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HOW MUCH DO WE LEARN ABOUT HALLUCINATIONS FROM THOUGHT-EXPERIMENTS?

Introduction

Hallucination is mostly treated as a mental state opposite to veridical perception. According to a common-sense view we usually think about hallucination as something different from illusion which is, in turn, any kind of perceptual error and misperceptions. Our basic intuition is that illusion is directed towards empirical object, though it somehow misrepresents it; while hallucination has no corresponding object it is about even though it seems to refer us to one. Consequently, here lies the true danger of having hallucinations — seeing things that are not really out there, which may lead to incorrect beliefs in hallucinated, actually non-existing object — delusions. Hallucinations are, then, not delusions, but they may provoke us to develop them (especially when hallucinations are persistent and obtrusive).

The phenomenon of hallucination has entered the philosophical discourse as a case of illusive and deceptive perception. In this context hallucination is usually placed among various perceptual disturbances that are supposed to exhibit limitations and weaknesses of our senses, or even to prove that perceptually grounded beliefs cannot account for knowledge. Originally, then, cases of hallucination (along with instances of illusion) have served as examples in epistemological disputes about the validity of knowledge based on perceptual beliefs.

Apart from this primary epistemological concern, the subject of hallucination is brought into play within ontological investigations of perception itself. Namely, the case of hallucination is used while addressing the matter of nature of perception (whether it has or lacks intentionality) and while determining the nature of object of perception. The possibility of hallucination is considered to be a challenge for

theories of perception, such as the direct (naïve) realism which assumes that perception is an immediate contact with the mind-independent objects and properties of the external world. It is also a tough nut to crack for contemporary externalism about experience which assumes the transparency of experience — the thesis stating that the content of experience is always something other than the experience itself (something ontologically independent from the experience)¹.

The purpose of this study is to work on the so-called argument from hallucination presented in the contemporary philosophical literature. The analysis of the argument will focus on elucidation and investigation of philosophical assumptions that are fundamental for the structure of this argument. Namely, I intend to raise following matters: (a) the semantic relationship between “hallucination” and “perception” which assumes the priority of the phenomenon of perception in discussions upon the phenomenon of hallucination; (b) the alleged qualitative indistinguishability of perception and hallucination; (c) the general conclusions about the nature of hallucination present in the argument from hallucination. The final part of the paper will be devoted to discussion upon the legitimacy of philosophical theses concerning the phenomenon of hallucination.

Argument from hallucination as a thought-experiment

The content of the argument from hallucination could be presented as follows²:

1. Suppose that Joanna sees some red and round. But there is nothing red and round before her; there is no mind-independent

1 In this context the examples of hallucinatory experiences are used not only within the discussion about the nature of perception, but also within more general disputes concerning the structure of consciousness, the nature of its content (i.e., internalism-externalism debate), and the problem of qualia.

2 Although there are many formulations of the argument from hallucination, I decided to rest upon the one taken from Harman (1990) and introduce some modifications within it (since Harman’s intention was rather to give an account of the general idea standing behind both the argument from hallucination and the argument from illusion). I have chosen Harman’s formulation, because it explicitly presents the argument in the form of thought-experiment.

object that would possess the qualities of redness and roundness. Thus, Joanna takes her experience to be a veridical perception, but in fact she undergoes the experience of hallucination.

2. So, the red and round Joanna sees is not external to her. Therefore, it must be *internal* or/and *mental*.
3. It is possible that hallucinatory experience can be qualitatively indistinguishable from veridical perception for a perceiver.
4. In all cases of perception Joanna is directly aware of something mental and inner. Consequently, the conception of perceptual experience treating perception as intentional relation between a perceiver and external, mind-independent objects cannot be correct.

This presentation of an argument has a form of thought-experiment, as it involves a characterization of hypothetical situation, a merely possible scenario, rather than it refers to real cases of hallucinatory occurrences³. It is thought that carrying on the philosophical reflection in this manner frees philosophers from requirement of referring to the scientific data which are the empirical reports of actual instances of hallucinations. Thus, the variety and richness of hallucinatory experiences remains outside philosophical interest, since its purpose is to deal with the most extreme scenario as possible⁴. Presumably, this strategy enables the philosophical reflection to deal with the *a priori* statements concerning the general nature of perception and hallucination⁵.

