

An Argument for Experiential Pluralism

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1. Visual Experience

Visual experiences essentially involve conscious presentation of the world: when undergoing visual experiences, it is as if things are visually presented to one. Some visual experiences are part of seeing the world properly, i.e. they figure in a cognitively successful relation to the world ('good case') and some fail to do so ('bad case').

2. Experiential Monism vs Experiential Pluralism

Mere recognition of good and bad cases does not involve any commitment about whether the visual experiences involved are of different mental kinds in some substantial sense. Both of the following views are compatible with the distinction between good and bad cases:

Experiential monism: Visual experience has a single common nature.

Experiential pluralism: It is not the case that visual experience has a single common nature.

The substance of (moderate) experiential pluralism depends on the significance of any proposed good-case-only-mental property: the putative explanatory role it plays and the mental kind it forms in light of that role.

- We need not only an argument for a good-case-only-property of experience, but also reasons for treating that property as constituting a mental kind.

These reasons need much more explicit articulation and defence than is typically provided. Proponents talk in terms of 'nature', 'kind', and 'fundamental', as in 'fundamental level of classification', or '(ontologically fundamental) kind'. Fundamental kinds are said to concern the essence of a given entity, according to

'some privileged classifications of individuals, both concrete objects and events, and ... our talk of what is essential to a given individual tracks our understanding of the kinds of thing it is. ... [E]ntities (both objects and events) can be classified by species and genus; for all such entities there is a most specific answer to the question, 'What is it?' in relation to the mental, and to perception in particular. ... [F]or mental episodes or states there is a unique answer to this question which gives its most specific kind; it tells us what essentially the event or episode is.'

(Martin 2006, 361)

These notions take for granted some prior and shared common sense understanding of what constitutes the fundamental level, the most specific kinds, cuts in nature, etc.

But they should not do so.

- Notions of kinds and cuts in nature are properly meaningful only when they are situated within an explanatory context which in turn is tied to a certain level of description of the world broadly conceived. Fundamentality is an explanatory notion.
- When it comes to natural psychological properties and psychological or mental kinds, this is an issue in urgent need of clarification:
 - There is no firm grasp of a level of (psychological) reality, even in common sense, independent of explanatory projects and uncontroversial enough to yield unique, most specific answers in the case of experience.

- However, not everything goes: there *is* a point to talk of cuts in nature and to getting something right about reality, psychological reality included. Not *all* classifications for *any* given explanatory purpose are equal with respect to the reality they describe.

My argument in favour of experiential pluralism is sensitive to these demands.

- I use an innocuous rule of thumb concerning the reality of psychological states/episodes: such states/episodes must be causally efficacious vis-à-vis human behaviour.
- My strategy is to show that certain types of experience play a key explanatory role, where this role shows that
 - a. there is a good-case-only-property
 - b. this good-case-only-property deserves to be treated as a mental kind.

But: my explanatory targets are not straightforwardly instances of behaviour and the explanations themselves are not straightforwardly causal either. Still, my strategy follows the rule of thumb in spirit if not in practice.

Consider VEs in good cases.

- i. They must consciously present the world the way it actually is.
 - This feature can be shared by VEs in bad cases (matching hallucinations)
- ii. They must involve a certain kind of perceptual contact with the world: being perceptually hooked up with the world the right way such that it is *in virtue* of this hook-up that the visual experience presents the world the way it is.
 - This feature cannot be shared by VEs in bad cases.

There are different ways to think about ii. Here is one way: visual experiences in the good case are **world-involving**. The conscious visual awareness of the world is itself constituted by perceptual contact with the world (a kind of acquaintance).

- Visual experience E is constituted by a given object *o* exactly when E depends for its existence (or for its being available to be had) on the existence and appropriate presence of *o*.

If there are world-involving visual experiences **and** such experience deserve to be treated as a mental kind, then experiential pluralism is true.

3. An argument for Experiential pluralism

- P1: We have some situation-dependent abilities.
- P2: For some of these situation-dependent abilities, their possession is explained by appeal to VEs in the good case
- P3: If VEs in the good case play this explanatory role, then they are world-involving.
- C1: There are some world-involving VEs.
- C2: Experiential pluralism is true.

3.1 Premise 1 – Situation-dependent abilities

We are able to do many things: we are able to get to the museum, pick strawberries, bake a cake, play catch, etc. Abilities are modal properties; they can be had even when they are not manifested or exercised. (I have the ability to walk even if I am standing still at the moment.)

We distinguish (*prima facie*) between two kinds of ability we regularly attribute to ourselves and others ('I can swim but I cannot swim right now.')

