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Seeing and feeling, all at once

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Abstract

We recognize a cube by sight and touch; can we really set apart visual from tactile aspects of our sensory phenomenology? Tradition has it that we can separate what it is like to see a shape from what it is like to feel it, even when they both concur to recognizing the shape experienced (Martin 1992). A new, challenging, answer is that we cannot split up experiences in the way tradition presupposes. Rather, all our sensory experiences are ineliminably crossmodal, and weave together aspects pertaining to different senses into a single, phenomenally unified, experience (Tye 2007). I propose a third answer, traditionally heeding the many differences between the senses. However, against tradition, I argue that, in recognizing shapes, sight and touch work closer together, in a way that makes visual and tactile phenomenal aspects at least sometimes impossible to separate for mature, unimpaired, experienced perceivers.

Keywords: crossmodal experiences; the unity of consciousness; Molyneux' problem; sensory consciousness

1. Introduction

Think of us – the ordinary perceptual subjects, unimpaired and often unreflective. Think of what it is like for us to recognize shapes by both sight and touch. We have a cube

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before us, within reach, we see and feel it (by touch), we recognize its cubical shape. In doing this, can we really set apart visual from tactile aspects of our sensory phenomenology?

Tradition has it that – of course – we can distinguish what it is like to see a shape from what it is like to feel it, even when they both concur to recognizing the shape experienced (Martin 1992). A new, challenging, answer is that we cannot split up experiences (or phenomenal aspects of our overall sensory experience) in the way tradition presupposes. Rather, all our sensory experiences are ineliminably crossmodal, weave together aspects pertaining to different senses into a single, phenomenally unified, experience (Tye 2007).

I will propose a third answer, which, in favor of tradition, pays heed to many of the differences between the senses in having an experience which involves more than one sense. However, against tradition and a step towards reform, I will suggest that, in recognizing shapes, sight and touch work closer together, in a way that makes visual and tactile phenomenal aspects at least sometimes impossible to separate for mature, unimpaired, experienced perceivers. The answer I propose avoids a few important objects, is truer to what we introspect, rehabilitates an Aristotelian tradition of common sensibles, offers a more nuanced way of raising Molyneux's question, and may, if adopted, reorient the research program in cognitive psychology aimed at understanding perceptual shape-recognition.

2. Tradition, a new radical answer, and a middle way

A traditional answer is that – of course – we can distinguish what it is like for us to see, and what it is like for us to feel, even when we do both, and recognize a shape by means of both. Giving voice to this tradition, Michael Martin (1992, 196) writes:

> We can tell what the shape or size of an object is by either sight or touch. These two senses are very different in character, not only in the mechanisms of perception – the physical media, the physiological organs of sense and possibly the psychological processing involved – but also in their phenomenological character, what it is like to see and to feel.

Martin's sweeping distinction between sight and touch helps zoom in on the problem. I will not deny Martin's claim about the distinct *physical* substrate of sight and touch. Nor will I deny Martin that it may be more theoretically *useful* - for neuroscience or cognitive psychology - to distinguish sight from touch on the basis of evidence like electrophysiological recordings. I grant Martin these claims because they do not concern phenomenology.

Rather, what I will now claim is this:

> (**T**) For perceivers like us, the conscious experience of recognizing shapes by both sight and touch is one whose phenomenal character (what it is like to undergo it) cannot be partitioned into purely visual aspects and purely tactile aspects.

In recognizing shapes by both sight and touch, the experience of mature unimpaired perceivers like us is somehow unified between visual and tactile aspects. The concessions just made to Martin are consistent with this view. But Martin denies it, by claiming sight and touch always differ "in their phenomenological character."

T is only about human conscious experience. It is only to our respective experiences that each of us have privileged access, and it is only the phenomenal character of such experiences, as evinced in introspection, that can serve as evidence for T or Martin's opposing claim. Available evidence can only come in the form of introspective reports, so we have to exclude pre-verbal infants. The phenomenology of perceptually impaired patients is often colored by their compensatory strategies and coping abilities, and is to some degree both medicalized (more regimented than otherwise) and more atypical; so I exclude their reports too. The everyman is what we're looking for.

Morever, T is only about experiences of *recognizing shapes*. It may be that a piece of cloth feels softer than it looks, or that (if I've lost my glasses) something looks farther than it really is, something I could check by reaching out and grabbing it. Shapes are not like this; I claim there is a certain phenomenal unity to recognizing them by both sight and touch.

