

## **In Defense of Disjunctivism**

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### **I. Disjunctivism about Perception**

Right now, I see a computer in front of me. Now, according to current philosophical orthodoxy, I could have the very same perceptual experience that I'm having right now even if I were not seeing a computer in front of me. Indeed, such orthodoxy tells us, I could have the very same experience that I'm having right now even if I were not seeing anything at all in front of me, but simply suffering from a hallucination. More generally, someone can have the very same perceptual experience no matter whether she is enjoying a veridical perception of some mind-independent object, or merely hallucinating. What differs across these two kinds of case is not the kind of experience that she has, but rather the connections between her experience and the rest of the world. So say most philosophers.

Disjunctivism rejects this widely held picture of perception and hallucination. Here is a typical statement of disjunctivism about perception:

'The disjunctive theory does not deny that there is some true description under which both the perception of a snow-covered churchyard and a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination of a churchyard can fall. It is easy to provide such a true description: both experiences are experiences which are subjectively indistinguishable from a perception of a snow-covered churchyard. Disjunctivists do not deny that such a true description is available. What they deny is that what makes

it true that these two experiences are describable in this way is the presence of the same fundamental kind of mental state in the case of perception and hallucination. In the case of the perception, what makes it true that the description applies is that the experience is a perception of the churchyard; in the hallucinatory case, what makes it true that the description applies is that the experience is a hallucination of the churchyard. What the disjunctivist rejects is what J.M. Hinton calls “the doctrine of the ‘experience’ as the common element in a given perception and an indistinguishable hallucination” (Hinton 1973: 71). The most fundamental common description of both states, then, is a merely *disjunctive* one: the experience is *either* a genuine perception of a churchyard or a mere hallucination of one. Hence the theory’s name.’ (Crane 2005)

For the disjunctivist, veridical perception of, say, a tomato is one kind of mental state, whereas hallucination of a tomato is simply another kind of mental state altogether – they are not species of a common genus. Although there are, of course, similarities between the two kinds of mental states, these similarities are not the result of there being a single kind of mental state present in both veridical perception and hallucination. Thus, for the disjunctivist, the similarities between a veridical perception and a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination are not like the similarities between one tiger and another tiger: different creatures of the same species. Nor are they like the similarities between a particular Bengal tiger and a particular Siberian tiger: different creatures of different species, but belonging to the same genus. Rather, the similarities between a veridical perception and a

hallucination are like the similarities between a tiger and a hologram of a tiger: the former is an animal of a certain genus and species, whereas the latter is not an animal at all but a fundamentally different kind of thing. There is no genus the species of which include tigers and holograms of tigers. What tigers and holograms of tigers have in common is simply that they are visually indistinguishable, at least from a certain vantage point. Similarly, the disjunctivist says, the only thing that veridical perceptions and hallucinations have in common is that they are ‘subjectively indistinguishable’. (Eventually, we’ll say more about what ‘subjective indistinguishability’ amounts to.)

Of course, this analogy, and the statement of disjunctivism quoted above, are open to many different interpretations and elaborations. Disjunctivism, as stated above, is not a very specific doctrine, since there are many different ways of understanding the claim that perception and hallucination involve ‘fundamentally different kinds’ of experience, or mental state. In this paper, I will not distinguish these various versions, since the points that I want to make apply equally well to all of the versions with which I’m familiar.

Furthermore, different philosophers have very different views about what experience is, and what it can do for us, and so the issue of whether or not disjunctivism is true will look very different to these different philosophers. What one takes to be at stake in the issue of whether or not disjunctivism is true will vary greatly, depending upon one’s other views about experience. In this paper, I will try to steer clear of the issue of what’s at stake in whether or not disjunctivism is true. The reason I will try to steer clear of this issue is not that I don’t regard it as

important. On the contrary, I regard it as very important. The reason I try to steer clear of it here is that I would like my discussion of disjunctivism to avoid presupposing one or another of these background views about experience. A necessary cost of such neutrality is that I remain silent on what I take to be a very important issue: the issue of what difference it would make if disjunctivism is true.

Although disjunctivism has won a few adherents in recent years (e.g., Hinton 1973, Snowdon 1980/81, McDowell 1982, McDowell 1994, Putnam 1999, Martin 2002, Martin 2004, Travis 2004), it is still overwhelmingly unpopular. Partly, this is because many philosophers regard the existing arguments for disjunctivism as unconvincing. And partly, it is because many philosophers are persuaded by a particular argument against disjunctivism. In this paper, I'll defend disjunctivism from this popular argument against it. I will also defend one of the current arguments for disjunctivism against a popular objection.

My aim in this paper is not to argue that disjunctivism is true, or that one of the arguments for it is sound or ultimately compelling. Rather, I aim to argue only that the disjunctivism can cogently reply to the most influential argument that's been given against disjunctivism, and can also cogently reply to a particular argument that's been given against one prominent argument for disjunctivism. If we should in the end reject disjunctivism, or reject the particular argument for disjunctivism that I will focus on, it's not for the reasons most commonly given.

## II. An Argument for Disjunctivism about Perception, and a Criticism of this Argument

One prominent argument for disjunctivism – the single pro-disjunctivist argument that I will focus on in this paper – is epistemological. McDowell states the argument this way:

‘The root idea is that one’s epistemic standing on some question cannot intelligibly be constituted, even in part, by matters blankly external to how it is with one subjectively. For how could such matters be other than beyond one’s ken? And how could matters beyond one’s ken make any difference to one’s epistemic standing? ...When someone has a fact made manifest to him, the obtaining of the fact contributes to his epistemic standing on the question. But the obtaining of the fact is precisely not blankly external to his subjectivity, as it would be if the truth about that were exhausted by the highest common factor.’ (McDowell 1982.)

