

Tim Crane and Craig French, ‘The problem of perception’

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1. The Ordinary Conception of Perceptual Experience

In this section we spell out the ordinary conception of perceptual experience. There are two central aspects to this: *Openness* (§1.1) and *Awareness* (§1.2).

1.1 Openness

On our ordinary conception of perceptual experience, perceptual experience is a form of “openness to the world”. We understand this more precisely as follows:

Openness: Perceptual experience, in its character, involves the presentation (as) of ordinary mind-independent objects to a subject, and such objects are experienced as *present* or *there* such that the character of experience is immediately responsive to the character of its objects.

To clarify this, we can break it down into two components: *Mind-Independence* (§1.1.1), and *Presence* (§1.1.2).

1.1.1 Mind-Independence

The first component of *Openness* is,

Mind-Independence: perceptual experience involves the presentation (as) of ordinary mind-independent objects.

On ‘object’: we assume a broad understanding of ‘object’ to encompass perceptible entities in mind-independent reality including material objects, but also features and other entities (e.g., events, quantities of stuff). *Mind-Independence* is thus a claim otherwise expressed as follows: perceptual experience is a presentation of, or is as of, a public, mind-independent *subject-matter*. On ‘ordinary’: *Mind-Independence* concerns *familiar* perceptible things, things that we admit as part of common sense ontology.

As P.F. Strawson argued, reflection on ordinary perceptual experience supports a characterization of it in terms of *Mind-Independence*: “mature sensible experience (in general) presents itself as, in Kantian phrase, an

immediate consciousness of the existence of things outside us" (1979: 97). Strawson begins his argument by asking how someone would typically respond to a request for a description of their current visual experience. He says that it is natural to give the following kind of answer: "I see the red light of the setting sun filtering through the black and thickly clustered branches of the elms; I see the dappled deer grazing in groups on the vivid green grass..." (1979: 97). There are two ideas implicit in this answer. One is that the description talks about objects and properties which are, on the face of it, things distinct from this particular experience. The other is that the description is "rich", describing the nature of the experience in terms of concepts like *deer* and *elms* and *the setting sun*. The description of the experience is not merely in terms of simple shapes and colours; but in terms of the things we encounter in the "lived world" in all their complexity. As Heidegger puts it,

We never ... originally and really perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things...; rather, we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-engine aeroplane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than any sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door slam in the house, and never hear acoustic sensations or mere sounds. (Heidegger (1977: 156))

It may be that descriptions of experience like this involve a commitment to the existence of things outside the experience; but surely it is possible to describe experience without this commitment? So let us suppose that we ask our imagined perceiver to repeat their description without committing themselves to the existence of things outside their experience, but without falsifying how their experience seems to them. Strawson claims that the best way for them to respond is to say "I had a visual experience such as it would have been natural to describe by saying that I saw..." and then to add the previous description of the trees and the deer etc. We give a description of our experience in terms of the ordinary objects of our world. And we do this even if we are trying not to commit ourselves to the existence of these objects.

Strawson's claim that perceptual experience strikes us as if it satisfies what we're calling *Mind-Independence* is not a philosophical theory, one that would (for example) refute scepticism, the view that we cannot know anything about the mind-independent world. Rather, it should be a starting

point for philosophical reflection on experience (1979: 94). This is why this intuitive datum of consciousness is not supposed to rule out idealism, the view that the objects and properties we perceive are in fact mind-dependent. The idealist need not disagree with Strawson that reflection on ordinary experience supports *Mind-Independence*. They will just hold that, for philosophical reasons, this is not how experience really is. *Mind-Independence*, they can say, is intuitively appealing but ultimately false as a characterization of experience and its objects.

1.1.2 Presence

The second component of *Openness* itself involves two components. First, the phenomenal character of an experience has something to do with its presented objects: experience is, *in its character*, a presentation of, or as of, ordinary objects; and second the character of perceptual experience involves the presentation of ordinary objects as *present* or *there* in that it is immediately responsive to the character of its objects.

Presence: the character of perceptual experience itself involves the presentation (as) of ordinary objects in such a way that it is immediately responsive to the character of its presented objects.

When we reflect upon how the phenomenal character of experience is, and try to “turn inwards” to describe the nature of the experience itself, the best way to do this is to describe the objects of experience and how they seem to us. It seems a simple matter to move to the further claim that the way these objects actually are is part of what determines the phenomenal character of an experience.

But this is to move too fast. For what can be said here about experience can also be said about belief: it is widely accepted that if I want to reflect upon the nature of my beliefs, the best way to do this is to describe the object or content of my belief: that is, what it is in the world that my belief is about. The things my beliefs are about can be as ‘objective’ as the things I perceive. So what is distinctive of the dependence of perceptual experience on its objects?

