

Discussione

M. Doyon and T. Breyer (eds.),
Normativity in Perception

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in the nature and functions of norms; to the extent that it may be said that there has been a normative turn in contemporary philosophy. The twelve essays collected in this volume reflect this growing interest. As the editors Maxime Doyon and Thimo Breyer explain in the introduction, normativity does not just belong to the moral or the ethical, but it rather concerns all facets of philosophical reflection, inasmuch as human action in general is guided with more or less motivational strength by norms of all kinds. In particular, the primary goal of the volume is to shed light on a specific dimension of normativity that, according to the editors, has not yet received the attention it deserves; that is, the dimension of perceptual normativity. In fact, whereas questions concerning the nature and functions of norms in perceptual experience have been examined for quite some time within analytic philosophy as, for example, thanks to John McDowell's *Mind and World*, it is only very recently that perceptual normativity has been explicitly thematized within phenomenology; in particular, by Steven Crowell's *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger*. Indeed, it is ever more clear thanks to recent contributions like these that philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger have not only dealt with normativity in their writings, but their works are interestingly relevant for the recent debate about perceptual normativity.

The essays contained in this volume address the question of normativity in perception from two different points of view: some consider perception as normative for it can justify or give reasons for believing and judging; others identify the normative character of perception with its being norm guided. As Doyon stresses in *Chapter 2*, the former approach to perceptual normativity is commonly developed within post-Kantian analytic philosophy, while the latter is traditionally dealt with by phenomenology. However, at any rate, these two

points of view are not mutually exclusive, as they are both contemporarily present in some of the essays collected in the volume, and even the first approach to perceptual normativity can be found in essays with a strong phenomenological background.

More specifically, the questions that the collection raise and address are whether a perceptual norm is something to be directly aware of or whether it guides one's perceiving regardless of it being noticed, where perceptual norms comes from, and why they have their normative strength, whether perceptual norms are to be understood as endogenous or intellectual, and whether they are historically determined or *a priori*. Despite their different approaches, the essays collected in this volume attempt to give answer to these questions drawing from the phenomenological tradition.

I will now provide a short summary of the volume's twelve essays, which have been divided into four sections by the editors.

1. Part I: Fundamental Problems

The first section of the volume, which is titled *Fundamental Problems*, introduces the reader to the issues and approaches to the question of perceptual normativity that will receive further attention throughout the rest of the volume.

In *Chapter 1*, Charles Siewert defends the idea that sensory experience has both a normative status and a normative function. As he argues, it has a normative status, for, roughly, things can appear to us more or less accurately, or become more or less apparent to us, for example, by touching them or looking at them differently, and accuracy and goodness are normative notions. Importantly, according to Siewert, the possibility of things appearing more or less accurately depends on the characteristics of our sensory experience; that is, the fact that things appearing to us appear as a unity, even though their appearing to us is always perspectively limited. Indeed, as Siewert writes, sensory experiences have «phenomenal sensory constancy.» (p. 26)

After having showed that sensory experience has a normative status, Siewert argues that it has also a normative function. This is so, according to him, for it provides epistemic justification for our beliefs and judgments. Further, he argues that to an increasing determination of the thing experienced often corresponds a higher justification of the belief or judgment grounded on that sensory experience. In other words, beliefs and judgments can be more or less justified for us depending on how clearly things appear to us. Moreover, getting a good enough look at something can lead us to correct our judgment about it. These considerations initiate reflections that find further development in *Part 4* of this volume.

Siewert also criticizes the view of the normative function of sensory experience defended by McDowell's in *Mind and World*, according to which critical self-assessment is needed for sensory experience to have objective purport, and perceptual beliefs can be justified just in case the sensory experience upon

which they are based has objective purport. According to Siewert, McDowell's view «overintellectualizes justification, as it seems unlikely that higher-order or metacognitive talents» (p. 20) such as critical self-assessment are needed for providing justification of perceptual beliefs. As opposed to that, he insists on the importance for this of being in a favorable environment and having a «capacity of improve one's sensorimotor performance, relative to one's aims, in response to changing conditions that might otherwise impede or diminish it.» (p. 35) And this is something that can, and often does, happen passively; that is, without our being directly aware of it.

