

Perception and Passivity

Richard Kenneth Atkins
Central APA 2013

Abstract: Non-Normativists maintain that perceptions are not subject to normative assessments; they are neither good nor bad. This thesis and an argument based on the passivity of perception to support it are stronger than is sometimes supposed. However, reflection on why the argument fails reveals in what way perceptions are subject to normative assessments.

Keywords: Perception, Normativity, Passivity

1. Perception and Norms

One of two views is typically adopted as regards the normativity of perception. The first view is that perceptions are good just in case they are accurate. The second view is that perceptions are not normatively assessable; they are neither good nor bad.

I think both views are false. However, my aim in this paper is to call the second view into question. Let's call this doctrine concerning perception Non-Normativism:

Non-Normativism: Perceptions are not normatively assessable; they are neither good nor bad.

Non-Normativism seems like two theses:

First: Perceptions are not normatively assessable.

Second: Perceptions are neither good nor bad

Someone might urge: the second thesis can be true whilst the first thesis is false. There may be some other norms—norms different from goodness and badness—by which perceptions are nevertheless to be assessed.

That might be true, depending on the latitude of our conception of “good” and “bad.” But if it should turn out that perceptions are not normatively assessable, it surely follows that perceptions are neither good nor bad (at least in any interesting, not merely stipulated, way), no matter the latitude of our conceptions.

2. Non-Normativism

Let's clarify to what, exactly, Non-Normativists commit themselves. This isn't easy, because “perception” and its species (“seeing,” “hearing,” “feeling,” etc.) are used in broad and narrow senses (e.g. when “perception” is used to refer to the entire

activity of perception or when it is used to refer only to the experience of perceiving), and used imprecisely in ordinary conversation (e.g. “I see what you mean”).

A. To begin, here are four claims to which Non-Normativists are not committed.

First, Non-Normativists are not committed to the claim that the *activity of perception* is not normatively assessable. For example, suppose that I try to ascertain the shape of an extremely large sculpture by standing 3 centimeters away from it and staring at my feet. The activity in which I am engaging to ascertain the shape of the sculpture is clearly bad. If I aim to ascertain the shape of a large sculpture, I should stand back from it and walk around it. Non-Normativists can agree.

Second, Non-Normativists are not committed to the claim that *perceivers* are not normatively assessable. A person can be a more or less skilled perceiver. For example, if I regularly try to match my socks by looking at them in a dark room, I’m a bad perceiver. Dark rooms are not good environments for matching colors and I, as a perceiver, ought to know as much.

Third, Non-Normativists are not committed to the claim that *procedures involving perceptions* are not normatively assessable. For example, when I aim to accomplish the goal of hitting a pitched baseball, whether my procedure is reliable or not (e.g. whether I keep my elbow up, keep my eye on the ball, assume a sufficiently wide stance, etc.) is normatively assessable. There are reliable and unreliable procedures, and Non-Normativists can agree.

Fourth, Non-Normativists are not committed to the claim that the *outcomes of our procedures involving perceptions* are not normatively assessable. For example, when I have walked around a sculpture and judged that it is cuboidal, my judgment may nevertheless be normatively assessed. I may either succeed or fail in my goal (in this case, of making a true judgment).

B. Now we might begin to wonder: To what *are* Non-Normativists committed? They maintain that the perceptual experience, the presentational content of our perceptions, is not normatively assessable.

Even this is vague. The word “experience” is laden with even more baggage than the word “perception.” And just what is presentational content?

These are hard questions, but without answering them we can get a sense of to what Non-Noramtivists are committed in three ways. First, Non-Normativists claim that bare seeing, bare feeling, bare presence—that feature of perceiving—is not normatively assessable. Alternatively, they claim that that feature of perception—whatever it might be—which can be abstracted from our concepts, conceptions, beliefs, affections, affectations, and actions, is not normatively assessable. Finally, they maintain that basic or non-conceptual perceiving, in contrast with perceiving-as (perceiving that deploys or implicates concepts) or perceiving-that (perceiving that deploys judgments), is not normatively assessable.

