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CONCEPT ACQUISITION AND EXPERIENTIAL CHANGE

An Examination of Siegel's Hologram Argument

ABSTRACT: Many have held the Acquisition of Concepts Thesis (ACT) that concept acquisition can change perceptual experience. This paper explains the close relation of ACT to ADT, the thesis that acquisition of dispositions to quickly and reliably recognize a kind of thing can change perceptual experience. It then states a highly developed argument given by Siegel (2010) which, if successful, would offer strong support for ADT and indirect support for ACT. Examination of this argument, however, reveals difficulties that undermine its promise. Distinctions made in this examination help to clarify an alternative view that denies ADT and ACT while accepting that long exposure to a class of materials may induce changes in phenomenology that lie outside perceptual experience itself.

There is a widely held view that may be expressed as the thesis that

ACT Perceptual experience can be changed by the acquisition of concepts.

Affirmations of this view can be found in Churchland (1979), Rosenthal (1991), Siegel (2010), Gennaro (2012), and many others. There are several common examples, e.g. experiences of wine tasters and musicians, that allegedly illustrate it, and a full discussion of the merits or

demerits of the claim would require far more than can be included in this paper.¹ However, an argument derived from recent work by Susanna Siegel seems to provide a way of giving ACT support. The aim of this paper is to clarify and examine this line of support.

Despite its popularity, it is clear that argument for ACT is needed. Novices with respect to Siegel's main example — recognition of pine trees — would plausibly succeed very well on the following task. Standing in a forest clearing, an expert points to three trees that are in fact two spruces and one pine, and requires the novice to say which one is not like the others. It is natural to suppose that the novice can succeed because the trees look different. If having acquired concepts of tree types (or, dispositions to recognize tree types) is not necessary for them to look different, it surely requires an argument to show that concept or disposition acquisition can change the way trees look.

The need for argument in support of ACT also arises from its suggestion of an asymmetric relation, in which the character of experience depends on having acquired concepts, but not conversely. It might be, however, that the dependence is asymmetrical, but in the reverse direction. This would be the case if the order of events went this way: (a) repeated experience, with or without tutelage by an expert, causes prolonged and repeated attention to relevant samples, which in turn causes (b) heightened sensitivity to small differences among the samples, due to small changes in synaptic weights in early sensory systems, which then cause (c) differences in experiences for which (d) new words (or other behavioral reactions) can then be learned. On such a scenario, differences in perceptual experience caused by voluminous exposure would be a requirement for acquisition of new recognitional concepts, not the other way around.

It would be question-begging simply to assert that this scenario is the way things actually are, or that the apparent force of the point about novices' discriminative abilities must be accepted without further discussion. However, no such strong assertions are being relied upon here. It is claimed only that the preceding two paragraphs present *prima facie* plausible considerations that raise a doubt about ACT, and offer an explanation for the correlation between concept acquisition and experiential change that is compatible with ACT's falsity. This modest claim is sufficient to show that argument for ACT is needed.

The argument found in Siegel (2010) that this paper examines goes deeper than those found in many discussions of ACT. It is promising, in the sense that it gets well beyond appeal to intuitions about concepts and experiential change that are based on examples such as wine tasting and musical proficiency.

1. PRELIMINARIES

I shall follow Siegel in distinguishing between *overall* experience and *visual* experience. Drawing this distinction precisely is difficult and controversial, but (Siegel 2010, p. 25) allows that it is “natural to suppose” that if a waterskier’s towboat engine had been somewhat quieter, or if the air hadn’t smelled quite so fresh, the scenery might have looked the same. If the natural supposition is correct, this case would illustrate the possibility of difference in overall experience without difference in visual experience. Further, Siegel describes a certain view as holding that “as far as visual phenomenology is concerned, [a certain pair of experiences]... are the same, but the difference in phenomenology of overall experiences is due to a non-sensory factor” (Siegel 2010, p. 102). This view (of which much more anon) is rejected by Siegel, but it is regarded as coherently stated, and as requiring a carefully worked out argument in response.

In a discussion of Thomas Reid, (Siegel 2010, p. 21–22) describes a view that distinguishes between a visual phenomenal state and a judgment. She makes it clear that the view that judgments depend on concepts is correct, but uninteresting for her purposes. The question of interest – the question that requires an argument of the kind to be examined here — is about the relation between visual phenomenal states and concepts.²

ACT is a thesis about an effect of concept acquisition. The argument given by Siegel (2010) that we are to examine here is stated in terms of acquisition of a certain recognitional disposition. So, it is directly concerned with ADT, the thesis that acquisition of recognitional dispositions can change perceptual experience.

