Comments on Benj Hellie's "There it is"

Heather Logue

First of all, I'd like to thank Benj for his paper—he's given us a lot to think about in the way of a big picture of what's going on with perceptual justification, as well as with respect to the details of its implementation. It was rewarding to think through it all! I have one concern I'd like to raise about the big picture, which I think can be addressed by altering one of the details. But I'll begin by summarizing what I take Benj's account to be, so that if my concern stems from getting something wrong somewhere he'll be able to point to where that is.

His first pass at an account of perceptual justification by veridical perception can be broken down into three stages. They go something like this:

Stage 1: Veridical perception involves acceptance of a sentence of a certain kind. For example, when Sam veridically perceives a red widget, she accepts the sentence '$\mathscr{R}$'. This sentence is in a "Lagadonian" language—roughly speaking, it is composed of what it refers to. It expresses the same content as the English sentence 'Sam is looking at the red color of a widget', and is composed of Sam and the property of looking at the red color of a widget. Given that the sentence is composed of that which makes it true, it's guaranteed to be true whenever it's "uttered". Although veridical perception involves acceptance of Lagadonian sentences, belief does not (it involves acceptance of sentences in English, or Swahili, or…etc.).

(Question about stage 1: Why is the Lagadonian sentence about Sam's *looking* at the red widget, as opposed to just the red widget? If the ultimate goal is to give an account of the justification of one's perceptually-based beliefs about one's environment, the latter would seem to do just as well—is the detour through acceptance of a sentence about *one's experience* really necessary? Moreover, one might think that the idea that the sentence is about *the widget* is even friendlier to direct realism…)

Stage 2: When Sam has her veridical perception of a red widget, she regards '$\mathscr{R}$' as equivalent to 'I am looking at the red color of a widget'. The second sentence expresses the same content as the Lagadonian perceptual sentence, but is one she could accept in having a belief.

Stage 3: If accepting an "articulate" sentence (i.e., a sentence the acceptance of which could underlie belief) is required for the preservation of the coherence of one's stream of consciousness, then one is justified in believing that sentence's content. Since Sam regards '$\mathscr{R}$' as equivalent to 'I am looking at the red color of a widget', she would be in an incoherent state if she were to accept the former but not accept the latter. Hence, Sam is justified in believing that she is looking at the red color of a widget.

(I take it that that the story about perceptual justification doesn't end here. Benj mentions that beliefs formed in response to perceptual states are treated by the subject as *evidence* (p. 52)—presumably, for propositions about one's environment. And I take it that Sam's belief that she is looking at the red color of a widget justifies the belief that there is a red widget before her because she couldn't be looking at the red color of a widget unless there was a red widget there for her to be looking at. But since this part of the story doesn't get much attention, I'm not entirely sure how it is supposed to go.)

This account is just a first pass, as we have to modify stage 2 in order to accommodate the possibility of false perceptual belief. Here's why stage 2 as it stands won't do:

1. '$\mathscr{R}$' is true when accepted by Sam at *t*.
2. If two sentences are regarded as equivalent by Sam at *t*, they have the same truth-value (since one regards two sentences as equivalent only if they express the same content (p. 40)).
3. Sam regards '$\mathscr{R}$' as equivalent to 'I am looking at the red color of a widget' at *t*.
4. Hence, 'I am looking at the red color of a widget' is true when regarded as equivalent with '$\mathscr{R}$' by Sam at *t*.

The upshot is that Sam's perceptual beliefs are bound to be true, which is (unfortunately for Sam) not the case. This stems from the fact that, in the account as it was initially laid out, Sam was portrayed as having an "evidential policy" of regarding '$\mathscr{R}$' and 'I am looking at the red color of a widget' as equivalent come what may. But given that perceptual experience can lead her astray, her evidential policy needs to be more complicated:

A. Regard '$\mathscr{R}$' and 'I am looking at the red color of a widget' as equivalent *if* I am looking.
B. Regard '$\mathscr{R}_\partial$' and '?' as equivalent *if* I am dreaming.

'$\mathscr{R}_\partial$' is the sentence that Sam would accept if she were dreaming. (It can't be the same sentence she would accept if she were looking, as that's a Lagadonian sentence partially composed of her instantiating the property of looking—which she doesn't if she's *dreaming*.) '?' stands for whatever sentence a direct realist should say Sam regards as equivalent to '$\mathscr{R}_\partial$' when dreaming.

