argument against Factualism and for Phenomenalism. (996-7)

§4

Point of this section: argue that good cases (no hallucination, no illusion, experience results in knowledge) are problematic for Phenomenalism

Remember:

Phenomenalists do not regard the mental state itself as a reason, but rather facts about mental states; the reason isn't Mary's experience as of the tomato, it's (something like) the true proposition *Mary had an experience as of the tomato*.

A reason for believing *p* is understood as a consideration that speaks in favor of believing that *p*.

First question: does *Mary had an experience as of the tomato* speak in favor *there's a tomato*? How strongly?

C&M: not at all:

...we take it that if phenomenal character is simply a matter of enjoying certain primitive qualitative feels or of perceiving purely mental sense-data, facts about phenomenal character do not weigh at all in favor in believing one or another proposition about the world outside us (they simply do not have the right subject matter to do so). (998)

Of course phenomenal facts could be combined with reliability facts (or 'facts'), and this combination would then speak strongly in favor of the conclusion:

1. I have an experience presenting that *P*
2. My experiences presenting that such and such reliably indicate that such and such.
3. Therefore (probably), *P*.

First problem: introspecting, we don't typically form beliefs by considering facts about our perceptual states – when we seem to see a tomato, we just come to believe *there's a tomato*

Second problem: how does Mary come to possess (2) as one of her reasons?

§5

Point of this section: defense of Propositionalism

Propositionalism holds reasons to be propositions about the world (contra Phenomenalism) that might sometimes be false (contra Factualism).

This could be spelled out in a number of ways. C&M prefer:

Appearance Propositionalism Perceptual reasons in both the good and bad case are propositions about things' having certain appearances (about things' having certain looks, sounds, smells, etc.)

NB: 'having certain appearances' is here understood as a property of the thing out in the world. E.g., if the reason is *this looks like a tomato*, we're attributing a property to the tomato (the property of looking like a tomato), rather than a property to the perceiving agent, such as 'It looks to me as if there's a tomato'. The latter sounds like a kind of adverbialism: 'I'm being appeared to tomato-ly'.

Claim: Appearance Propositionalism's reasons are propositions about objects in the world, 'so, it has at least the same advantages over Phenomenalism that Factualism enjoys. The reason does not need to be combined with considerations bridging the internal to the external.' (1000)

Larger point: Appearance Propositionalism fares well in good cases (like Factualism and unlike Phenomenalism)

BTM: true, the Appearance Propositionalist doesn't need to be able to bridge the internal and the external (as with Phenomenalism), but they do need to bridge from *this looks like a tomato* to *this is a tomato*, which was the original. Presumably that will require further considerations as auxiliary hypotheses. How much of an advantage is this?

What about bad cases?

Bad cases come in a number of forms, as we have seen. So long as the relevant looks-proposition exists in a given bad case,² and so long as the subject is perceptually justified in believing it, the subject in the bad case has the same reason as the subject in the good case.

There are many forms of bad cases, and the most troublesome for Appearance Propositionalism are hallucination cases

² What does it mean for a looks-proposition to exist in the bad case? When there's an object that doesn't have the property of looking like a tomato, and Mary looks at it and it looks *to her* like a tomato, does the proposition exist? Is it thereby one of her reasons? This is way to quick to pass over a key part of the theory.

illusion you seem to perceive an object as having properties A, B, and C, but it doesn't: it has properties X, Y and Z (e.g. Lady Macbeth looks at her hands and sees them as covered in blood, but they aren't)

hallucination you seem to perceive an object, but there isn't one (e.g. Lord Macbeth perceives a dagger, but there isn't one)

Why hallucination is potentially problematic where illusion isn't:

In hallucination cases, there is no object to "stick" in the proposition this looks such and such. Therefore there is no such proposition. But there is such a proposition in the good case, and it is the basic perceptual reason. So the reason in the good case is not the same as the reason in the bad case. S(ame) B(asis), which we used against Factualism, requires us to find the same reason in both cases. (1000-1)

Possible response:

