

PHL340 Handout 2: Transparency and Classical Views of Perception

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. [1 & 2]
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. [3]
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.
6. For some veridical experiences, there is an illusory experience which from the subject's point of view is indistinguishable from the veridical experience.
7. How things seem from a subject's point of view provides no grounds for the claim at 5. [6]
8. Absent some other ground, we must say that illusory and veridical experiences involve awareness of the same sorts of objects. [5 & 7]
9. Veridical perceptual experience does not involve direct awareness of (presumably mind-independent) external world objects. [4 & 8]

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.
3. In the cases described at 1, the direct object of a subject's awareness cannot be an external world object with which she in perceptual contact. [1 & 2]
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.
5. For some veridical experiences, there is a hallucinatory experience which from the subject's point of view is indistinguishable from the veridical experience.
6. How things seem from a subject's point of view provides no grounds for the claim at 4. [5]
7. Absent some other ground, we must say that hallucinatory and veridical experiences involve awareness of the same sorts of objects. [4 & 6]
8. Veridical perceptual experience does not involve direct awareness of (presumably mind-independent) external world objects. [3 & 7]

§1 The Metaphysical Problem of Perception

Last class we used the arguments from illusion and hallucination to generate 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. The problem arises because the conclusion of the two arguments above – namely that veridical perceptual experience does not involve direct awareness of external world objects – forces us to treat the phenomenology of experience as quite radically misleading. In particular, we're

forced to treat the following claim about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience as misleading:

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

If the arguments from illusion and hallucination establish their conclusions, and if *Transparency* is true, then perceptual experience is not as it seems.

At this stage, a theorist of perceptual experience has three options:

1. Accept the arguments from illusion and hallucination, but deny *Transparency*.
2. Accept the arguments from illusion and hallucination, and accept *Transparency*.
3. Resist the arguments from illusion and hallucination, and accept *Transparency*.

Notice that each option carries different explanatory burdens:

1 requires that we overturn *Transparency*. But this seems quite hard to do. As Strawson argues, *Transparency* isn't merely one among many candidate 'theories' of what it is like to undergo a perceptual experience. Any attempt to explain what it is like for us – no matter how minimal – seems to presuppose *Transparency* (cf. pp. 93-95 of Strawson's 'Perception and Its Objects').

2 requires an error theory that explains the mismatch between the phenomenology of perceptual experience (which 2 allows *Transparency* successfully captures) and its metaphysical structure. In particular, this error theory must explain how it can seem to us as if we're directly aware of external objects and their properties despite the fact that these are not the direct objects of our perceptual awareness.

3 allows us to keep *Transparency* without an error theory, but requires an account of perceptual experience that blocks the arguments from illusion and hallucination. The development and defence of such a theory isn't easy, as we'll see next week.

Today we're going to focus on accounts of perception that more-or-less accept the arguments from hallucination and illusion. Defenders of these accounts must therefore pursue either 1 or 2.

§2 Transparency Complications

Before we explore these accounts of perception, let take a closer look at *Transparency*. As you read more philosophy of perception, you'll see so-called 'transparency' claims everywhere. These claims usually appear when a philosopher wishes either to motivate a chosen account

of perception, or to bludgeon some poor opposing account by accusing it of ‘being false to the phenomenology of perception’.

But some ‘transparency’ claims are more plausible than others. So when faced with appeals to transparency, always ask: which ‘transparency’ claim does the author actually need in order to establish her conclusion? And is this claim plausible?

We come to know the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience through introspection. So to find out how things seem from our point of view, we must introspectively attend to our perceptual experience:

Weakest Transparency: introspective attention to perceptual experience reveals what seem to be ordinary objects (and their properties).

Weak Transparency: introspective attention to perceptual experience reveals what seem to be ordinary objects (and their properties) as direct objects of awareness.

Strong Transparency: introspective attention to perceptual experience reveals *only* what seem to be ordinary objects (and their properties) as direct objects of awareness.

Strongest Transparency: introspective attention to perceptual experience reveals *only* what seem to be ordinary objects (and their properties).

Weakest Transparency does not generate the metaphysical problem of perception; *Weak Transparency* does generate the problem, but doesn’t rule out non-ordinary direct objects of awareness; *Strong Transparency* does rule out non-ordinary direct objects of awareness, but leaves open what might count as an indirect object of perceptual awareness; *Strongest Transparency* rules out even this possibility.

One metaphor often used to elucidate transparency is that of a clear glass window. If the glass isn’t dusty or otherwise distorted, when we look at the glass we see the objects on the other side. Imagine that our perceptual experience is the glass. If the glass isn’t distorted, then when we try to attend to the glass itself we only ever manage to attend to the objects on the other side.

Exercise: play around with this metaphor a bit to try to understand the difference between the various transparency claims distinguished above. Some will be quite natural to model, others quite strange. Which of these claims do you find introspectively plausible?

Looking Ahead: a nice question to ask yourself, once you've a handle on these transparency claims, concerns the reach of perceptual experience. The transparency claims all entail that visual experience reveals some properties of ordinary objects – most likely their the colours, shapes, and sizes of objects. But what about their other properties? For instance, when we see a tree, do we also see that it is a beech tree? This question will be the topic of our fifth class when we first read Susanna Siegel.

