

Philosophy 136  
The Philosophy of Perception  
Handout 17  
Thursday 27 October 2005

1. *The Intentional Theory of Perception and Belief Analyses of Perception*

It is clear that the biological function of perception is to give the organism information about the current state of its own body and its physical environment, information that will assist the organism in the conduct of life. This is a most important clue to the *nature* of perception. It leads us to the view that perception is nothing but the acquiring of true or false beliefs concerning the current state of the organism's body and environment. (D.M. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, p.209.)

What, in general, is perception for?

It enables both thought and action directed out on the world: agents can think about objects that they perceive and they can gain knowledge or information about them when perceptual systems are working correctly.

But can we capture this by saying that perceiving just is the acquiring of belief?

2. *Disbelief in Perception*

One can perceive that things are a certain way; they can look a certain way; and yet one not come to believe they are that way.

First, an example of a familiar illusion:

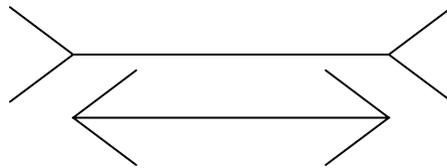


Fig. 1 The Müller-Lyer Illusion

In the Müller-Lyer illusion, the top line looks longer than the bottom line, but when you know about the illusion you no longer believe that the top line must be longer just because of how it looks. Your failure to acquire this belief does not stop this being a case of its looking to you as if the top line is longer.

So in this case one has the (illusory) perception of relative length but one does not acquire the belief. (The same can occur in veridical perception – cf. Anscombe's story about Frank Cioffi: the stick looked bent, the audience did not believe it was bent, yet the stick looked the way it was, and was bent.)

Armstrong suggests that perceiving is the acquisition *or disposition* to acquire the belief. But merely being disposed to acquire a belief doesn't pick out a unique or distinctive psychological state. For example if you stimulate a particular area of my amygdala I may come to believe that my children have been replaced by Martians (cf. the delusions of sufferers of Capgras Syndrome). But that I am so disposed to acquire the belief indicates nothing about any psychological state that I am now in.

3. *The Over-intellectualization of Perception*

The only events that can conceivably be regarded as data for a conscious, reasoning subject are *seemings* – events, that is, already imbued with (apparent) objective significance, and with a necessary, though resistible, propensity to influence our actions...

In general, it seems to me preferable to take the notion of *being in an information state with such-and-such content* as a primitive for philosophy, rather than to attempt to characterize it in terms of belief...

If we wish to define the states which the normal operation of the informational system produces in terms of belief, we shall have to adopt, quite generally, the manoeuvre undertaken by several philosophers in the theory of perception, and make the connection via some such phrase as

'*prima facie* inclination to believe'. But... I cannot help feeling this gets things the wrong way round. It is as well to reserve 'belief' for the notion of a far more sophisticated cognitive state: one that is connected with (and, in my opinion, defined in terms of) the notion of *judgement*, and so, also, connected with the notion of *reasons*. The operations of the informational system are more primitive. (Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, pp.124-5.)

We think other animals and human infants can perceive just as adult humans can, but we don't suppose that they can make the judgements, or appreciate the *reasons* for accepting claims that adult humans can. If 'belief' is tied to *judgement* and *reason*, such creatures lack belief (according to Evans), but they don't lack perceptions. So perceptual states aren't simply the operation of a system of beliefs.

#### 4. *Intentional Approaches to Perception*

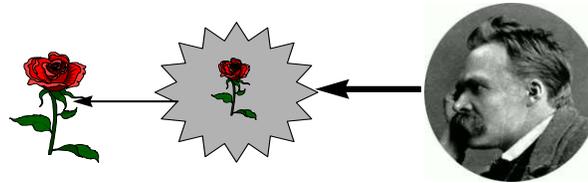
Given the first objection, one may deny that perception simply involves the attitude of belief – it is not either the mere acquiring of a belief, or the disposition to do so.

Given the second objection, one may suppose that it involves a different, more intellectually primitive state of mind, than belief or judgement.

*But* one may still wish to claim that it is an intentional state of mind, in some ways analogous to belief. It is the intentionality of perceptual experience which is to explain what is lacking in the sense-datum theory. How should it do that?

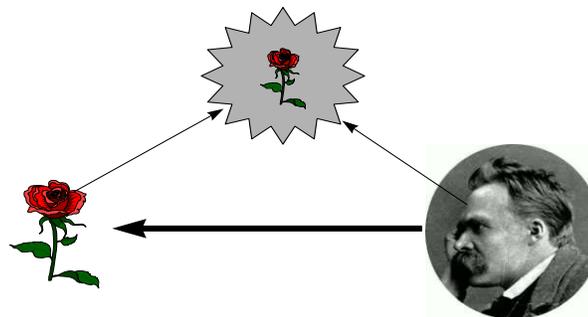
#### *The Sense-Datum Model*

Nietzsche is aware of the sense-datum of the rose and through being aware of the sense-datum is aware of the rose



#### *The Intentional Model*

Nietzsche is aware of the rose in virtue of how his experience represents his environment to be.



One is aware of the objects of perception in virtue of how one's experience represents the world to be, but one's experience could represent the world to be that way even if the objects were not there. The presence of the content in both perception and hallucination explains their common character. But one is aware of the objects of perception *immediately*—one is not aware of them through being aware of the content.