

Perception and Basic Beliefs: Zombies, Modules, and the Problem of the External World, Jack C. Lyons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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Perception and Basic Beliefs is an engaging defence of a radical form of epistemological reliabilism. Drawing on modular theories of the mind, it aims to give a naturalistic account of basic beliefs and their justification, and ultimately provide a solution to the traditional problem of external world scepticism.

Central to Lyons's project is a distinctive account of the distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs. This is intended to solve in tandem two recurring epistemological problems: the *delineation problem* of specifying which beliefs are basic, and the *source problem* of specifying in virtue of what basic beliefs are justified. *Basic beliefs* are identified as the outputs of inferentially opaque modules or primal systems; in the case of perception, for instance, the output of perceptual systems (where perceptual systems are identified, to avoid circularity, as those systems that are classified as 'perceptual' by cognitive science). These beliefs are justified (prima facie, if they are justified) in virtue of the reliability of the cognitive processes by which they are formed. Although exactly which beliefs are basic will ultimately be an empirical question, one of the many congenial features of Lyons's foundationalism is that basic beliefs will not be restricted to beliefs about experience. Instead, basic perceptual beliefs are likely to include beliefs about objects' properties (location, colour, shape, motion), 'entry-level' categories (e.g. chair, apple), as well as facial identifications and beliefs about individual objects (p. 96); more generally the class of basic beliefs is likely to include memory beliefs, some a priori beliefs, introspective beliefs, and moral beliefs. *Nonbasic beliefs*, in turn, are identified as beliefs that are formed by inferential processes, the input to which are themselves beliefs, and these beliefs are justified just in case the inferential processes are reliable.

Lyons's reliabilism is radically nonexperientialist: perceptual *experience* plays no part either in identifying basic perceptual beliefs or explaining the source of their justification. Indeed, one of the most striking consequences of Lyons's view is that zombies could have justified perceptual beliefs in the absence of experiences, so long as their perceptual modules issue in reliably formed beliefs. Lyons courageously embraces this consequence, arguing against experientialist views of justification that zombies' perceptual beliefs lie on a continuum with other, more common, forms of 'experienceless perception': 'sensationless perception', such as the perception of

amodally completed figures, and ‘perceptless perception’, such as ‘facial perception’ where blind (and blindfolded) people are able to detect obstacles through a form of echolocation.

Perhaps inevitably given the sheer variety of experientialist theories, the arguments (in Chapter 3) against experientialism, and by elimination for Lyons’s nonevidentialist reliabilism, are not always convincing. Against experientialist theories which treat high-level ‘percepts’ as evidential justifiers, the only example of ‘perceptless perception’ mentioned to motivate the claim that zombies could also have justified perceptual beliefs is facial vision; yet whether facial vision lacks phenomenology is at least debateable (e.g. Schwitzgebel Forthcoming). On the other hand, Lyons’s criticisms of experientialist theories that appeal to low-level ‘sensations’ are directed both against views which understand sensations as non-representational qualia or as nonconceptual representational states. Although both views may ultimately founder on the same horn of the Sellarsian dilemma that Lyons exploits (that non-propositional states do not require justification, but are apparently incapable of conferring it), nonconceptual experiential states certainly seem better placed to address this problem. In this respect, it is a shame that the ‘Peacocke-McDowell’ debate (Lyons mentions Peacocke’s *Sense and Content* and McDowell’s *Mind and World*, but not Peacocke’s later work, or the contributions of Evans, Heck, or others) is dismissed as having little to do with the Sellarsian concern that experiences which lack propositional content are able to justify a belief (p. 47).

Part of the appeal of Lyons’s positive theory of epistemic justification lies in the fact that it offers a sharp distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs, and then employs this distinction to answer standard objections to reliabilism: Bonjour’s Norman, the reliable clairvoyant, and Lehrer’s Truetemp, who is fitted with a device that provides accurate beliefs about the ambient temperature (Chapters 4-5). Lyons ingeniously argues that these are not objections to reliabilism per se, so much as versions of reliabilism that fail to distinguish between basic and nonbasic beliefs. Whereas monolithic versions of reliabilism classify these beliefs as justified, Lyons’s *inferentialist reliabilism* correctly classifies these beliefs as unjustified because they are neither basic beliefs, nor nonbasic beliefs that are formed via reliable inferential processes. Lyons secures this conclusion by requiring of perceptual systems whose outputs are basic beliefs, that ‘they have developed as the result of some combination of learning and innate constraints’ (p. 117). The problem with both Norman and Truetemp is then that their capacities simply spring into existence, often with an unusual aetiology (for instance, exposure to radioactive material).

We might wonder, however, whether this gets the right results for the wrong reasons. Are the aetiologies of Norman and Truetemp’s capacities the source of the intuition that their beliefs are unjustified, rather than their lack of conscious

experiences? For instance, Lyons's account appears to have the consequence that a congenitally blind person who wakes up with the capacity to see after a sophisticated sight-conferring operation would not form basic perceptual beliefs on the basis of their visual experiences, given the capacity's nascent aetiology. Experientialists can say that the newly-sighted person's beliefs are perceptual due to the experiences that this person has, and that Norman and Truetemp lack; Lyons, however, cannot appeal to this difference, because he thinks that experience is neither necessary nor sufficient for perceptual justification.

As these questions illustrate, *Perception and Basic Beliefs* is a rich and provocative defence of an uncompromisingly externalist theory of justification. Closely argued and written in an accessible style, it represents an important contribution to the project of naturalizing epistemology.

References

Schwitzgebel, E. Forthcoming. *Perplexities of Consciousness*. MIT Press.