One respect in which our discussion departs from some of the readings is that I've been careful to distinguish between *Transparency* – roughly the claim that perceptual experience seems to reveal ordinary objects and their properties – and what I called *Objectivity* – the claim that these objects seem to be mind-independent. Many run the two claims together and call the result a transparency claim.

Next week we're going to look at an argument for an account of perceptual experience – *representationalism* – that makes essential appeal to a transparency claim. But today our focus will be on how an account of perceptual experience that accepts the arguments from illusion and hallucination can accommodate the various transparency theses.

§3 Classical Responses to the Arguments from Hallucination and Illusion

We can effect an initial division between these classic accounts of perceptual experience according to how they understand the phenomenal principle – the claim that 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.

Sense-Datum Theory accepts the phenomenal principle, and posits a new sort of thing – a sense datum – to serve as the direct objects of awareness that instantiate the properties we perceive.

Adverbialism accepts the phenomenal principle, but refuses to posit a new sort of thing to serve as the required direct object. Instead, the view holds that the perceived properties are modifications of experience itself (so to perceive F isn't to perceive an F thing, but to perceive F-ly – e.g. brownly, or squarely, etc.).

Obvious Problem (cf. Crane on 'act-object structure'): Adverbialism renders the various transparency claims quite mysterious, since it cannot easily accommodate even indirect awareness of ordinary objects or their properties.

Let's put adverbialism to one side. The sense-datum theory admits of a number of different versions. We'll briefly survey a few of them.

The most pressing question about the sense-datum theory concerns the nature of the posited sense data. These entities cannot be ordinary objects, since we're meant to be directly aware of sense data even when we're hallucinating. So what are they?

Could they be mind-independent? Early sense-datum theorists thought so (e.g. G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell); but recent adherents treat sense data as mind-dependent.

Could they be physical? It isn't clear how to answer this question, since we do not know what it takes for something to count as physical. But if sense-datum theorists must say that sense data are non-physical, they'll run afoul of those who think that all contingent entities are physical (*n.b.* the restriction to 'contingent' entities allows these theorists to admit non-physical necessary entities – e.g. numbers, propositions).

Another division concerns our awareness of mind-independent ordinary objects. Because they accept the phenomenal principle, sense-datum theorists must deny that ordinary objects can be the direct objects of perceptual awareness. Yet this leaves open whether perceptual experience provides indirect awareness of ordinary objects.

Indirect or *Representative Realists* (e.g. Locke) accept that direct awareness of sense data can provide indirect awareness of mind-independent objects and their properties.

Analogy: imagine you glance at a painting. In one sense, you are aware of what the painting depicts (say a scene in which a group of people are talking). But you're aware of what the painting depicts largely because you are aware of features of the painting itself: the brush strokes, the various patches of paint, etc. Indirect realists think that sense data play the role of the painting: just as we're aware of the depicted scene in virtue of being aware of features of the painting, we're indirectly perceptually aware of ordinary objects in virtue of being directly aware of the sense data.

Phenomenalists (e.g. later Russell) and *Idealists* (e.g. Kant) deny that direct awareness of sense data can provide indirect awareness of mind-independent ordinary objects and their properties.

The difference between these two views doesn't concern perceptual experience, but instead the metaphysical status of ordinary objects. Phenomenalists accept the existence of mind-independent ordinary objects, but deny that perceptual provides awareness of them. Idealists deny the existence of such mind-independent objects.

These views do not say what it is for a perceptual experience to be veridical, illusory, or hallucinatory. These stories turn out to be quite complicated, so we're going to bypass them.

Sense datum theories differ in their ability to accommodate transparency claims. Indirect realists need not be error theorists about *Weakest Transparency*, since they hold that perceptual experience provides awareness of mind-independent ordinary objects. In contrast, phenomenologists and idealists must provide an error theory even for *Weakest Transparency*.

Also, indirect realists may have a potentially plausible error theory for *Weak Transparency* (and maybe *Strong Transparency*). Just as the features of a vivid painting 'disappear' to reveal what the painting depicts, an indirect realist might claim that we mistake ordinary objects for direct objects of awareness because perception presents them with more 'immediacy' or 'vividness'. Furthermore, in order to 'look past' the effect of this immediacy to become aware of sense data we must engage in a non-trivial act of introspective attention.

Notice: this error theory will not work if *Stronger Transparency* is true, since that claim rules out it ever seeming as though we are aware of something other than an ordinary object or its properties.

§4 Preview: Representationalism vs. Indirect Realism

Next class we're going to look at one of the two major contemporary accounts of perceptual experience: Representationalism.

An experience's *representational content* is the way the world must be if the experience is to be veridical.

Representationalism: the way perceptual experience seems to a subject is exhausted by the way the experience represents things as standing in the world (i.e. the phenomenal character is exhausted by the experience's representational content)

Example: suppose I undergo a visual experience as of a red cup on my table. My visual experience will be veridical if and only if there is a red cup on my table. So the representational content of my experience is this: there is a red cup on the table. Representationalism says that the phenomenal character of my experience amounts to this: there is a red cup on the table.

Representationalists are not indirect realists. They hold that the *direct objects* of perceptual awareness are the mind-independent objects that form part of an experience's representational content. We'll see how this works next time.