

## PHL340 Handout 1: Arguments from Illusion and Hallucination

### §1 Things It Seems Obvious To Say About Perceptual Experience

The *phenomenal character* of a perceptual experience is the way the experience seems from the subject's point of view.

Philosophers often use the locution 'what it's like' to capture this feature of perceptual experience. We ask: 'What is it like to see a rampaging lion?'

*Transparency (rough version)*: perceptual experience seems to provide direct awareness of ordinary objects and their observable properties.

Suppose a non-philosophical observer gazing idly through a window. To him we address the request, "Give us a description of your current visual experience," or "How is it with you, visually, at the moment?" Uncautioned as to exactly what we want, he might reply in some such terms as these: "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..." and so on.

[Strawson 1979]

*Objectivity*: the ordinary objects we perceive seem as though they would continue to exist even when unperceived (i.e. their existence is mind-independent).

Question: *Transparency* and *Objectivity* are quite compelling for the case of visual experience. What about other sorts of perceptual experience (e.g. auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory)?

*Veridicality*: we usually perceive things as they are: the blackboard really is black, the door really is tall, and the table really is flat.

Note: *Transparency* and *Objectivity* are claims about the phenomenology of perceptual experience (i.e. about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience). *Veridicality*, in contrast, concerns the relationship between perceptual experience and the external world.

A perceptual experience, say of a strangely shaped balloon, is veridical if the world is as it seems to a subject (i.e. there really is a balloon in front of her, and it has the strange shape).

But sometimes our perceptual systems are led astray, through malfunction or misleading perceptual cues, and so perceptual experience presents the world as being some way that it really isn't. These cases of non-veridical perceptual experience divide into two categories:

In cases of perceptual illusion, an object seems to possess a property it does not in fact have.

*Example:* abnormal lighting conditions might result in a subject seeing a red ball as orange, or a white wall as purple.

In cases of perceptual hallucination, it seems to a subject as if she sees an object, but there is in fact no object that she perceives.

*Example:* Shakespeare's Macbeth describes his own hallucination when he says: 'Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible / To feeling as to sight? Or art though but / A dagger of the mind, a false creation / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?'

There are nice questions about how precisely to understand the contrast between veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory perceptual experience. But we're going to sidestep those questions for now and proceed directly to the arguments from illusion and hallucination.

There are actually several arguments that go by these names. The two we'll be looking at bear on the *metaphysical problem of perception*. This is the problem of identifying and explaining the relation subjects stand in to objects (and their properties) when they are in perceptual contact with them. It arises because the (metaphysical) arguments from illusion and hallucination put pressure on our common sense claim that perceptual experience provides direct awareness of objects (and their observable properties).

In contrast, the *epistemological problem of perception* is that of explaining how perception provides subjects with knowledge of the external world.

## §2 (Metaphysical) Argument from Illusion

1. Perceptual Illusion: There are cases in which a subject has a perceptual experience as of something having a property F, but the external world object with which the subject is in perceptual contact does not in fact have F.
2. Phenomenal Principle: If a subject has a perceptual experience as of something having a property F, some thing of which the subject is *directly aware* actually has F.
3. In the cases described in 1, the external world object with which the subject is in perceptual contact is not the F-thing of which she is directly aware. [From 1 & 2]

So

4. In the cases described at 1, the direct object of a subject's awareness is something other than the external world object with which she is in perceptual contact. [From 3]

Yet

5. If we want to claim that illusory and veridical experiences involve direct awareness of different sorts of objects, we need a proper reason to believe this claim.

But

6. For some veridical experiences, there is an illusory experience which from the subject's point of view is indistinguishable from the veridical experience.

So

7. How things seem from a subject's point of view provides no grounds for the claim at 5. [From 6]

It follows that

8. Absent some other ground, we must say that illusory and veridical experiences involve awareness of the same sorts of objects. [From 5 & 7]

So we seem to be stuck with 9:

9. Veridical perceptual experience does not involve direct awareness of (presumably mind-independent) external world objects. [From 4 & 8]

### §3 (Metaphysical) Argument from Hallucination

1. Perceptual Hallucination: There are cases in which a subject has a perceptual experience as of something having a property F, but there is no external world object with which the subject is in perceptual contact.
2. Phenomenal Principle: If a subject has a perceptual experience as of something having a property F, some thing of which the subject is *directly aware* actually has F.

So

3. In the cases described at 1, the direct object of a subject's awareness cannot be an external world object with which she is in perceptual contact. [From 1 & 2]

Yet

4. If we want to claim that hallucinatory and veridical experiences involve direct awareness of different sorts of objects, we need a proper reason to believe this claim.

But

5. For some veridical experiences, there is a hallucinatory experience which from the subject's point of view is indistinguishable from the veridical experience.

So

6. How things seem from a subject's point of view provides no grounds for the claim at 4. [From 5]

It follows that

7. Absent some other ground, we must say that hallucinatory and veridical experiences involve awareness of the same sorts of objects. [From 4 & 6]

So we seem to be stuck with 9:

8. Veridical perceptual experience does not involve direct awareness of (presumably mind-independent) external world objects. [From 3 & 7]

#### §4 Questions

*Why distinguish these arguments?*

-6 in the first argument seems more plausible than 5 in the second. We're often misled by perceptual experience about the properties of objects, but how often do we seem to see an object that isn't really there?

-Solutions to the metaphysical problem of perception frequently treat illusion and hallucination differently (as we'll see when we reach John Campbell and Bill Brewer).

*Are the arguments persuasive (or not) for the same reasons?*

Some philosophers go so far as to deny that hallucinatory experience can ever be perceptual (instead classifying cases of hallucination as exercises of imagination). If correct, this claim might provide the sort of 'other ground' mentioned in 7.

*How exactly should we understand Transparency?*

Is it introspectively obvious that we're directly aware of nothing but external objects and their properties? Perhaps we're directly aware of other things as well, except these somehow elude introspection.

More on this next time...

*Which premiss (or premisses) should we reject (if any)?*

Think about this for next time...