One answer is that when an object is perceptually experienced, it is experienced as “there”, “given” or “present to the mind” in a way in which it is not in belief, thought and many other mental states and events. Experience seems to involve a particular kind of “presence to the mind”. This “presence”

goes beyond the mere fact that the objects of experience must exist in order for the experience to be veridical. For the objects of knowledge must exist too, but states of knowledge do not, as such, have presence in the same way as perceptual experiences—except, of course, in the case when one knows something is there by perceiving it.

So what is this perceptual presence? Compare perceptual experience with pure thought. Pure thought, like experience, goes straight out to the world itself. But a difference between them is that in the case of thought, how the object of thought is at the moment one is thinking of it does not in any way constrain one's thinking of it; but in the case of perception it does. One's perception of a snow covered churchyard is immediately responsive to how the churchyard is now, as one is perceiving it. But one's (non-perceptual) thought need not be: in the middle of winter, one can imagine the churchyard as it is in spring, covered in autumn leaves, and one can think of it in all sorts of ways which are not the ways it presently is. This is not available in perception, because perception can only confront what is presently given: in this sense, it seems that you can only see or hear or touch what is there. It is because of this that perception is sometimes said to have an immediacy or vividness which thought lacks: this vividness derives from the fact that perceived objects and their properties are actually given to the perceiver when being perceived, and determine the nature of the character of the experience.

Openness is the combination of *Mind-Independence*, and *Presence*. It is most clearly understood when it applies to those perceptual experiences involved in genuine perception (e.g., when one sees a snow covered churchyard for what it is). But we understand *Openness* as applying more broadly to even perceptual experiences which don't involve perceptual contact with the world. This is why we have formulated it in terms of the presentation '(as) of' ordinary objects. For instance, take pure hallucinations of the sort we will consider in §2.2 below. Suppose one has an hallucination of a snow covered churchyard for what it is, even when there is no such churchyard there to be perceived. Here, *Mind-Independence* characterizes one's experience. For one's experience is still *as of* a public mind-independent scene: the *apparent* objects of such hallucinatory experiences are ordinary objects. And, in a sense, *Presence* holds. The hallucination is, *in its character* as of the snow covered churchyard, and the churchyard seems to be *there*, present to one, such that the character of the experience is constrained by that apparent scene.

1.1.3 Transparency

Some recent writers on perception have defended a thesis which has become known as the transparency of experience. *Transparency* is normally defined as the thesis that reflection on, or introspection of, what it is like to have an experience does not reveal that we are aware of experiences themselves, but only of their mind-independent objects. There are two claims here: (i) introspection reveals the mind-independent objects of experience, and (ii) introspection does not reveal non-presentational features of experience (that is, features of the character of experience not traceable merely to the appearance of some object or feature in the environment).

Transparency is similar to *Openness*. The latter claim does involve something like (i). But *Transparency* is not the same as *Openness*, for it is not obvious that (ii) is part of our intuitive conception of experience. We do not have to hold that the phenomenal character of experience is exhausted (or completely determined) by the nature of the objects and qualities which are presented in experience. This claim can be disputed. For example, a scene can look very different when one removes one's glasses: one's visual experience of the churchyard then becomes hazy and blurred. But it can be argued that this phenomenal difference in experience need not derive from any apparent or represented difference in the objects of experience. Rather, it seems to be a difference in the way in which those objects are experienced. So there are reasons for thinking that (ii) is not part of the common sense conception of experience.

1.2 Awareness

Openness can characterize perceptual experience which doesn't involve genuine perceptual contact with the world. But it is part of our ordinary way of thinking about perceptual experience that we sometimes make perceptual contact with the world. Thus, we come to the second component of our ordinary conception of perceptual experience:

Awareness: perceptual experience sometimes gives us perceptual awareness of ordinary mind-independent objects.

For instance, in seeing a snow covered churchyard for what it is, one has a visual experience, and is visually aware of a snow covered churchyard. (Here we understand *perception* as a conscious state or event—as something which is or involves perceptual experience—which is a mode of awareness).

2. The Problem of Perception

The Problem of Perception is that if illusions and hallucinations are possible, then perception, as we ordinarily understand it, is impossible. The Problem is animated by two central arguments: the argument from illusion (§2.1) and the argument from hallucination (§2.2).

In this section we present the arguments from illusion and hallucination both as challenging *Awareness*. That's bad enough for our intuitive conception of perceptual experience, but it gets worse: for later we'll see how the arguments can be supplemented so as they support the rejection of *Openness* too [In §3.1, not included in this selection].