In *Chapter 2*, Maxime Doyon deals with the question of perceptual normativity not from the epistemic point of view, as he explicitly puts aside the questions concerning how and why perceptual experience justifies or gives reason for believing or judging to examine closely another key feature of perceptual normativity, that is, the norms guiding perceptual experience.

Despite favoring this approach to perceptual normativity, Doyon compares his view of perceptual normativity, which has a strong phenomenological background, with John McDowell's. More precisely, the assumption which this essay originates from is that McDowell rightly claims that perceptual experience is normative just in case the norms governing it are directly accessible for the perceiving subject. According to Doyon, however, McDowell is wrong to claim that the capacity of self-assessment and self-correction that serves this aim need be realizable through concepts. Doyon argues, in fact, that Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's views of body consciousness and of body schema allow to account more appropriately for the kind of self-assessment and self-correction required for perceptual experience being normative; that is, as a practical, pre-reflective self-consciousness that does not require concept possession. This pre-reflective form of bodily self-consciousness manifests normative significance for perception, as it allows the perceiving subject to develop appropriate responses to the environment she is in. As Doyon explains, «our body cannot engage in a self-critical activity,» but still it can be «normatively attuned to its environment and self-correct when the situation requires it» (p. 44), through a tacit, pre-reflective recognition of the norms governing perception; which consist of the appropriate movements necessary to guarantee successful perceptions. There are many examples of activities that give evidence for the view advanced by Doyon; that is, activities in which it is our body alone recognizes what is the best thing to do to achieve success. Thus, perceptual experience is normative, according to Doyon, inasmuch as achieving successful perceptions (which is, in Husserl's vocabulary, to come close to the perceptual *optimum*) involve bodily self-assessment and self-correction.

The status of the *optimum* as the primary guiding norm of perceptual experiences, which the bodily practical pre-reflexive self-consciousness is subordinated to, remains almost unexplored in Doyon's view of perceptual normativity. Thus, it seems, although the essay deals with a deeply important aspect of perceptual normativity, it does not offer a complete account of it, and

I think it would be interesting to see how the author would have developed the relationship between the *optimum* and bodily self-consciousness, as well as the normative role of the *optimum* itself.

In the last chapter of *Part I*, Michael Madary argues that the content of visual experience is always socially structured; that is, in other words, the content of visual experiences are partly determined by social factors. This is so, according to Madary, for the socially shaped categories of normality and familiarity cannot be disentangled from the general structure of anticipation and fulfillment of visual experience explicitly discussed in Edmund Husserl's writings first. Issues related to Madary's essay receive detailed examination in the third section of the volume.

2. Part II: Delusions, Illusions, and Hallucinations

Part II of the volume gathers those essays about sensory normativity and normality that discuss those phenomena that are usually considered as deviations from perceptual norms and normality; that is, delusions, illusions, and hallucinations.

In particular, I find the first (that is, *Chapter 4*) rather interesting, as David Morris offers an original view of illusory and hallucinatory perceptions that partly corrects my previous claim. In fact, according to his view, illusory and hallucinatory perceptions are not exactly deviations from normality. As Morris argues, indeed, illusions, for example, are not perceptual mistakes; that is, having an illusory experience is not mistakenly perceiving something as being something else. For the norms that would explain why illusory experiences are perceptual mistakes are not accessible from the perspective of the subject having the illusory experience. In fact, if one had been able to know that one was violating a norm of perceptual experience, one would have stopped having the illusory experience.

More interestingly, Morris argues that illusory experiences are constitutively such that they at once compellingly engage us in perceiving a given phenomenon through some norm that tells it as being an *X*, but also allows us to disengage from that norm and discover some other norm that reveals it as being a *Y*. Thus, sensory experiences are always guided by some norms, although, in the case of illusory experiences, the norm is divergent from past, usual, or expected norms.

