

# THE FORMULATION OF DISJUNCTIVISM: A RESPONSE TO FISH

by Paul Snowden

**ABSTRACT** Fish proposes that we need to elucidate what ‘disjunctivism’ stands for, and he also proposes that it stands for the rejection of a principle about the nature of experience that he calls the decisiveness principle. The present paper argues that his first proposal is reasonable, but then argues, in Section II, that his positive suggestion does not draw the line between disjunctivism and non-disjunctivism in the right place. In Section III, it is argued that disjunctivism is a thesis about the special nature of perceptual experience, and the thesis as elucidated here is then distinguished from and related to certain other ideas about perception, namely, direct realism and also McDowell’s epistemological disjunctivism.

Those who talk of disjunctivism tend to locate its origins in the writings of Michael Hinton in the 1970’s, the fullest and subtlest expression of his thinking being his book *Experiences*. Hinton did not himself use the term ‘disjunctivism’ for a general thesis, but in his discussion he focussed on a particular sort of disjunctive sentence or proposition, which he called ‘perception/illusion disjunctions’. An example of such a sentence is ‘I see a flash of light of a certain sort or I am having the perfect illusion of seeing one of that sort.’<sup>1</sup> Hinton was the first to attempt to determine the varieties and properties of such sentences, and the name ‘disjunctivism’ is used for the view that he is credited with starting partly in recognition of the centrality in his discussion of such disjunctions. This centrality is obvious, but it is far from obvious what the major thesis is that Hinton is advancing about perception/illusion disjunctions, nor what the significance his treatment of perception/illusion disjunctions has for his overall conclusions about experience.<sup>2</sup> Some (but by no means all) of the other moments in the development of disjunctivism which people cite when talking about it are two articles of my own employing Hinton’s ideas to criticise the causal theory of perception, McDowell’s endorsement of a

1. Hinton, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

2. This is not the place to discuss Hinton in detail, but I hope to say something about his views elsewhere.

form of disjunctivism, which had an enormous influence on its prominence in the philosophical community and about which I do wish to speak briefly here, Bill Child's exposition of it, presenting his own understanding of the idea and disputing that it counts against the causal theory of perception, and of particular importance, a series of recent articles by Michael Martin significantly developing the idea and the debate.<sup>3</sup> There is also, of course, an acknowledged critical dissenting tradition which I do not need to detail. William Fish's paper starts from his reaction to one recent debate about disjunctivism, the doctrine, whatever it is, which has been evolving, or emerging, in this tradition.

## I

*The Need to Attend to the Formulation of Disjunctivism.* William Fish is struck by the following fact or facts: in his paper 'What is Realism?' Professor Ayers points out that we can be interested in how it appears to a subject of experience irrespective of how it is in the environment of the subject. He seemed to think that this possibility counts against the claims of what he evidently thought was the view called 'disjunctivism'.<sup>4</sup> In reply I pointed out that the disjunctivist's disjunctive analysis of certain appearance claims was precisely designed to be consistent with that possibility. Ayers seemed to be citing a possibility as an objection to a theory, which according to me, obviously allowed for that possibility. I added that Ayers when formulating the view he wished to criticise failed to mention what many disjunctivists would say.<sup>5</sup> As a reflection on this exchange Fish suggests that 'this apparent lack of engagement suggests that the terms of this debate are not adequately clear.' The purpose of his paper is to clarify the terms of the debate.

I think that Fish is right in making this suggestion, though the details of my own exchange with Ayers suggest at most that someone in *it*—one of us, or, perhaps both of us—was not adequately clear about the content of the debate, not

3. See Hinton 1973, Snowdon 1980–1, Snowdon 1990, Child 1994, McDowell 1998; and Martin 1997, Martin 2002 and Martin 2003.

