Die Philosophie der Wahrnehmung und der Beobachtung

The Philosophy of Perception and Observation

Beiträge der Österreichischen Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Band XXV
Volume XXV
Die Philosophie der Wahrnehmung und der Beobachtung

Beiträge des 40. Internationalen Wittgenstein Symposiums
6. – 12. August 2017
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Band XXV

Herausgeber
Christoph Limbeck-Lilienau
Friedrich Stadler

Redaktion: Sebastian Kletzl

WISSENSCHAFT · FORSCHUNG
NIEDERÖSTERREICH

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung der Abteilung
Wissenschaft und Forschung (K3)
des Amtes der NÖ Landesregierung

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2017
Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
The Philosophy of Perception and Observation

Contributions of the 40th International Wittgenstein Symposium
August 6–12, 2017
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Editors
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Copy editing: Sebastian Kletzl

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Printed with the support of the
Department for Science and Research
of the Province of Lower Austria

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2017
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society
Distributor
Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society
Markt 63, A-2880 Kirchberg am Wechsel
Österreich / Austria

www.alws.at

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ISSN 1022-3398
Refereed Periodical
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Die Beiträge, Abstracts und Programm wurden mit Hilfe eines von Joseph Wang, Universität Innsbruck, erarbeiteten Datenbankprogramms erstellt.
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Contributions, Abstracts and Program were produced using a database application developed by Joseph Wang, University of Innsbruck, Austria.
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Visuelle Gestaltung / Visual graphics: Sascha Windholz
Druck: Eigner Druck, A-3040 Neulengbach
The Presentativity of Perceptual Experiences

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Abstract

As is well known, direct realism on perception claims that we straightforwardly perceive objects and properties of the world. This paper, I will try to show how the phenomenological datum according to which perceptual experiences have a representational character can be explained in direct realist’s terms both for perceptions (both veridical and nonveridical) and for hallucinations. This prompts me to drop the naive realist account of the datum. It also lets me see the representational character and the (singular) representational content of perceptual experiences as independent.

1. The phenomenological datum, a problem with it, and some possible solutions

As Crane and Craig maintain (2017), the phenomenology of our perceptual experiences provides us with an interesting datum, the openness claim. According to this datum, not only the objects of such experiences are given to us as mind-independent items, but also the phenomenal character of such experiences gives such objects to us as present (i.e., as being out there) in a way responsive of such a presentness: unlike imagination, one cannot modify at will what one perceives. Phenomenologically speaking, therefore, the representational character of a perceptual experience contributes to its phenomenal character; in that experience, objects are felt as present. Thus, it also contributes to the mode of such experiences, i.e., to what kind of mental states such experiences have. Since in thoughts objects are not felt as present, presentness tells perceptual experiences from thoughts.

According to direct realism, we straightforwardly perceive objects and properties of the world. Now, a problem with the above datum immediately arises for a direct realist. How can nonveridical perceptual experiences – illusion experiences, hallucinatory experiences – be presentational, if the worldly sensible properties those experiences apparently mobilize are not instantiated out there? Either I see a green wall as yellow, or I straightforwardly hallucinate a yellow wall. In both cases, the sensible property of being yellow is not instantiated: either because another such property, being green, is instantiated, or because no such property is instantiated. Then, how can the uninstan
tiated property be given in my experience as being out there?

Clearly enough, the problem arises for any theorist on perception, but it is particularly pressing for a direct realist. For an indirect realist on perceptual experience solves it by saying that the sensible properties in question are indeed instantiated, yet not by a worldly object but by a mind-dependent object, i.e., what one immediately senses and in virtue of which one may indirectly perceive a worldly object: a sense-datum. Indeed, it is because of this problem that the indirect realist may convincingly appeal to the so-called Phenomenal Principle:

(PP) If it sensibly appears to one to be something that possesses a certain sensible property, then there is something of which one is aware that possesses that property.

For (PP) naturally leads to her solution to the problem in terms of mind-dependent objects as instantiating the relevant sensible properties.

As is well known, indirect realism is full of independ problems. So, one might try to go in the other direction and radicalize direct realism in terms of a naïve realist account of the datum. Naive realism sticks to the stronger thesis that we straightforwardly perceive objects and properties the world as they are in the world. Thus, it may provide intertwined solutions to the problem. First, as to perceptual illusions, the naïve realist may say that some, perhaps a perceptual illusions are veridical experiences; they index veridically grasp objective properties yet of a different kind from worldly properties (Fish 2009). Second, as to hallucinations, the naïve realist may say that hallucinations, or perhaps some perceptual illusions as well, are not presentational experiences; thus, they constitute a different kind of mental states from perceptions. Two variants of this second solution are available. Hallucinations are not presentational either because i) by not being related to worldly sensible properties, they have no presentations character hence no phenomenal character either (Fis 2009), or because ii) they just make as if they were as presentational as veridical perceptual experiences are, by being parasitic or dependent on the latter experiences will respect to their phenomenal character (Martin 1997, Nudds 2013).

In what follows, by scrutinizing why such naïve realist solutions do not seem to be viable, I will try to show how the aforementioned phenomenological datum can be explained in more direct realist’s terms both for perceptions (veridical, nonveridical) and for hallucinations.

2. The problem of illusion

As Fish (2009) says, there are three different kinds of perceptual illusions, which displace themselves along a line going from the more objective to the more subjective: a) physical illusions (e.g. a stick seen as bent in water) b) optical illusions (e.g. grasping the Müller-Lyer figure) c) cognitive illusions (e.g. mistaking a rope for a snake). I will try to show that the first naïve realist solution may work both for a) and b), but not for c).