However, ADT and ACT are closely related. Namely, for recognitional concepts (the class of concepts such that having acquired them requires having acquired the ability to quickly and reliably apply the

concept when an item falling under it is present to normally functioning senses in normal conditions), ACT implies ADT. So, an argument that is stated as an argument for ADT is an argument that a necessary condition of ACT is satisfied for recognitional concepts. And a failure of an argument for ADT would remove one reason for affirming ACT. These relations are important, because recognitional concepts give initially plausible illustrations of ACT.³ Novice wine tasters, for example, are often held to have enriched experiences because they have learned to recognize, e.g., tannin (in varying concentrations) in wine.

2. SIEGEL’S ARGUMENT

(Siegel 2010, Chapter 4) contrasts the experience of a novice identifier of pine trees with the later experience of the same person, who has in the meantime become an expert. While she does not present her argument in the style of numbered premises and conclusions, it will be helpful for us to adopt that style. Her first premise is plausible, and will not be questioned in this paper. It can be expressed as follows.

- S1. There is a difference in the overall experiences had by a novice and an expert when looking at a pine tree.

Siegel’s view is that the best account of this difference is that the visual experiences themselves are different. She distinguishes, and discusses, three ways of denying this view. Only one of these denials needs to be successful in order to undermine support for her view, and the remainder of this paper will focus on just one way of departing from it.

Siegel (2010) states the view of her opponents with admirable clarity, on p. 104.

In the tree case, the suggestion [for a way of denying that the visual experiences themselves are different] amounts to this: how the tree looks before and after you become disposed to recognize pine trees is exactly the same; that is, it looks to have certain color and shape properties. But the moment you recognize the tree, you experience a feeling of familiarity, and this feeling accounts for the phenomenological change before and after you gain the disposition. So, on this suggestion the way the tree looks stays the same,

belief that *that kind of tree* is familiar, then, if that belief were not present, the difference would have to disappear.

- S4. The hologram scenario presents a possible case in which the belief is not present but the difference does not disappear.

Therefore,

- S5. The difference in experience between the novice and the expert is not that the latter, but not the former, has a dwelling on the belief that *that kind of tree* is familiar.

The argument for S5 depends on taking the element that is proposed as an addition to the visual experience to be a belief, i.e., an attitude that commits one to the presence of a tree. So, Siegel's opponents could maintain their view in the face of S5 by replacing such a belief with a non-committal, mere entertaining of the proposition that *that kind of tree* is familiar. This is alternative (b) in S2.

Siegel argues that this alternative also fails, but for a different reason, as follows.

- S6. An additional element — be it committal or noncommittal regarding a proposition — has to be an “occurrent state [that] is explicit, not akin to having a tacit recognition. . .” (Siegel 2010, p. 106)

However,

- S7. “There need not be, it seems, an extra episode (or occurrent state), beyond sensing, for the phenomenological change [i.e., between the overall experience of the novice and the overall experience of the expert] to take effect.” (Siegel 2010, p. 106)

Therefore,

- S8. The difference between the novice and the expert is not that the latter, but not the former, has an entertaining of the proposition that *that kind of tree* is familiar.

Therefore, by modus tollens from S5 and S8 (and the assumption that

one or the other of the arguments given will apply to all candidates for an “additional element” in the expert's experiences that cannot be dismissed from relevance on other grounds),

- S9. The antecedent of S2 is false: The difference in the overall experiences of the novice and the expert comes from a difference in the nature of their visual experiences themselves, not from the absence vs presence of some element that is additional to the visual experiences.

3. TWO DIFFICULTIES FOR SIEGEL'S ARGUMENT

The first difficulty that Siegel's argument encounters concerns her second premise, which was this:

- S2. If the novice/expert overall experiential difference is not a difference in the visual experiences themselves, then it is the difference of absence vs presence of either (a) a dwelling on the belief that *that kind of tree* is familiar, or (b) an entertaining of that proposition.

This premise is doubtful. The reason is that a feeling of familiarity is a feeling, and a feeling is neither an accepting nor an entertaining of a proposition. Ruling out the relevance or general availability of acceptance or entertaining of a proposition thus does nothing at all to show that the novice/expert overall experiential difference does not reside in the absence vs. presence of a feeling of familiarity.

We can, of course, accept or explicitly entertain propositions about feelings. We can believe our present anger to be stronger than our anger on a previous occasion. We can explicitly wonder whether a certain discomfort we feel might not be a bit of jealousy. These are believings or wonderings that are about our feelings. But having such believings or wonderings is not the same thing as having the feelings that they are about. The point is quite general: the presence of a feeling in one's phenomenology may be a truth maker for some belief about one's feeling, but it is not the same thing as having that belief. All these points hold for feelings of familiarity.