McDowell’s point seems to be this: Veridical perception gives us knowledge of independently existing things, and hallucination does not. So, veridical perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does. But, so the argument goes, the only satisfactory explanation of this fact is an explanation according to which veridical perception and hallucination are *subjectively* different. What is it for veridical perception and hallucination to be *subjectively* different? I take this to amount to the following: a person who is enjoying veridical perception has *reflectively accessible epistemic reasons for belief* that are not possessed by the

person who is merely having a hallucination. It is, of course, a substantive and tricky issue what it is for something to be reflectively accessible to a subject. But we can all agree that there is some sense in which, for example, one's own conscious states are reflectively accessible to oneself. Whatever that kind of access is, let's use the phrase 'reflective access' to denote that particular kind of access – whatever its nature may be. So I take McDowell to be saying: the only satisfactory explanation of the fact that veridical perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does is an explanation according to which veridical perception provides one with different reflectively accessible reasons for belief than those provided one by hallucination. And the only explanation that involves that claim, so the argument continues, is an explanation according to which veridical perception is a fundamentally different kind of mental state than hallucination. Since the only satisfactory explanation of the fact that veridical perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does is an explanation according to which veridical perception is a fundamentally different kind of mental state than hallucination, it follows that the only satisfactory explanation of this fact implies disjunctivism about perception.

Many philosophers will resist McDowell's argument by rejecting the premise that the only satisfactory explanation of how veridical perception can put us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does is an explanation according to which veridical perception and hallucination are subjectively different. (Indeed, given my gloss of this subjective difference above – in terms of a difference in reflectively accessible reasons for belief – even such disjunctivists as Martin might resist

McDowell's epistemological premise.) These objectors might say, for instance, that the best explanation of this fact is simply this: veridical perception – unlike hallucination – is, or involves, a reliable source of true beliefs. In other words, veridical perception puts us in a better epistemic state than hallucination does, not because of any difference in the experiences involved in each, but because of some difference that's extrinsic to the experiences involved in each. So although there is a real difference between the perception-induced epistemic state and the hallucination-induced epistemic state, this is not a difference in what McDowell would call 'subjectivity'. It is not a difference in what is reflectively accessible to the subject herself. That is one reply that many philosophers would issue to McDowell's argument.

Now, I will not devote any space in this paper to evaluating the relative merits of the various explanations of the fact that perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does. This is a complicated epistemological issue well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I want to focus on a different response that many philosophers have to McDowell's argument for disjunctivism. Recall that, according to McDowell's argument, disjunctivism helps to explain the following fact: perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does. But many philosophers don't see how disjunctivism could help at all in explaining that fact. Suppose that perception is a fundamentally different kind of mental state than hallucination is. How – these philosophers would ask – could that difference possibly explain the fact that the former puts us in a better epistemic position than the latter? In fact – the objection continues – since the perception and the hallucination at issue

are, by hypothesis, subjectively indistinguishable, it's not at all clear how the former could possibly put me in a better epistemic position than the latter, except by appeal to its reliability or veridicality, something extrinsic to the experience itself. The experience is just the same *from my point of view*, the objection has it.

Crispin Wright states this objection in the following form. If veridical perception and hallucination are subjectively indistinguishable, then being in the former state cannot, Wright says, justify me in taking myself to be warranted in believing p, if being in the latter state does not equally justify me in taking myself to be warranted in believing that p. (Wright 2002, 342 – 3) More generally: if experiences E1 and E2 are subjectively indistinguishable by their possessor S, then there can be no difference between what being in E1 makes S justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing and what being in E2 makes S justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing. Whatever difference there is in the epistemic state induced in S by his being in E1 and the epistemic state induced in S by his being in E2, it's not a difference in what S is justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing.

Now, the disjunctivist might grant Wright's point about our which second-order beliefs one is justified in having, and still say that the difference between the epistemic state induced by perception and the epistemic state induced by hallucination is a difference in what first-order beliefs S is justified in holding – even if it's not a difference in what S is justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing. But, for the sake of argument, I will suppose that the disjunctivist wants to say something stronger than this. I will suppose that the disjunctivist wants to say precisely the thing that Wright claims she's not in a position to say: namely, that the

difference between the epistemic state induced by perception and the epistemic state induced by hallucination is actually a difference in what the subject is justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing.

On this interpretation, then, McDowell's argument for disjunctivism proposes an explanation for the fact that perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does, but this explanation strikes many philosophers in the way that it strikes Wright: as not being a possible explanation at all. It's not merely that McDowell's argument offers an optional explanation, an explanation that's not obviously better – perhaps even worse – than some alternative explanations. Rather, the thought goes, it's that McDowell's argument offers a merely putative explanation that clearly cannot be of any explanatory value whatsoever.

Now, I will not attempt to show that the disjunctivist offers the best, or the only satisfactory, explanation of the fact that perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does. But I will attempt to show that the disjunctivist's explanation is not open to the popular objection stated by Wright. In short, I will argue that Wright's objection is not a good objection. So, whether or not the disjunctivist's explanation is, in the end, correct, it may well actually have some explanatory value.

Before pursuing that task, I will first examine an argument that's commonly offered for the conclusion that disjunctivism is false: an argument that's sometimes called 'The argument from hallucination'. According to the argument from hallucination, perception and hallucination must be mental states of fundamentally

the same kind, and so disjunctivism about perception is false. I'll devote the next section to stating and examining the argument from hallucination.

