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Knowing that I see

Comments on Alex Byrne's 'Knowing what I see'

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1.

Alex wonders how we can figure out that we see something when we do. A visual experience gives us information about some external state of affairs which is independent of our seeing it. We know, through vision, that the state of affairs in question obtains, but the inference from its obtaining to our seeing that it does seems to lack justification. After all, the state of affairs could obtain without our seeing it. So how do we know, when we see something, that we do? Which 'epistemic rule' are we following when we conclude, on the basis of our visual experience, that we see what we see?

Before giving my answer to that question, let me remind you that the notion of seeing something is ambiguous. To see something, in a first sense, is to undergo a visual experience as of that thing. In that sense, I can 'see a pink elephant', even though there is no pink elephant to be seen. Let us call that sense the *phenomenal* sense of 'seeing'. It is distinct from what I will call the *epistemic* sense. In the epistemic sense, to see something is to stand in a certain (epistemically rewarding) relation to that thing. The thing seen must exist in order for us to stand in that relation to it.

Given this ambiguity, Alex's question can be interpreted in two ways. First interpretation: how do we know that we are having a visual experience (as of a certain thing) when we do? Second interpretation: how do we know, when we see something, that we bear a certain relation to that thing (i.e. that it stands in front of us and affects our visual apparatus, causing the current visual experience)?

Alex's paper starts with the following statement:

By using my eyes, I can come to know that there is a hawk perching on the fence post.

Cognitive science has made enormous progress in understanding how we have this sort of perceptual knowledge. Any textbook on perception will go into detail about the receptors in the eye, the detection of low-level features such as edges, the recovery of 3D shape, and theories of object-recognition. (...) When I am in a position to know, by using my eyes, that there is a hawk on the fence post, I am usually in a position to know something else, namely that I see a hawk. (...) How *do* I know that I see a hawk? Textbooks are of no help [here].

Well, it depends. If we consider knowledge of *phenomenal* seeing, textbooks will be of much help. Visual states are conscious, and cognitive science has made enormous progress in understanding consciousness. Much is controversial, and much is unknown, but a number of scientists focus on that phenomenon and provide tentative accounts of it. So I will simply assume that, when we are having a visual experience, we know that we are. For the explanation of that fact, I defer to cognitive science.

It is not the issue of consciousness which Alex has in mind, however. When he asks : ‘how do we know that we see ?’ he does not mean ‘how do we come to be conscious of our experiential states ?’ (a question that is better left to cognitive scientists). Rather, he takes ‘see’ in the epistemic sense. Like him, I will understand the question this way. What follows is my answer to the question, thus understood.

2.

I will adopt Alex’s notion of an ‘epistemic rule’. An epistemic rule, he tells us, is a conditional of the form ‘If conditions C obtain, believe that *p*’. A subject S *follows* an epistemic rule on a particular occasion iff on that occasion S believes that *p* because she recognizes that conditions C obtain. As Alex points out, this implies (i) that S recognizes (hence knows) that conditions C obtain, (ii) that conditions C indeed obtain; and (iii) that S believes that *p*.

I suggest that we come to know that we see (in the epistemic sense) by following (an instance of) the epistemic rule (PT) :

(PT) If you are in a state $M(p)$, where ‘M’ is the mode of the state and ‘*p*’ is its content (what the state represents), believe that you stand in relation R_M to *p*.

What — following Searle (1983) — I call the ‘mode’ M of an experiential state is what enables us to classify such states into types such as *perceptions*, *memories*, etc., independent of the content of the state (what is perceived, remembered, etc.).

The mode M of an experience determines that (if all goes well) a certain relation R_M , determined by the mode, holds between the subject of the experience (S) and what the experience represents (its content p). The subject undergoing an experience $M(p)$ is therefore entitled to proceed as if he or she bore relation R_M to p . For example, the subject undergoing a visual experience normally stands in an appropriate causal relation to the scene represented (she ‘sees’ the scene, i.e. stands in front of it and has her visual apparatus causally affected by it) ; in episodic memory, the subject’s relation to the scene represented is that of having perceived it in the past ; in proprioception the subject’s relation to the bodily condition represented by the state is that of being in that condition. On the view I argued for in *Perspectival Thought*, the content of a proprioceptive state is a property (a bodily condition) which the subject is entitled to self-ascribe, just as the subject is entitled to self-ascribe the property of standing-in-front-of-and-being-causally-affected-by what his or her visual experience represents, or the property of having-perceived-in-the-past the scenes represented by his or her episodic memories. (If the subject makes these self-ascriptions explicit, the resulting judgments are characteristically ‘immune to error through misidentification’ ; for even if the subject is mistaken in holding that she bears R_M to p , still she is not entitled to conclude that anybody but her bears that relation to the content of the experience. The subject cannot think, on the basis of her episodic memories : ‘Someone experienced these scenes in the past, but was it I ?’ Nor can she think, on the basis of her perceptual experience : ‘Someone is currently seeing these things, but is it I ?’ Nor can she think, on the basis of her proprioceptive experience : ‘Someone’s legs are crossed, but are they mine ?’)

(PT) is a good rule, by Alex’s standards, because when we are in a visual state with a certain content, it is normally the case that the state of affairs represented obtains and that we stand in relation R_{VISION} to that state of affairs. The rule is as good, it seems to me, as Alex’s illustrative example of a good rule:

WOODPECKER If x is a bird with a red head, believe that x is a woodpecker.