The shift from feelings to propositional attitudes occurs quite early in Siegel's discussion. One sentence from a passage already quoted, in which she lays out her opponents' view, is this:

But the moment you recognize the tree, you experience a feeling of familiarity, and this feeling accounts for the phenomenological change before and after you gain the disposition" [to recognize pine trees]. (Siegel 2010, p. 104)

But in the very next sentence, we find the opponents' view described this way:

the phenomenology of "taking" the tree to be familiar contributes to the phenomenological change.... (Siegel 2010, p. 104)

This latter formulation suggests a propositional attitude, and indeed, in the next following sentence, Siegel selects her example, namely, "the event and attitude of dwelling on a belief, and the content that *that kind of tree* is familiar". Here, the feeling of familiarity has been abandoned, and the move to propositional attitudes is explicit and complete.

Siegel's text presents no argument for this shift.⁴ It is, however, crucial for her argument. That argument has the form of an argument by elimination: three options are offered, and two (the ones labeled "(a)" and "(b)") are dismissed. But arguments from elimination are not sound if they omit consideration of a relevant alternative, and the effect of the shift is to omit the feeling of familiarity itself, which was the original formulation of the "additional element" put forward by Siegel's opponents.

It may, however, be suggested that this problem can be easily repaired, by holding that a feeling of familiarity must be a feeling of familiarity of something, and so must involve the application of some concept, thus requiring a proposition after all.⁵ So, in the next part of our discussion, we shall accept the shift, and raise a second difficulty for the argument. To wit: even if we suppose that a feeling of familiarity involves a propositional attitude, there is an available propositional attitude that the hologram example does not exclude from relevance.

This propositional attitude can be expressed in words such as *Here's a familiar look*, or *Here's something familiar*. Accepting such propositions does not commit one to any particular cause or possessor of the

look. So, if one had assumed one was looking at a real forest, and was then told that there was only a hologram, one need not retract one's acceptance that there's a familiar look here, or that here is something familiar. Such an acceptance could well occur in an expert, and would not occur in a novice. Further, such propositions need not be explicitly entertained, until one has been apprized of the hologram. So, accepting them seems available, on Siegel's own terms, as an explanation of why the overall experience of the expert can be different from that of the novice, even when the expert has come to believe that what's present is a hologram, not a real forest.

There are other ways of expressing the kind of propositional attitude suggested here. Consider a case in which someone says "I wonder how that bluish smudge on the wall got there." A small amount of investigation later, she comes to believe that there is no smudge on the wall; she was having a bluish afterimage while her eyes were focused at the distance of the wall. So, for a brief moment she was making some kind of mistake. It was, however, not a mistake about color; there was indeed something bluish, the error was about what it was. She got *something* right, and what she was right about might be expressed as *There was something bluish here*.⁶

4. GENERALIZATION AND CONCLUSION

The lesson from our discussion of Siegel's pine-spotter has general application. For example, it is sometimes suggested that familiar people look different from the way they looked on first exposure (e.g., Siewert 1998). Our discussion suggests that we need not accept such claims as data, if "look different" is taken to mean that the visual experience is different, and not merely that the overall experience is different. For there is another plausible account, namely, that the visual experience is the same, but a certain emotional tone — pleasure in the arousal due to novelty, for example — has worn off, and a different feeling — a feeling of familiarity — has taken its place.

The aim of this paper has been to examine a particularly well-developed argument that promised to offer direct support for ADT and indirect support for ACT. Our conclusion is that it is flawed in a way that undermines the support it might have been thought to offer.

Notes

¹Robinson (2004) contains discussion of some of these other considerations.

²Let “CPET” be the thesis that concepts are partially constitutive of perceptual experience itself. CPET is not quite equivalent to ACT. One could, in principle, hold (a) that innate concepts are partially constitutive of perceptual experience but acquired concepts make no difference; or (b) that acquiring concepts produces change in perceptual experience by a causal route, even though CPET is false. These views are, however, complex and are unlikely to be attractive, as compared with views that either accept both CPET and ACT or deny both. We may say that CPET and ACT are mutually consilient.

³Of course, for any concept for which recognition is sufficient as well as necessary for possession, the relation will be even closer: the claims of ACT and ADT about such a concept will be equivalent.

⁴It is possible that someone will come to Siegel’s defense by proposing that it is question-begging for me to assume that a feeling of familiarity might not involve a propositional attitude. However, (1) a contrary assumption is equally question-begging (in the opposite direction); and if the question is left open, Siegel’s argument will have failed to rule out a relevant alternative. (2) The second of my “two difficulties” explains how the argument fails even upon the assumption that a feeling is a kind of propositional attitude. See remainder of this section.

⁵Robinson (2006) contains a reason for resisting this view. But the present paper does not depend on that work, as the immediately following text shows.

⁶Representationalists may be suspicious of this formulation, but they can read “something” as referring to a merely intentional object.

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