As Vega-Encabo (2010) correctly noticed, the argument from hallucination consists of two steps. The first step is concerned with the ontology of hallucination, and the second refers to the ontological consequences for perception derived from the hallucinatory case. More

3 The reconstruction of the argument from hallucination done by Robinson is traditionally considered to be the first and classical version of the argument (see Robinson 1994, 87f).

4 That is, the situation where the perceiver mistakes a hallucinatory experience for a perception.

5 Although thought-experiments are considered by and large an appropriate part of philosophical methodology, it remains a matter of controversy whether empirical findings should be included while constructing thought-experiments.

specifically, the first part of the argument (1–2) familiarizes us with the phenomenological facts about hallucinatory experiences, which are: having a phenomenal (sensual) character, being of non-relational kind, and being subjectively indiscriminable from veridical perception. The second part (3–4), in turn, involves a transition of consequences about hallucination to perceptual experience by assuming that states of hallucination belong to the category of perceptual states⁶. This transition is considered legitimate due to the possible phenomenological indistinguishability⁷ of hallucination and perception (3). The conclusion of the argument (4) states that perceptual experience reveals directly the content of our minds⁸, and only indirectly provides (if it does at all) contact with the mind-independent reality.

Moreover, the assumption that hallucinations can be subjectively indistinguishably from veridical perceptions (as Joanna takes her hallucinatory experience for a perceptual one) is the core of the argument. It is what *de facto* makes the argument valid and what posits the requirement upon every theory of perception to account for hallucinatory cases⁹.

The ontological theses and consequences of the argument

The phenomenological indistinguishability of hallucination and perception

The argument from hallucinations takes certain philosophical

6 As a matter of fact, they are certain kind of non-veridical perceptual states.

7 The terms “phenomenological” and “subjective” will be used interchangeably in the paper. They will refer to way how hallucinatory and perceptual experience are from the first-person perspective.

8 This standpoint is, in fact, the central thesis of the proponents of indirect realism about perception, and internalist about mental content, or sense-data theory. Because of their mutual agreement on the conclusion of the argument from hallucination, Johnston (2004) proposes to give them a common name “conjunctivism”.

9 In philosophical literature we may find many ways of dealing with the argument from hallucinations, such as the so-called adverbial theory and various versions disjunctivism. Since the detailed presentation of those proposals would be a departure from our main topic, for further reading see e.g., Crane (2005) and a compilation by Byrne and Logue (2009).

assumptions for granted. The most crucial one concerns the relation of hallucination and perception. Hallucinatory experience is a type of perceptual experience, but the one of non-veridical nature which, in addition, gives us an impression that when we are hallucinating we are actually perceiving. This relation between perceptual and hallucinatory experiences is also clearly visible in the psychological and psychiatric literature. For instance, the American Psychiatric Association defines “hallucination” as:

A sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ (1994, 767).

This definition (and others as well¹⁰) stresses the semantic dependence of the concept of hallucination from the concept of perception. This semantic dependence means that the concept of hallucination is defined in reference to the concept of perception, and it is subsequently specified in terms of being opposite to true and veridical, or directly in terms of falsehood, mistake or deception. Thus, it is quite common to encounter understanding of hallucination as a “false sensory perception”¹¹.

Definitions of hallucination comprise also the assumption of phenomenological indistinguishability of hallucinatory and perceptual experience. This phenomenological feature was stressed by philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers (1963/1997) in his *General Psychopathology*, where he argued that from the subjective perspective hallucination resembles perception rather than imagery. By doing this comparison Jaspers listed features that, in his opinion, are shared both by perception and hallucination, and which imagery lacks. These common phenomenological features are:

- (a) the sensory character;
- (b) the apparent mind independence;
- (c) the impression of existence of the objects and properties presented;

10 For the extensive review of definitions see *The Dictionary of Hallucinations* by Blom (2010).

11 For instance, see one of the older versions of *Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III-R; APA, 1987, 398).

- (d) the involuntariness of experience;
- (e) the sense of reality (Jaspers, 1963/1997, 69).

Moreover, Jaspers stressed that these phenomenological characteristics are to be treated as the criteria of hallucinations. If certain experience lacks at least one them, the experience is to be considered as an instance of *pseudohallucination*¹², and cannot be classified as a hallucination proper.

Jaspers insisted that all the phenomenological criteria of genuine hallucination are the same as the phenomenological characteristics of veridical perception. In the words of contemporary language of analytical philosophy of mind, one could say that hallucination and perception are experiences sharing the same phenomenal character. In the argument from hallucination the commonality of phenomenological features (the sameness of phenomenal character) is, then, something what is assumed and taken as a ground for phenomenological indistinguishability. The identity of the phenomenological features of hallucination and perception is also the substantial reason for considering hallucinations as kind of perceptual experiences, and it is *ipso facto* a basis of the argument from hallucination.