2.1 The Argument from Illusion

According to *Awareness*, we are sometimes perceptually aware of ordinary mind-independent objects in perceptual experience. Such awareness can come from veridical experiences—cases in which one perceives an object for what it is. But it can also come from illusory experiences. For we think of an illusion as “any perceptual situation in which a physical object is actually perceived, but in which that object perceptually appears other than it really is” Smith (2002: 23). For example, a white wall seen in yellow light can look yellow to one. (In such cases it is not necessary that one is deceived into believing that things are other than they are). The argument from illusion, in a radical form, aims to show that we are *never* perceptually aware of ordinary objects. Many things have been called “the argument from illusion”. But the basic idea goes as follows:

- A. In an illusory experience, one is not aware of an ordinary object.
- B. The same account of experience must apply to both veridical and illusory experiences.
- C. Therefore, one is never perceptually aware of ordinary objects.

Four immediate comments on this are in order: First, as it stands this is an inadequate representation of the argument as it conceals the complex moves usually invoked by proponents and expositors, but we'll try to improve on this soon (in particular, a fuller version includes a mini argument for (A)). Second, it is useful to represent the argument in this basic form to begin with as it enables us to highlight its two major movements; ...the base case, and the spreading step. In the base case a conclusion about just illusory experiences is sought: namely, (A). In the spreading step, (B), this result is

generalized so as to get conclusion (C). Third, as we're representing the argument here it is purely negative. But many philosophers have moved from this to the further conclusion that since we are always aware of something in perceptual experience, what we are aware of is a "non-ordinary" object (sometimes called a "sense-datum"). Finally, this argument is *radical* in that it concludes that we are never perceptually aware of ordinary objects. A less radical version concludes instead that we are never *directly* aware of ordinary objects, but for all that we may be *indirectly* aware of them. For now we'll set aside complications to do with direct and indirect awareness.

Moving beyond the simple formulation, the argument from illusion is typically presented as involving these steps:

- i. In an illusory experience, it seems to one that something has a quality, *F*, which the ordinary object supposedly being perceived does not actually have.
- ii. When it seems to one that something has a quality, *F*, then there is something of which one is aware which does have this quality.
- iii. Since the ordinary object in question is, by hypothesis, not-*F*, then it follows that in cases of illusory experience, one is not aware of the object after all. (A).
- iv. The same account of experience must apply to both veridical and illusory experiences. (B).
- v. Therefore, in cases of veridical experience, one is not aware of the object after all.
- vi. If one is perceptually aware of an ordinary object at all, it is in either a veridical or illusory experience.
- vii. Therefore, one is never perceptually aware of ordinary objects. (C).

This improves on the simple version of the argument in having both a fuller base case stage and a fuller spreading step. That is, the basis of premise (A) is made clear, and the spreading from (B) is expanded.

The most controversial premise in the argument is premise (ii). The other premises just reflect intuitive ways of thinking about perceptual experience, and so are unlikely to be targeted by one seeking to reject the argument from illusion. This is clear enough with premises (i) and (vi), but what about premise (iv)? What this means is that the account of the nature and objects of illusory and veridical experiences must be the same. Though it may be disputed, this premise seems plausible. For veridical and illusory experiences both seem to be cases where one is aware of an ordinary object. The only

difference is that in the illusory case, but not in the veridical case, the object one is aware of appears some way other than it in fact is.

Premise (ii) is what Howard Robinson has usefully labelled the "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 (1994: 32).

C.D. Broad motivates this principle on explanatory grounds. In cases of perceptual experience things appear some ways rather than others to us. We need to explain this. Why does the penny one sees look elliptical to one as opposed to some other shape? One answer is that there is something of which one is aware which is in fact elliptical. Thus as Broad says "If, in fact, nothing elliptical is before my mind, it is very hard to understand why the penny should seem elliptical rather than of any other shape." (1923: 240). Other philosophers have simply taken the principle to be obvious. H.H. Price, for example, says that "When I say 'this table appears brown to me' it is quite plain that I am acquainted with an actual instance of brownness" (Price 1932: 63).

So much for the argument's main premises. How is it supposed to work? Here we find the suggestion that it hinges on an application of Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. The point is that (i) and (ii) tell us that in an illusory experience one is aware of an *F* thing, but the ordinary object supposedly being perceived is not *F*, thus the *F* thing one is aware of and the ordinary object are not identical, by Leibniz's Law. On these grounds, the conclusion of the base case stage is supposed to follow. And then the ultimate conclusion of the argument can be derived from its further premises.