### **III. A Common Argument Against Disjunctivism about Perception**

In this section, I will state and examine the argument from hallucination. Perhaps the most prominent recent statement of the argument is in Johnston 2004, who states the argument by appeal to the following dramatic example. I quote it in full so that we may then go on to consider various interpretations of Johnston's argument:

'You are undergoing an operation for an aneurysm in your occipital lobe. The surgeon wants feedback during the operation as to the effects of the procedure on the functioning of your visual cortex. He reduces all significant discomfort with local anaesthetic while he opens your skull. He then darkens the operating theater, takes off your blindfold, and applies electrical stimulation to a well-chosen point on your visual cortex. As a result, you hallucinate dimly illuminated spotlights in a ceiling. (You hallucinate lights on in a ceiling. As yet, you are not at all aware of the lights or the ceiling of the operating theater.) As it happens, there really are spotlights in the ceiling at precisely the places where you hallucinate lights. However, these real lights are turned off, so that the operating theater is too dark to really see anything.

...

'While maintaining the level of electrical stimulation required to make you hallucinate lights on in a ceiling, the surgeon goes on to do something a little

perverse. He turns on the spotlights in the ceiling, leaving them dim enough so that you notice no difference. You are now having what some call a 'veridical hallucination'. You are still having a hallucination for you are not yet seeing the lights on in the ceiling, the explanation being that they still play no causal role in the generation of your experience. Yet your hallucination is veridical or in a certain way true to the scene before you; there are indeed dim lights on in a ceiling in front of you.

'In the third stage of the experiment the surgeon stops stimulating your brain. You now genuinely see the dimly lit spotlights in the ceiling. From your vantage point there on the operating table these dim lights are indistinguishable from the dim lights you were hallucinating. The transition from the first stage of simple hallucination through the second stage of veridical hallucination to the third stage of veridical perception could be experientially seamless. Try as you might, you would not notice any difference, however closely you attend to your visual experience.

Of course, at the level of brain states, there will be some causal explanation for the experiential seamlessness. Whether one's brain is stimulated by the scene before one's eyes or by the direct application of electrical impulses, the effects on one's brain will be very similar in respects relevant to the causation of experience. This explanation in terms of brain states raises another explanatory question, which is our real concern. When we say that either way the effects on the brain are very similar in respects relevant to the causation of experience, we rely upon a picture according to which the differences at the level of brain states make no discernible difference at the level of experience. It is very likely that there are some intrinsic differences between

the brain processes in the two cases. The idea of such differences not making a discernible difference at the level of experience begs for a characterization of what is taking place at the level of experience. Accordingly, our question is: What kinds of things can visual experience be a relation to so that in a case of hallucination and a case of seeing there need be no difference which the subject can discern? In itself, appeal to ever so slightly different brain states cannot answer that question.'

(Johnston 2004, 122 – 3)

Johnston goes on to claim that the disjunctivist cannot answer this last question in a satisfactory way. And this, according to Johnston, is a compelling reason to reject disjunctivism. In short, Johnston claims, the disjunctivist cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of the seamlessness of the experiential series described in this example.

Now, it is crucial that we be clear about precisely what it is that the disjunctivist is here alleged to be unable to explain. Johnston describes it as the 'experiential seamlessness' present in the example, that the difference in brain states makes 'no discernible difference at the level of experience', and that there is 'no difference which the subject can discern'. Precisely how should we understand these claims?

Now, I take it that Johnston does not mean to be supposing that the surgical patient cannot *by any means* discern a difference between perceiving and hallucinating: the patient could perhaps discern this difference by simply asking the surgeon to announce when the patient is perceiving and when he is hallucinating, or he could discern the difference by looking at some electronic monitor of his brain

functions, or in various other ways. I take it that what Johnston means when he says that the surgical patient cannot discern the difference between perceiving and hallucinating is that the patient cannot discern this difference without the help of informants or instruments – in short, *without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience*. And I suppose that, when Johnston speaks of ‘experiential seamlessness’, what he means is simply (what he takes to be) the lack of anything in the subject’s experience that would, by itself, enable the subject to tell the difference between perceiving and hallucinating.

What is it to ‘tell the difference’ or ‘discern the difference’ between two things? We might reasonably assume that Johnston is using these locutions in such a way that, S’s knowing which of p or q is true is a sufficient condition for S’s being able to ‘tell the difference’ or ‘discern the difference’ between p’s being true and q’s being true. For instance, if S knows which of seeing or hallucinating is occurring in her now, then she can discern the difference between seeing and hallucinating. Moreover, I assume that if S knows which of seeing or hallucinating is occurring in her now, and she knows this without the assistance of any source of information distinct from her own thinking or experience, then she can discern the difference between seeing and hallucinating in precisely the way that Johnston is claiming she cannot discern the difference.

If this is what Johnston has in mind, then I take it that his objection to disjunctivism comes to this: the surgical patient in the example above cannot know – at least not without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – which of seeing or hallucinating he’s undergoing at any

particular moment. It follows that the surgical patient cannot ‘discern the difference’ (in the relevant sense) between seeing and hallucinating, and the disjunctivist cannot satisfactorily explain this inability on the part of the surgical patient. But some anti-disjunctivists can perfectly well explain this inability. They can say, for instance, that the surgical patient is in the very same state of mind both when he’s hallucinating and when he’s perceiving, and this is why the surgical patient cannot know which of the two he’s undergoing, without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience. So there is a fact – an epistemic fact about the surgical patient and others like him – that some anti-disjunctivists can satisfactorily explain, but that the disjunctivist cannot satisfactorily explain. That, according to Johnston, constitutes a powerful argument against disjunctivism. This is my first interpretation of Johnston’s argument against disjunctivism.

One worry about this first interpretation of Johnston’s argument is that it gives no role to the gradualness of the transition that seems so important to Johnston. What difference could it make to Johnston whether the transition between perception and hallucination is gradual? It might be suggested that what Johnston has in mind is not merely that the surgical patient cannot tell, on the basis of his experience, whether he is perceiving or hallucinating. It might be suggested that what Johnston has in mind instead is this: the change from hallucinating to perceiving is a gradual change, but this gradualness cannot be modeled by the disjunctivist, who claims that perceiving and hallucinating are fundamentally different kinds of mental events. Now, if this is Johnston’s argument, then I don’t see how it’s supposed to be compelling at all.