- we're imagining cases in which the reason is *this thing before me looks like there's a tomato*, which supports the belief *there's a tomato before me*
- hallucination cases are problematic specifically because 'this thing' has no referent in the bad (hallucinatory) case
- so, the proposition *this thing before me looks like there's a tomato* doesn't exist in the bad case, so you can't have the same reason in both cases, so your belief that *there's a tomato before me* can't have the same basis in the good and bad cases. That contradicts SB.
- Proposal: the reason for believing *there's a tomato before me* isn't *this thing before me looks like there's a tomato*, the reason is *there's a tomato before me* itself! (No missing referent in that proposition, even in the bad case)

Problem: but in the good case the existential proposition isn't epistemically basic – it's something more directly about *that tomato* (which doesn't exist in the bad (hallucinatory) case)

BTM: why say that? Is this coming from considerations around constraints on what sorts of mental contents are represented in experience? Is this a purely epistemic point?

C&M's Better response:

Let's agree that our basic perceptual reasons are of the form *this looks like a K*. Now, consider demonstrative thinkings, i.e., episodes of thinking (or believings) in which one employs a demonstrative concept

and brings it under a predicative concept. Say that a demonstrative thinking is empty if the demonstrative concept employed is not a concept of any existing object. We distinguish object-independent versus object-dependent views of the contents of demonstrative thinkings. Object-independent views hold that a demonstrative thinking has the same content whether it is empty or non-empty. If such a view were correct, Appearance Propositionalists could clearly say that in the hallucination case the subject has the same basic reason as in the good case. The reason would be the proposition that serves as the content for the relevant demonstrative thinkings, a non-existential proposition this looks like a K. This would preserve SB.

Suppose, instead, that object-dependent views of the content of demonstrative thinkings turn out to be correct. On object-dependent views, the contents of empty demonstrative thinkings are different from those of non-empty ones. In the empty case, the content is perhaps a gappy proposition or a proposition-radical rather than a fully-fledged proposition capable of having a truth-value. Wouldn't the Propositionalist then have to concede that the reasons are different across the good case and the hallucination case? Thus, SB will be jeopardized. (1002)

Two responses on behalf of Propositionalist who takes reasons to be demonstrative in the object-dependent way:

First response: fine, reasons are different in the good and bad cases³, but the rational support of both reasons for *that's a tomato* is the same

³ (<that thing, looks like a tomato> and <—, looks like a tomato, respectively)

How can gappy propositions support?

Analogue: thoughts with singular contents that fail to refer (e.g. *Vulcan is a planet, Santa Claus is fat and jolly*) can nonetheless be well justified and transmit that justification to existential propositions (e.g. *there exists an inter planet Aristotle didn't know about, Someone is fat and jolly*). Why think this is possible in the case of singular content-gappy propositions but not demonstrative-gappy propositions?

Proposal: reasons propositions that are demonstrative-gappy transmit justification exactly like their non-gappy analogues.

Upshot: SB is abandoned, but something close is preserved (bases in good and bad cases are similar⁴, but existential belief supported by the reason is equally justified in both cases.

⁴ Is that right?

Second response:

Reasons are not propositions, after all. Rather, reasons are thought-types, i.e., types of thinking episodes. In good cases, one's thinking episode has a proposition as its content; in hallucination cases, it does not. No matter, it is not the content that is the reason. It is the thought-type. According to this revised theory, basic perceptual reasons are thought-types involving the employment of a perceptual demonstrative concept and bringing it under a concept of looks, a type of the form

this looks like a K. These thought-types are about the external world in this sense: whether their tokens are true or not depends on how things are in the world external to the subject. The thought-type I am undergoing phenomenal state *u* by contrast is about the world internal to the subject.

Upshot, according to C&M:

Our main point is that, once we have a good account of empty demonstrative thinkings, Propositionalists can use it to give a plausible account of hallucination cases. For, a good account of empty demonstrative thinkings, among other things, explains how these thinkings can be every bit as well justified whether they are empty or not and allows that they can transmit their justification to existential beliefs just as effectively whether empty or not.