Dissertation Abstract

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Much of the philosophical work on perception has focused on vision, with very little discussion of the chemical senses—olfaction and gustation. My three-paper dissertation focuses on olfactory perception, with each paper exploring an ongoing debate in the perceptual literature through the olfactory ‘lens’. I argue that consideration of olfactory perception presents us with unique challenges to central debates in the philosophy of perception. Meeting these challenges rewards us with new insight into three topics: 1) the nature, and extent, of representational content, 2) qualia and the alleged transparency of experience and 3) the nature of the secondary qualities.

1. “A Representational Account of Olfactory Experience”

In this paper, I consider the challenge that olfactory experience presents to upholding a representational view of the sense modalities. Implicit in much of the contemporary perceptual literature is the unification thesis: the thesis that certain philosophical issues about perception should be settled in the same way for each of the sensory modalities. It is commonplace to suppose that visual experience is world-directed and, in particular, that it is representational. World-directed views contrast with subjectivist views—views according to which experiences are raw feels or mere sensations. Given the phenomenology of olfactory experience, it is difficult to see prima facie how a representational view of it might go. A subjectivist view of it might seem inevitable. This is a serious problem given that the notion of representational content is central to important metaphysical and epistemological projects in the philosophy of mind—namely, the projects of providing a naturalistic account of the mind and of securing knowledge of the external world in the face of skeptical worries. Olfaction, then, presents an important challenge for representational theories to overcome.

In this paper, I take on this challenge and argue for a representational account of olfactory experience that honors its phenomenology. In order to do this, I need to get a firmer grip on what olfactory experience is like. I do this by comparing olfactory experience to experiences in other modalities. I then consider a form of subjectivism about olfactory experience—namely, the view that olfactory experience is purely sensational. The sensational view, as I call it, is inspired by the perceptual theory of Thomas Reid. Although discussions of smell are rare in the contemporary literature, the sensational view is suggested in several of these few discussions. My observations about olfactory phenomenology explain why the sensational view seems appealing for olfaction. Although the view is appealing, it is not inevitable. I argue for what I call the abstract view—the view according to which olfactory experience has a very weak kind of abstract, or existentially quantified, content. It, too, honors the phenomenology of olfactory experience. I conclude by showing where the abstract view sits in the greater project of providing a unified account of perceptual experience.

2. “Olfaction, Qualia and the Transparency of Experience”

In this paper, I consider what olfactory experience can tell us about the controversy over qualia and, in particular, the debate that focuses on the alleged transparency of experience. The appeal to transparency is supposed to show that there are no qualia—intrinsic, non-intentional and directly accessible properties of experience that determine phenomenal character. It is most commonly used to motivate intentionalism—namely, the view that the phenomenal character of an experience is exhausted by its representational content. Although some philosophers claim that transparency holds for all of the sense modalities, any detailed discussion of it focuses on vision. I argue that transparency does not hold across the sense modalities and that, in particular, it fails for olfactory experience.
Transparency is typically introduced by a metaphor: experience is transparent in the sense that we 'see right through it' and onto objects and properties in the external world. Once unpacked, we see that the transparency thesis consists of two sub-theses—a positive and a negative one. The positive sub-thesis concerns what the properties we are aware of in a given experience appear to be properties of—namely, the object of experience. The negative sub-thesis concerns what they do not appear to be properties of—namely, the experience itself. Although these two sub-theses seem intuitive in the case of visual experience, this intuitiveness does not carry over to olfactory experience. I ask: what makes transparency intuitive in the case of vision and unintuitive in the case of olfaction? Drawing on observations about olfactory phenomenology from the previous paper, I note that visual experience presents us with a structured sensory field. Such a structure, I argue, is necessary for both the positive and negative sub-theses to hold of visual experience. Olfactory experience lacks such a structure. For this reason, both theses do not hold of it and, as a result, the transparency thesis does not hold of olfaction. I close by arguing that this result draws attention to weaknesses with using the appeal to transparency to argue against qualia in the visual domain.

3. “What’s that Smell?: The Nature of the Olfactory Qualities”

In this paper, I turn to the question of what smells are. From the literature on color, we have learned that we can ask two related questions about the color properties:

(1) when we look at a ripe tomato (e.g.), does anything external to us really have that distinctive property—namely, redness?
(2) what is the nature of redness?

Similarly, we can ask two related questions about smells:

(1’) when we smell the lilac (e.g.), does anything external to us really have that distinctive property—namely, lilac-ness?
(2’) what is the nature of lilac-ness?

I define smell realism as the view according to which the answer to (1’) is ‘yes’. The realist has several different options for answering (2’): physicalism, dispositionalism and primitivism. In contrast to smell realism, smell eliminativism claims the answer to (1’) is ‘no’. With respect to (2’), eliminativism proper claims that nothing whatsoever has lilac-ness and that the question is moot. Another form of eliminativism, projectivism, claims that lilac-ness is a property of olfactory experiences that we project onto external things.

I draw attention to the fact that those who have discussed smell in any kind of detail have favored either dispositionalism or projectivism. Following John Locke, Thomas Reid claimed that lilac-ness is a dispositional property—in particular, a disposition to cause a certain kind of sensation in human perceivers. More recently, Moreland Perkins has argued for a form of projectivism. The trend so far, then, has been to favor views that take into account the ‘felt character’ of olfactory experience. I discuss the details of each of these views and argue that we can understand their attractiveness in light of the phenomenological features that I drew attention to in the first and second papers.

In the face of their attractiveness, I defend physicalism about smell. Projectivism about color is criticized on the grounds that it accuses visual experience of systematic error. Visual experience reports that ripe tomatoes are red. But, according to projectivism, tomatoes are not red; experiences are. I argue that, although the representational purport of olfactory experience is much less ambitious than that of its visual counterpart, projectivism about smell still accuses olfactory experience of implausible error. Physicalism does not. Dispositionalism poses a more significant challenge to physicalism. The results of certain psychophysical studies show that there is a significant degree of perceptual variation in the olfactory domain—and seemingly no non-arbitrary way to determine which perceivers have ‘got the smell right’. Still, I argue that physicalism can accommodate these facts and, in arguing for this, I provide further details of my version of physicalism. I conclude by arguing that it is more attractive than dispositionalism given that it does not share with dispositionalism certain key problems.