This is all very imperfect, but I think it suffices to get at what Non-Normativism is all about: There is some core element of perception that is a

consequence of perceptual intake, of receiving information by virtue of our perceptual organs, and whatever that core element is is not normatively assessable.

3. Easy Defeats?

Some people might think that Non-Normativism, understood in this way, can be easily defeated because it implies an untenable account of perception. My goal here is to show that two such easy defeats are but illusory victories.

A. First, someone might claim that Non-Normativism entails that we can have perceptions that do not implicate conceptual contents. But, that is surely false—all perceiving is (in some sense) perceiving-as.

To begin my reply, I think such a view is false. Not all perceiving is perceiving-as. I think we do enjoy non-concept-implicating perceptions. But even if I am wrong, even if all perceiving is perceiving-as, Non-Normativism cannot be so easily defeated.

Suppose we admit that all perception implicates concepts. It does not follow from this claim that we cannot draw a distinction between that element of perception that is conceptual and that element of perception that is presentational. To be sure, the manner of that distinction is up for debate: Is it a distinction in the way that the recto and verso of a sheet of paper are distinct? Or is it a distinction in the way that color and space are? (We can think of uncolored space—e.g. the space between my nose and the computer screen—but not of a color that isn't coloring some space.) Yet whatever the case may be, we must grant that we can draw some sort of distinction between the conceptual and presentational elements of a perception.

Non-Normativists are committed to the claim that the presentational element—however it relates to the conceptual element—is not normatively assessable, and that is perfectly consistent with admitting that the presentational element always implicates concepts, that all perceiving is perceiving-as.

B. A second way of trying to win an easy defeat is to claim that Non-Normativism commits us to a sense-datum theory of perception. But such a theory is false.

Of course, the truth of the sense-datum theory remains up for vigorous debate. Hence, sustaining this objection is not an easy task and this may not be such an easy defeat after all. Nevertheless, let's suppose that the sense-datum theory is false. Are Non-Normativists committed to it?

The answer is no. Whether the perceptual intake is a sense-datum or an unmediated *tête-à-tête* with the object itself, Non-Normativists are only committed the claim that the presentational content of our perceptions—whatever the nature of that content be—is not subject to normative assessments.

4. An Argument for Non-Normativism

Thus far, I have tried to clarify to what Non-Normativists are committed and I have rejected two attempts at an easy defeat of Non-Normativism. But are there any

arguments to support Non-Normativism? Indeed, there is one argument that deserves consideration here, and the argument is stronger than it may at first glance appear.

A. Most recently, we find the argument expressed in Anil Gupta's recent work on perception:

experience is passive, and it is always a good policy not to assign fault to the passive. If, having suffered an experience, I acquire a false perceptual belief, it is better that I assume responsibility (and change my manner of "reading" the experience) than that I pin blame on the experience. The experience is bound to be the way it is, given the circumstances... (185).

Although Gupta expresses the argument in terms of experience and blameworthiness, we might generalize the argument in this fashion, to accord more closely with the way we have been characterizing Non-Normativism:

- (1) Perception is passive.
- (2) What is passive is not subject to normative assessments.
- (3) So, perception is not subject to normative assessments.

Obviously, the logic is flawless, but are the premises? Let's consider each in turn.

B. Someone might object that premise (1) is clearly false. Perception is an activity; it is not passive. Indeed, the recent work in the enactive approach to perception has provided very strong grounds for rejecting premise (1).

However, when we fully understand to what Non-Normativists commit themselves, enactivist grounds for rejecting premise (1) aren't so strong after all. As we noted above, Non-Normativists need not deny that the *activity* of perceiving is subject to normative assessments. Their claim is that there is some core element, the presentational content, that is not subject to normative assessments. Enactivism provides us with a theory for understanding the nature of sensory feels, but enactivists still concede that there are such feels. What Non-Normativists claim is that those feels, whatever their explanation, are not normatively assessable. Explaining how that perceptual intake is generated, closing the explanatory gap, may well require the resources enactivists have so brilliantly developed. But premise (1) of our argument does not stand or fall with the truth of enactivism.

