

‘Metachoric’ experiences

metachoric experience = experience in which the whole of a subject’s visual field is replaced by a hallucinatory one

Our research on lucid dreams, false awakenings and out-of-the-body experiences highlighted the capacity of the brain to generate experiences which provide a convincing replica of normal perceptual experience.

In *lucid dreams*, the subject appears to be relatively ‘normal’ in terms of cognitive faculties, as evidenced by the fact that he has awareness of his actual state, i.e. that he is asleep and that the experiences he is having are hallucinatory. In *false awakenings*, the subject appears to ‘see’ a convincing replica of his normal bedroom environment. He may then see monsters or other figures of various kinds, apparently superimposed on this otherwise faithful replica, although in fact the whole of the visual field is of course hallucinatory. In *out-of-the-body experiences* (OBEs) the subject is typically awake but appears to be seeing his environment from the wrong perspective — often as if from a point of view above his head. Again, the brain appears to be generating a highly convincing replica of the normal environment, visually speaking.

In the case of OBEs, there was also the observation that the hallucinatory state could be entered with little or no awareness that a discontinuity had taken place from (a) actually seeing the environment to (b) *hallucinating* the same environment, albeit from a different perspective.

These experiences suggested a departure from the previous idea of a hallucination as an isolated area of the visual field which was generated erroneously by the brain, and then superimposed on the rest of the visual field which was generated from actual input in the normal way.

Certain features of our research on *apparitional* cases — cases where an apparitional figure or object is seen against the background of the normal environment — led us to the possibility that many apparitional experiences, and possibly all of them, were analogous to lucid dreams and OBEs in being *totally* hallucinatory. That is to say, rather than the experience consisting of normal perception plus a finite hallucinatory element (the two elements being integrated in some way), the perceptual environment is entirely replaced by a hallucinatory one, at least as long as the apparitional figure is being perceived.

We proposed the term *metachoric* to designate such experiences in which the normal perceptual environment is entirely replaced by a hallucinatory one (see Green and McCreery 1975).

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Apparitions may be characterised as hallucinations which are (a) ‘projected’ on to the external world and (b) consist of unrealistic or non-existent elements which appear more or less fully integrated into the rest of the perceptual field. On the face of it, the latter component – the apparently veridical representation of a greater or lesser part of the subject’s physical environment – consists of normal percepts based on sensory input. This seems to be the interpretation of the situation assumed by the philosopher C.D. Broad, for example.

Broad (1962) contrasts dreams and apparitional experiences in the following terms. He writes of dreams: ‘The whole context is hallucinatory, though certain features in it may ultimately originate in specific sensory stimuli from within or without the dreamer’s body’. He contrasts with this the situation of the sane person in good health who suddenly has what he calls ‘an hallucinatory quasi-perception’ when he is wide awake. Here, writes Broad, ‘the principal figure, and possibly some of its immediate appurtenances, are hallucinatory; but the background is usually that of normal waking sense-perception.’

It is perhaps not entirely clear from these remarks whether Broad is merely describing the empirical facts of the situation, namely that

some of what the percipient is seeing corresponds to the physical environment and some of it does not, or whether he is asserting a qualitative or philosophical difference in status between the figure of the apparition and the background environment. However, this very ambiguity perhaps indicates that there is an area of unanalysed assumption in what one might call the conventional view of hallucinations, namely that it is only the unrealistic or non-existent element that is hallucinatory while the rest of the environment continues to be perceived normally.

The conventional view of hallucinations seems also to have been held, at least implicitly, by the authors of one of the earliest studies of hallucinations in the sane, Henry Sidgwick, who wrote of the person perceiving an apparition:

[T]he percipient, while experiencing the hallucination, is at the same time normally perceiving real objects within his range of vision, and the hallucinatory percept is brought into relation with these, so as to occupy apparently as definite a place in the field of vision. The phantasm appears to stand side by side with real objects (Sidgwick *et al.* 1894).

In contrast to these views, we have suggested that the whole visual field may be hallucinatory in such experiences, and not just the unrealistic or non-existent element. This interpretation is clearly indicated in a case such as the following, which is taken from our collection. It is of the 'waking dream' type, in which the subject's normal perceptual environment was temporarily completely displaced by a hallucinatory one. The subject was a New Zealander and the experience took place on a visit to England, when she went to stay at what had once been a priory.

