

Philosophy 136
The Philosophy of Perception
Handout 11
Thursday 6 October 2005

1. *The Problem for the Argument from Illusion*

The argument must *first* establish that,

- (A) In the case of misperception or illusion, the subject is aware of an impression, image or sense-datum and *not* aware of the physical object;

And then show that,

- (B) If the subject is only aware of the impression, image or sense-datum in the case of illusion, then the subject is *not* aware of the physical object even in cases which are not clear cases of illusion.

We have seen already that there are problems with establishing (A) – we must assume something like Robinson’s *Phenomenal Principle*, and we have seen no justification for that; we must also appeal to some further consideration to show that only the image or impression could be the object of awareness. (A) seems to have the consequence that, strictly speaking, you can never misperceive an object.

(B) is equally problematic. If you sometimes perceive images and not objects, why should it follow that you always perceive only images?

Some philosophers argue that the qualitative similarity between illusions and perceptions gives you reason to give the same account of both.

It is this line of thought which Austin is so withering about. Decoy ducks can look just like real ducks. So why can’t sense-data appear just like real objects? In which case there would be an indiscernible difference between the two kinds of sense experience, despite the one being awareness of an impression and the other the awareness of a duck.

The argument from hallucination avoids the first of these problems by looking at a special range of cases: those in which we all agree are not examples of perceiving something in the physical world: pure hallucinations.

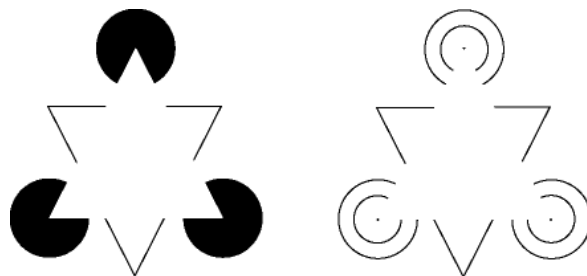
2. *The Contrast Between Illusion and Hallucination*

Roughly:

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.

But Compare:



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.

3. *Why are hallucinations relevant to the study of perception, though?*

There is no particular reason to suppose that the delusions or hallucinations of schizophrenics or other psychotic patients is remotely like our ordinary waking experience, or their experiences when not suffering a psychotic episode. It seems a subject of clinical study and empirical investigation to determine the similarity here, not just a matter of philosophical assumption.

The Cartesian Assumption

Consider your current perception of the environment around you. Perhaps you are staring out at the early Fall trees; or examining the spots on the ceiling; or trying to read what was written on the blackboard during the last class. It is quite conceivable for you that there should be a situation in which you could not tell that things were not as they are now: so it might seem to you as if you were then staring out at the early Fall trees, or examining the the ceiling, or looking at the blackboard, even though unknown to you in that situation you were not doing so. Your perspective on the situation would not, in that situation, distinguish how things were from how they are now.

Now let us say that how you are in that situation is a matter of having a sense experience which is not a case of perception.

This would be a *perfect* hallucination. One which, by our assumptions about the case, would be just like perceiving *from the point of view of the subject*. But note that, as we have introduced it, this *wouldn't* be a case of perceiving anything.

What does the mere possibility of this case tell us, though, about the nature of ordinary perception?

4. *The Causal Argument from Hallucination*

When we consider the possibility of artificially inducing perceptual experiences by electrical stimulation of the subject's nervous system, it seems impossible to deny that, for each genuine perception i.e. for each perception of a physical object, there could be a hallucinatory experience of exactly the same intrinsic psychological character. If this is so, then whenever someone perceives a physical object, his experiential state is, in itself, logically neutral between genuine perception and hallucination, and his perceptual awareness of the physical object is mediated by this experiential state... (Foster, A.J. Ayer, p.161)

Foster here seems to be assuming that for any veridical perception there is a corresponding perfect hallucination. What holds of the hallucination must also hold of the perception. And that this fact would seem to support the conclusion that perception of the world is *mediated*. How should we re-construct this argument?

Proposal: we show the following three assumptions to be inconsistent:

- (A) *Naïve Realism*: No instance of the specific kind of experience I have now, when seeing the white picket fence for what it is, could occur were I not to perceive such a mind-independent object as this.
- (B) *Common Kind Assumption*: whatever kind of mental, or more narrowly experiential, event occurs when one perceives, the very same kind of event could occur were one hallucinating.
- (C) *Experiential Naturalism*: our sense experiences are themselves part of the natural causal order, subject to broadly physical and psychological causes.