C. A better approach to the argument is to reject premise (2). We need to show that what is passive may nevertheless be subject to normative assessments.

No one doubts that a variety of examples seem to support premise (2). Suppose I am standing on the subway platform and a stranger punches me in the face. I haven't done anything wrong. I was passive. And no one doubts that I should not be blamed for being punched in the face. I am not subject to any sort of normative assessment, being but the sufferer of the agent's punch. If anything, I should be pitied.

Similarly, suppose that I am jogging and trip over an uneven slab of the sidewalk. I may curse. I may get up, inspect the slab, and stare at it menacingly. I may even return with a jackhammer and reduce the slab to rubble. But does anyone really think the slab is subject to normative assessment? Has the slab really done anything wrong? It was passive. I should be blamed for tripping, for not paying attention as I was jogging. The slab itself was neither good nor bad. It's not subject to normative assessment.

Yet let's consider another case. Suppose I set a mousetrap. However, unbeknownst to me, the latch on the mousetrap is defective. It won't spring when the mouse nibbles on the piece of cheese. When I check the mousetrap the next day, and find that the cheese is missing but the trap hasn't sprung, I inspect the trap and find that the latch is bad. I realize I need a new mousetrap.

Notice what I just said, though: the latch was bad. Now latches aren't much different from sidewalk slabs. They don't really do anything themselves. After all, it's the mouse that activates the latch, and we are the ones who set up the traps to be activated. The latches are passive considered in themselves. Nonetheless, some of them are defective in that some of them will not work correctly in the mousetrap mechanism. Latches are designed to fulfill a role in the mousetrap mechanism. Some will fulfill that role correctly, in which case they're good. Others will be defective, in which case they're bad. But latches themselves are passive. They don't do anything.

So, a defective mousetrap latch is an example of something that is passive but is subject to normative assessment. A mousetrap latch is good or bad depending on whether it fulfills its role in a mousetrap mechanism. However, the latch itself does not do anything. After all, we humans build and set the traps, and mice spring them.

The same considerations apply to other mechanisms. For example, if a grandfather clock doesn't ring at the top of the hour because of a defective spring, the spring is bad. Yet, the spring is passive. It is activated by another mechanism in the clock, and humans have made the clock and wound it. The spring is passive, but it is bad nonetheless. Hence, what is passive can be subject to normative assessments. Premise (2) is false.

5. Against Non-Normativism

My contention for the remainder of this essay is that perceptions (understood in the very way Non-Normativists require) are subject to normative assessments in the way that mousetrap latches and grandfather-clock springs are.

A. Perceiving organisms (like us) oftentimes have aims in perceiving. Sometimes those aims are practical: walking down a hallway without bumping into a door; feeding ourselves; coordinating our clothes, etc. At other times, those aims are theoretical: plotting the orbit of Venus; studying the mating dances of birds; counting grains of sand to ascertain how many it takes to make a heap, etc.

Yet whichever of those goals we're aiming to achieve, in trying to achieve those goals, we implement some procedure that involves perception. Typically, those procedures are second nature, learned at a very young age. We know to walk

around the object we are observing, to observe it in the right light, to keep our eyes open, etc.

That procedure may be assessed as either reliable or not: it will either help us attain our goal or not. That is one kind of normative assessment. But as noted above Non-Normativists can accept this kind of normative assessment.

Moreover, the procedure will either be a success or not. Either we will succeed in attaining our goal or we will fail. Once again, as noted above, Non-Normativists can accept this as a kind of normative assessment of the entire activity of perceiving.

Furthermore, either we will be skilled perceivers or we will not. Maybe we know the right procedures or maybe we've just gotten lucky. Either way, once again, Non-Normativists can accept this sort of normative assessment.