4. See Ayers 2001.

5. See Snowdon 2002, Sec. II.

that there is any such *general* failure. My own reasons for agreeing with Dr Fish in thinking that it is good to attempt to elucidate disjunctivism are threefold. First, in reflecting on Fish's suggestions and other recent discussions (including those by Martin and Williamson) my own sense of what the doctrine says has been loosened and some sorting out is needed.<sup>6</sup> Second, I think that it is quite common to encounter the attitude, lying behind Fish's paper, of thinking that it is not clear what disjunctivism claims.<sup>7</sup> This is quite a general feeling and it merits a response from those of us who think that at least there is something interesting here. Third, although the view is called 'disjunctivism', there is no clear agreement as to how and why *disjunctions* should figure in the presentation of the view, nor as to which disjunctions, if any, should be the ones figuring in its presentation. There is obviously something here that needs clearing up, or at least, the significance of which needs attention.

## II

*Fish's Suggested Formulation.* We should, then, agree with Fish that there is a need to clarify what disjunctivism is claiming. Should we accept Fish's own suggested clarification?

As I understand it, his suggestion can be expressed as the conjunction of three claims:

- (a) The dispute between non-disjunctivism and disjunctivism is over acceptance or rejection of the decisiveness principle, which says roughly that all experiences which seem the same to the subject are of the same basic type;
- (b) The principle is a methodological proposal, to be assessed as such, and so the dispute is a *methodological* one; finally,
- (c) There is *also* a factual dispute (along the lines of (a)) between disjunctivists and non-disjunctivists.

Fish fills out his proposal, in Section IV of his paper, by trying to explain how the methodological dispute is to be resolved. He

6. See the articles by Martin; and Williamson 2000, pp. 41–48.

7. At a recent conference in Frankfurt devoted to disjunctivism one session was about the question 'What is disjunctivism?' and it was obvious how little unanimity there was (amongst friend and foe).

also notes that what he has the space to present here is merely the beginning of the clarificatory story he would wish to offer.<sup>8</sup>

There are, I think, reasons not to accept proposal (a). Leaving aside Fish's novel claim (=b)) that the dispute should be described as methodological, his idea is that disjunctivism amounts to rejection of the decisiveness principle, and non-disjunctivism amounts to acceptance of the principle. Now, the principle is, roughly, that, necessarily, if two experiences seem the same to the subject (or are, simply considered in themselves, indistinguishable by the subject) then they are the same basic type of experience. However, this does not seem to me to draw the line at the right place. First, although it should be agreed that disjunctivists need to reject that principle, it is wrong to *equate* disjunctivism with rejection of the principle, because, whatever exactly it says, disjunctivism must, surely, make claims about the nature of perceptual experiences as compared to non-perceptual experiences (for example, hallucinations), and simply rejecting the decisiveness principle says nothing about what is distinctive about perceptual experience, beyond its not being *necessitated*, by the decisiveness principle, as the same type of experience as non-perceptual experience. If Fish thinks that we would be entitled, given rejection of the decisiveness principle, to say, more strongly, that perceptual experiences are of a different type to, for example, hallucinatory ones, then that also seems too weak, since disjunctivism should say more about what type they are, beyond their simply not being the same type as the others. Second, it seems wrong, too, to *equate* non-disjunctivism with acceptance of the decisiveness principle. The reason is that someone might think that there is no necessity to the decisiveness principle at all but that there are other good reasons for holding that there is a shared common experiential element to perceptions and, say, hallucinations.

Fish further recommends that we understand the decisiveness principle and the dispute about it as *methodological*. Thus, he talks of the 'underlying methodological disagreement between the two parties' and he calls the principle 'a methodological principle'.<sup>9</sup> My first comment is that this is not a particularly