To support his view, Morris gives an original interpretation of the rubber hand illusion. According to him, the reason why subjects of this illusion consider the rubber hand as their own is that they very quickly get use to the new sensory norm brought about through the illusory experience.

Then, Morris's view of illusory experience shows, according to him, the endogenous character of sensory norms; that is, in other words, their being formed and continuously enriched by and within perceptual living dynamics.

I think that the view advanced by Morris is well presented, engaging, and well argued. Yet, it seems to me that his argument is not sufficient to establish

that perceptual experience cannot be guided by other kinds of norms alongside those of the endogenous kind.

Morris' essay' is followed by Matthew Radcliffe's (that is, *Chapter 5*). In his contribution to the volume, Radcliffe holds that some hallucinatory experiences, as, for example, experiences of auditory verbal hallucinations, cannot be understood as perceptual mistakes because they lack sensory content; for, according to him, these hallucinatory experiences differ structurally from normal perceptual experiences. Radcliffe interprets these kinds of hallucinations, instead, as the consequence of traumatic changes in the general structure of anticipation and fulfillment of experience. These changes are caused, for example, by a state of anxiety, and generate breakdowns of the structural familiarity and habitual confidence with which we usually orient through the world. Indeed, according to Radcliffe, the occurrence of a state such as that of anxiety can modify one's normal anticipations, create abnormal anticipations, and make their fulfillments look different from how they would have looked otherwise. Even though Radcliffe does not explicitly argue that, his contribution is evidence for the fact that the structure of normality and the norms that regulates our expectations are not fixed *a priori*.

3. Part III: The Sociocultural Embeddedness of Norms

The essays contained in *Part III* quite explicitly address the questions concerning whether perceptual norms are endogenous, embodied norms; that is, whether they are embedded in bodily patterns, in historical, social, or cultural environments or practices.

Chapter 6 by Shaun Gallagher defends the view that interactions with others can shape and change perception, regardless of any changes in how sensory experience is conceptually structured. Most of Gallagher's arguments build upon recent literature on developmental psychology. Among the most convincing evidence he adduces for his view, indeed, he cites empirical studies according to which infants are able to learn generalizations even from seeing just one or very few instances, when this is matched with ostensive signals of their being actively addressed. In Gallagher's words, «in contexts of ostensive-communicative interaction, infants develop referential expectations and are biased to interpret such communications as conveying information that is generalizable.» (p. 120) Further, according to those studies, infants can learn generalizations about whether other people will like or dislike something because of the intonation or the facial expression of other agents, and typically of their caregivers. Then, the learning associated with this form of interaction need not occur through linguistic communication. Again, Gallagher draws from empirical studies that show how, at least since the first year of life, infants can gain or confirm information through the look of their caregivers. Therefore, according to him, this gives reason to think that we nonconceptually internalize

the behaviors and actions of others in a way that contribute to shape our future expectations.

The views offered by Maren Wehrle and Thimo Breyer respectively in *Chapter 7* and *Chapter 8* of the volume come close to Gallagher's.

More specifically, Wehrle gives an account of perceptual normativity drawing from Husserl's original writings, which suits well with the view defended by Doyon in *Chapter 2*. Contrary to the latter, however, she focuses on the normative role played in Husserl's account by the *optimum* of perception, which, as I have explained, is the *telos* of perception, and, accordingly, the standard for assessing whether perceptual experience successfully achieves its goal. Interestingly, Wehrle claims that the *optimum* is only apparently something objective or ideal for the subject, whereas, it is actually formed in accordance with the particular cultural norms of the particular intersubjective cultural environment which the subject belongs to. Wehrle notices, then, what correspond to the standards set by the culturally shaped *optimum* is considered to be normal. Thus, normality is not an objective category but a dynamic notion, because it depends on normative standards that can be reshaped. For this reason, even what is now abnormal can later become part of normality through a shift of the intersubjective cultural environment.

