

Disjunctivism

Perception, Action, Knowledge

Edited by Adrian Haddock and Fiona Macpherson

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Contemporary Readings

Edited by Alex Byrne and Heather Logue

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Two books, one title. And what a title! Two leading academic publishers have produced anthologies of essays about a philosophical doctrine with a name like an eye disease. Those familiar with the field will not be surprised: disjunctivism is one of the hot topics in the philosophy of mind, and these books will sell to researchers and busy graduate students. Anyone unfamiliar with contemporary philosophy may well be baffled. But it's worth working to eliminate bafflement: the debate to which the books contribute lies at the heart of our own conception of our minds.

So what is disjunctivism? The cover of the Haddock-Macpherson volume shows a fragmented face: broken up, out-of-focus, blotchy and occluded. Maybe the designer's idea was that the mind, or self (or soul?) is 'disjoined', 'disjointed' or in some way divided: one part over here, one part over there. One can only sympathise with a designer faced with the task of illustrating an abstract philosophical doctrine.

But in this case they have got it completely wrong. Disjunctivism is not about how the mind might be disturbed or disjointed; its main point is not about any kind of breakdown of cognition. It's a view about the nature of the most ordinary, undisturbed cognition that there is: visual perception and the knowledge of the world it brings.

The issue is not how perception works at a psychological or neuroscientific level. Rather, it is about how to characterise perception from the subjective perspective: the perspective of someone, anyone at all, actually having a visual experience. What is it like to be seeing something? How would a reflective thinker describe their experience? And how does visual experience provide us with knowledge of the world?

A natural answer is that to perceive the world is simply for you to be related to things outside you, for these things simply to be there for you. To describe your experience is just to describe how things around you seem to be. Antonio Damasio once described the problem of consciousness as the problem of how we construct a 'movie in the brain'. But as far as conscious perception (e.g. seeing) is concerned, this is a misguided approach. Seeing things around us is not like watching a movie (in the brain, or the mind or anywhere else). The things we see don't seem to be in our brain or in our mind: they seem to be in the world around us, and we seem to be immersed in this world along with them. It's not that we can't also reflect upon individual sensory discrepancies; but, as Heidegger put it (in a rare moment of good sense) a person's 'primary kind of being is such that they are always "outside", alongside entities which they encounter and which belong to a world already discovered'. This obvious truth surely deserves to be called the 'Ordinary View' of perceptual consciousness.

Why is it necessary even to *state* something like this Ordinary View? Because philosophers, at least since Hume, have argued that the Ordinary View (sometimes called ‘naïve realism’) is refuted by abstract philosophical argument. They argue that because of the possibility of certain kinds of error in perception, the Ordinary View cannot be true. The most extreme and clearest case is this: it seems possible in principle to stimulate the brain to create an experience which seems just like the experience you have when you see a pig in your garden, except that there is no pig there. It seems possible, that is, to create a perfect hallucination of a pig in your garden. Of course, this is not a practical possibility; but there seems to be nothing we know which rules it out as absolutely impossible.

Seeing a pig is, of course, a very different thing from hallucinating a pig. When you see a pig there is a pig before you; when you hallucinate there is not. But from the subjective point of view, the experience that you are having when hallucinating might be exactly the same as the experience you have when seeing. The experience is the same, though the world is different. For things seem exactly the same to you in each case; and isn’t subjective experience just a matter of how things seem? If this is so, then the experience as such is independent of the real existence of thing you are seeing, the pig.

There seems, therefore, to be a paradox at the heart of our thinking about perception. For if the experiences we have when perceiving are fundamentally the same when perceiving as when hallucinating, then the Ordinary View is not true. And if the Ordinary View is not true, then perceptual consciousness as we ordinarily conceive of it is impossible. This is the philosophical paradox of perception.

For many years it seemed like there were only a limited number of options in response to this paradox. One could deny the Ordinary View outright, and insist that

we are only aware of inner mental items; or one could try and undermine the argument against the Ordinary View, and give some other analysis of perception (in terms of judgement or belief, for example). The first option seemed to many like a wild unscientific speculation; while the second seemed just to ignore the distinctive features of sense perception by assimilating it to more intellectual acts, like judgement. For most of the twentieth century, the philosophy of perception struggled with these various theories, until eventually the interest in perception faded out and gave way to other fashions.

It was into this context that the doctrine of Disjunctivism emerged in the last few decades of the century, as a genuinely new option in the theory of perception. Its central claim is that it is a mistake to think that a hallucination and a genuine perception have any common mental nature. A perception and an hallucination may seem exactly the same to the person having the experiences, but this is a matter of how the experiences seem, not how they essentially are. How things seem can be a very different matter from how things are; and this truism can apply to experience too. Disjunctivists say that if it is true that it seems to someone as if a pig is in their garden, then this is true either because they are directly aware of a real pig before them (as the Ordinary View has it), or because they are merely hallucinating a pig. Logic gives the name *disjunction* to claims of the form ‘either ... or ...’ – hence the theory’s name.

The denial of a common mental nature shared by perception and hallucination enables disjunctivists to reject the argument against the Ordinary View at its very outset. For now there is no common ‘experience’ which remains the same whether or not its object exists. Being in a perceptual state simply seems like being in a hallucinatory state, and that’s all there is to it.

