

UNDERSTANDING HOW EXPERIENCE “SEEMS”

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ABSTRACT

I argue against one way of understanding the claim that how one's visual experience “seems” provides support for the naïve-realist theory and weighs against sense-data theories (and other theories). If my argument is correct, and we abandon this way of understanding how experience “seems”, we would lose one reason for favouring naïve-realism at the start of the dialectic of the traditional problem of perception. En route, I distinguish different ways of understanding the (alleged) transparency of experience, consider how to make sense of rival theorists' disagreement over the manifest nature of visual phenomenology and recount a story about Wittgenstein.

Key words: visual experience, phenomenology, Tim Crane, M. G. F. Martin, transparency, naïve realism, sense-data, intentionalism, Wittgenstein, introspection, consciousness, attention

1. The traditional problem

Tim Crane, in his excellent Stanford encyclopaedia entry, sums up the traditional problem of perception in a sentence: “The structure of the problem is simple: perception seems intuitively to be openness to the world, but this fact of openness is threatened by reflection on illusions and hallucinations” (Crane 2005, section 1.1). The dialectic of the debate then is supposed to begin with the thesis that perceptual experience¹ is essentially world-involving or “relational” because this is just how perceptual experience “seems intuitively”. The debate gets going when this natural idea is challenged by philosophical arguments, based on the possibility of hallucination or illusion, promoting the antithetical idea that perceptual experience cannot be essentially world-involving. I want to consider what exactly the phrase “seems intuitively” is supposed to mean here, because I think that there is a tempting-but-wrong way

¹ I will stick to considering visual experience throughout this essay.

to understand the claim that perceptual experience “seems” to be essentially world-involving.

Consider the following passage from Mike Martin, where he claims that the relational account of perceptual experience:

... is put forward on the grounds that it gives an accurate description of how the subject’s situation strikes her when consciously perceiving. For example, at present I can see the Genoa lighthouse. Focusing on the tower, I can note its distinctive shape and colouring; turning my attention inward, and reflecting on the character of my looking at the tower, I can note that the tower does not disappear from the centre of my attention. The tower is not replaced by some surrogate, whose existence is merely internal to my mind... in its very conscious and so subjective character, the experience seems literally to include the world. (Martin 1997, 84)

This passage is instructive as it contains hints of both the right way and the wrong way to understand the naturalness of the relational conception of experience. At the start of the passage Martin claims that the relational account is an “accurate description” of how a perceptual situation “strikes” the subject. What is the meaning of “strikes” here? Well, in the next sentence Martin glosses this by saying that the subject is to be envisaged as turning their attention inwards and reflecting on the character of the experience. Prima facie, this sounds like two distinct mental actions: turning attention inwards and then also reflecting upon the character of whatever this inward turn has revealed. But when we get to the end of the passage we are told that the apparent world-involving-ness of the experience is part of the very subjective character of the experience. This suggests that whether or not we choose to reflect or think about it, the very phenomenology of perceptual experience is *itself* such as to be apparently world-involving.

There are two ideas here:

NATURALNESS IDEA 1) The most natural/intuitive *conception of*, or way of thinking about, our visual experience is as an instance of being consciously confronted with the world itself.

NATURALNESS IDEA 2) The nature of our visual phenomenology *itself* is such as to be apparently world-involving – that is, the essential nature of our visual phenomenology is “presentational”; phenomenology is essentially as of the presentation of the mind-independent environment.

A comparison might help to clarify this distinction: we naturally conceive of our own visual experience as relying in some way on anatomical structures (of some kind) inside our eyes. This is surely a correct “folk-theory” about visual experience. But the nature of visual phenomenology *itself* is not such as to indicate anything about the

insides of one's eyes. Visual experience *itself* does not appear reliant on the inner workings of the eye. Were someone to doubt that the innards of eyes had anything to do with visual experience we could not allay their doubt by getting them to pay attention to their own visual phenomenology. In contrast, visual experience surely does appear to involve awareness of colour – were someone to doubt *this*, we would try to direct their attention to their own experience.

If we advance the first idea, our complaint against sense-data theories will be that they go against our natural conception of perceptual experience, they require us to abandon deeply held, intuitive beliefs about the nature of experience. And for their part, sense-data theorists have generally been happy to concede that their position is indeed revisionary with respect to our natural, pre-philosophical views or conceptions about experience.