In *Chapter 8*, on the other hand, Breyer sheds light on the fact that the way in which we direct our attention towards others gives or withholds them our recognition, so that «perception has an inherent normative and moral dimension» (p. 147). For this reason, Breyer argues that we have a moral obligation to look at others in a way that fully acknowledges them, and to regulate the way we look at others so to empathize with them. Thus, Breyer's idea is that we ought to actively attempt to become more receptive and responsive in front of the other, even in those cases in which it may be generally considered as awkward, inconvenient, or dangerous, to set into motion processes of habituation through which all could become more receptive and responsive in front of the other.

4. Part IV: Issues in Epistemology

The last section of the volume deals with questions concerning the normative function of perceptual experience; that is, with how perceptual experience can justify or rationalize belief or judgment. Whereas this issue has attracted considerable attention in mainstream analytic epistemology, phenomenologists have hardly ever tackled it. The essays contained in *Part 4* intend to fill this gap in the literature, while bringing a fresh look at the issues at hand.

More specifically, in *Chapter 9*, Aude Bandini asks what is it about perceptual experience that justifies or rationalizes holding perceptual beliefs. In other words, she asks why perceptual experience has the normative «epistemic authority» (p. 161) one very often spontaneously ascribes to it. According to Bandini, the answer to this question is that the normative epistemic authority of perceptual experience is explained by «its specific mode of conscious apprehension, namely

its *givenness*.» (p. 162) Since Bandini thinks this to be so, she first attempts to rehabilitate the notion of the given, for this notion has long been discredited within mainstream epistemology mainly because of Wilfrid Sellars's criticisms. To do this, she advances a phenomenological argument; which is concerned with the nature of perceptual experience, and its primary aim is, in the author's words, «capturing the distinctive characteristics of [...] experience as a genuine encounter with – or *openness to* – the outer world and its mind-independent objects.» (p. 163) Bandini concludes through this argument that perceptual experience has the distinctive character of *givenness*, which is, in turn, analyzable in terms of three core properties; that is, *presence*, *inalterability*, and *robustness*. According to her, givenness as the distinctive raw feel associated with perceptual experience grounds its epistemic authority.

The primary objective of *Chapter 10* by Arnaud Dewalque is to give a satisfactory account of the kind of justification provided by perceptual experience to beliefs based upon it; or, in Dewalque's words, «perceptual justification.» (p. 179) Without getting into the details of Dewalque's arguments, he comes up with the following view of perceptual justification: «for any experience *E*, and for any proposition *P*, *E* perceptually justifies the belief that *P* if and only if (i) *E* has reason-giving force, (ii) *E* has the same object as the belief that *P*, (iii) *P* represents its object in a way that is congruent with *E*, and (iv) *E* doesn't call for further justification.» (p. 189-190) Even though I am sympathetic with Dewalque's phenomenological view, I understand that to the eyes of contemporary epistemologists it may look worrisome; in particular, for condition (i) seems to make the view circular. In fact, having reason-giving force intuitively requires being able of providing justification.

Chapter 11 by Virginie Palette is perhaps one of the most interesting essays in the volume. At the outset, Palette claims that she agrees with Crowell's view according to which perception does not only have sensory content, for otherwise there would be too big of a gap between perception and judgment, and, accordingly, perception could not have its normative strength over judgment. For example, if the content of perceptual experience of a dog and the content of corresponding judgment based upon it 'That's a dog' are heterogeneous, one could not even rightly say that what one sees is a dog.

