



The structure of experience, the nature of the visual, and type 2 blindsight[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Unlike those with type 1 blindsight, people who have type 2 blindsight have some sort of consciousness of the stimuli in their blind field. What is the nature of that consciousness? Is it visual experience? I address these questions by considering whether we can establish the existence of any structural—necessary—features of visual experience. I argue that it is very difficult to establish the existence of any such features. In particular, I investigate whether it is possible to visually, or more generally perceptually, experience form or movement at a distance from our body, without experiencing colour. The traditional answer, advocated by Aristotle, and some other philosophers, up to and including the present day, is that it is not and hence colour is a structural feature of visual experience. I argue that there is no good reason to think that this is impossible, and provide evidence from four cases—sensory substitution, achromatopsia, phantom contours and amodal completion—in favour of the idea that it is possible. If it is possible then one important reason for rejecting the idea that people with type 2 blindsight do not have visual experiences is undermined. I suggest further experiments that could be done to help settle the matter.

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0. Introduction

Unlike those with type 1 blindsight, people who have type 2 blindsight have some sort of consciousness of the stimuli in their blind field. What is the nature of that consciousness? More specifically, do those people have a visual experience of a stimulus or of some of its features, or do they lack such a visual experience, and have some other type of conscious state, such as a conscious feeling or thought? I address this question by considering whether we can establish the existence of any structural features of visual experience. Structural features of experience are necessary features of experience. I will argue that it is very difficult to establish the existence of any such features. In particular, I investigate whether it is possible to visually, or more generally perceptually, experience form or movement at a distance from our body, without experiencing some colour (chromatic or achromatic colour). The traditional answer, advocated by Aristotle, and some other philosophers, up to and including the present day, is that it is not. I argue that there is no good reason to think that this is impossible, and the evidence, although not conclusive, suggests that it is possible. If this is possible then one important reason for rejecting the idea that people with type 2 blindsight do not have visual experiences is undermined.

This result is important for if it can be established that those who have type 2 blindsight are having visual experiences then we have reason to think that area V1 of the visual cortex is not required for visual consciousness. This is because such

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people suffer lesions to V1.¹ (See Zeki and ffytche (1998), Stoerig and Barth (2001), and ffytche and Zeki (2011).) Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that in fact type 1 blindsight does not exist at all, and that all cases of blindsight are really of type 2 (Overgaard, Feh, Mouridsen, Bergholt, & Cleeremans, 2008). If that is right then one main source of evidence for thinking that there can be unconscious perception is removed.

In section one, I explicate what structural features of experience are. In section two, I outline the nature of type 1 and type 2 blindsight. In particular, I outline the debate about the nature of the conscious state in those said to have type 2 blindsight. In section three, I discuss the difference between different kinds of mental states and argue that those with type 2 blindsight either have visual experiences or conscious thoughts. We should eschew the idea that their awareness or consciousness is a matter of them having feelings. In section four, I examine the evidence about the nature of the awareness or consciousness had in type 2 blindsight. I show that one reason given by Overgaard et al. (2008) and Overgaard and Grünbaum (2011) for thinking that those with type 2 blindsight have visual experiences is not a good one. I then go on to explicate two arguments that Brogaard (2011, 2012) has put forward in favour of thinking that the sort of consciousness in type 2 blindsight is conscious thought. I show that one of these arguments is not suitably backed up by the empirical evidence. So the weight of her position rests on the other argument. That argument relies on the premise that visual experiences have a certain structural feature: they must all be experiences of colour. In section five, I explore whether one should believe that visual experiences must have that feature and conclude that there is no good reason to think that. Indeed, the evidence tells in favour, although not conclusively, of the claim that they do not. That evidence also points towards an account of what the visual experiences of those with type 2 blindsight might be like that has not yet been considered. I show that visual experiences can be like that. I therefore conclude that there are no good arguments for the conclusion that the type of consciousness enjoyed by people with type 2 blindsight cannot be visual experience. And I suggest further experiments that could be done to test whether they do have such experiences.

1. Structural features of perceptual experience

What are structural features of perceptual experience? Structural features of experience are invariant features of experience. On a weak understanding, they are simply invariant features of human perceptual experience that exist as a matter of nomological necessity given the kind of human brain that we have. Thus, the perceptual experiences of creatures that have other types of brain need not exhibit these invariant features, nor need the perceptual experiences of subjects with human brains in possible worlds with a physics unlike our own. On a strong understanding, structural features of perceptual experience are metaphysically or conceptually necessary invariant features of experience *tout court*. Such features would be true of any creature with any type of brain in every possible world. Of course, there will be accounts of structural features of experience of strengths intermediate to the strong and the weak kinds just outlined: metaphysically necessary features true of all subjects with human brains, and nomologically necessary features true of all creatures no matter what kind of brain they have. However, I set these aside in this paper.

Here are some examples of propositions that some people have claimed specify structural features of perceptual experience. I offer these up only as candidates for propositions that specify structural features. I do not show that they really are ones.² I begin with an example that many hold to be true:

- (i) Necessarily, perceptual experiences are conscious.

This is plausibly proposition that specifies a structural feature of perceptual experience—and a structural feature of perceptual experience in the strong sense. Many philosophers hold this to be true *a priori*.

Many candidate structural features of perceptual experience will be features concerning what is represented in perceptual experience. Some may be pertain to all experiences. For example this proposition specifies an alleged such feature:

- (ii) Necessarily, perceptual experiences represent space and time.

The representation of space and time is, somewhat plausibly, a weak structural feature of perceptual experience. However, some structural features may pertain only to experiences in a certain modality. Consider these modality specific claims:

- (iii) Necessarily, auditory experiences represent sound.
 (iv) Necessarily, visual experiences represent colour.³

Again these seem, to some degree, to be plausible truths about structural features of experience. For example, Aristotle in *De Anima* held that each of the sensory modalities had a proper sensible, that is, an object or property that could only be

¹ Although people with type 2 blindsight don't suffer complete loss of V1, the area of V1 loss corresponds to the area of their visual field in which they have type 2 blindsight. Thus, if it can be shown that they have experience in this area of the visual field but lack corresponding areas of V1 then there is reason to believe that V1 is not necessary for visual consciousness.

² An interesting discussion defending the idea that there are different structural features of vision and touch is found in Soteriou (2011).

³ By "colour" I mean not only chromatic colour but also black, white and grey. I use "colour" this way through out this essay.

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