8. Fish, *op cit.*, fn. 2.

9. Fish, *op. cit.*

illuminating suggestion because it is quite obscure what the term ‘methodological’ means, particularly as applied to the decisiveness principle. If it means anything, presumably it means this; the decisiveness principle is to be read as proposing that we say of experiences which are indistinguishable that they belong to the same (ontologically fundamental) kind as a means to some end, as, that is, a method to achieve that end. It is also, presumably, an implication of this that the recommended remark considered in itself is not to be regarded as true or false. What can be assessed as true or false is the overall thesis that incorporating the sameness claim is the best way to achieve some end or goal. This makes the overall issue one about the method for achieving something.<sup>10</sup> Second, Fish, as far as I can see, offers little reason to interpret the issue as methodological. One argument that he can be read as advancing (although I do not claim that he is actually advancing) against the idea that there is a factual issue over the sameness claim (rather than a methodological issue) is that various arguments against the principle which clearly treat it as factual are not cogent. He mentions, for example, and rejects as irrelevant an argument in favour of non-disjunctivism based on the presence of a ‘substantial physical common factor’ to perceptual and non-perceptual experiences.<sup>11</sup> However, the failure of certain arguments which are based on the assumption that the issue is a factual one is not evidence that it is not a factual dispute. Apart from that I do not think that Fish offers any evidence. Third, Fish does need to convince us of the methodological interpretation because that is the most original aspect of his account. Indeed, it had not occurred to anyone, disjunctivist or non-disjunctivist, prior to Fish that the issue is methodological. The group whose view might seem to Fish to merit the gloss ‘methodological’ are those who deny the possibility of two different types of

10. I am guided here by the thought that if a dispute is methodological then it can be expressed as one about a claim of the form ‘Method M is the best method to achieve goal G’. I have tried to express Fish’s claim along lines amounting to this. I am also influenced in the interpretation developed at this stage by Fish’s remark that the dispute is akin to one over ‘competing research strategies’ and his remark that we should ‘avoid the immediate ontological question of whether or not a common “sensory state” exists’.

11. Fish, *op. cit.* fn. 5.

experiences being such that undergoing them can seem the same to the subject. It is more plausible, though, to interpret them as thinking that the decisiveness principle is an *a priori* necessary truth, and that, I think, is how they think of themselves. Fish needs to dislodge the more or less universal assumption that the issue is a factual, truth-assessable, one, and this makes his failure to provide any evidence in favour of his view worrying. Fourth, there seems to be a tension or inconsistency in Fish's view. Although Fish proposes that the issue is methodological he also holds that 'there is an important factual dispute.'<sup>12</sup> It is not easy to understand how the issue can be *both* factual and methodological. Further, if Fish holds that there is a factual dispute it is hard to understand why he does not think that that is what divides the non-disjunctivist and the disjunctivist. Finally, it seems to me that I do understand the claim that two experiences are the same type of experience, in such a way that it can, perhaps after some further clarification, be regarded as a claim which is, in itself, interpretable, as either true or false.

It may be responded that, perhaps, in describing the issue as methodological Fish is doing no more than noting that there is a need to locate good grounds, that is to say, a sound method, for determining whether disjunctivism is correct or not. Clearly, if this is what is meant then some of the comments above cease to be appropriate, and, moreover, it would be a point that no one could dispute. However, the description of the debate as methodological would then not tell us anything as to what the central *issue* is. We would then be left with thought (a), against which I have already objected.

I have argued that it is wrong to treat the dispute between non-disjunctivists and disjunctivists as a disagreement over the correctness of the decisiveness principle, and that there is nothing attractive to the proposal that the issue is methodological. There are, though, three respects worth emphasising in which I agree with Fish. The first is that disjunctivism is inconsistent with the decisiveness principle.<sup>13</sup> The second is that the main

12. Fish, *op. cit.*

13. Since, as I have argued, Fish is wrong to call the decisiveness principle 'methodological', it is better to treat the principle as a proposed (*a priori*) necessary truth. How should it be opposed? The simplest point is this; in general, that *x* is indistinguishable from *y* (from a certain perspective) does not mean that *x* is of the

claim of disjunctivism is about the contrasting nature of different sorts of experiences. If I am right this means, as I shall argue, that it is not tied to the formulation of a thesis employing the notion of disjunction. Third, Fish is right to suggest that there is a need to consider, as he does in Section IV, what good reasons there are or might be to favour one view over the other. If we reject the decisiveness principle as settling the debate, we need grounds to favour one approach. This challenge, I think, applies to both parties, particularly to disjunctivists. Why should that conception of perceptual experience deserve our assent? Fish is right to take this seriously.

How, then, should we characterise the issue?

### III

*An Alternative Approach.* I want to present my own positive suggestions in a series of four, rather condensed, remarks. The aim is not complete explicitness and clarity, but rather a plausible fixing of directions.

