Comments on Schwenkler's "Vision, Self-Location, and the Phenomenology of the 'Point of View"'

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Introduction

Can the spatial content of visual experience suffice to represent the location of the perceiver, as Cassam (1997: 52-53) and Peacocke (1999: 264) think? Or does visual experience lack such self-locating contents, as Campbell (2002) argues? Aligning himself with the former camp, Schwenkler's distinctive contribution to this debate is to provide an *argument* that some visual experiences have self-locating contents, indeed that "there are cases where there is no phenomenologically adequate way to describe an experience without attributing to [visual experience] a self-locating content" (p. 7). I'll first gloss Schwenkler's Self-Location Thesis and then summarize his argument for it, so that if my questions or comments stem from misunderstanding his view he will be able to pinpoint where I go astray.

The Self-Location Thesis

The Self-Location Thesis states that "simply in virtue of its perspectival character, visual experience can include the location of the perceiver among its face value contents" (p. 4). Schwenkler's conception of visual experience is more fine-grained than the deliverances of the optic flow and concerns how things *look* (p. 13-14). For example, different aspects of visually ambiguous figures count as different visual experiences. In speaking of that content which is 'simply in virtue of its perspectival character', Schwenkler isn't disallowing the cognitive penetration of visual experience (see Siegel (2010a), Macpherson

(2012)). Rather, he means that visual experience can be self-locating even when the self is completely out of view (p. 4). As for the 'face value' contents of visual experience, I take it that Schwenkler means the state of affairs represented by visual experience as determined by naive introspection of visual experience – or so I guess.

Schwenkler's argument

How does Schwenkler argue for the claim that some visual experiences have self-locating contents? He deploys the *method of phenomenal contrast* (developed by Siegel (2010b)) which takes as input a *target hypothesis* about the contents of experience and aims to deliver a yes/no verdict on the hypothesis. In following the method, we first describe a *target experience* which is a plausible candidate for having the hypothesized content, and then describe a *contrasting experience* which plausibly lacks the hypothesized content. These experiences differ phenomenally. What explains that difference? If the contents specified by the target hypothesis best explains the phenomenal contrast, that vindicates the claim that visual experience can represent such contents.

Schwenkler's target hypothesis is that "visual experience can include the location of the perceiver among its face value contents." (p. 4). In Schwenkler's target experience a perceiver sits stationary in the middle of a rotating drum whose interior surface is painted with vertical stripes. The perceiver has a vection illusion that they are spinning in a direction opposite to the rotation of the drum, which is erroneously perceived as stationary (the felt spin is so powerful they can become dizzy and nauseous!). Schwenkler contends that the face value contents of this experience includes 'I am spinning'. Schwenkler calls the (illusory) target experience "**I**". In the contrasting experience, the drum rotates as before, but the perceiver's visual experience correctly represents the drum as rotating and the perceiver as stationary. Schwenkler calls the (veridical) contrasting experience "**V**". What's the best explanation for the phenomenal contrast between **I** and **V**? Schwenkler argues that the target hypothesis must be part of what explains the phenomenal contrast between them. We might put the point this way: because the contents of visual experience explicitly includes the location of the perceiver among its face value contents, it 'centers'

visual experience to a time, place, and individual, thereby allowing a sufficiently fine-grained distinction between a perceived change in the properties of the perceiver verses properties of the scene. But the target hypothesis has competition from a view he dubs the *Minimal View*.

What is the Minimal View? Characterizing it requires distinguishing relational from monadic egocentric predicates, following Campbell (2002: 184). The former are explicitly dyadic relations ('x is to my left'), the latter are monadic ('x is to the right'). The Minimal View is the conjunction of a positive and a negative thesis. The positive thesis is that the spatial contents of visual experience only represents monadic properties like 'x is to the right', etc. The negative thesis is that the spatial contents of visual experience cannot suffice to represent the location of the perceiver. Schwenkler attributes the Minimal View to Campbell (2002) and Perry (1986), and would presumably do so to Brewer (1992) too. (A quibble: Schwenkler seems to think that in denying explicitly self-locating contents to visual experience, proponents of the Minimal View *must* view the self-locating judgments ensuing from such contents as involving an *inference*, "...if we insist, with the Minimal View, that self-locating judgments are always drawn only by inference from visual experiences whose face value contents are entirely non-self-locating" (p. 19; also see p. 6). But proponents of the Minimal View hold that self-locating judgments are representationally independent of visual experience, and as Peacocke (1999: 268) argues, while the content of the latter 'epistemically implies' the content of the former the transition between them should not be construed as an inference (see Peacocke (1999: 277)). This renders the Minimal View rather more plausible.)