But if we advance the second idea then our complaint against sense-data theories will be rather different. Now we are claiming that sense-data theories go against the very phenomenological character of experience itself. This complaint is that the sense-data theory does not do justice to the manifest phenomenology of the experiences it is supposed to be accounting for. Putting matters another way, the complaint is that sense-data theorists must be committed to the view that the very nature of our visual phenomenology is *systematically misleading about itself* for this phenomenology essentially suggests that experience is world involving when, according to the sense-data theorist, it is not. Even if this second complaint were correct, it would not necessarily be a decisive blow against sense-data theories. A sense-data theorist *might* be happy to concede that the real nature of experience is not the way that it introspectively seems. But I will argue that sense-data theorists need not make this concession and should reject this second type of complaint against them².

A well-known passage from Strawson advances the second idea:

Mature sensible experience (in general) presents itself as, in Kantian phrase, an *immediate* consciousness of the existence of things outside us... the human commitment to a conceptual scheme of a realist character is not properly described, even in a stretched sense of the words, as a theoretical commitment. It is, rather, something given with the given. (Strawson 1979, 47)

Strawson claims that the apparent world-involving-ness of experience is something “given with the given”; that perceptual experience “presents *itself*” as world-involving, rather than this world-involving nature being any kind of “theoretical commitment”.

² I might add that I have no wish to defend sense-data theories per se. My aim is only to clarify the nature of the dialectic here and clarify how we think of visual phenomenology.

That these two N-ideas can easily get run together is illustrated by Crane's Stanford Encyclopaedia entry. When setting up the dialectic, Crane writes of the arguments from illusion and hallucination that their conclusions aim to show that "perceptual experience cannot be what we intuitively think it is". This, I take it, is the first N-idea. But then two paragraphs later Crane writes that the conclusions of such arguments "conflict [with] the manifest nature of perception, as it is from the phenomenological point of view". This, it seems to me, is now the second N-idea. Crane has, I'm suggesting, equivocated over the notion of the way experience "intuitively seems" – sometimes he means the way it is natural/intuitive to think about and conceive of our visual experience/phenomenology, at other times he means to describe the nature of our visual phenomenology itself, prior to any cognitive reaction we might have to it.

Basically, I want to argue that N-IDEA 1 is legitimate but N-IDEA 2 is not; however there will be a few complications and, I hope, points of interest along the way.

2. Transparency

The idea that when we try to direct our attention at our own visual experience³ we are bound to discover phenomenology that, in some sense of "seems", seems to be the presentation of external mind-independent features is often labelled "the Transparency of experience". It is common to distinguish two strengths of transparency claim, weak and strong, but I think it is just as important to distinguish between notions of transparency understood according to either N-IDEA 1 or N-IDEA 2. Lets consider weak/strong first⁴.

Consider again the Strawson passage; the claim being made is that when we pay attention to our visual experience as a whole, an adequate description of the phenomenology is bound to mention the apparent presentation of mind-independent items. Now compare an equally oft-quoted passage from Harman:

Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to the intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict that you will find that the *only* features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree... (Harman 1990, 39, my italics)

³ There are, of course, many difficult issues surrounding how to understand the act of introspection, or paying attention to experience. Indeed, these seem to me to be some of the hardest issues in the philosophy of mind. To mention just two basic options: one might conceive of introspecting visual experience as being just the act of thinking about some aspect of that experience. Or, one might conceive of introspection in terms of a genuine "inner sense" thought of in some quasi-perceptual fashion. But these are issues for any candidate theory of experience.

⁴ Strictly speaking, strong transparency claims of the form: every x is F, will only imply weak transparency claims of the form: some x's are F, if it is assumed that there is at least one x. Given that x here ranges over phenomenal features of experience this seems a fair assumption.

The claim being made here is stronger than Strawson's claim. Harman is saying that there is *nothing more* to pay attention to in one's visual phenomenology other than the apparently mind-independent objects and properties.

WEAK PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY (WPT): If we pay attention to the phenomenology of visual experience, there are bound to be *some* elements/features whose essential phenomenological nature is as of mind-independent features.

STRONG PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY (SPT): If we pay attention to the phenomenology of visual experience, *every* element/feature we could discover will be, in its essential phenomenological nature, as of mind-independent features.⁵

I will just briefly mention the most obvious counter-example to SPT. The obvious objection to Strong transparency is simply that one can in fact discover or pay attention to features of visual phenomenology that are not environmental features. And the most commonly cited purported example of this is blurriness of vision – when I remove my glasses my visual phenomenology changes, things look blurry. And it is argued that this blurriness is a phenomenal feature that is not even apparently a feature of the environment – it doesn't look like the world itself has suddenly blurred (see Crane, 2006). I don't want to pursue this issue any further here and so I'll just state the obvious point that WPT appears easier to defend in as much as it is not open to such counter-examples.

