



Perceiving expressions of emotion: What evidence could bear on questions about perceptual experience of mental states?



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ABSTRACT

What evidence could bear on questions about whether humans ever perceptually experience any of another's mental states, and how might those questions be made precise enough to test experimentally? This paper focusses on emotions and their expression. It is proposed that research on perceptual experiences of physical properties provides one model for thinking about what evidence concerning expressions of emotion might reveal about perceptual experiences of others' mental states. This proposal motivates consideration of the hypothesis that categorical perception of expressions of emotion occurs, can be facilitated by information about agents' emotions, and gives rise to phenomenal expectations. It is argued that the truth of this hypothesis would support a modest version of the claim that humans sometimes perceptually experience some of another's mental states. Much available evidence is consistent with, but insufficient to establish, the truth of the hypothesis. We are probably not yet in a position to know whether humans ever perceptually experience others' mental states.

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1. Introduction

The trainer's mind had wandered so far from the match that he had no idea who was winning until Blanche's howl of victory rang through the stadium, seizing his attention. Her howl and accompanying aerial contortions revealed much about the category and intensity of her emotions. Afterwards he said he could see she'd won, could see her ecstasy in winning. How could we find out whether this is all merely a way of speaking or in part a literal description of a perceptual experience? More generally, what evidence might bear on questions about whether humans ever perceptually experience any of another's mental states?

In asking what evidence might bear on such questions I am presupposing, of course, that they have not yet been answered decisively. This is reasonable given recent interest in arguments whose modest aim is to show only that the view that humans can perceptually experience some mental states of subjects other than themselves is not obviously false (Smith, 2010; McNeill, 2012a, 2012b).

In asking what evidence might bear on questions about perceptual experience of mental states, I am also presupposing that answering such questions will involve some people doing experiments. This may initially seem controversial given what may appear to be narrowly philosophical arguments for the view that humans can perceptually experience some mental states. However, those arguments quite often rest on unargued conjectures about the existence of certain perceptual states, looks, visual similarities or the like. To illustrate, Smith offers an argument which hinges on the conjecture that there are

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'visual states ... [which] possess content that matches the causal profile' of states such as a person's happiness (2015; on what this amounts to, see Smith, 2010, Section 4). His argument and some other careful narrowly philosophical discussions might be charitably interpreted as providing frameworks for understanding claims about perceptual experience and mental states rather than as offering grounds for accepting or rejecting them.¹ There may much that can be discovered without seeking experimental evidence. But to know whether the claims that matter most are true or false we will probably have to find experimental evidence that bears on questions about whether any humans ever perceptually experience others' mental states.

Note that the claims under consideration here are about perceptual experience; they are not claims about psychological mechanisms, nor about epistemology. (These distinctions are explained in the Introduction to this Special Issue, Michael & De Bruin, 2015.) These topics are probably related, however. One lesson from research on physical properties is that discoveries about psychological mechanisms can inform views about what can be perceptually experienced (see Section 4). And it is possible that answering questions about perceptual experience will somehow inform investigation of epistemological questions about whether perceiving is sometimes a way of knowing facts about another's mental states. Nevertheless, my focus in this paper is perceptual experience.

The aim of this paper is to identify evidence linked to expressions of emotion that bears on claims about perceptually experiencing others' mental states, and, in so doing, to formulate a modest interpretation of the view that humans can sometimes perceptually experience others' mental states. I start by describing the problem which motivates this work (in Section 2) and then outline some research on perceptual experiences of physical properties (in Section 4) which will serve as a model for thinking about what evidence concerning expressions of emotion might reveal about perceptual experiences of others' mental states (in Section 6 onwards).

2. The problem

Some researchers appear to hold that mere verbal reports and explicit ratings are sufficient to show that humans can perceptually experience some mental properties of subjects other than themselves (see, for example, Schlottmann, Ray, Mitchell, & Demetriou, 2006, p. 135; Scholl & Tremoulet, 2000, p. 299). This would make it easy to confirm the hypothesis about the perception of mental states. After all, Heider and Simmel (1944, p. 257) famously demonstrated that people will, in describing what they see, spontaneously attribute motives and needs to animated polygons. As this suggests, many people are disposed to say things which, if literally true, would imply that they sometimes perceptually experience others' mental states. Indeed, people will spontaneously say such things even when presented with stimuli which manifestly do not involve subjects of mental states.

But can we really support claims about perceptual experience merely by measuring verbal reports? In the right situations people will also talk about seeing properties related to the market values or historical origins of physical objects. To infer from this that what humans can perceptually experience extends beyond the narrowly physical to include features related to an object's scarcity, or that it extends beyond the present to include the past, would make sense only given an extremely broad notion of perceptual experience. Heider and Simmel were clearly operating with such a broad notion, for they stipulated that they use the word 'perception' 'in the sense of cognitive response, i.e. as covering all cognitive processes which follow the exposure of a set of receptors to stimulation' (Heider & Simmel, 1944, p. 243, Footnote 1). This is a way of saying that they are not concerned with perception at all.

Compare the question, can humans perceptually experience categorical colours of physical objects in addition to particular shades? Can humans, for example, perceive the greenness of an unripe tomato where greenness is a property the tomato shares with a blade of grass and a leaf? Answering this question depends in part on complex issues about when and why verbal interference affects discrimination between categorical colour properties (Roberson & Davidoff, 2000; Wiggett & Davies, 2008). Clearly what people say about their experiences is not decisive here. But if such verbal reports alone are not sufficient to decide questions about perceptual experience of colour, they surely cannot decide questions about perceptual experience of mental states either.

This leaves us with a problem. Given that mere verbal reports and explicit ratings alone are not sufficient to establish claims about perceptual experience, how else could the hypothesis that humans sometimes perceptually experience others' mental states be tested?

3. Phenomenal expectations (a preliminary step)

In working out what kind of evidence might be relevant to answering questions about whether humans ever perceptually experience others' mental states, it is useful to consider physical properties. In tracking objects' movements, which physical properties of them can humans perceptually experience? In particular, can they perceptually experience properties such as solidity, velocity or momentum?

As a preliminary to investigating both this question and its counterpart about mental states, it is useful to distinguish two ways in which things can feature in perceptual experience. Suppose you saw the scene depicted in the right panel of Fig. 1 on the next page. Do you perceptually experience the parts of the shape behind the thumb? In one sense you do not: after all,

¹ Compare Smith (2015, p. 291): 'I have not offered a robust defence of the phenomenological claims..., motivating them rather on intuitive grounds.'

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