Further, in line with Crowell's view, Palette contends that the content of perceptual experience is what Husserl calls 'sense' [*Sinn*] (that is, the intentional object or *noema*) and that the latter has a normative function. Yet, in the essay, Palette's efforts focus setting a boundary to the normative strength which phenomenology attributes to the intentional content of perceptual experience, in favor of stressing the normative role played by the *hyle* or sensation. Palette claims, indeed, that, for perception to be normative, the similarity between its content and the content of judgment is necessary but not sufficient. There must also be agreement between the content of perception and the content of sensation or *hyle*, which is, according to Palette, «the very *norm of normativity*» (p. 197). According to Palette, thus, the intentional content of perception can

serve as a norm just in case its typification is «verified or attested» (p. 201) by *hyle* (which is the ultimate norm); for there are cases of mistypification that show how the type alone cannot function as a norm. For this reason, we could still say, according to Palette, that the intentional content of perception is the norm in some sense, but only if its type has been corrected through the experience of agreement between the type itself and the sensory given.

The reason why Palette is so interested in making her point and why she attributes the decisive normative role not to the type itself but to the experience of the agreement is that she takes normativity to have also the function of legitimizing scientific judgments about reality. According to the Palette, in fact, we cannot attribute to the type alone such an important function, without generating worrisome consequences. To understand clearly why this is so, she considers the example of psychiatry. Clearly, in this case, it is intuitively wrong and dangerous to ground a certain diagnostic judgment on the basis of a typification (which consists, in this case, in a diagnostic category) before that this typification is validated by sensory experience. Therefore, the *hyle* is indeed the norm of normativity that verifies and corrects the normative authority of the typification of the sense of perceptual experience in general. Thus, Palette's essay seems to me a noteworthy clever attempt to explain the relationship between types, concepts and sensations.

In *Chapter 12*, Valérie Aucouturier attempts to rehabilitate and defend Anscombe's view, according to which, one is directly acquainted to mind-independent or *material* objects or phenomena through perceptual experience, but she nonetheless ascribes perceptual experiences an intentional character; that is, an *intentional* object. To do this, she insists on a grammatical understanding of the intentional character of perceptual experience; that is, according to Aucouturier, to be charitable to Anscombe's view, we must understand the intentional character of perceptual experience as meaning that perception verbs are intentional, as suggested by Anscombe herself; that is, in other words, the truth-conditions of sentences containing perception verbs can vary across contexts depending on whether their direct object refers to a material or an intentional object. For this reason, we can make sense of why many non-factive uses of perception verbs are intuitively proper uses of these verbs.

Conclusion

This volume constitutes a serious and well-thought attempt to stress the important insights that phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have had about the question of perceptual normativity, and to bring them into fruitful dialogue with contemporary analytic and continental philosophy. Arguably, the idea of creating a dialogue between philosophers of different traditions is not always concretely realized within the volume, for some of the essays lack the argumentative power that would have been necessary to convince their opponents that the views defended are worth to be dealt with (and in my

opinion this is specifically true of *Part IV*), but I think that the volume is in principle on the right track for it at least encourages cross-traditional dialogue.

My only remark is that while many phenomenological ideas are very well represented in the essays, as, for example, the normative function of the body, there is at least one aspect of Husserl's thoughts about normativity that is completely overlooked; that is, the normative function that implicit or explicit knowledge of essences can have within experience. This is, in my opinion quite surprising, since Husserl himself talks, in many of his works, about essences in terms of norms that prescribe rules for actualities, and about essential laws too.

In fact, it would have been very interesting to know whether the contributors to the volume think that essential norms play any role at all within our perceptual experiences, for example by regulating our expectations within perceptual dynamics. If so, one could argue, perceptual norms would not be only *a posteriori*, contingent, context-sensitive, endogenous, *etc.* as it appears from reading the essays; but there would be at least some *a priori* norms of perceptual experience. Otherwise it would have been interesting to know how contributors would have motivated their refusal to think about essences as norms of perceptual experience.

Developing these aspects, together with clarifying the normative function of types and perceptual objects, may be the subject of future works directed to provide more complete accounts of perceptual normativity from the phenomenological point of view. It is undeniable, then, that after Crowell's recent book and with the publication of this volume, 'normativity' is a word that has definitely entered into the vocabulary of phenomenologists. At any rate, this volume still is a useful tool to get access to the question of perceptual normativity, and it raises many questions that are far from being easy to answer.