(i) *The Thesis of Disjunctivism.* Experiences are one fundamental sort of occurrence. We think of some of these experiences as *perceptual* experiences. It may be that we are not entirely sure of the extension of the category of perceptual experience. For example, should we think of the occurrence of certain sensations as really perceptions of our bodies? Here, though, we need to focus on those experiences that we consider to be perceptions of our environment, for example, the experience of seeing things around us. As well as such perceptual experiences there are experiences which are certainly not perceptions of the environment, but which when undergone, are (or can be) easily mistaken for such perceptual experiences. There are, for example, certain sorts of after-images and hallucinations. Now, a thesis that seems perfectly intelligible to me, and which many philosophers have held, and do hold, is that these experiential occurrences, which we classify in different ways (as, for

same nature as *y*. We need only recall Austin's example of the shaped yellow bar of soap and the lemon, which are indistinguishable to look at. Supporters of the principle owe us some strong reason to agree that this simple point does not also apply to experiences and their kinds. I do not see therefore that the decisiveness principle is particularly attractive. For a subtle and deep discussion see Martin 1997.

example, perceptions or non-perceptions), are, in respect of the experiential element in them, of the same fundamental sort. They are, in a fundamental sense, alike. Clearly, there are different and competing accounts of what their similar nature is, but one aspect of this similarity must be that the experiences themselves, in their nature, do not involve or have as constituents, any items in the external environment. This is a consequence of the thesis of a shared nature, together with our conviction that the non-perceptual experiences do not have such items as constituents. This thesis, that all such experiences, both perceptual and non-perceptual, have the same nature and, therefore, do not reach out to, or involve as constituents, items external to the subject, is what I take Hinton to have meant (at least in connection to visual experience) by talk of a 'common visual element', an idea which it was his main purpose to oppose. If someone subscribes to the idea of a common visual element and also accepts that it is right to distinguish between experiences which are components of a perception and those experiences which are not, then the difference must be thought of as consisting in features external to the experiences, such as their respective causes.

Now, my proposal is that the thesis that 'disjunctivism' stands for is precisely the *denial* of the common visual element claim. It, therefore, represents the thought that the experience in a genuinely perceptual case has a different nature to the experience involved in a non-perceptual case. It is not exhausted, however, by the simple denial of a common nature, but involves also the characterisation of the difference between the perceptual and non-perceptual in terms of the different constituents of the experiences involved.<sup>14</sup> The experience in a perceptual case in its

14. I think that the thesis that I am suggesting 'disjunctivism' stands for is more or less the idea that John Foster calls Strong Direct Realism in Foster 2000. He first defines (p. 10) the thesis that perception is what he calls psychologically mediated by a non-essentially perceptual psychological state. A supporter of this claim believes that the mediating psychological state counts as perceptual, when it does count as perceptual, in virtue of certain further relational non-psychological facts, for example, facts about causation. Foster then introduces the denial of this thesis, and calls it Strong Direct Realism. So the Strong Direct Realist denies that there is a common psychological state (i.e., experience) to both the perceptual and the non-perceptual cases. Foster, of course, is opposed to Strong Direct Realism. The point here is not the truth or defensibility of claims, but a formulation which might generate some convergence about what is at issue, and I sense that convergence between what I am calling disjunctivism and what Foster calls Strong Direct Realism.

nature reaches out to and involves the perceived external object, not so the experience in other cases.<sup>15</sup>

(ii) *Disjunctivism and Disjunctions.* If that is the way to think of the thesis of disjunctivism, it is reasonable to ask what role disjunctions or theses about disjunctions have in relation to the *central claim*? We can certainly employ 'or' in stating the thesis that I have identified as disjunctivism. Thus, we can take a neutral description which ranges across the set of relevant experiences, for example, experience in which it looks to the subject as there is a table before him. If we call these T-experiences, we can then express a restricted version of the thesis in the claim that T-experiences are *either* experiences of a sort which involve objects in the external environment as constituents (that is the perceptual case) *or* are experiences of a different sort (or sorts) which do not. It is, though, perfectly possible, as I see it, to express the thesis without employing the term 'or'. We can say this; T-experiences can be external object involving experiences and (or but) they can also be another type of experience which does not involve such objects. It should be concluded, I suggest, that the basic claim has nothing *essentially* to do with disjunction. It may be said, too, that there is something misleading about the name under which the doctrine is known.