Michael Tye (2007, 290) clarifies the sense in which what it is like to see the shape you recognize cannot be

separated from what it is like to feel the shape you recognize. He writes:

> [I]n saying that the relation of experienced togetherness (or unity or co-presence in consciousness) is phenomenal, I mean to distinguish it conceptually from spatial unity..., neurophysiological unity (which obtains just in case the relevant experiences are realized by a single neurophysiological mechanism), subject unity (the relata of which are experienced by the same subject), higher-order subject unity (the relata of which the subject can self-ascribe as being experienced at a given time), introspective unity and general attentional unity.

Like Tye, I do not mean to exclude (nor to presuppose) these other aspects of unity; they might be useful by-products, though not adequate surrogates, for phenomenal unity. For those of us prone to over- or underanalyze our phenomenology, the danger of mistaking genuine phenomenal unity (or separatedness) with other forms of unity (or separatedness) is high. But the disagreement between Martin's phenomenological claim and T concerns only phenomenal unity. In fact, Tye (2007, 290) makes a much stronger claim than T, equally opposed to Martin's:

> There is something it is like to experience the smell of the sea air, for example; and there is something it is like to experience the color of the sea; but there is also something it is like to experience these things together ...the relation of experienced togetherness (or unity or co-presence in consciousness) is phenomenal[.]

Unlike Tye's hypothesis, T is consistent with saying that experiencing the smell and color of the sea are phenomenally separable in a way that seeing and feeling the recognized cubical contour of a toy building block is not. We can make this explicit:

> (T') Not all experiences which involve several senses are phenomenally unified in the way that experiences of recognizing shapes by sight and touch are.

Martin and Tye's claims stand at two opposite extremes. For Martin, no experience involving sight and touch is unified in the requisite sense. For Tye, all experiences, hence all experiences involving sight and touch are unified in the requisite sense. Claim T denies Martin's and remains agnostic about Tye's claims. Claim T' denies Tye's and remains agnostic about Martin's claims. Together, T and T' articulate an outlook I

will argue for. I believe this outlook is more germane to what it is like for perceivers like us to recognize shapes by sight and touch.

An apple is always a good example. Martin would say we can distinguish all of what it is like to see the red of the apple, to see the roundness of the apple, and to feel the roundness of the apple. Tye would say our experience of the apple involves all these phenomenal aspects as being inextricably linked: What it is like for me to see the apple's redness as I do couldn't be the way it is unless it were part of what it is like for me to see and feel – jointly, in a unified way – the apple's redness and roundness. Differing from Tye, I claim (by T') that in having the overall experience, we can distinguish between what it is like to see the apple's redness and what it is like to see the apple's roundness. Differing from Martin, I claim (by T) that we cannot distinguish between what it is like to see and what it is like to feel the apple's roundness.

What is the disagreement between Martin, Tye, and myself about? It cannot be about sensations, since they lack the rich kind of intentionality needed to recognize shapes like cubes and spheres. It cannot be about merely latching on to the same property in the environment, since the apple's roundness is one regardless of whether I both see and feel it, or I just see it, or I just feel it. It cannot be about the content of experience, since intentionalists (like Tye) would think this problem reduces to that for objects or properties in the environment. Nor can it be about concept-application in experience, since that would cast doubt on the perceptual character of shape-recognition.

Rather, I take the problem to be not about the very content of experience, but about the *type-representational properties of perceptual vehicles* which stand for that content. This needs unpacking. Suppose I see and feel an apple, and thereby recognize its round shape. I endorse (for the purpose of this debate with Martin and Tye) that in perception, a perceiver is related (Martin) to an object or property in its environment, mentally representing (Tye) that object or property. I mentally represent the apple's roundness in various ways. Some of these ways are sensory: visual and tactile. Other ways are conceptual: what I mean by the word "round."

Now we can put the debate between Martin, Tye, and myself in these terms. For Martin, there is no *perceptual* representation common across sight and touch. For instance, there is no perceptual representation of roundness that is *both* visual and tactile. (This leaves open that sense-specific representations are integrated by cognition.) For Tye, there are perceptual representations standing for objects. In the case of the apple, there is a representation both visual and tactile of its roundness, but there is also a representation, perceptual too, of the apple's redness plus its tactile roundness. We can now see that Martin's view undergenerates perceptual representations, while Tye's view overgenerates them, for no obvious reason.