Consider two things that are fundamentally different in kind: say, a tiger and a hologram of a tiger. If each of those two things is composed of a great many parts, then there could be a gradual transition from one thing to the other thing by a temporal series of replacements of parts of one for parts of the other. We could replace one small part of the tiger with one small part of the hologram, and then continue this series of replacements one-by-one, and thereby make a gradual transition from the tiger to the hologram of the tiger. (We may suppose that the tiger is unconscious or paralyzed, so as to enable the replacement to proceed without effect on its behavior.) Of course, if some epistemicist view of vagueness is correct, then there will in fact be a sharp cutoff point where we no longer have a tiger, and a sharp cutoff point where we finally have a hologram, and these two cutoff points could be distinct. But from the point of view of an observer, this series of transitions would be gradual and the cut-off points would not be noticeable. So I don't see how the gradualness of the transitions from hallucinating to perceiving can play any role in Johnston's argument against the disjunctivist.

It seems to me, therefore, that the second interpretation of Johnston's argument just considered should not be the interpretation we focus on. Later on, I will consider a third interpretation, but I'll do so only after I reply to Johnston's argument, as the first interpretation represents it.

So, to sum up, here's where we've gotten so far: According to disjunctivism about perception, veridical perception and hallucination involve fundamentally

different kinds of mental states. What reason have we to accept this highly unorthodox philosophical view? The epistemological argument that I've chosen to focus on may seem particularly unpromising, as it is open to the popular objection stated by Crispin Wright. Worse yet, Johnston offers an argument which, on at least one interpretation is seemingly compelling, against disjunctivism about perception. It seems, therefore, that the prospects for such disjunctivism are bleak.

In the remainder of this paper, I'll argue that the prospects for disjunctivism about perception are in fact much brighter than they now seem. In the next section, I'll consider how the disjunctivist might easily explain the fact that Johnston (according to the first interpretation of his argument) accuses the disjunctivist of being unable to explain. And I'll then consider a third interpretation of Johnston's argument, and show that the disjunctivist can reply to the argument construed in that third way as well. Finally, I'll return to examine and criticize Wright's objection against McDowell's argument for disjunctivism.

#### **IV. Factors that Explain Ignorance, or Truthful Attributions of Ignorance**

In this section, I will consider how a disjunctivist might explain the fact that perception and hallucination are subjectively indistinguishable for Johnston's surgical patient, i.e., that the surgical patient does not know which of perception or hallucination he's undergoing at any moment in the series of surgically induced experiences. Let's begin by considering some factors that can prevent us from knowing things that we would otherwise know. As I will argue, the disjunctivist can

appeal to some such factors in order to rebut the argument from hallucination (at least as the first interpretation represents it), and also in order to defend his explanation of the fact that perception can put us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does. To see how this works, let's consider what these factors might be. We will do this by appeal to Carl Ginet's classic 'barn facades' example, as described in Goldman 1976.

Consider the following two cases:

Henry 1: Henry is driving through some farmland. He gets a clear, unobstructed look at a barn that's just a few yards from the side of the road. He sees the barn for enough time to recognize it clearly as a barn. His vision is normal, and he is alert and of sound mind. He has no reason whatsoever to suspect that it is not a barn, or to distrust his senses. On the basis of his current experience, Henry is fully confident that that is a barn.

Henry 2: This case is just like Henry 1, except this time the farmland through which Henry is driving is full of barn facades. We can suppose that Henry has not yet seen any of these barn facades, and that he has not the slightest reason to suppose that there are any barn facades around. Again, on the basis of his current experience, Henry is fully confident that that is a barn.

Now, when we think about Henry 1 on its own, we are typically inclined to think that Henry knows that that is a barn. But when we think about Henry 2 on its own, we are typically inclined to think that Henry does not know that that is a barn. And yet the truth-value of Henry's belief that that is a barn is held fixed across the two cases: the belief is true in both cases. So too is Henry's confidence.

What lessons can we learn from this pair of cases? Different philosophers have drawn different lessons. Many philosophers (we may call them ‘subject contextualists’) say that whether or not Henry knows that *that is a barn* depends on features of Henry’s context of which Henry may be unaware (e.g., whether or not there are barn facades around). Other philosophers (‘attributor contextualists’) say that whether or not we can truthfully claim that Henry knows that *that is a barn* depends on features of our context (e.g., whether or not we’re thinking about Henry 2). Some philosophers accept both of these views. And of course there are various versions of each of these views, corresponding to the different features of the subject’s context or the attributor’s context that can be identified as relevant, and corresponding to the different ways in which those features can affect (the truth-conditions of our verdicts concerning) Henry’s knowledge. I mention these various views not in order to settle on one of them, but only because I want to remind the reader of the variety of factors that might plausibly be thought to lead us truthfully to deny that Henry knows that *that is a barn*.

Notice that I have said that the subject’s epistemic status – or what we can truthfully say about the subject’s epistemic status – *depends upon* these contextual factors. I have not said that it is *constituted by* any contextual factors. This distinction between dependence and constitution is important. There are lots of ways in which something can depend upon a factor without being constituted by that factor. For instance, my thinking about epistemology depends upon my being alive. I could not think about epistemology if I were not alive. But my thinking about epistemology is not constituted by my being alive. My being alive is not that in virtue of which I

think about epistemology. Again, my eating a meal depends upon my having food available to me, but it is not constituted by my having food available to me. Not all dependence is constitutive dependence. And not all dependence of facts about a subject's epistemic status – or facts about what we attributors can truthfully say about a subject's epistemic status – upon contextual factors is constitutive dependence. Later on, we'll see why this distinction will be important to a McDowellian disjunctivist who wants to reply to Johnston's argument. But we're not in a position to see that just yet.