Yet what Non-Normativists do deny—that our perceptions themselves may be either defective or not, bad or good with respect to whether they fulfill their role in their procedure—they ought not to deny. As parts of procedures for attaining our goals, our perceptions fulfill a role in attaining those goals. They either fulfill that role well or they don't. If our perceptions do fulfill that role, then they are good. If they don't, then they are bad. This is analogous to how mousetrap latches are good or bad: they either fulfill their role in the mousetrap mechanism or they do not.

Now it should be obvious that when we perceive we do not always have an aim. Suppose I am lying in bed, looking up at the ceiling, thinking about how best to catch a mouse. I perceive the ceiling. However, my perception is not part of a procedure to attain an aim. In this case, I concur with Non-Normativists that my perception is neither good nor bad. This is analogous to a latch that has not yet been incorporated into a mousetrap mechanism. It's just sitting in a box; it's neither good nor bad.

But suppose the next day that I am selecting a color of paint to match my ceiling. In that case, the memory of my perception—and by virtue of my memory my perception from the previous night—will be taken up in a procedure for selecting a color of paint to match my ceiling. In so doing, I might ask myself: Were the conditions last night for viewing the color of paint on my ceiling good conditions for judging the color of paint? I may realize that they were not—that it was dark, that I was distracted by the thought of bloody mouse fur—and so reject the perception (and thereby my memory of it) on the grounds that the perception would not fulfill its role in my procedure. The perception would be defective in my procedure, and so it was not a good perception for judging the color of paint on my ceiling.

This is analogous to a mousetrap latch. If I decide to make a mousetrap, I may realize as I am putting the mousetrap together that the latch I've selected would not cause the mechanism to spring. In that case, I might reject it as bad, even though prior to selecting it for the mousetrap mechanism it was neither defective nor effective.

The upshot is this: some perceptions are non-normative. But not all perceptions are. When perceptions fulfill or fail to fulfill their roles in procedures, they are either good or bad. Also, perceptions may change from being non-normative to normative when they are subsequently taken up in procedures.

Moreover, some perceptions may be good for some procedures but bad for other procedures. For example, suppose an error theory about color is true. Then color perceptions are bad for figuring out the nature of reality. But they are still good for coordinating our clothes with the aim of avoiding public embarrassment. The goodness or badness of our perceptions is relative to the procedure in which they are to fulfill their roles.

B. At this point, a Non-Normativist may object: Why should we assess the perception itself as good or bad? It seems clear that these “errors” in perception are really the fault of the perceiver. It is the perceiver who is to blame if her perception does not fulfill its role, just as it is the mousetrap maker who is to be blamed for using a defective mousetrap latch. Indeed, if we want to correct an “error” in perception, we do not correct the perception itself. Rather, we tell the perceiver to do something, e.g. to walk around the object, to turn on the light, to open her eyes, etc.

I reply that this objection is quite right in some respects. When we believe someone has made an error in perception, we do ask that person to engage in some activity—turning on the light, moving—to correct her error. In that sense, the perceiver has made a mistake herself, and this is consistent with Non-Normativism.

Yet why do we ask the perceiver to undertake such actions? It is because we believe the perception itself is not fulfilling its role in the procedure for attaining the perceiver’s aim. We don’t question the perceiver’s knowledge of the English language or her eyesight. The perception is defective, but we believe we know how to correct it, to make it functional in the procedure. We get the perception to fulfill its role by asking the perceiver to do something to alter the perceptual experience itself.

In like manner, suppose a mousetrap maker has a defective latch. He might realize the latch is defective because, say, it is too long. In that case, he might shorten the latch, thereby making it effective. By doing something to the latch, he corrects the problem to make the mousetrap mechanism successful. The latch was defective, but the mousetrap maker has made the latch effective. By analogy, if we have a perceiver do something with respect to the manner in which she has perceptually coupled with the object of her perception, we are able to correct her perception so as to make the procedure a success. We have changed the perception from defective to effective, from bad to good.

Works Cited

Gupta, Anil (2006), “Experience and Knowledge” in *Perceptual Experience*, eds. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 181–204.