How do these transparency theses WPT and SPT relate to the two N-ideas distinguished in the previous section? WPT and SPT are two different strength versions of N-IDEA2: that the nature of visual phenomenology *in itself* is as of world-presentation. WPT claims that any visual experience will have some such presentational phenomenology, SPT claims that all visual phenomenology is presentational. Both are claims that mere attention/introspection, without any theorising or inferring, reveals phenomena that purport to be mind-independent. This is supposedly a theory-neutral datum that any theory of visual experience should try to account for. Reading the following passage from Crane, one might understand the phrase “experience *seems*” in this way:

...all (or almost all) serious theories of perception agree that our perceptual experience *seems as if* it were an awareness of a mind-independent world. One's awareness of the objects of a perceptual experience does not seem to be an

⁵ I have formulated these Transparency claims so as to be acceptable to both intentionalist and Naively-direct theorists. Both of these schools of thought typically claim that transparency is a property of visual experience and that their own theory is well placed to account for this transparency. But, of course, they account for it in very different ways: the intentionalists will claim that phenomenology is partially or wholly constituted (in some sense of “constituted”) by the representational content of the experience, content that the environment is some way. Whereas the naïve/direct theorist claims that phenomenology is, at least partially, constituted by the mind-independent environment itself being present to, or confronting, the conscious mind.

awareness of things which depend on that experience for their existence. (Crane 2005, section 2.1.1)

However, the notion of how experience “seems” might alternatively be understood in line with N-IDEA1 – as how it is most natural for us to *conceive* of experience. We can then formulate two parallel transparency theses⁶:

WEAK CONCEPTIONAL TRANSPARENCY (WCT): If we pay attention to the phenomenology of visual experience, there are bound to be *some* elements/features that we find it very natural to conceive of as being apparently mind-independent features.

STRONG CONCEPTIONAL TRANSPARENCY (SCT): If we pay attention to the phenomenology of visual experience, *every* element/feature we could discover will be such that we find it very natural to conceive of them all as being apparently mind-independent features.

I claim we should prefer WCT/SCT to WPT/SPT. Why?

3. A short story about Wittgenstein

There is a well-known, though quite possibly apocryphal, anecdote involving Wittgenstein. During some philosophical discussion a student of Wittgenstein (possibly Anscombe) is supposed to have remarked: “it doesn’t *look* like the earth is rotating”. The student thought she was stating something obvious and non-contentious. Wily old Wittgenstein, however, is supposed to have asked in response: “Well, how *should* a rotating earth look?” – his point being that as the earth *does* rotate, surely the way that things look *is* the way that a rotating earth, in fact, looks.

In the middle ages the following argument perhaps seemed persuasive:

(1) The way that the earth appears indicates (provides non-conclusive evidence) that the earth does not rotate.

(2) The earth is in fact the way that its appearance indicates.

So, (3) The earth does not rotate.

Someone defending the earth-rotating theory might accept premise 1 but reject premise 2. They might allow that appearances are misleading – the earth is not in fact the way that its appearance suggests. This would be to concede that appearances weigh against their theory to some extent, but that the evidence of appearances is not decisive.

⁶ Once more, of course, SCT will, whereas WCT will not, have to face blurry-vision-style objections.

Wittgenstein's move in the story is to reject premise 1. The way that the earth appears does *not* indicate (provide evidence) that the earth does not rotate – it is only a wrong-headed conception or background beliefs that leads us to infer non-rotation from the earth's appearance. We might sympathise with mediaeval people erroneously taking the appearance of the earth to support non-rotation and to weigh against rotation, but we now realise that this way things look is in fact accounted for and explained by earth-rotation and so does not provide support for non-rotation. People in the middle-ages were not just wrong about whether the earth rotates, they were also wrong about the *evidential bearing* of the earth's appearance on this astronomical question.

Likewise, I suggest, it is wrong to claim that visual phenomenology itself, or mere introspection of it, provides evidence against sense-data theories. For a question analogous to Wittgenstein's could be pressed: how *should* visual phenomenology be if, say, sense-data theories are correct? Consider an argument that might seem reasonable to a theorist who accepts N-IDEA 2:

(1*) The way that experience introspectively appears indicates that experience is not awareness of sense-data.

(2*) Experience is in fact the way that its introspective appearance indicates.

So, (3*) Experience is not awareness of sense-data.