However, this conclusion does not rule out that there are true theses the expression of which essentially employs the concept of disjunction (or a logical equivalent) and which may figure in arguments for disjunctivism, or which may express truths about experience, or about some basic experience concepts, and which may therefore form part of a complete *defence* of what I have called disjunctivism.

(iii) *Disjunctivism and Naïve Realism.* What, then, is the relation between disjunctivism as elucidated here and the position in the

15. There is the issue whether disjunctivism, so explained, is true or false. But there is also the issue whether efforts at conceptual analysis of perceptual concepts are entitled to assume the falsity of disjunctivism. My own earlier papers in effect were arguing that they were not so entitled. The little argument of mine that Fish criticises in Section IV was not meant to show that disjunctivism is true, but rather that since there is no manifest effect end in perceptual experience it is unlikely that our concept of perception will have a causal structure.

philosophy of perception called 'naïve realism'? 'Naïve realism' is, of course, a term of art and it needs to have its significance fixed. However, I think that there is something to be said for taking that name to stand for the following thesis about experiences which are perceptual; if an experience E is a genuine perception by subject S of object O then the occurrence of E places S in such a relation to O that were S able to entertain demonstrative thoughts (and was equipped with the necessary concepts) then S could entertain the *true* demonstrative thought 'that is O.'<sup>16</sup> The point (or part of the point) of this way of putting what naïve realism claims is to capture what philosophers who are sceptical of the truth of naïve realism are wishing to deny, and to capture it in a way that explains why their denial of naïve realism seems so significant. The elucidation delivers that significance since if naïve realism is false it would seem to follow that a fundamental demonstrative type of judgement which we regularly rely on should be viewed as false.

There are three remarks I wish to make when comparing disjunctivism (D) and naïve realism (NR):

- (a) It is clear that we cannot equate D and NR. They are defined in quite different ways. NR is a thesis about the sort of true judgement a perceptual experience (given certain assumptions) enables its subject to entertain. D is a thesis about the constituents or extent of perceptual experiences.
- (b) It is intuitively plausible to say that if D were true then NR would be true. Even in this direction, though, the link between D and NR is not completely obvious. Thus, it is not obvious that the fact that O is a constituent of an experience E entails that E places its subject in a position to have a true a demonstrative thought directed at O. If one is a materialist one might suppose that a particular experience involves a certain physical object as a constituent (say, certain items in a certain brain region) without those items thereby becoming available for an object directed thought by the subject. D would not, therefore, be a complete explanation of the object directedness of perceptual experience. Perhaps, though, it

16. See Snowdon 1992, especially Sections 5, 6, and 8, for a much fuller development of this idea.

is plausible to say that if a perceptual experience involves an object *O* in a certain way (which a fuller account will spell out) then *O* will thereby be available for demonstrative thought.

- (c) What is not at all obvious is that the falsity of *D* would entail the falsity of *NR*. There is nothing obviously impossible about an experience *E* occurring in such a way involving *O* and in such a context that its subject is thereby enabled to have a certain style of demonstrative contact with *O* even though *O* is itself totally distinct from *E*. I am far from wanting to say that is possible, but it is certainly not obviously impossible.

The important point is that any assertion of the dependency of the truth of *NR* on *D* needs substantial support.

