Self-consciousness, perception and agency

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Bermúdez's Paradox

In analyzing what it is to be self-conscious, José Luis Bermúdez claims that, at least prima facie, self-conscious cognitive states are those states in which I refer to myself.

"the capacity for self-conscious thought must be presupposed in any satisfactory account of mastery of the first-person pronoun. I cannot refer to myself as the producer of a given token of 'I' without knowing that I intend to refer to myself – which is itself a self-conscious thought of the type we are trying to explain."

Bermúdez's Paradox

- explanatory circularity
- capacity circularity
- Capacity circularity is especially problematic because infants are not able to grasp the first-person concept, yet they gain this capacity, and will exhibit fully-fledged self-consciousness.
- So we need to provide a story of how self-consciousness develops prior to first-person concept use.
- If we can do this, we will be able to explain self-consciousness without requiring first-person mastery, so the latter can be explained by the former and they are not co-dependent.

Bermúdez's solution

- There are several more basic forms of self-consciousness that do not require use of the first-person concept.
    - Ecological self-awareness
    - Somatosensory self-awareness
    - Non-conceptual point-of-view

Non-conceptual point of view

- The point of view shows that a subject can distinguish between the world and himself.
- This is the result of his ability to distinguish between his experiences and what they are experiences of.
- The most obvious way a subject can do this, according to Bermúdez, is by recognizing a place as somewhere that he has been before.
- Such recognition does not require conceptual understanding of objects or the self, but it does require conscious memory so that the subject can recall his previous experience of the place.
- In doing so he realizes that the place exists apart from and separate to any one experience he has had of it.

‘Ecological Perception and the Notion of a Nonconceptual Point of View’ (1995)

- Recognizing a place as somewhere one has been before involves “appreciating how these varying spatial relations afford different possibilities for action.” (Bermúdez 1995, p. 172)

- What Bermúdez wants to do the work is my understanding that I can perform actions in a perceptually presented scene, and presumably, that the scene affords certain actions and not others.

- What interests Bermúdez about this ability, is that he thinks it involves the “subject representing himself as an agent. What the subject grasps, on this account, is the close connection between his own intentions and the spatial configuration of the environment.” (Bermúdez 1995, p. 172)

- Just how this connection involves the agent representing himself as an agent and how it gives us a nonconceptual point of view is left unexplained at this point.

The Paradox of Self-Consciousness (2000)

- We distinguish ourselves from the physical environment and combine this with being able to represent the spatial nature of the physical environment we are in.
- Spatiality is important because what we grasp in self-awareness is our own existence in a physical world. And the way we understand ourselves as existing within but separate from the physical world is by acting within this world.

  "Appreciating the spatiality of the environment and one's place in it is largely a function of grasping one's own possibilities for action within that environment: realizing that if one wants to return to a particular place from *here* one must pass through these intermediate places." (Bermúdez 2000, p. 222)

The Paradox of Self-Consciousness (2000)

- Bermúdez wants to ground the non-conceptual point of view in visual perception by appeal to Gibsonian afforances. When we calibrate affordances into a systematic representation of the world we get an understanding of the spatiality of the environment.
- What this involves, according to Bermúdez, is more than mere perception of affordance. This, in itself, merely gives us co-perception of the self and the environment.
- In order to build a spatial understanding of the environment our understanding of affordances must be calibrated for the properties of symmetry and transitivity. Spatial relations are transitive and symmetrical, so we must understand the spatial relations between affordances as being symmetrical and transitive also.
- By applying this understanding to the different affordances I come across I will build up, says Bermúdez an integrated representation of the environment.

Perception and Action

- Classical views of perception and action as separate and distinct
  - moderately informative and uncontroversial way in which the movements I make will alter the sensory input I receive.
  - So, turning my head to the right will enable me to look out of the window, rather than at the page in front of me.
  - The dependence of perception on action in this case is merely instrumental. Action is a means to a change in sensory input.
  - According to a proponent of ecological perception, perceptual content includes information from visual kinesthesis about the movement of the perceiver, and also information about possibilities for action that the environment affords, which provide the subject with a primitive self-awareness. However the dependence of perception on action is merely instrumental in affecting the content of sensory inputs.

Perception and Action

- Motor theories: action constitutes perception
  - on the sensorimotor account to perceive is to know how our possible actions will alter our perceptions.
  - The sensorimotor dynamics in question can be understood at the personal level as the dynamic relations between perception and action (Noë, 2004).
  - Or they can be understood at the sub-personal level as the dynamic relations between sensory inputs and motor commands (Hurley, 2002).