General abilities: what a person can do in a suitably wide range of circumstances, independently of whether the person is in one of these circumstances.

Situation-dependent abilities: what a person can do, dependent on being in a particular circumstance, what she has opportunity to do in a given situation.

3.2 *Premise 2 – Explaining possession of situation-dependent abilities*

There is an explanatory link between having some situation-dependent abilities and having VEs in good cases. This explanatory link is part of common sense practice.

Example: Crossing the stream

Suppose you are standing at the bank of a stream full of big boulders forming a natural path to hop across. You are visually aware of the things around you, the sloping bank, boulders, the water, etc. You are, as a result, in a position to make your way across the stream.

- Your visual experiences of your surroundings help explain how you are able to cross the stream – even if you are not doing that at the moment.
- But not just any VEs about your surroundings can play this role – it takes those in good cases to do the job. If your visual awareness did not amount to seeing relevant parts of the environment, the VEs could not do explanatory work in question.

3.3 *Premise 3 - the explanatory demand for world-involving VEs*

Mere performance of action A is not sufficient for possessing the ability to A (A-ing does not entail the ability to A). Distinguish:

- a fluke performance of A
- an exercise of the ability to A.

Performance of A which constitutes an exercise of the ability to A must satisfy some anti-luck or **robustness condition**: it must be repeatable by the subject in sufficiently similar situations. The performance of A has to be such that one could have successfully A-ed in similar circumstances (or, one could not easily have failed to A in similar circumstances).

Abilities are individuated in terms of an action-type Φ and a range of situations where the performance of Φ is available to the subject. In the case of situation-dependent abilities, the individuating range of situations is such that it includes

- (i) a particular situation with respect to which the agent's situation-dependent ability is fixed (the 'base situation'),
- (ii) more situations than the base situation,
- (iii) those situations which are relevantly similar to the base situation.

When we explain a subject's possession of a situation-dependent ability by attributing a visual experience in the good case to her, that experience must provide reason to pick out not only the action-type that individuates the ability, but also to fix the ability's modal profile, such that (i), (ii), and (iii).

- The base situation is identified as the one in which the agent has a given experience.
- Relevantly similar situations are those which differ minimally from the base situation, namely, from the situation in which the agent has that experience.

What must be guaranteed is that these are indeed situations in which the action in question is available to the agent.

- *World-involving* visual experiences can best explain possession of the ability to Φ because they (simply and elegantly) guarantee the right modal profile of the ability, such that (i), (ii), and (iii):
 - The base situation is identified in terms of the agent's having a given world-involving experience E_{w-i} . The base situation is thus one in which she has the right cognitive access to her environment for her to successfully perform Φ , where success in Φ -ing depends on such access.
 - The range of relevantly similar situations, in which Φ is also available to the agent, is comprised of those situations which are consistent with the agent having E_{w-i} . Since E_{w-i} is world-involving, that means that relevantly similar situations are those in which the required cognitive access obtains.

Possession of the situation-dependent ability to Φ is thus explained by appeal to having a certain kind of experience: by having a certain kind of cognitive access to relevant aspects of one's environment provided by the visual experience. Importantly, this cognitive access explains how the potential for the performance of Φ is robust, how you could not easily fail to Φ in relevantly similar situations, namely those situations in which you have such cognitive access. The visual experience's being world-involving – that it is partly constituted what the cognitive access is access to – thus guarantees robustness.

Worry: Is this merely an argument by elegance for (P3)?

Other conceptions of VE in the good case – a complex state $E+C_{ext}$ consisting of a veridical experiential mental state together with the right kind of external hook-up – it seems can also account for robustness.

But there is a significant difference in how each conception of visual experience in the good case can guarantee robustness:

- If VE in the good case is world-involving, then conscious visual experience of the world *itself* does the explanatory heavy lifting with respect to robustness.
- If visual experience in the good case is not world-involving, then the experiential element, the conscious visual presentation of the world, drops out as a significant explanatory factor. Instead, the explanation appeals first and foremost to the additional external conditions which characterize cases of genuine seeing, where these might obtain in conjunction with a variety visual presentational states the agent is in.

4. World-involving experiences as a mental kind

- Situation-dependent abilities are a central ingredient in behaviour-related planning and decision-making and they are causally trackable.
- In light of their explanatory and predictive role and the fact that they are subject to empirical investigation and revision, situation-dependent abilities are genuine psychological properties of ours.
- Mental states/episodes by appeal to which we attribute and explain possessing them, have a claim to be taken seriously as real psychological properties if not kinds as well.
- World-involving visual experience does have such an explanatory role and it is therefore a fitting candidate for counting as a psychological kind.