On arrival, a lady in charge took us through the entrance hall, and opened a door on the far side, right on [the] banks of [the] river. As we stood in the afternoon sunshine, suddenly everything was black and rain seemed to be slanting down, And there was a small boat, and seven or eight figures in flapping black clothes, hurrying to get into the building – there was a great feeling of fear. I was surprised to find shortly that I still stood in the afternoon sun.

There are a number of other considerations which led us to suggest that in a sense all apparitional cases may be of the waking dream type, with a complete substitution of the perceptual environment

with a hallucinatory one. For a full account we would refer the interested reader to the first five chapters of our book *Apparitions*. However, we will mention one other class of apparitional case in which the metachoric interpretation is clearly indicated, which is those in which the illumination of the whole environment appears altered during the experience. The following is a case of this type:

On New Year's Eve, 1852, I awoke about 12.40 a.m. and found my room so brilliantly illuminated that I imagined I had forgotten to put out my candle, and that something must have caught fire. I got up and, on looking round, saw at the foot of the bed a coffin resting on chairs, on each of which was a silver candlestick with a large wax taper alight; in the coffin was a figure of my father. I put out my hand and touched him, when it became quite dark. I felt for my matchbox and lighted a candle, looked at my watch and wrote down the time. The next morning I told a friend, with whom I was staying in Paris at the time, and on the morning of the 2nd of January we received a letter from Marseilles, saying that my father had died suddenly at 12.40 on New Year's Eve, and that he had expressed such a strong wish to see his youngest child (i.e., myself) again just before his death. (Gurney, Myers and Podmore 1886)

In a case such as this, where a dark room appears illuminated, we are compelled to the conclusion that the whole scene is hallucinatory, at least until the room again 'becomes dark'. This despite the fact the representation of the room may have been realistic except for certain elements such as the coffin and the candles. That is to say, apart from those added elements, the subject may have 'seen' the room much as it was at the time.

What we propose as a hypothesis is that many, if not all, apparitional experiences are of the metachoric type, like the two quoted above – even when a large part of the subject's visual environment appears to him or her to remain unchanged throughout the experience, and there is no obvious clue to give away the hallucinatory status of these unchanged parts, such as an apparent change in the overall level of illumination.

Employing the philosophical device of Occam's razor may be appropriate here. The situation is that there is a minority of cases of waking hallucination in which the metachoric hypothesis is forced upon us, as in the two cases just quoted. As far as we can see there are no cases in which the metachoric interpretation is impossible and the conventional interpretation the only possible one. Therefore, to retain the conventional interpretation in those

cases where the metachoric one is not forced upon us requires us to postulate two distinct kinds of mechanism, the one metachoric and the other 'partial', for what appears to be a relatively homogeneous class of experience.

For example, applying the conventional interpretation to the second of the two cases cited, it would appear to be relatively contingent matter that the hallucinatory lighting affects the whole scene, and not just part of it (as in the case of the majority of hypnopompic apparitions, where a figure or object may be 'seen' in spite of a surrounding dark background).

Similarly, it seems a relatively inessential feature of the first case that the whole visual environment is temporarily replaced with a hallucinatory one, rather than only part of it as in those cases in which only a figure is 'seen'.

By contrast, to adopt the metachoric interpretation for *all* cases involves us in postulating only one basic hallucinatory process behind the whole class of experiences.

It does not seem to have been generally realised that what we have called the conventional view of hallucinations, as expressed or implied by Professor Broad and the Sidgwick report quoted above, poses a serious theoretical difficulty. This is the question of how the hallucinatory percept of an apparitional figure is integrated with the apparently normal percepts of the environment surrounding it.

If the hallucinated subject is continuing during his hallucination to perceive most of his environment in the normal way, and hallucinating only a part of his visual field, for example, that occupied by a human figure which is not really there, then in many cases this would seem to involve us in positing the occurrence of two kinds of hallucination at once, a negative as well as a positive one. The reason for this is that many hallucinatory experiences in normal people involve opaque-seeming rather than transparent hallucinatory elements. For example, we found that that 91 per cent of our subjects reporting apparitional experiences, when questioned on the degree of apparent transparency of what they had seen, described the apparition as looking completely opaque like a normal

object so that nothing was visible through it, rather than transparent so that they could see what was behind it. In many cases, therefore, we have to explain why the hallucinatory element appears to 'block out' that part of the real environment which lies 'behind' it.