Perception and Action

- Action-Space account
  - perception is a matter of knowing the kinds of actions that a perceived environment affords.
  - Ward, Roberts and Clark claim that to perceive is to have:

"unmediated knowledge concerning [one's] poise (or apparent poise) over a currently enabled action space: a matrix of possibilities for pursuing and accomplishing one's intentional actions, goals and projects."

(Ward, Roberts & Clark (Submitted) 'Knowing what we can do: Actions, Intentions, and the construction of phenomenal experience', p. 1)

Motivation for the Action Space Account of visual perception comes from evidence for two visual systems.

Milner and Goodale hypothesize from cases of visual form agnosia, optic ataxia and blindsight that there are two visual systems, which process sensory input for different purposes.

- The dorsal stream provides information for the motor system and governs the fine details of action, giving so-called vision for action.
- The ventral stream provides sensory information in the form of internal representations for acts of judging, planning and the forming of intentions, giving vision for perception.

- This knowledge can be non-conceptual.
  - I don't need to have the concept of the object I am poised to sift and sort, nor do I need the concepts of any properties by which I might sift and sort.
- Our visual experience, they suggest, consists in knowing what it is that we can do. Rather than perception being linked directly to action we have what Ward, Roberts and Clark call a second order disposition towards action.
- At least some of the language here relates to Bermúdez's non-conceptual point of view, so what does the Action Space actually give us in terms of self-consciousness?

- Knowing the possible actions that the environment affords includes knowledge of how I might reach certain objects that I can see. That is, the knowledge of the matrix of possible actions must involve spatial information about the objects I can perceive, specifically spatial information that relates to me because it will be in terms of possible actions I might perform.
- The actions I am enabled to perform are understood in a coarse-grained way, without the details associated with motor commands. However, the second order disposition towards action that Ward, Roberts and Clark speak of is to be understood as something that could "generate a specification of a first-order routine" I might not have a detailed representation of the space around me and the exact locations of the objects I can see, but this does not mean that I do not have any understanding of the environment as spatial.
- This gives us a distinction between self and world, but does it get me self-consciousness?

The Action Space account faces the objection that non-conceptual, action-orientated content cannot present a perceiver-independent world.

"Action-space content only provides the agent with information about himself, or about how objects can be dealt with by himself; this isn't enough for him to grasp the independence of those objects from himself, and therefore doesn't count as perceptual representation; independence and objectivity only come through the satisfaction of the Generality Constraint, and so experiential states must feed into conceptual resources in order to acquire properly perceptual status."

"The necessary separation between subject and object is achieved only when the Generality Constraint is satisfied – only when the agent is able to open-endedly recombine the components of his thought with his other concepts."

(Roberts, 'Action and Experience')

- When I perceive an array of objects I have spatial awareness of them in relation to myself, because I am aware of the possible actions that can be performed at that time, including the physical actions that would allow we to approach and to grasp them in the many ways I can.
- Moreover, this knowledge of possible actions is temporally extended. It is not merely the case that I know of a set of possible actions I can perform right now. Instead, I am aware of the set of possible actions that I could perform now and in the future.
- The matrix of possible actions are integrated with my ongoing goals and long-term planning. In integrating the space of actions in this way I am made aware that my possibilities for action are enduring ones.

- I might perceive some stones on the ground, which afford a set of possible actions including grasping and throwing and which also can be used to hit other things.

- I might also have long-term goals such as eating some nuts, nuts that are located elsewhere and that I perceived earlier.

- By integrating the possible actions I can now perform with my long-term goals I can have an understanding of objects as existing separate from my experiences of them.

- Planning intentional, world-directed action requires an understanding of "the spatially and temporally extended space of opportunities for action that the environment affords." (Roberts, 'Action and Experience')

- For Bermúdez what makes the difference between mere self-specific information and self-consciousness is the recognition of the world as existing separate from my experiences. This gives me a non-conceptual point of view.
- What we get with the Action Space account is the understanding of the spatially and temporally extended space of opportunities for action that the environment affords.
- That is, we understand the world as existing separate from our experiences of it. As concerns perception, this entitles us to think that the Action Space account gives us genuine perceptual experience.
- What we can also take away is that genuine perceptual experience gives the subject a nonconceptual point of view.

- Questions:
  - How does the integration of the matrix of possible actions with my long-term goals happen? What is required for this integration?
  - Depending on this, does this give us a more parsimonious account of the non-conceptual point of view?
  - Can we really distinguish ventral and dorsal stream operations so completely, especially as concerns experience of space.