Now, against the background of our discussion of Henry, let's consider the following argument:

(1) Henry knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – that *that is a barn* (where Henry is using the demonstrative 'that' to refer demonstratively to the barn that he is at that moment seeing).

(2) If S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that p, and S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that p implies q, and S deduces q from p and so believes q while retaining his knowledge that p, then S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that q.

(3) Henry knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – that *that is a barn* implies *that is not a barn façade*, and deduces the latter from the former, and so believes the latter while retaining his knowledge of the former.

(4) Henry knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – that *that is not a barn façade*. (1, 2, 3)

(5) If S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that p, and S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that not-q, then S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) which of p or q is true.

(6) Henry knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – which of *that is a barn* or *that is a barn façade* is true.  
(1, 4, 5)

The argument above employs two suppositions about Henry in particular (1 and 3), and two plausible general epistemic principles (2 and 5). The argument concludes that, without relying on any sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience, Henry can know which of *that is a barn* or *that is a barn façade* is true. That's just to say, given our gloss above, that Henry can tell the difference between

that thing's being a barn and it's being a barn façade, and he can do this without relying on any source of information distinct from his own thinking or experience.

Shall we accept this conclusion? Many philosophers would, I think, reasonably refuse to accept it. But on what grounds could we reasonably refuse to accept it? A few philosophers, such as Dretske 1970, Nozick 1981, and Heller 1999, would reject the epistemic closure principle 2. But they recognize that this rejection of closure requires a good deal of argument, and many philosophers have criticized the arguments provided, and continue to find closure highly plausible. In this paper, I will not entertain the rejection of the closure premise 2.

Nor will I entertain the rejection of the general epistemic principle 5. I take 5 to be obviously true. We don't need an analysis of knowing which, or a comprehensive theory of the 'knows which' construction, in order to recognize that 5 is true.

If we accept 2 and 5, then the only way that we can escape the conclusion 6 is by refusing to grant 1 or 3. But I can see no good grounds for refusing to grant 3, so I'll restrict my attention to grounds that we might have to refuse to grant 1.

On what grounds could we reasonably refuse to grant 1? Perhaps on one or another of the grounds canvassed above, in connection with Cases 1 and 2. For instance, we could say this: the cases in which conclusion 6 seems false are precisely those cases in which Henry is prone to mistake a barn façade for a barn (perhaps because of the frequency of barn facades in the relevant landscape). They are cases like Henry 2 above. But if, in those cases, Henry is prone to mistake barn facades for barns, then, even when there happens to be a real barn before him in such a case, he does not know that that is a barn. Had his environment been more cooperative, then

he might have known that that is a barn. But if his environment is an epistemically treacherous place – as is Henry 2 – then he is prone to mistake barn facades for barns, and consequently does not know that that is a barn. That is one way that we could reject supposition 1 – at least for a certain range of cases in which conclusion 6 seems false.

Alternatively, we could resist the conclusion 6 quite generally by claiming that, when we go through the argument 1 - 6, we move from a context in which we can reasonably suppose that 1 is true to a context in which we cannot reasonably suppose that 1 is true. Henry's context does not change, and neither does Henry's epistemic situations. Rather, what changes is our context, and what words we can use to issue true descriptions of Henry's epistemic situation. These things change by virtue of our going through the argument 1 – 6. When we entertain supposition 1 on its own, we can truthfully affirm it. But by the time we've reached our conclusion 6, something or other that we've done has moved into a context in which we cannot truthfully affirm 6, or even truthfully affirm 1. Going through the argument has so changed the contents of our words that the sentences that we could truthfully assert when we set out on our argument are sentences that we can no longer truthfully assert. At least, so says the attributor contextualist, in an attempt to explain why we cannot truthfully affirm the conclusion 6. (Of course, different attributor contextualists will locate the context-shifting move, the 'sleight of mind', at different junctures.)

So we've now considered two ways to avoid the conclusion of the argument above. We could reject supposition 1 for certain cases in which we take 6 to be false. We could reject 1 for those cases on the grounds that, in those cases, Henry's

environment makes him prone to mistake a barn façade for a barn, and this proneness to error prevents Henry from knowing that that is a barn. Alternatively, we could reject supposition 1 on the grounds that there's something about going through the argument that puts us in a context in which we can truthfully deny 1. So we can offer a subject contextualist explanation of why 1 is false when Henry is in certain contexts. Or we can offer an attributor contextualist explanation of why we can truthfully deny 1 when we are in certain contexts. Either way, we can give an explanation of why we can truthfully deny 1 – why we can truthfully attribute a certain kind of ignorance to Henry.

In the next section, we'll see how this discussion of Henry can help us to reply to Johnston's argument, on our first of the two interpretations of it considered above. We'll also consider a third interpretation of Johnston's argument, and reply to it as well.

## **V. Response to Johnston**

Now that we've offered these two options – the subject contextualist option and the attributor contextualist option – for resisting the conclusion of the argument about Henry above, let's see how we might employ one or another of these options to resist the conclusion of the following analogous argument:

(1') The surgical patient knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – that *this event is a perception of*

*ceiling lights* (where the surgical patient uses the demonstrative ‘that’ to refer demonstratively to the event of his now seeing ceiling lights).<sup>1</sup>

(2’) If S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that p, and S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that p implies q, and S deduces q from p and so believes q while retaining her knowledge that p, then S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that q.

(3’) The surgical patient knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – that *this event is a perception of ceiling lights* implies that *this event is not a hallucination of ceiling lights*, and deduces the latter from the former, and so believes the latter while retaining her knowledge of the former.