The initial evidential policy generated the false prediction that Sam's perceptual beliefs cannot be false. This more complicated evidential policy is an improvement in that it generates true predictions about what Sam should do when her beliefs about whether she's dreaming or looking are true. So, for example, if she's looking, she should regard '$\mathscr{R}$' and 'I am looking at the red color of a widget' as equivalent. And if she's dreaming, she should regard '$\mathscr{R}_\partial$' and '?' as equivalent. However, the story doesn't tell us what Sam should do if she falsely believes that she's looking or falsely believes that she's dreaming. For Sam *cannot* regard '$\mathscr{R}$' and 'I am looking at the red color of a widget' as equivalent if she's *dreaming*, since she lacks the requisite materials to construct the

Lagadonian sentence '$\mathscr{R}$' in such a case (so to speak). (The same is true of the case in which she falsely believes that she's dreaming, *mutatis mutandis*.)

One might try to complicate the evidential policy in order to cover such cases, but Benj thinks that would be a futile endeavor. For given how he's set things up, Sam's perspective is *incoherent* in these "mismatch" cases: "…the perceptual aspects of [her] perspective affirm a certain hypothesis; the doxastic aspects affirm a certain incompatible hypothesis" (p. 59). For example, when Sam is dreaming but believes that she is looking, in her acceptance of '$\mathscr{R}$' she (perceptually) affirms that she is looking, but in her acceptance of 'I am dreaming of the red color of a widget' she (doxastically) affirms that she is dreaming. Furthermore, since Sam's perspective is incoherent, Benj suggests that her doxastic response to her perceptual state falls outside the scope of rational explanation: "all bets are off from the point of view of intentional psychology (p. 59)". Thus, in a sense, the question of its justification doesn't even arise. The thought is something like this: if one is in a mismatch case, one's perceptual belief is akin to a belief formed as a result of someone tinkering with your brain or clonking you on the head. It's not the sort of thing that's justified or unjustified; it just *is*, and the only kind of explanation in order is causal, not rational. In short, provided that Sam follows the conditional evidential policy outlined in (A) and (B) above, in the "match" cases she'll have justified perceptual beliefs. The perceptual beliefs she finds herself with in the mismatch cases, on the other hand, don't admit of justification at all.

I find it difficult to accept this conclusion about the mismatch cases. For example, if one believes that one is dreaming even though one's looking, typically one will *have a reason* for believing this. Perhaps one has been told by a trusted source that one's been slipped a sleeping pill that generates very vivid dreams as a side effect. Of course, one might cultivate the belief that one is dreaming on a whim. In that case, we'd say that this belief is unjustified, and that any beliefs based on it are unjustified. Nevertheless, he point remains that one's belief that one is dreaming *can* be justified in a mismatch case—but the account on offer yields the opposite prediction.

Rather than accept that this sort of belief doesn't admit of justification, I'm inclined to suspect that something has gone awry somewhere in the account. A suspicious assumption that seems to be lurking in the background is the following: the sentences one accepts in having a perceptual experience and a perceptual belief are *about one's perceptual states* (i.e., about whether one is really looking or just dreaming). But suppose we say that the sentence Sam accepts when she's veridically perceiving a red widget expresses the content that *there is a red widget before her*, and that the sentence underlying her immediate perceptual belief is something like '*there is a red widget before me*'. There is, of course, no incompatibility between there being a red widget before Sam and Sam dreaming of a red widget. So there's no *incoherence* in perceptually affirming the proposition that there is a red widget before her, doxastically affirming the proposition that there is a red widget before her, while also doxastically affirming the proposition that she's dreaming of a red widget. (Sam will presumably withdraw her doxastic affirmation of the proposition that there is a red widget before her in light of testimony that led her to doxastically affirm the proposition that she's dreaming—

provided that she recognizes that the move from perceptual to doxastic affirmation isn't legitimate if she's dreaming.) Of course, this way of avoiding incoherence requires saying that perceptual affirmations and the doxastic affirmations that immediately issue from them concern one's environment rather than one's perceptual state. So my question for Benj is: why *not* say this? Is the thought that once we accept that perceptual beliefs in mismatch cases can be justified, a direct realist theory of perceptual justification cannot get off the ground? Or is the worry that we cannot specify what an utterance of a Lagadonian sentence concerning one's environment would consist in? I'm not too troubled by either of these issues—but if Benj is, perhaps we can continue the discussion in the ensuing comments!