My own view, incorporated by T and T', is that there is (by T) a *visuotactile* perceptual representation of roundness underlying our experience of roundness. There may, but need not be, also exclusively visual and exclusively tactile representations of roundness in the causal ancestry of this visuotactile crossmodal representation, which I call a *common sensible*. I think crossmodal representation exist because this best explains our unified phenomenology. However, representations are not overgenerated because of T'. For instance, there is no reason to think that visual redness and tactile roundness are jointly represented in perception (as opposed to conceptually).

How might common sensibles like *round, square,* etc. have come about? One possibility is that they were acquired through learning. First the infant experiences the world around by setting up modally-specific representations, then she learns how to integrate them and the world around begins to make sense, to be a world of shapes. In fact, this is unlikely. Meltzoff and Borton (1979) had shown that infants are capable of shape-recognition in the first few months of life and, more recently, Streri and Gentaz (2004) suggest this may even be possible from the second day of life. So a second, more plausible, hypothesis may be that the machinery in place for crossmodal cooperation is hardwired, and already largely developed before birth (Gallagher 2005).

3. Objections and replies

First and foremost, I think we should appeal to introspection to decide the case for the existence of visuotactile common sensible representations used in the perceptual recognition of shapes. I explore what introspective evidence there is, and how it may be controverted, below. But it is important to first establish that there is no *principled* objection to the view I advance.

The first and most intuitive objection to the outlook I propose is that visual and tactile experiences might seem to be separable. Doesn't the fact that we can see *afar*, and feel nearby while *blindfolded*, show visuotactile experience can be analyzed into visual and tactile components? No; as Tye (291) puts it:

> The conjunction of two experiences isn't itself an experience at all. The overarching experience must be a new experience, one that unifies the qualities experienced via different senses into a single phenomenological whole.

Tye's logical point hides a deeper one. Suppose there's an apple on my table, which I see without feeling (touching) on Monday morning, feel without seeing on Tuesday night, and do both on Wednesday afternoon, when I put it in the fridge. One may grant that the experiences on Monday and Tuesday are separate, but that doesn't imply that the visual and the tactile phenomenal aspects of one's Wednesday experience are separate too. Thinking otherwise may stem from not clearly distinguishing *types* of experiences (which is what seeing the apple has in common on all days of the week) from *token* experiences (indexed by time in the week, say). However, we need to keep in mind that types of experiences aren't experiences at all, no more than types of personality are real-life human beings. The separability of types of experiences doesn't preclude such types may be coinstantiated. T demands necessary coinstantiation of visual and tactile types of phenomenal properties (e.g., visual roundness, tactile roundness), where the necessity is developmental, and only relative to mature, unimpaired, and experienced perceivers. T might be independently false, but this first objection fails to pose a problem.

This might be refined into a second objection. Drawing on a rich neo-Kantian tradition, von Senden (1932, 289-290) has

suggested that visual phenomenal type-properties and tactile ones themselves have properties which make it impossible for us to be unable to distinguish them in token experiences. Consider sight: the visual scene is there, before my eyes, all at once. Now consider touch: I touch this, then I touch that. In touch there is *experienced succession,* not *experienced simultaneity*, as in seeing.

In reply, Evans (1985, 368) remarks: "It is unacceptable to argue from the successiveness of *sensation* to the successiveness of *perception*." Say I hold a champagne cup as I look at it (this discussion owes much to Martin (1992, 200), though he uses the example to make a different point). I experience holding the whole cup with my hand; there is simultaneity to that. Moreover, my surroundings are – now – all available to touch, even though I only touch one or a few objects in my environment at a time. So *possible* touch, like *possible* sight, is simultaneous. How about *actual* touch and sight? Take sight: as the visual scene displays itself before my eyes, my eyes can wander about, attending to different things. Perhaps I am searching for something, or merely exploring my surroundings. I first see this, then I see that. There is experienced succession in sight too, as there is in touch. As Schwenkler (2013, 87) puts it, "there is a respect in which temporal features like succession and duration *appear* the same whether they are perceived through vision, touch, or hearing."

These phenomenological glosses rely on aspects of my experience which I attend to. But suppose that I can consciously see things I fail to attend to. Even if that is true, I can also consciously touch things I fail to attend to. Surely the crucial difference in point of simultaneity and succession isn't to be found *solely* in unattended to phenomenal aspects, and *solely* inasmuch as they're unattended.