(4’) The surgical patient knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – that *this event is not a hallucination of ceiling lights*. (1’, 2’, 3’)

(5’) If S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that p, and S knows (without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) that not-q, then S knows

(without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience) which of p or q is true.

(6') The surgical patient knows – without the assistance of sources of information distinct from his own thinking or experience – which of *this event is a perception of ceiling lights* or *this event is an hallucination of ceiling lights* is true. (1', 4', 5')

Note that 6', the conclusion of this argument, is incompatible with the fact that Johnston was accusing the disjunctivist of being unable to explain satisfactorily (at least as we understood Johnston's accusation), namely the fact that the surgical patient cannot know whether he's veridically perceiving or hallucinating. The argument from hallucination begins by assuming quite reasonably that 6' is false, and it then claims that the disjunctivist cannot satisfactorily explain the fact that 6' is false. But we're now in a position to see why this accusation is wrong. The disjunctivist is in a perfectly good position to explain the fact that 6' is false.

One way that she could do this is by claiming that the surgical patient's environment makes him prone to mistake a hallucination of ceiling lights for a perception of ceiling lights, and this proneness to error prevents the surgical patient from knowing that this event is a perception of ceiling lights. Just as Henry in Henry 2 is in 'barn façade country', so too is the surgical patient in 'perception façade country'. In both cases, their environments are epistemically treacherous, and render them prone to error. Such proneness to error robs them of knowledge that they would otherwise have. That is one way for the disjunctivist to explain the falsehood of 6'.

Some philosophers might protest that this route is not open to the disjunctivist, for the datum that the disjunctivist must explain is not simply the datum that Johnston adduces – namely that *the surgical patient in the scenario described* cannot know whether he is veridically perceiving or hallucinating. It is rather a different datum – namely that none of us can ever know ‘from the inside’ whether we are veridically perceiving or hallucinating, for the two events are ‘subjectively indistinguishable’. But in order for me to address this protest, I would need to understand it more fully: what is meant by saying that none of us can ever know this ‘from the inside’? If it means simply that a subject can never know by reflection alone whether she is enjoying a veridical perception or a hallucination, then this, I take it, is something that McDowell would simply deny. He would say that, under normal circumstances of veridical perception, one can simply tell *by reflection alone* that one is veridically perceiving and not hallucinating. (Of course it does not follow from this that, when one is hallucinating or even seriously prone to hallucination, one can *in those cases* tell by reflection alone whether one is veridically perceiving or hallucinating!) So the claim that one can never tell by reflection alone whether one is veridically perceiving or hallucinating cannot serve as an undefended premise in the anti-disjunctivist’s argument against McDowell: that would be to beg the question against McDowell. But then how should we understand these protests? Rather than deal with these issues in the abstract, I am now approaching what may end up being those very same issues more concretely by trying out different interpretations of Johnston’s argument against disjunctivism.

Alternatively, the disjunctivist could reject 1' on the grounds that there's something about going through the argument that puts us in a context in which, by the end of the argument, we can truthfully deny 1'. Perhaps entertaining the possibility of hallucinations puts us in a context in which we can truthfully deny 1', no matter how well situated the surgical patient might be. That is another way for the disjunctivist to explain the falsehood of 6', at least relative to the context that we put ourselves in by going through the argument above.

So the disjunctivist can offer a subject contextualist explanation of why 1' and 6' are false in the case of the surgical patient as described by Johnston. Or the disjunctivist can offer an attributor contextualist explanation of why she can truthfully deny 1' and 6' when she is in certain contexts, such as the context that she's in when she completes the argument above. Either way, the disjunctivist can give an explanation of why we can truthfully deny 1' and 6' – why she can truthfully attribute a certain kind of ignorance to the surgical patient. But, given our present understanding of Johnston's objection against disjunctivism, this is precisely what Johnston was saying that the disjunctivist was unable to explain. And so Johnston's objection (at least as we've been interpreting it) is wrong.

Now, it may be objected that the preceding contextualist responses to Johnston's argument are not open to a disjunctivist like McDowell. For McDowell recommends disjunctivism on the grounds that it offers the best – indeed the only satisfactory – explanation of why veridical perception puts us in a better epistemic position than hallucination does. But it is supposed to do so by virtue of being the only response that allows veridical perception to provide one with different reflectively accessible

reasons for belief than hallucination does. But, it will be said, what is reflectively accessible to a subject is restricted to those things that are constituted solely by factors that are, in some way, *internal to that subject*. And, it may be objected, what reflectively accessible reasons that surgical patient has cannot depend upon contextual factors. So – the objection concludes – the contextualist responses I’ve just canvassed are not open to McDowell, at least as I read him.

The problem with this objection is that it falsely assumes that, if the truth-values of our epistemic attributions *depend* upon contextual factors, this dependence must be *constitutive dependence*. But this is precisely the confusion that was exposed in the preceding section. Not all dependence is constitutive dependence. The surgical patient’s epistemic status – or the truth-values of our attributions of epistemic status – could depend upon contextual factors without being constituted by those contextual factors. It could be that the reasonableness of the surgical patient’s belief, in a particular case, that he is perceiving ceiling lights, depends upon the extent to which he is prone, in his actual surroundings, to confuse a hallucination for a perception – but this dependence is not constitutive, so we can maintain the view that veridical perception and hallucination differ in what reflectively accessible reasons for belief they provide, and we can also maintain the view that what is reflectively accessible to a subject is internal to that subject: the veridical perception and the hallucination are both of them – McDowell may allow – internal to that subject. (Of course, McDowell may wish to reject the popular view that only what is internal to a subject is reflectively accessible to a subject. But what I am pointing out here is simply that he *need not* reject it in order to claim both that there is a difference between the

reflectively accessible reasons for belief one gets from veridical perception and the reflectively accessible reasons for belief that one gets from hallucination, and also that some version of subject contextualism or attributor contextualism is true.) So long as such epistemic features are not constituted by those contextual factors, McDowell can accept the claim of dependence. Thus, unless there is an *argument*, and not a mere *assumption*, that the dependence in question is constitutive dependence, there is no obstacle to McDowell's accepting the relevance of such contextual factors to what is reflectively accessible to the subject.