Of course, in order to follow (PT), one has to know that the antecedent holds ; one has therefore to know that one is in state $M(p)$, i.e., that one is undergoing a visual experience as of a certain thing. But that knowledge I said we can safely assume.

3.

The ‘transparency thesis’, or rather the strong version of it which Alex seeks to defend, is the claim that we can gain knowledge *that* we see through inference from *what* we see. Since information is amodal, however, the epistemic rule ‘if *p*, believe that you see that *p*’ is no good. It may be that *p*, and I may know that *p*, even though I do not *see* that *p*. Precisely because informational content is amodal and cannot ground the relevant inference, we need something more than the content of the visual state (what we see) to trigger the inference. That something more is what I call the mode of the experience, of which we are typically aware (‘Perky effects’ notwithstanding). Acknowledging the need for such an additional element means that we give up the transparency thesis. I am happy to do so, but Alex is not. He wants to stick to the transparency thesis, which he thinks can be rescued by appealing to the idea of a v-fact – a ‘visual fact’, i.e. a fact which holds in the ‘visual world’.

Visual facts are facts about visual objects and sensible qualities, e.g. the fact that that thing over there has a certain blueish color. Alex assumes that ‘vision is an exclusive conduit for v-facts’. That crucial assumption enables him to pack the visual mode into the content, as it were. When the content of my experience is a v-fact, I can infer from the fact I see that I see it, since I would not know such a fact unless I saw it.

This is an interesting manoeuvre, but it rests on the dubious assumption that vision is an exclusive conduit for v-facts. I see no reason to accept that assumption. Could I not learn v-facts through testimony? Alex says we couldn’t, but that is far from obvious.

During our walk my companion Ryle might tell me : ‘you see that strange thing over there? From that distance it looks black, but actually it is that colour’ [said while pointing to a colour sample]. In that example I seem to gain knowledge of a v-fact : the fact that that object (which I see) is that colour (which I also see). But I gain knowledge of that fact through testimony, contrary to the crucial assumption.

Alex might respond : the fact I gain knowledge of in this example is not a visual fact, because I do not *see* that the object is that colour – I see the object and the colour, but I learn through testimony, not vision, that the object *has* that colour. But it would be question-begging (in the current debate about the acceptability of the crucial assumption) to stipulate that a fact that is known through something other than vision is *eo ipso* not a visual fact. Alex needs to provide a characterization of ‘visual fact’ that is independent of that stipulation.

At this point, Alex might make use of Kathrin Glüer's suggestion that visual experience does not have a naive semantics but what she calls a phenomenal semantics (Glüer 2009 : 310-12). On Glüer's account, the fact that this object is that colour is not the sort of fact that can be seen. What can be seen is only the fact that this object *looks* thus and so (whatever its actual colour is). In the above example, what I learn through testimony is the actual colour of the object (blueish), but what I *see* is that the object looks black. In contrast to the fact I see, the fact I learn through testimony does not belong to the visual world, even though it involves a visual object and its colour. Only phenomenal properties (such as the property of *looking thus and so*) can be constituents of a visual fact. The property of *being* a certain colour is not a phenomenal property, and the fact that a given object instantiates that property is not a visual fact.

On this restricted understanding of 'visual fact', is the crucial assumption acceptable ? Is vision an exclusive conduit for v-facts ? I am not sure. It may be that, through testimony, we can gain knowledge of the fact that that object over there looks thus and so. (My senses may be malfunctioning, and my friend Ryle may come to my rescue by telling me how things look.) Let us, however, bracket this objection. Let us admit that, by giving experience a phenomenal semantics, one can pack the visual mode into the content of the experience, along the lines of Alex's suggestion. Is that enough to rescue the transparency thesis ?

I do not think so, for a reason which Alex discusses. The phenomenal facts which (let us assume) are the content of visual experiences can be remembered. But of course, when I remember the object's looking thus and so, I do not self-ascribe the property of seeing that object, but the quite different property of having seen it. (PT) predicts that difference : on the basis of the memory experience I assume that I stand in the relation R_{MEMORY} to the scene which the memory represents, i.e. the relation of having perceived it in the past. When I visually perceive the scene, on the other hand, I assume that I stand in the relation R_{VISION} to that same scene ; I assume that I see it, in the epistemic sense.

To deal with the memory objection, Alex says that in episodic memory, « although the information is packaged visually, it is a transformed and degraded version of the visual information that characterizes successful seeing ». The episodic-memory transformation and degradation of a v-fact turns it into an m-fact. So, Alex concludes, it is not true that I can remember (as well as perceive) a v-fact. A v-fact which I remember is no longer a v-fact, but an m-fact. The difference between the two facts is due to the transformation/degradation which characterizes episodic memory.

I fully agree with Alex that there is something in the phenomenology of episodic memory that tells us that it is a memory rather than a perception. But I see no reason to pack this into the informational content of the memory.¹ The informational content of the memory just is the fact, or the scene, which I remember. When we remember, or when we perceive, we are additionally aware of the mode of the current experience. What makes us aware that we are remembering rather than actually seeing may well be the transformation and degradation Alex talks about. But this has nothing to do with the informational content of the memory : the content of the memory, I contend, just is the fact I initially perceived and now remember. The difference between the two cases is located in the mode of the experience, and it is what drives the transition to the relevant epistemic self-ascription.

References

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John Searle, 1983 : *Intentionality*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

¹ See my *Perspectival Thought*, p. 141 : « There is absolutely no reason to consider that phenomenology supervenes on (...) content. The mode also contributes to the phenomenology, since the mode is something the subject is aware of. »