

Philosophy 136
The Philosophy of Perception
Handout 10
Tuesday 4 October 2005

1. *Do Hume and Berkeley really make the mistake that Anscombe supposes?*

Does Hume (or Berkeley) make the same supposition about *thinking* as he does about *sensing*? This is difficult to answer in the case of Berkeley because he only ever talks about our ideas, and doesn't really say much about thought as opposed to perception. Hume on the other hand contrasts impressions and ideas – and talks of feeling versus thinking.

Compare here, on the other hand, Malebranche:

I think everyone agrees that we do not perceive objects external to us by themselves. We see the sun, stars, and an infinity of objects external to us; and it is not likely that the soul should leave the body and stroll about the heavens, as it were, in order to behold all these objects. Thus, it does not see them by themselves, and our mind's immediate object when it sees the sun, for example, is not the sun, but something that is intimately joined to our soul, and this is what I call an *idea*. Thus by the word *idea*, I mean here nothing other than the immediate object, or the object closest to the mind, when it perceives something, i.e., that which affects and modifies the mind with the perception it has of an object. (Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, Bk. 3, Pt. 2, Ch.1, p.27.)

If Hume and other proponents of the argument from illusion employ the argument in the case of sensing but not in the case of thought in general, then they are not in general confused about the status of intentional objects in Anscombe's sense. That is, they do not suppose that when you think about an object, there must be some entity in mind about which you think.

If that is so, then why do they make a mistake in the case of sensing? Why is sensing so special?

2. *A Further Assumption*

Burnyeat claims that these philosophers are in thrall to the 'window model' of vision, which he characterises variously so:

...that we look through our eyes as through a window... (83)The window-pane should be transparent, without spot or blemish. Or better, since Greek windows were unglazed, the eye should be an aperture with no pane at all. There is as it were nothing between the perceiver and the thing he perceives... (85) at the core of the perceptual experience there will be an unmediated knowing, like Moore's diaphanous awareness of blue, and when a suitable story has been told about the objects of this knowing, the problem of conflicting appearances is solved.(95)

Whether it is the flawless close-up vision or the prehensive grasp, whether it secures a whole object or only some part of the surface of one or just a non-physical substitute for these, such pictures have their origin in our earliest and deepest experience. If they elicited a smile, it should have been a smile of recognition and not contempt. For if, as Heraclitus advised, we remember our dreams, we will recognize that there was a time in our own lives when the problem of conflicting appearances engaged our strongest feelings...(108)

Why should it matter whether the principle is hidden in our 'earliest and deepest' experience? Burnyeat wants to explain why we should find the argument compelling given that we should reject the conclusion.

So, the problem is: why do we think the principle has any claim on us?

Howard Robinson's *Phenomenal Principle*:

If there sensibly appears to a subject to be something which possesses a particular sensible quality then there is something of which the subject is aware which does possess that sensible quality. (Robinson, *Perception*, 1994, p.32.)

3. Hume's Negative Conclusion

...it, was, therefore, nothing, but its image, which was present to the mind.

Suppose Hume is right in his positive conclusion, and we do perceive an image or impression when we see a visual illusion. What shows that we don't see the table on that occasion?

Hume must be assuming that if the image or impression is the explanation for the facts about how things look to us, then the table in that case is not.

Compare this with what we said about the criterion for something's being the immediate object of perception.

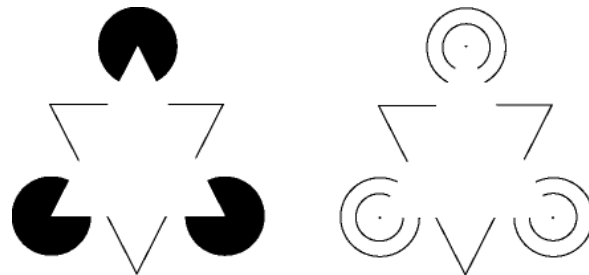
But if we don't see tables when we misperceive them in some way; still what shows that we *never* see a table? What shows in cases where there does not seem to be any misperception that still only the image is seen and not the table?

But if we are prepared to admit that there may be, even that there are, *some* cases in which 'delusive and veridical perceptions' really are indistinguishable, does this admission require us to drag in, or even let in sense-data? No. For even if we were to make the prior admission (which we have so far found no reason to make) that in the 'abnormal' cases we perceive sense-data, we should not be obliged to extend this admission to the 'normal' cases too. For why on earth should it *not* be the case that, in some few instances, perceiving one sort of thing is exactly like perceiving another? (J.L. Austin, *Sense & Sensibilia*, p.52.)

4. The Argument from Hallucination

Perceptual illusion: one perceives some object yet misperceives it to be some way

Perceptual hallucination: how things appear to one is not how one perceives one's physical, public environment to be.



Kanisza Illusion

Note that in this diagram there are illusory objects (the white triangles) but we don't suppose that these illusions are hallucinatory, even though there is no object in the environment which matches how things look to one.

The argument from illusion or hallucination needs to establish:

(a) in some significant kind of case, the subject is not (immediately) perceiving any physical object; and (b) if the subject is not (immediately) perceiving any physical object in situation (a) then the subject is not (immediately) perceiving any physical object in any situation.

Criticisms of the argument from illusion often focus on (a). Why should the fact that you are misperceiving an object be reason to suppose that you are perceiving something else entirely?

The importance of focusing on cases of hallucination, therefore, is that typically we accept that in those cases (a) holds. The question, then, is whether we can show that (b) must hold.

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