But...this is invalid. (i), (ii) and Leibniz's Law entail that in an illusory experience one is directly aware of an *F* thing which is non-identical to the ordinary object supposedly being perceived. But this doesn't entail that in the illusion one is not directly aware of the ordinary object. One might be aware of the ordinary object *as well as* the *F* thing one is aware of. We should be careful to distinguish not being (directly) aware of the wall from being (directly) aware of something which is not the wall. The argument is invalid in conflating these two ideas.

One option for fixing the argument is to introduce...the Uniqueness Assumption:

If in an illusion of an ordinary object as *F* one is aware of an *F* thing non-identical to the ordinary object, one is not also aware of the ordinary object.

This assumption bridges the gap between the conclusion actually achieved:

(iii*) in an illusory experience one is aware of an *F* thing non-identical to the ordinary object

and the desired conclusion (iii). But whether this assumption is defensible remains to be seen...

2.2 The Argument from Hallucination

A hallucination is an experience which seems exactly like a veridical perception of an ordinary object but where there is no such object there to be perceived. Like illusions, hallucinations in this sense do not necessarily involve deception. And nor need they be like the real hallucinations suffered by the mentally ill, drug-users or alcoholics. They are rather supposed to be merely possible events: experiences which are indistinguishable for the subject from a genuine perception of an object. For example, suppose one is now having a veridical perception of a snow covered churchyard. The assumption that hallucinations are possible means that one could have an experience which is subjectively indistinguishable—that is, indistinguishable by the subject, “from the inside”—from a veridical perception of a snow covered churchyard, but where there is in fact no churchyard there to be perceived.

A radical form of the argument again challenges *Awareness*:

- A. An hallucinatory experience as of an ordinary object as *F* is not a case of awareness of an ordinary object.
- B. Veridical experiences of ordinary objects as *F* and their hallucinatory counterparts are to be given the same account.
- C. Therefore, one is not perceptually aware of ordinary objects in veridical experience.

What this argument shows, if it is successful, is that one is not perceptually aware of ordinary objects in veridical experiences. The conclusion here is not as general as the conclusion of the argument from illusion, but the more

general conclusion is surely not far off: for it would be difficult to maintain that though one is not perceptually aware of ordinary objects in veridical experiences, there are other cases of experience where one is perceptually aware of ordinary objects. So this argument *supports* if not *entails* the rejection of our ordinary conception of perceptual experience. Its aim is to show that an aspect of our ordinary conception of perception is deeply problematic, if not incoherent: perceptual experience cannot be what we intuitively think it is. But as with the argument from illusion, the argument can be developed, in supplemented form, to defend the conclusion that we only ever perceptually aware of “non-ordinary” objects.

Once again we can view the argument as having a base case (A) and a spreading step (B). Unlike with the argument from illusion, the base case here is less controversial: it doesn't rely on the Phenomenal Principle. We thus don't need a more complicated argument to support it. (A) simply falls out of what hallucinations are supposed to be, and two principles: first, that awareness of an object is a relation to an object, and second, that relations entail the existence of their relata. For given our principles, if an hallucination as of an ordinary object is to be a mode of awareness of an ordinary object then there must be an ordinary object there for one to perceive. But no such objects are there in hallucinations, therefore, hallucinations are not cases of awareness of ordinary objects.

Where the argument from hallucination is controversial is in the spreading step. The spreading step here gets construed in terms of the idea that veridical experiences and hallucinations are essentially the same; mental events of the same fundamental kind. (This doesn't mean that we lose a distinction between veridical experiences and hallucinations. It just means that the difference between veridical experience and hallucination is not to be found in their intrinsic natures). This claim seems plausible, as from a subject's perspective an hallucination cannot be told apart from a veridical experience. Thus some will accept (B) and thus deny that we are ever perceptually aware of ordinary objects, and others will accept (B) but argue that we can still have perceptual awareness of ordinary objects. But...others will want to secure perceptual awareness of ordinary objects by rejecting (B) and holding that hallucinations and veridical experiences are fundamentally different.

Though it is not plausible to deny the possibility of illusory experiences, the claim that subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations are possible is a little

more controversial. How do we really know that experiences like this are possible? One way to answer this—though certainly not the only way—is to appeal to a broad and uncontroversial empirical fact about experience: that it is the upshot or outcome of a causal process linking the organs of perception with the environment, that our experiences are the effects of things going on inside and outside our bodies. If this is so, then we can understand why hallucinations are a possibility. For any causal chain reaching from a cause C1 to effect E, there are intermediate causes C2, C3 etc., such that E could have been brought about even if C1 had not been there but one of the later causes. If this is true of causal processes in general, and perceptual experience is the product of a causal process, then we can see how it is possible that I could have an experience of the churchyard which was brought about by causes “downstream” of the actual cause (the churchyard).

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