One way we could explain this is to suppose that the subject has a negative hallucination for the part of the environment behind the hallucinatory figure. M.J. Horowitz seems to be referring to this possibility when, in defining hallucinations, he writes:

The 'ideal' hallucination [...] is independent of immediate external information except as external information is 'negatively hallucinated' to allow conceptual 'space' for the (externalized) information of internal origin. (Horowitz 1975)

However, Horowitz does not seem to have appreciated the difficulties this model would raise. On this view of the matter, we should also have to suppose in many cases that the negative hallucination moves and changes its configuration in such a way as continually to coincide with just that part of the visual field which is occupied by the positive hallucination. Sidgwick et al. noted that in more than half of their visual cases the hallucinatory figure was seen to move in various ways. Likewise we found that 66 per cent of our own subjects, when asked, reported that the apparition moved in some way in relation to the rest of the visual environment.

The failure to notice this problem may partly result from the relative neglect of hallucinatory experiences in the sane, and the corresponding focus on the hallucinations of the mentally ill. The latter appear to be predominantly auditory, at least in the for which most often attract the attention of physicians, and in the auditory modality the problem of integration is less obvious. The fact that hallucinations in mental illness often occur in the context of other symptoms, such as delusional beliefs, may also have tended to distract attention away from the phenomenology of experiences themselves, or at any rate made such a study difficult compared with the comparable enterprise in relation to hallucinations of the sane.

The only writer we have come across who has clearly articulated the problem of how hallucinations and normal percepts are integrated is the pioneer electroencephalographer,

W.G. Walter. He illustrates the problem by reference to the case of an epileptic patient he studied.

[A patient who was referred to our clinic in Bristol during the war with a shell wound in the posterior part left temporal lobe] had attacks preceded by a vision of an old crone dressed in rags and [...] emitting a disagreeable smell, who would clatter about in the kitchen, apparently cooking some unsavoury dish. He was alarmed by this recurrent vision which resembled the witch of a fairy tale, but as she seemed to mean no harm he accepted her as a familiar, and mentioned that – apart from her ragged clothes and odour – she rather resembled his grandmother. (Walter 1960)

As Walter points out, in a case such as this, the brain region affected is such as to involve disturbance of three sensory modalities at once – vision, hearing and olfaction – as well as the the evocation of affective elements. He writes:

The difficulty in such cases is to explain how the brain lesion could produce so integrated a pattern of illusion, in which the neurogenic components, the crocodile or the crone, were projected precisely on the physical background so as to take their place within the framework of external reality. Illusory figures of this sort will often come through a doorway, sit on a chair, use an implement and yet be appreciated sooner or later as illusory or unreal. (*ibid.*)

The necessity of positing two separate but simultaneous hallucinatory processes, the positive and the negative, to account for certain types of visual experience is removed if we adopt the metachoric interpretation. Experiences in which the hallucinatory element appears integrated into the subject's real environment do not present a special problem for such a view, regardless of whether the hallucinatory element appears opaque or transparent. If the whole scene is hallucinatory then there seems no a priori reason why the one unrealistic element, that is, the apparitional figure, should not appear opaque rather than transparent. That it is relatively 'easy' for a person to hallucinate the entire field of vision, and in such a way as to convince the subject that he is seeing his actual environment, is demonstrated by experiences such as false awakenings and out-of-the-body experiences.

If our model of apparitional experiences is correct, there are at least four types of metachoric experience: lucid dreams, false awakenings, out-of-the-body experiences and apparitional experiences.

In general, we believe that the metachoric interpretation resolves the problem that Walter raised of how purely hallucinatory perceptions are integrated with input-based perceptions. If we regard the whole field of vision as hallucinatory during, for example, the aura preceding the epileptic attacks of Walter's patient, then the problem of integration does not arise.

The metachoric model of waking hallucinations suggests that they may have a closer relationship with lucid dreams than might otherwise appear. Thus in both types of experience the subject is surrounded by a completely hallucinatory environment, the difference being that in lucid dreams this is initiated during sleep whereas during an apparitional experience it is initiated from the waking state.

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The above text is an edited extract from:

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