Against von Senden, the phenomenal difference between succession and simultaneity seems to be orthogonal on which sensory modalities we use, and is consistent with a strong form of crossmodal phenomenal unity.

Martin (1992, 210) tries to find another difference between visual and tactile phenomenal type-properties which may make it impossible for us to be unable to distinguish them in token experiences. That is, if Martin were right, it would be

necessarily possible for perceivers like us to distinguish visual and tactile phenomenal aspects of our own crossmodal experiences of recognizing shapes. He writes:

> Here we have found an essential phenomenological difference between sight and touch. The former is experience of objects external to one as arranged in physical space. The latter is experience of objects as they come into contact with one's body.

Martin proposes this difference as a consequence of his discussion of how space is perceptually represented in sight and in touch. To advance a *phenomenological* claim as the *conclusion* of a theoretical argument is, in itself, of concern. Our background theoretical assumptions may skew our faithfulness to introspection. This is what I think happens with Martin's alleged phenomenological difference too. Now let's look closer at the assumptions involved.

One of Martin's premises is that touch and awareness of one's body posture are not two different sense modalities, but two different manners in which the same sense modality can be exercised:

> not as one in which we have two distinct states of mind, a bodily sensation and a tactual perception, both of which can be attended to; but instead simply one state of mind, which can be attended to in different ways (204).

Current orthodoxy in cognitive science would balk at this identification of (some) proprioception with touch. Other than the benefit of taking on different perspectives on how to individuate senses, it's hard to see how Martin supports his alternative to classical cognitive science.

Another of Martin's premises for the "essential phenomenological difference" between sight and touch is that we can have an experience *of* space directly (199). However, relationists about space (like Leibniz), and post-Kantians (like von Senden) who think space is a "form of intuition" but *cannot* itself be intuited, would take issue with Martin's claim.

Since all this hangs on so much theory, it is fair to characterize Martin's point less as an "essential phenomenological difference" and more as a "structural difference between the experiences," as Martin himself puts it (1992, 197). The structure, I take it, is super-imposed by one's

preferred theory of perception, hence is *not* purely phenomenal. I am unsure whether Martin would agree, since he is "sceptical as to whether one can give one general theory of what perception is" (211). But where so much psychological theory is involved, clearly these claims cannot be used to make a "purely" or "essentially" phenomenological point. Perhaps there may be other ways to distinguish visual from tactile phenomenal type-properties so that they could never be phenomenally united in the fairly strong required sense. Absent specific candidates for why that may be, I conclude T and T' have not been undermined

4. Introspection and reflection

The crux of the issue is whether introspection leans towards the traditional view defended by Martin, or whether it leans towards its complete opposite (as with Tye), or whether there are cases where our experience is phenomenally unified, and cases where phenomenal aspects are separable from one another. I claim perceptually recognizing shapes when both seeing and feeling them has a unified phenomenology, while other experiences are different, and separable. Think of the apple again. In using a visuotactile common sensible to recognize its roundness, we could then go on to try to separate what we *think* are sensory aspects of our overall phenomenology: what is visual and what is tactile to the roundness we both see and feel. We would be doing this not in introspecting on our experience, but in conceptually reflecting on it.

But the adept of tradition might say the putative visuotactile phenomenal unity is an artefact of reflection. We're duped into thinking there is a special unity to what it is like to see the apple's roundness and what it is like to feel the apple's roundness. We're fooled into this because (to fall into Kantian jargon) we synthesize both intuitions under the same concept: *roundness*. The thought originates with Berkeley's *An essay towards a new theory of vision* (1709):

> one is with more difficulty brought to discern the difference there is betwixt the ideas of sight and touch. (par. 47)
>
> [This] seems to arise from want of a due application of our discerning faculty. (par. 66)

Berkeley is too concise here. He *admits* in par. 47 we ordinarily do *not* discern visual and tactile phenomenal aspects when both are part of our experience. He thinks this is a failing of ours because, as he puts it in par. 66, our "discerning faculty" *should* be applied to distinguish these phenomenal aspects even though it isn't. In effect, what I am proposing is to agree with par. 47 and disagree with par. 66. If "our discerning faculty" is reflection, then Berkeley is suggesting we should impose an artificial, conceptual distinction, upon our crossmodal sensory phenomenology. If "our discerning faculty" is introspection, then Berkeley owes us a reason for why he thinks we can discern visual and tactile aspects of a visuotactile experience in introspecting our experience *as opposed to* conceptually reflecting on it. Berkeley might refuse to draw the introspection / reflection distinction (he doesn't use it), but, in this context, that would be begging the question.

