

Kern, the Two-Capacity View, and Paradigmatic Exercises of Rationality

Raja Rosenhagen, Ashoka University

April 10, 2022

1 The Two-Capacity View

The following view, Andrea Kern argues, is indefensible:

Two-Capacity View [*TCV*]:

- I. Generally, perception is a capacity that enables subjects to gain perceptual knowledge.
- II. This capacity involves two sub-capacities: one for perception, one for judgment. ([2]: §1).

Let's dub the capacity featuring in **I** $C[PK]$, and those featuring in **II** $C[P]$ and $C[J]$, respectively, taking each as distinct. Kern accepts **I** and denies **II**. We should not, she insists, think that the mental episodes that result from acts of $C[P]$ —henceforth: *perceptual experiences*—provide “less than knowledge of how things are” and serve as mere conditions for exercises of $C[J]$, which in suitable circumstances may yield perceptual knowledge. If we do, she claims, we render “unintelligible the very idea of a capacity for knowledge that, at the same time, it presupposes” ([2]: §1).¹ For reasons that will become clear shortly, I disagree.

2 Kern's Argument

Kern distinguishes two versions of *TCV*. *TCV-1* involves accepting, *TCV-2* denying that acts of $C[P]$ and $C[J]$, respectively, are specifiable independently of each other. Since both versions fail, Kern argues, we must reject *TCV*.

Consider Kern's attack on *TCV-1*. Its **first** step is a reasonable demand: reject as unintelligible accounts that do not enable us to explain how, based on perceptual experience, subjects can exercise $C[J]$ such as to transition to knowledgeable judgments about that which $C[P]$ is responsive to. In short: reject accounts that leave it mysterious how acts of $C[P]$ and $C[J]$ combine to yield acts of $C[PK]$. **Second**, from the fact that on *TCV-1*, acts of $C[P]$ and $C[J]$, respectively, are considered as specifiable independently of each other,

¹On the most natural interpretation, the ‘it’ in the passage refers either to what I have dubbed $C[P]$ or to any attempt to specify it as providing something less than knowledge. Kern thus appears to believe that somehow either $C[P]$ itself or any attempt to specify it as proponents of *TCV* would already presuppose the idea of a capacity for knowledge.

Kern infers that acts of the former do not *eo ipso* enable one to engage in acts of the latter: we cannot, based on perceptual experiences alone, judge what these are about. From this, she infers, *third*, that *TCV-1* leaves it mysterious how such perceptual experiences could feed into $C[J]$ to yield exercises of $C[PK]$, and thus rejects *TCV-1*.

We cannot, I agree, extract from perceptual experiences alone what they are about. But Kern’s inference to this claim can be doubted. Consider your capacity to play chess and your capacity to beat me in some game or other. Acts of these capacities may be specifiable independently of each other. Still, could not your exercise of the former enable you to exercise the latter?² If so, why couldn’t something analogous be possible for $C[P]$ and $C[J]$?

More importantly, defenders of *TCV* can reject Kern’s third step. Suppose they agree that we cannot extract from perceptual experiences alone what they are about. Next, suppose they suggest that all perceptual experiences that $C[P]$ could yield are connected with exercises of $C[J]$ as follows: the combination of any background view a subject may inhabit with any perceptual experience they could have makes it rational for the subject, relative to that combination, to transition to certain exercises of $C[J]$. In other words, while *eo ipso*, perceptual experiences don’t enable us to rationally transition to specific exercises of $C[J]$, perceptual experiences do so enable us if combined with a background view. On this view, the following seems possible: if the relevant background view is sufficiently correct, exercises of $C[J]$ amount to exercises of $C[PK]$.³ If such a view is possible, Kern’s third step must be rejected. However, if it is impossible, upon undergoing an experience, for the background view to supply whatever conditions must be met to enable the subject to exercise $C[PK]$, Kern must explain why.

3 Final Observations

Kern may demur to my rendering of her argument or elaborate on the moves I have claimed it involves. Even so, the view just sketched provides a theoretical option I believe she overlooks. In closing, let me briefly address an objection Kern might raise and add a final comment.

Objection: “In assuming that acts of $C[J]$ must be specified as acts of a capacity that is responsive to perceptual experiences in a way that is mediated via the subject’s background view, we give up the idea that acts of $C[J]$ and acts of $C[P]$ can be specified independently of each other.”

Response: Acts of the capacity to make *perceptual* judgments may not be specifiable independently of the specification of acts of $C[P]$. But pending further argument, we need not accept an analogous claim regarding acts of $C[J]$ in general. Conversely, why should we accept that for the specification of acts of $C[P]$ we must draw on the specification of acts of $C[J]$? We can, after

²Here, interesting questions arise, concerning, e.g., at what level of generality capacities (and their acts) ought to be specified. Given the space constraints, I can only gesture at them.

³Anil Gupta, in [1], provides a view of roughly that shape, although he sees no need to frame it in terms of the notion of a capacity. In [3], I suggested that Gupta’s view can be developed in two ways: as the kind of view that Gupta himself favors, on which the mental episodes produced by exercises of $C[P]$ lack content, or as a kind of view that I dub the *Variable Content View* and in which such episodes are associated, relative to the background view in play, with content.

all, imagine and describe beings who lack a suitable background view, but still engage in exercises of $C[P]$.⁴

Kern never considers such a view. She only considers, and argues against, views on which acts of $C[P]$ yield perceptual experiences that can serve, by themselves, as *reasons* for acts of $C[J]$, and takes it that the former cannot be specified but in terms of the latter (see [2]: §4). However, the view we have been imagining is not of this kind. On it, in the absence of a suitable background view, perceptual experiences do not provide subjects with *any* reason to engage in acts of $C[J]$. Only if combined with a background view do perceptual experiences make transitioning to certain acts of $C[J]$ rational for subjects.

Clearly, such a view is a version of *TCV*. Pending further arguments, it accommodates both **I** and **II**. And since it does so in ways that Kern does not consider, i.e. by adding the subject's background view as a crucial explanatory component, her arguments do not affect it.

My final observation concerns Kern's notion of a paradigmatic exercise of reason. For Kern, it seems, paradigmatic exercises of reason are limited to exercises of the capacity for judgment that do in fact terminate in knowledge. From the perspective of the kind of view we have been imagining, this restrictive take on what counts as paradigmatic exercise of reason is unmotivated. Why not think, one may wonder, that paradigmatic exercises of reason are those in which subjects transition to judgments (and other actions) that are rational conditional on their perceptual experience and their respective background view? Why not think that acts of $C[J]$ that are also acts of $C[PK]$ are just one kind of result—albeit one that in an epistemic sense is particularly valuable—that such paradigmatic exercises of reason may yield, provided that in the background things go sufficiently well?

Why not indeed?

References

- [1] Gupta, A. (2019). *Conscious Experience: A Logical Inquiry*. Harvard University Press.
- [2] Kern, A. (2022). “The Knowledge View of Perception. Capacities, Opportunities and Hindrances for Perceptual Knowledge”, in: ...
- [3] Rosenhagen, R. (2018). *Experience and Belief: An Inquiry Into the Doxastic Variability of Experience*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Pittsburgh. URL = <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/35163/>

⁴Note that on the *Variable Content View* mentioned in footnote 3 above, perceptual experiences are associated with contents not intrinsically, but relative to the subject's background view. In the absence of such a view, they have no such content at all. Accordingly, on this view as well, acts of $C[P]$ can still be taken as in principle specifiable independently of acts of $C[J]$.