Do monadic spatial predicates suffice to explain how **I** contrasts phenomenally from **V**? Schwenkler argues that they don't: in both experiences a point on the interior surface of the drum sequentially looks 'to the right', 'straight ahead', and finally 'to the left'. Thus such monadic predicates don't suffice to capture the fact that in **I** the experience represents the perceiver as rotating whereas in **V** it represents the drum as rotating.

The Minimal View could hold that **I** differs from **V** thanks to the contribution of a non-visual modality. Schwenkler's response is that if such a contribution makes a

difference to how things look 'in some strict sense', the difference is properly visual. But surely, presses the objector, the experiences differ kinesthetically – why suppose a further visual difference? In response, contrast two cases both featuring a person's voice growing fainter – in one, the person synchronously recedes from view while in the other they appear stationary. The former experience is more vivid because it exhibits a certain 'cross-modal unity': vision and audition work in concert. Analogously, if only kinesthetic sensations contributed to the feeling that one's body was in motion, then the experience would be less vivid than if there were also a distinctly visual contribution. Hence Schwenkler concludes it isn't reasonable to think that a non-visual modality suffices to explain how **I** differs from **V**. (Doesn't this response beg the question against the Minimal View? The objector can grant Schwenkler's counterfactual: the illusion would be *even more* powerful if there were a distinctly visual contribution, but the actual difference is purely kinesthetic. The vividness of the vection illusion, by the objector's lights, is purely a function of a kinesthetic contribution. How has Schwenkler show otherwise?)

Schwenkler offers the Minimal View another tack by appealing to a purely qualitative non-representational features of visual experience. For example, the regions and features of the visual field that are the referents of primed predicates, introduced by Peacocke (1983: 20). But Schwenkler thinks it is clear that the spatial regions and features captured by Peacocke's 'imagined interposed plane' would be the same in both **I** and **V**.

Partisans of the Minimal View might now argue that visual experience does not explicitly represent that 'I am spinning' or that 'I am stationary' but rather turn to demonstratives such as *this body* to mark what it is that is spinning or stationary. But, Schwenkler argues, such demonstratives won't capture the phenomenal difference between *my* spinning body and somebody else's. (I don't follow Schwenkler's reasoning here. Why don't tokenings of 'that body' towards spatially distinct individuals suffice to distinguish the case of *my* body spinning from anothers? Schwenkler objects that "...that difference is not exhibited, as it were, simply by citing demonstrative contents in this very generic way" (p. 18). Perhaps Schwenkler means that demonstratives *inadequately* distinguish the cases by failing to capture the fact that only one of the demonstrated bodies is *my*

body. But the Minimal View would presumably reject such an explanatory demand on the contents of visual experience: the relevant phenomenology isn't a product of *visual* contents.)

Lastly, Schwenkler considers whether the Minimal View can appeal to the origin of the visual reference frame or the point of view as a proxy for self-locating contents. The idea is that the visual experience represents the point of view, which is essentially that of the perceiver. Schwenkler thinks this proposal confuses a property of the visual representation with a property of what is visually represented: that visual experience has a point of view is a property of the visual representation, but it is not itself part of what is represented. Thus the Minimal View in all its guises fails and the target hypothesis is vindicated.

I am sympathetic to Schwenkler's powerful argument, which invites extension to other modalities (see Vljame (2009) for some suggestive evidence from audition) and may even have the resources to tell Dennett (1978/1981) where he is! But developing and deploying Schwenkler's argument to solve longstanding puzzles is not my privilege as a commentator. Instead, I turn finally to sketching another proposal on behalf of the Minimal View, not so much as to endorse it but as to use it to probe Schwenkler's own view.

First person indexicality: explicit vs. unarticulated

Schwenkler argues that defending the Minimal View requires "[finding] a way to characterize [**I** and **V**] adequately without attributing to any of them *explicitly* first-personal contents involving the apparently changing (or unchanging) location of the self [my italics]" (p. 12; also see p. 17). How important is Schwenkler's requirement that the content be *explicitly* first-personal?

Perry (1986; 1990; 1998; 2011) provides an account of the perceptual judgment "There is an apple there" which while lacking an explicit representation of a first-person indexical at the level of visual content or judgment nevertheless concerns a fixed unarticulated object: oneself. Now suppose that the perceptual judgment is 'I am in front of a door'. Why can't this too lack an explicit representation of a first-person indexical at the level of

visual content, while nevertheless articulating the object in the judgment? The thought is that the object – oneself – is unarticulated at the level of visual contents in both cases because the same object always occupies one of the arguments of the n-ary perceptual relation, so we don't need to track its occupant (see Perry (1998: 87)). Because the self is an unarticulated constituent of visual experience, it seems misleading to characterize this position as completely silent on self-location, even though it falls short of the Self-Locating Thesis. Is there reason to think that this position lacks the resources to distinguish **I** from **V**? And if it can explain how they differ, does it 'screen-off' the explanatory role of explicitly first-personal contents?

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