Hallucination as a perception with or without reference?

A common philosophical view on perception (and on conscious experience in general) is that perceptual states are intentional. Despite the differences in the understandings of the notion of intentionality between the continental phenomenological movement and the analytical tradition, the idea that perceptual experience has a character of relation between subject and object is something both sides would accept.

The essential difference between perception and hallucination is that the former has the empirical object of its intention while the latter is

12 This term was not invented by Jaspers, but taken from works of Russian physician Victor Kandinsky. Kandinsky used the notion of pseudohallucination in order to describe the phenomena lying between imagery and hallucination, which he allegedly were experiencing himself and did not consider as symptoms of psychopathology (Sanati 2012, Blom 2010). Nowadays, the concept has been a subject of criticism due to its ambiguity, and the terms such as hallucinatory-like experiences is preferred instead.

characterized by the absence of corresponding empirical object. The absence of empirical object is what defines hallucination and what begs a question whether hallucinatory experience is intentional. However, if perception is essentially intentional and hallucination is a kind of perception, then hallucination should also be considered as intentional. But, in the light of the understanding hallucination as an experience of perceptual character that differs itself from perception by lacking a perceived object, we must either assume that the intentionality of hallucination is of different kind from the intentionality of perception, or agree that perception is also not intentional.

Moreover, the approval of the intentionality of hallucination is controversial for philosophers even if it does not affect the nature of perception¹³. It seems so, because by allowing for the intentionality of hallucinatory experience, one would be either committed to the possibility of non-existing objects, or forced to accept internal mental objects (and properties), or the concept of existence would be coerced into expanding so that “existence” would not merely mean “physical existence”.

Philosophical assumptions of the argument from hallucination — a discussion

Because of these undesirable consequences there are plenty of proposals rejecting the idea that hallucination is a kind of perception (e.g., Austin 1964, Byrne and Logue 2009)¹⁴. For instance, Austin (1964) stresses that by using expressions such as “false perception” we make a category mistake that relies upon employing the categories from the domain of judgement onto the domain of experience. Accordingly, perception (and any other sort of experience) is never false, though it may provoke false beliefs.

13 I refer here to the fact concerning the “true” reference of perceptual experience, which was originally to be proved by the argument from hallucination, that is the internal and/or mind-dependent objects.

14 Interestingly, when we focus on the etymology of the term “hallucination”, we find little evidence of its alleged perceptual connotations, since the term comes from the Latin word *halucinari* (*alucinari*) meaning wandering mentally, day-dreaming, or being absent-minded. It also has roots in Greek verb *aluein* which means to wander; to be distraught, upset or outrageous (see Blom 2010, 219).

Within the phenomenological tradition similar idea was expressed by Merleau-Ponty who also insisted that “false perceptions are not genuine perceptions at all” (1962, 301). In addition, he stressed that when we approach the experience from its phenomenological aspect, categories of truthfulness or falsehood lose their relevance:

If myths, dreams and illusion are to be possible, the apparent and the real must remain ambiguous in the subject as in the object. It has often been said that consciousness, by definition, admits of no separation of appearance and reality, and by this we are to understand that, in our knowledge of ourselves, appearance is reality: if I think I see or feel, I indubitably see or feel, whatever may be true of the external object. Here reality appears in its entirety, real being and appearance are one, and there is no reality other than the appearance. If this is true, there is no possibility that illusion and perception should have the same appearance, that my illusions should be perceptions with no object or my perceptions true hallucinations (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 264).

The idea that the phenomenological indistinguishability of perception and hallucination justifies treating hallucinations as perception is also controversial. The most apparent objection is that sharing the phenomenological features by two phenomena is not sufficient condition for assigning these phenomena to the same ontological category (Langsam 1997). In other words, the phenomenological claims cannot by themselves constitute the ontological claims.