Perhaps Berkeley's par. 47 suggests we might, if we're especially careful, or in special circumstances, distinguish visual and tactile phenomenal aspects of a visuotactile experience. To this, I reply both 'yes' and 'no.' 'Yes' because we should be open to different individuals, or a single one at different moments in life, not only having different experiences, but also *experiencing them differently*. Some may experience what Martin does. Others, what Tye does. Others, what I do. We should be open to differences between us, and time may change us.

There is a suggestion in Berkeley's par. 47 we should say 'no' to. Suppose (perhaps per impossibile) that, in being very careful, we could achieve the result of not letting concepts interfere with the sensory aspects of our phenomenology. That introspective result should be counted no more, and no less, of an introspection, than the naïve and confused kind all of us practice daily. Granted, the introspective exercise may be important for theoretical reasons in philosophy and psychology. But that doesn't make it more privileged *qua* introspection. In setting up problem, I have suggested that the only kind of evidence admissible to choosing between Martin's, Tye's, and my own view, is introspective. We shouldn't value careless introspection any less than the careful one.

5. Prospects

I have suggested claims T and T' are more accurate to at least some of our experiences than either of Martin's traditional answer and Tye's radical departure. While phenomenology is their proper home, T and T' also change the way we think of other topics in the philosophy of perception.

Although sight and touch are different senses, the individuation of senses falls short of establishing how experiences involving more than one sense are individuated. This is a vast area, where analysis of our everyday or specialized concepts of "experience" have not often shook hands with empirical approaches to how, in point of computational aspects of information-processing, we should conceive of the representations underlying our conscious experience. If T is right, we should not ignore a class of sensory representations coded differently – crossmodally.

When does consciousness intervene in the process of recognizing the shapes of objects in the environment? By T, it is after visual and tactile inputs will have converged to identify a unique shape-representation to be ascribed as a feature to the object sensed (Treisman 1998). By T', this happens only in special cases; color-recognition is not like shape-recognition. So we might fail to reach a general conclusion regardless of the specifics of what is experienced. Perhaps this is what Martin (1992, 211) meant when he was unsure "whether one can give one general theory of what perception is."

Recognizing the existence of common sensibles may be a step towards distinguishing normal crossmodal experience from a *pathological* one. In synaethesia (Farina 2013), for instance, patients may find themselves unable to distinguish phenomenal aspects which they should be able to distinguish. (Claim T' makes this very point against Tye's view, but the clinical details are, of course, much more nuanced than broad theoretical generalizations.)

History benefits too. One tradition, left behind after Berkeley's thesis that the senses are heterogeneous, can now be revived. Aristotle's view in *De anima*, Book III, seems to have been that perception is an integrated, overarching capacity, responsive to common sensibles like shapes (Gregoric 2007).

Tye claims, by the title of his (2007), to have solved "the problem of common sensibles." Moving to experience and its representational aspects beyond the mere capacity to be sensitive to a stimulus is a step in the right direction, which Tye makes. But T' seems closer to what the ensuing tradition, if not Aristotle himself, intended. Contra Tye, and pro Aristotle, not all sensibles are common sensibles.

Reviving this Aristotelian tradition throws new light on Molyneux's problem: could a previously blind person, expert on recognizing shapes by touch, recognize them visually upon seeing them for the first time? Older surveys of the debate focused on either sensations of sight or touch, or on concepts of shape (Degenaar 1996). Whereas discussing common sensibles, as T and T' characterize them, moves the debate towards crossmodal perceptual representations (representational vehicles of contents of experience) which are intentionally rich, and are not modally-specific. Locke's dictum that ideas of shape are "simple ideas of divers senses", which he mobilized in the brief answer he approvingly gave to Molyneux (*Essay*, Book II, Chs. 5, 9), is most straightforwardly construed as endorsing an Aristotelian tradition of common sensibles (Brykman 1991).

There is no conceptual barrier to thinking they T and T' are true. The introspective evidence available suggests they are, at least sometimes, true. If true, they would be important in reorienting research about the phenomenology of perceptually recognizing shapes. And, if true, they would shed new light on early modern debates which introduced assumptions now underwriting much of how we think about the senses. To be sure, T and T' may turn out be false. However, I hope to have shown they are important, and deserve closer scrutiny. If they are true, traditional ways of understanding perceptual experiences may need to change.

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