From this apparently modest starting point, disjunctivists have drawn large and interesting conclusions. Some, like John McDowell, see the view as an essential part of the rejection of what they call the 'Cartesian' conception of the mind: the conception of the mind as essentially isolated from the world around it. M.G.F. Martin draws a different anti-Cartesian moral: disjunctivism shows the real limits to what we can know about our minds by introspection or self-awareness. Descartes may have been wrong to think that our own minds are the things we know best.

Disjunctivism, then, concerns something the very heart of our mental lives: the nature of cognitive contact with the world in visual experience. One would not get much sense of this from a casual look at Haddock and Macpherson's collection of essays. Rather, the impression one gets is that of joining a very complicated conversation which has already been going on for several years. Beginners should approach this book with caution. Even the (otherwise excellent) introduction takes four or five pages before it even begins to suggest what disjunctivism might actually be. The papers are all heavily immersed in recent debates; the table of contents lists one obscure title after another (with Duncan Pritchard's 'McDowellian Neo-Mooreanism' surely winning the prize). For the beginner, the introduction to Byrne and Logue's volume would be the best place to start.

How did things become so complicated? The Byrne-Logue volume, a reprinting of some of the most important articles on disjunctivism, shows how the history of disjunctivism developed. The book starts with a couple of papers by the late Oxford philosopher J.M. Hinton, the rather unlikely hero of this fashionable movement. Not especially well-known in his lifetime, Hinton invented the essence of disjunctivism in his 1967 paper 'Visual Experiences' and in his 1973 book *Experiences*. In the Haddock-Macpherson volume, Paul Snowdon gives a lucid and

judicious assessment of Hinton's contribution. Snowdon himself published a classic argument for the coherence of disjunctivism in 1978, and McDowell appealed to the view in 1982 in a famous argument for the thesis that perceptual knowledge is direct contact with reality (all these papers are helpfully collected by Byrne and Logue).

In its early days, disjunctivism was something of a slow burner (it didn't even get its name until Howard Robinson christened it thus in his 1994 book, *Perception*). The theory didn't really start generating worldwide interest until early 2000s, largely through the influence of a number of large and intricate papers by M.G.F. Martin, a couple of which are reprinted in the Byrne-Logue collection. It's fair to say that Martin's name is now most closely associated with the view because of his painstaking and detailed development of the basic disjunctivist idea; and there is also one aspect of his view which has come under particularly intense criticism.

What its critics have found most difficult to accept about disjunctivism is its account of hallucinatory experience. If it is really true that a genuine perception and a subjectively matching hallucination have nothing significant in common, then what can explain the fact that these experiences seem exactly the same? Isn't this precisely what the appeal to the common state of mind is supposed to do? Disjunctivists have answered this question in different ways. Martin insists that we should not expect any positive characterisation of these kinds of hallucination. From the point of view of the philosophy of perception, the only thing that we need to say about the hallucination of a pig is that it is subjectively indistinguishable from a genuine perception of a pig. In other words, in the hallucinatory state the subject cannot tell from reflection on their experience alone that they are not perceiving a pig.

A number of the papers in the Haddock-Macpherson volume (notably those by Susanna Siegel, A.D. Smith, E.J. Lowe and Jonathan Dancy) take issue with this idea

of Martin's. One question raised by Siegel is how the idea can be squared with the possibility of hallucinations in creatures who lack the cognitive resources to reflect on their experiences. Such phenomena seem clearly possible; but Martin's account apparently makes them problematic, since it defines the perfectly matching hallucination solely in terms of what can be known by reflection. What lies behind this criticism is the feeling that one has not made sense of the objection to the Ordinary View unless one has given some positive account of hallucination in terms of the actual psychological qualities of the experience. An alternative disjunctivist response to this challenge is given by William Fish, who claims that a positive account of hallucination can be given in terms of the ways in which the hallucination can have similar cognitive effects to genuine perception.

This being philosophy, once someone has an idea then someone else tries to apply it elsewhere. Can there be a disjunctive conception of judgement? Or belief? Or action? All these ideas have been suggested, but only the last (the most sensible application) is treated in the Haddock-Macpherson volume. In one of the best papers in the book, Jennifer Hornsby applies the disjunctivist idea to the philosophical problem of what it is to be a reason for an action. The question Hornsby addresses is: when does someone have a reason for what they do? On the one hand, we are inclined to say that someone's reason is some fact about the world ('I helped her because she was poor and starving'). On the other hand we might say that someone had a reason even if they merely thought something was a fact ('I helped her because I thought she was poor and starving – but I was wrong'). Hornsby uses the basic disjunctivist idea to show how both these conceptions of a reason have a place, without us having to retreat to a common element of a subjective conception of reasons.

These books are very different; but each of them is worth having. The Byrne-Logue collection introduces the topic and the seminal contributions of the leading disjunctivists, while the Haddock-Macpherson volume gives us a representative snapshot of the current state of play. The two books complement each other beautifully; together they provide almost everything you need to know about this important new development in the philosophy of mind.

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