In response to the argument that I've just offered against Johnston, Johnston might reply as follows. The reason that the presence of barn facades in Henry 2 robs Henry of his knowledge that that is a barn is that *barn facades and barns look alike* (at least from a certain angle). The presence of sheep facades, for instance, would not rob Henry of his knowledge that that is a barn, for sheep facades do not look like barns. Analogously, the reason that the occurrence of hallucinations robs the surgical patient of his knowledge that this event is a perception of ceiling lights is that *perceptions of ceiling lights and hallucinations of ceiling lights seem alike* to the one having them. But if perceptions and hallucinations *seem alike* to the one having them, then this can only be because they are, or involve, the very same experience. And this refutes disjunctivism.

I propose this as the third interpretation of Johnston's argument against disjunctivism: perceptions and hallucinations seem alike to the one having them, and

the disjunctivist cannot admit this, for if they seem alike to the one having them then this can only be because they are, or involve, the very same experience.

Now, whatever the merits of this argument, it's not an argument that can work against the disjunctivist. From the fact that perceptions of ceiling lights and hallucinations of ceiling lights seem alike (at least to the one having them), it doesn't follow that they are, or involve, the very same experience. If such seeming were all that there was to experience, then seeming alike would suffice for being the same experience. But why should the disjunctivist grant that such seeming is all there is to experience? Recall why it is that we appeal to such seeming in the first place: we appeal to the fact that hallucinations seem like perceptions in order to explain the fact that the frequency of hallucinations can rob the surgical patient of his knowledge that he's perceiving, when he's perceiving. Now, in order for this similarity in seeming to do this bit of explanatory work, does such similarity in seeming require sameness of experience? No. It could do this explanatory work even if there were no sameness of experience. For example, suppose that we take it to be a sufficient condition of hallucination H's seeming like perception P that all of the introspectibly detectable features of H are also introspectibly detectable features of P, and vice-versa. If all of the introspectibly detectable features of H were also introspectibly detectable features of P, and vice-versa, that would help to explain why, when one is *prone* to suffer hallucinations, one cannot know that one is perceiving, even when one happens to be perceiving. But even if all of the introspectibly detectable features of H are introspectibly detectable features of P, and vice-versa, it doesn't follow that H and P

are, or involve, the same experience. So H and P could seem alike in this sense – all of the introspectibly detectable features of one are also introspectibly detectable features of the other – without their being, or involving, the same experience. Moreover, their seeming alike could do precisely the explanatory work that the disjunctivist needs it to do without H and P being, or involving, the same experience.

Johnston might respond to this argument as follows: the fact that H and P seem alike – their sharing of introspectively detectable features (if that’s how we choose to cash out such ‘seeming alike’) – of course does not imply, but is nonetheless best explained by, the claim that they involve the same experience. But why should we accept this? Tigers and tiger-holograms look alike (i.e., share visually detectable features), but this is explained by appeal to their similar impacts on our visual machinery, not by appeal to their being the same kind of thing. Why can’t the sharing of introspectibly detectable features by H and P be equally well explained by appeal to their similar impacts on our introspective machinery? (I’m using the phrase ‘introspective machinery’ here to refer to whatever causal processes are involved in introspective awareness. We may assume that some causal processes are involved in such awareness. This assumption does not commit me to the claim that our mental states exist, or have their properties, independently of our introspective awareness of them. That claim would follow only from the conjunction of the claim that there is an introspective causal process, and the Humean claim that causes and effects are ‘distinct existences’. But I see no reason to accept the latter Humean claim.)

Finally, Johnston might protest that ‘seeming the same’ cannot amount to, or be explained by, having the same impact on our introspective machinery, for beasts that

simply lack introspective machinery might nonetheless have experiences that ‘seem the same’ in the relevant sense, i.e., are subjectively indistinguishable. This objection can be easily met: we can understand the fact that such experiences ‘seem the same’ to the beast in question in terms of what sort of impact those experiences would make on some standard-issue introspective machinery, whether or not the beast itself has the requisite machinery. Of course, we may treat different sorts of introspective machinery as standard-issue, and so end up counting different sorts of experiences as ‘seeming the same’ to the beast. Some philosophers will protest that this is to allow an objectionable indeterminacy in our description of the beast’s phenomenology. But I don’t see what evidence we have for regarding the beast’s phenomenology as truthfully describable in terms that are any more determinate than this.

In this section, we’ve seen how the disjunctivist can respond to Johnston’s argument. Johnston alleges that the disjunctivist cannot explain a certain epistemic shortcoming on the part of the surgical patient. But the disjunctivist can explain this epistemic shortcoming in any number of ways, corresponding to the ways in which epistemologists seek to explain Henry’s epistemic shortcoming concerning the presence of a barn. So much for Johnston’s argument against disjunctivism.

## **VI. Response to Wright**

Now, let’s return to Wright’s argument to the effect that the disjunctivist cannot explain how perception can put me in a better epistemic position than hallucination

can. Wright's point, recall, was this: since perceiving one's hand is subjectively indistinguishable from being a brain-in-a-vat that's being electrochemically stimulated to have experiences as of having a hand, it follows that, even when I do perceive a hand, nothing can justify me in taking myself to have a warrant for believing that I see a hand, rather than believing the weaker disjunction, either I see a hand or I am a brain-in-a-vat being electrochemically stimulated to have experiences as of a hand. And this is what McDowell is, on my interpretation, committed to denying. Now, how can the disjunctivist plausibly deny this?