Moreover, not only perception and hallucination can be subjectively indistinguishable. For instance, while dreaming we are also convinced of perceiving, the content of a dream presents itself independent of our will and with the overwhelming sense of reality, but still it seems unreasonable to treat dreams as having the same ontological nature as perceptions of waking consciousness. To consider a dream an experience of the same ontological kind as a perception would mean that we ignore the difference between altered state of consciousness and the ordinary state of consciousness, which obviously contradicts empirical findings¹⁵. Although the notion of altered state of consciousness is elusive, in scientific literature there is a moderate agreement of what kind of phenomena should be treated as forms of

15 See, for example, an article by Vaitl et al. (2005).

altered states of consciousness (Revonsuo, Kallio and Sikka 2009), and dream is definitely such a state¹⁶. On the other hand, Hobson (2001) gives empirical reasons why hallucination is a global state of a subject analogous to the state of dreaming.

Developing this point further, we may ask why it sounds more legitimate to treat hallucination as a kind of perception rather than as a kind of altered state of consciousness itself¹⁷. As González (2010) points out, the argument from hallucination is based upon the fantastic view of hallucination which ignores the empirical reports concerning hallucinations and “usually presents the hallucinatory episodes as singular excerpts that are supposedly inserted and belong in a normal global experiential field, as if the rest of our mental life remained untouched and operating as usual”(205). Of course, the question — whether hallucination is a kind of altered state of consciousness or not — is still a matter of scientific dispute, but for that very reason it should also be raised within philosophical investigations.

One final remark should be made in reference to the conclusion of the argument for the nature of object of hallucination. According to the argument, since properties (or objects) that perceiver hallucinates are not external properties of mind-independent physical world, they have to be somehow internal and mental properties. This conclusion reveals another controversial assumption of the argument from hallucination, namely the commitment to two oppositions. The one concerns the internal and the external, the another is about the mental and the physical. These concepts are mutually exclusive, as something may be either internal or external, and may be either mental or physical. Approaching the phenomenon of hallucination armed with those conceptual oppositions stands in contradiction with certain empirical data. As Larøi (2006) shows, research upon reported hallucinatory experiences indicates that hallucination does not necessarily have to appear phenomenologically as located in the outer world or be attributed to external object in order to be a hallucination. It happens, as well, that hallucinating subjects are not able to determine whether the

16 The review of various lists of altered states of consciousness can be found in Móró (2010).

17 According to Windt (2011) and Kokoszka (2012) hallucinatory experiences are to be included within the domain of altered states of consciousness.

content of hallucination is “outside” or “inside”, but still consider their experiences as being hallucinatory. Larøi’s observation not only challenges the relevance of certain categories in defining hallucinatory phenomena, but it also provokes reflection to what extent our beliefs about nature of hallucinations are justified or they are just widely-held prejudices.

Conclusions

The prevailing philosophical discussion concerning hallucinatory experience is centred around the so-called argument from hallucination which is usually presented in the form of thought-experiment. Formulating the argument in this way allegedly enables philosophical analysis to face the possibility of such a hallucinatory experience which in principle cannot be subjectively distinct from veridical perception. Since the phenomenological features of hallucination proper (listed by Jaspers) are the ones shared by genuine perception, the phenomenological indistinguishability of these two phenomena seems to be a justified premise of the argument.

Nevertheless, even if a perception and a hallucination had common phenomenological character, the transition from phenomenological description of phenomena to establishing ontological claims remains a subject of controversy. The impossibility of telling a hallucination from a veridical perception on the grounds of phenomenological description cannot suffice for assuming that hallucination is a kind of perception. Therefore, the conclusion about the nature of hallucinatory experience cannot affect the nature of perception. In addition, in the light of some empirical findings the conclusions about the nature hallucinatory experience seem to be formulated by means of categories (e.g., internal and external) that raise serious doubts concerning their relevancy for hallucinatory phenomena.

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ABSTRACT

HOW MUCH DO WE LEARN ABOUT HALLUCINATIONS FROM THOUGHT-EXPERIMENTS?

The idea that our sensory experience cannot serve as a ground for knowledge lingers on within philosophical thinking from its very beginning. Since even the ancient sceptics argued against the possibility of knowledge based on sense perception due to its potentially illusory or hallucinatory character, it seems reasonable to address the issue of hallucination itself.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss upon the philosophical account of hallucination present in current debates. I will mainly work on the so-called 'argument from hallucination' which provides a prevalent objection both against the direct realism theory of perception, and externalist theories of content of experience. My primary intention will be to single out the ontological claims concerning hallucinatory experience that constitute the core of the argument from hallucination. Moreover, the legitimacy of philosophical theses concerning hallucination will be discussed both by means of philosophical analysis, and in the light of chosen empirical findings.

KEYWORDS: hallucination, perception, argument from hallucination, phenomenology, thought-experiment.