With respect to the a)-cases, in seeing a straight stick as bent, a green wall as yellow, a round coin as elliptical etc., a naïve realist may say that one does not experience the uninstanitiated worldly property, but rather another objective property of a different kind. This property may be: a situation-dependent property (a relational property involving environmental factors, e.g. light refraction) (Schellenberg 2008, Fish 2009), or a look (the stick, the wall, the coin have the looks that paradigmatically bent things, paradigmatically yellow things, paradigmatically elliptical things respectively possess) (Martin 2010, Kalderon 2011),
3. The problem of hallucination

I may now assess the original problem with respect to hallucinations. Let us reconsider the second naive response solution to that problem, in particular its first variant, the 'no phenomenal character'-solution. This variant adopts a relational conception of phenomenal character: having for an experience a phenomenal character amounts to its being accounted with certain instantiated worldly sensible properties constituting its presentational character. As a consequence, a hallucination has no phenomenal character, it simply has the same cognitive effects as the corresponding indiscernible perception (Fish 2009).

However, this variant hardly works. Since as to a perfect hallucination we may not realize that the experience we took to be a perception is a hallucination, it is implausible that that experience originally yet erroneously seemed to have a phenomenal character. Moreover, this solution implausibly equates a hallucination with a zombie perception, which is by definition cognitively identical with the corresponding experienced perception, yet, unlike a hallucination, is a perception of an existing worldly object.

The second variant, the 'parasitic phenomenal character'-solution, seems definitely better than the first one. For in holding that hallucinations just make as if they were as presentational as veridical perceptual experiences are, it still describes such hallucinations a phenomenal character.

Yet it presupposes a hardly justifiable dependence of hallucinations on perceptions. Pace Martin (2006), hallucinations do not stand to perceptions in the same relationship fiction stands to reality. Fiction may depend on reality, both ontologically and epistemically: not only fiction presupposes reality, as a way of modifying it or its representation (Risselé 1970), but also one cannot represent a fictional world unless one has already represented the real world. Yet hallucinations do not exhibit either dependence on perceptions: one's first perceptual experience may be hallucinatory and if Cartesians are right, all perceptual experiences may turn out to be such. Granted, one may say that hallucinations are the bad cases whereas perceptions are the good cases of perceptual experiences. In order to say so, however, one must postulate a shared function that only perceptions satisfy, thereby pointing to a common factor between perceptions and hallucinations that may be hard for a naive realist to swallow. Moreover, it is generally not the case that bad cases depend on good ones. As the history of technology abundantly shows, bad artefacts do not depend on good ones.

Grantee, one might differently justify the second variant by saying that the very notion of presentation is causally based. For one might then say that, unlike perceptions, hallucinations present no sensible worldly properties. For since in the hallucinatory case such properties are uninstantiated, they can cause no feature in the phenomenal character of the experience.

Yet why must one invoke that notion, rather than say that, unlike thoughts, qua perceptual experiences all such states are presentational ones (Searle 1995)? Presentation has merely to do with the fact that a property manifests itself in the perceptual experience; even with respect to the actually existent and causally determinant object of a perception, not all its relevant properties are so manifested (in particular, those properties that are instantiated in occluded parts of that object, Noë 2004).

By appealing to a noncausal notion of presentation, one may then say that hallucinations are presentations of worldly sensible properties via their sensory features as
manner of presentation. Simply, unlike perceptions, the sensible worldly properties the sensory features of hallucinations present are not fixed by a causal, but rather by a similarity, relationship. Unlike an illusory experience of a green wall as yellow, a hallucinatory experience of a yellow wall presents yellowness, not greenness, the property that is more qualitatively similar to the sensory features that hallucination instantiates. Thus, there is no determination route from manners of presentation to presented properties: the sensory feature of being yellow may present both the worldly sensible property of being green (in an illusion) and the worldly sensible property of being yellow (in a hallucination). Yet this noncausal fixation depends on the fact that, unlike the perception mode, the hallucination mode is not qualified by its being caused by existing worldly objects, since in its case no such things are easily available. Thus, the phenomenological datum from which we started, the openness claim, may be ultimately justified for all perceptual experiences.

One may wonder whether the claim that even a hallucination presents worldly sensible properties entails a definitively not trivial consequence; namely, that it has an object of the same metaphysical kind as a perception, a concrete object, i.e., an object that may exist (Cocciairella 1982, Priest 2016), yet something that, unlike the object of a perception, does not actually exist.

In the framework of direct realism, some have already claimed that both perceptions and hallucinations have ordinary objects, existent and nonexistent respectively (this idea traces back to Thomas Reid; see Butcharov 1994, Smith 2002, Priest 2016). Yet a direct realist may defend the two claims independently. For pace Smith (2002), unlike mind-dependent objects such as sense-data, the concrete merely possible object of a hallucination does not exemplify the worldly sensible properties it is ascribed in a hallucination. For since they are existence-entailing, those properties are instantiated. Something that is hallucin-ated to be yellow is not yellow, for being yellow entails to exist. Indeed, this direct realist does not commit to (PP), but to a weaker version of it:

(PP*) if it sensibly appears to one to be something that possesses a certain sensible property, then there is something of which one is aware that seemingly pos-sesses that property.

If a direct realist allows that hallucinations to have concrete yet merely possible objects, another consequence rather ensues. Although three qualitatively identical perceptual experiences sharing their presentational character – a veridical perception, an illusionary perception, a hallucination – also share their predicable content, their whole singular representational contents do not supervene on that char-acter. For the objectual parts of such different contents are different, the first two involving different concrete existent objects, the last one involving another concrete yet non-existent object. E.g., three yellowish experiences are respectively a veridical perception that O is yellow, an illusionary perception that O* is yellow, a hallucination that O** is yellow.

Literature