To answer this question, let's consider: what makes Wright's general principle at all plausible? It seems to me that the only possible answer to this question is: reflection upon particular pairs of cases in which a subject is, in one case, perceiving, and in the other case, hallucinating or otherwise having some misleading experiential evidence. For instance, there is Johnston's surgical patient who is sometimes veridically perceiving ceiling lights and is sometimes hallucinating ceiling lights. It seems that, despite the changes in the surgical patient's perceptual state, there is no change in what he is justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing. Such a case may seem to lend support to Wright's general principle, and thus lend support to Wright's argument against the epistemological argument for disjunctivism.

Now, what would the disjunctivist say about such cases? We've already seen that the disjunctivist can explain the subjective indistinguishability of perception and hallucination by appeal to features of the context of the perceiver, or features of the context of the epistemic appraisal, or both. But, no matter which of these factors the disjunctivist appeals to in explaining the subjective indistinguishability of perception

and hallucination, it is open to the disjunctivist to appeal to those very same factors to explain our intuitions about what perceivers or hallucinators are justified in taking themselves to be warranted in believing. I'll illustrate this by appeal to the following pair of cases:

Moore 1: G.E. Moore holds up a hand, gets an unobstructed view of it, sees it, is fully confident that he sees it, is alert and of sound mind, and thinks 'I see a hand'.

Moore 2: Just like Moore 1, except that Moore is surrounded by brains-in-vats who are being electrochemically stimulated to have experiences as of being G.E. Moore, and each of whom thinks that it is G.E. Moore seeing his hands.

When we think about Moore 1 on its own, and apart from any consideration of skeptical scenarios, it seems quite plausible to say that Moore is justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing that he has hands. I frequently take myself to be warranted in believing that I have hands. For instance, when I am confident in the success of my plans to hammer some nails into the wall in order to hang a picture, and you challenge my confidence by saying 'how can you be so sure that you will succeed?', I will claim that your challenge is unreasonable, and that I am entirely warranted in being sure that my plans will succeed. But for me to be warranted in being sure that my plans will succeed, I must be warranted in being sure that I have hands – and I know this. So I take myself to be so warranted, and I am typically justified in taking myself to be so warranted.

But when we think about Moore 2, it seems quite implausible to say that Moore (who still veridically perceives his hands) is so justified. What generates the difference? Again, the disjunctivist can appeal to features of Moore's own context in Moore 1 and Moore 2 to explain this difference. Whatever contextual factors operate in Henry 2 to deprive Henry of knowledge that that is a barn, those same factors operate in Moore 2 to prevent Moore from being justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing that he has hands. Thus, by reflection on a case like Moore 2, we may be led to say – truthfully – that Moore's veridically perceiving his hands does not make him justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing that he has hands. But the correctness of this verdict about Moore in Moore 2 need not show that, in Moore 1, Moore's veridically perceiving his hands does not make him justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing that he has hands. Even if Moore's perception in Moore 2 does not render him so justified, it doesn't follow that Moore's perception in Moore 1 does not render him so justified.

In fact, the disjunctivist can grant Wright even more than this. The disjunctivist can even allow that, after thinking about Moore 2, we cannot truthfully admit even that Moore's perception in Moore 1 renders him justified in taking himself to be warranted in believing that he's seeing his hand. But the disjunctivist can allow this without giving up disjunctivism. She can do this by claiming that, when we reflect upon Moore 2, we alter our own context of appraisal, and put ourselves in a context in which we cannot truthfully attribute such justification to Moore in Moore 1. But it doesn't follow from this that we can never truthfully attribute such justification to Moore in Moore 1.

In short, the disjunctivist can appeal either to subject contextualism or to attributor contextualism in order to grant the truth of the intuitive judgments that seem to support Wright's general principle. But the disjunctivist can grant these intuitions without granting Wright's general principle, or Wright's argument against McDowell. The disjunctivist can claim that she is able to explain how perception sometimes – and hallucination never – makes one justified in taking oneself to be warranted in believing that one is perceiving. The disjunctivist can offer such an explanation consistently with allowing that perception sometimes does not make one so justified. And she can offer such an explanation consistently with allowing that, when we attributors entertain skeptical counterpossibilities, then we cannot truthfully ascribe such justification even to someone who does perceive. So once again, disjunctivism can accommodate the intuitions that motivate its critics, and it can do so by appeal to some variety of subject contextualism or attributor contextualism. And such contextualisms are in no way incompatible with the view that epistemic status is not constituted by contextual factors.

This is, of course, not to say, let alone show, that epistemic status is *not* constituted by contextual factors. But again, I am not attempting to show that disjunctivism is true, only that Johnston's argument against disjunctivism, and Wright's argument against McDowell's argument for disjunctivism, are neither of them telling. There may be problems with disjunctivism, or with McDowell's argument for it, but those problems have not yet been exposed by either Johnston or Wright.

## **VII. Conclusion**

I have argued that Johnston's argument from hallucination does not tell against disjunctivism. I have also argued that the epistemological argument for disjunctivism is not subject to the objection that Wright levels against it. Maybe disjunctivism is true, and maybe it isn't. Maybe it provides the best explanation of the epistemic superiority of perception over hallucination, and maybe it doesn't. In this paper, I have not staked out a position on either of these issues, nor have I staked out a position on why they matter. I hope to have shown only that disjunctivism's dialectical position has been greatly underestimated.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I assume that seeings are events. If they are states instead, then I invite the reader to substitute "state" wherever I have "event". The difference is immaterial to the argument in the text.

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