(iv) *Disjunctivism and Knowledge*. I have proposed that the central claim under the banner of disjunctivism is a claim about the nature of experience. It represents, that is, a claim in the philosophical theory of perceptual experience. It is not clear, though, that this characterisation fits the thesis that McDowell has famously endorsed. In the version of his thesis that I shall concentrate on, he puts the view he thinks true in these words. ‘But suppose we say—not at all unnaturally—that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive case is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer.’<sup>17</sup> Now, I take it that this talk of a ‘fact itself being disclosed’ in the non-deceptive case receives an explanation a little later when McDowell adds; ‘One can hardly countenance the idea of having a fact made manifest within the reach of one’s experience, without supposing that that would

17. McDowell 1998, pp. 386–387.

make knowledge of the fact available to one.<sup>18</sup> I think that it is reasonable to suppose, then, that this confers on McDowell's talk of 'fact manifestation' an epistemological interpretation. McDowell adds, though, that the epistemological upshot of fact manifestation is to make knowledge *available*, rather than 'actually conferring the knowledge on one'.<sup>19</sup> This is to allow that the subject might be convinced that his senses are 'out of order' when in fact they are not, and so the subject does not acquire the knowledge that is *available to him*. McDowell adds that 'for some purposes the notion of being in a position to know something is more interesting than the notion of actually knowing it.'<sup>20</sup>

We can, therefore, read McDowell as claiming something along these lines; we can divide cases where it is true that it appears to the subject as if P into two sort; one is where the subject is in a position to know that P, in that the fact that P is manifested to him, and others where the subject is in a position to know merely that it appears to be P. The fundamental division between the cases is to be drawn in epistemological terms.

Now, the point that I wish to make is that if the asserted contrast within the range of experiences all of which can be characterised as being cases of appearance that P is between those in which the subject is in a position to know that P and those in which the subject can merely know that it appears that P, then, without further substantial argument, there is no reason to ascribe to McDowell acceptance of the claim about perceptual experience that I have been suggesting is the distinctive claim of disjunctivism. For why cannot a single basic sort of (inner) experience have quite different epistemological significance in different cases, depending, say, on the context and on facts about causation?

This is not meant as critical of the categories that McDowell employs or of the disjunctive thesis that he endorses. The aim, rather, is to display McDowell's thesis as a distinct claim from the other disjunctive thesis and to oppose a tendency, present in

18. McDowell 1998, p. 390.

19. *Ibid.*, fn. 37.

20. *Ibid.* Presumably, McDowell would admit as another example of this kind cases where the percipient has no worries that about the state of his senses, but has, rather, mistaken worries about the condition of the environment, say that a strange and distorting light is suffusing the region.

plenty of discussions of disjunctivism, to treat McDowell's way of putting it as simply a variant of the other claim.

#### IV

*Conclusion.* Fish proposes that a clarification of disjunctivism is in order, and with that I agree. I am not persuaded, however, by his suggested clarification, and have tried to advance my own. It is also important, though, to distinguish what disjunctivism stands for from other distinct and important ideas in the philosophy of perception, and I have tried to do that too.<sup>21</sup>

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University College London*  
*p.snowdon@ucl.ac.uk*

#### REFERENCES

- Ayers, M. R., 2001, 'What is Realism?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 75, pp. 91–110.
- Child, W., 1994, *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Fish, W., 2004, 'Disjunctivism and Non-Disjunctivism: How to make Sense of the Debate', this volume.
- Foster, J., 2000, *The Nature of Perception*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hinton, M., 1973, *Experiences*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Martin, M. G. F., 1997, 'The Reality of Appearances', in (ed) M. Sainsbury, *Thought and Ontology*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.
- Martin, M. G. F., 2002, 'The Transparency of Experience', in *Mind and Language* Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 376–425.
- Martin, M. G. F., 2003, 'The Limits of Self-Awareness', in *Philosophical Studies* 2003 pp. 37–89.
- McDowell, J., 1998, 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge', in *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, Harvard University Press, London, pp. 369–394.
- Snowdon, P. F., 1980–1, 'Perception, Vision and Causation', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.
- Snowdon, P. F., 1990, 'The Objects of Perception', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 64.
- Snowdon, P. F., 1992, 'How to Interpret "Direct Perception"', in T. Crane (ed.), *The Contents of Experience*, CUP, Cambridge.
- Snowdon, P. F., 2002, 'What is Realism?', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 76, pp. 201–228.
- Williamson, T., 2000, *Knowledge and its Limits*, OUP, Oxford.

21. I wish to thank Stephan Blatti for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.