Defenders of sense-data theories might try accepting 1* but rejecting 2*. So they would accept that the way experience introspectively appears is misleading; experience is not the way that is suggested by its introspective appearance. This would be to concede that introspection of experience does weigh against their theory but not decisively so. The parallel move to Wittgenstein's in the story is to reject 1*. The way that experience introspectively appears does not indicate that sense-data are not involved⁷.

Presumably no sense-data theorists take their theory to make claims or predictions that our visual experience *should* seem any way other than how it *does* seem to us. In the (unlikely) event that sense-data theories were shown definitively to be the correct theory of perceptual experience, we would presumably have to accept that such theories *do* in fact account perfectly well for our visual phenomenology. To put the same point another way: any theorist who wishes to claim that visual phenomenology *in itself* supports their particular theory should be able to say how visual phenomenology *would* be, how experience would seem different to how it does seem, *if* some other theory or model of visual experience were actually the case. Well, how would our visual phenomenology be in a possible world in which sense-data theories of visual experience were true? One might be tempted to think that experience would somehow be flatter or cruder, like looking at a 2-d image or a mosaic – but this would be an unfair caricature of sense-data theories.

⁷ Notice, of course, that this is quite different from claiming that the way experience introspectively appears indicates that sense-data are involved. I have no wish to defend that claim!

Of course, one *might* want to argue that although some theory about the nature/structure of conscious episodes *claims* that their proposed structure accounts well for our manifest phenomenology, the theory is not entitled to make such a claim. This is what I understand the standard kind of criticism of adverbialism to be – adverbialists want to claim that their proposed unitary structure has enough dimensions of variation to account for all of the varied phenomenology we enjoy, but adverbialism’s critics doubt that the proposed unitary structure does really provide the resources to account for our manifest phenomenology. But this is *not* the sort of criticism that can reasonably be levelled against sense-data theories. *Once* a theorist has posited an entire realm of non-environmental particulars and properties, it should be conceded that they have helped themselves to enough resources to account for our visual phenomenology. Sense-data are entities that are just *stipulated* to be such as to seem the way that experience does (introspectively) seem. The only reasonable way then to complain that visual experience “does not *seem* to be awareness of sense-data” is when “seem” is understood in accordance with N-IDEA 1) and not N-IDEA 2).

4. Disagreeing about phenomenology

Mike Martin⁸ has pointed out that there is something odd about the very idea of disagreement over phenomenology. Phenomenology is supposed to be that which is just directly present to mind, something we are confronted with when we open our eyes, which simply stands revealed to our attention or introspection. So, assuming that different theorists don’t have markedly different phenomenology, shouldn’t we expect them to agree as to what is just manifest when we pay attention to experience?

Nevertheless, the fact remains that there *is* disagreement about the manifest phenomenology of visual experience. For example, sense-data theorists are committed to their own rival thesis, which they take to be supported by mere theory-neutral introspection; a thesis that Martin usefully labels as “actualism”.

Actualism requires that whatever qualities one senses, some actual instance of those qualities and the object which bears them must exist and be sensed. (Martin, forthcoming)⁹

A well-known statement of actualism, together with the idea that its truth should be obvious once we merely attend to our own experience, comes from H.H. Price:

When I see a tomato there is much that I can doubt... One thing however that I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape, standing out from a background of other colour-patches... that something is red

⁸ See section 6 of Chapter 1 of his forthcoming book “Uncovering appearances”. See also Spener, forthcoming.

⁹ This is similar to Robinson’s well known “Phenomenal Principle” (Robinson 1994, 32)

and round then and there I cannot doubt... that it now *exists*, and that *I* am conscious of it – by me at least who am conscious of it this cannot possibly be doubted... (Price 1932, 3)

Despite Price's repeated insistence to the contrary, actualism *has* been doubted, indeed it has been repudiated by theorists in the intentionalist school, who consider it a sort of fallacy. Intentionalists claim that things can appear red or brown, or circular or square, without there having to be any actual instance of such properties – all that is required is that my mental state, my experience, *represents* that those qualities exist in the environment. Intentionalists then deny that visual phenomenology is such that mere introspection reveals that it is constituted by *actual* quality instances. They take actualism to be an erroneous theoretical commitment of the sense-data school, something that is not just “given in the given”.

Thus we have rival theorists disagreeing over theses that each rival claims to be just obviously true once we attend to our own experience¹⁰. Another example of disagreement about the nature of visual phenomenology is the debate over whether causation is something that we genuinely experience. Hume, of course, denied that we do; but since the work of Michotte¹¹ in the sixties many have come to argue that causation is experienced in the same way that movement and depth and shape and colour are experienced – e.g. Siegel 2005. That is, the appearance of causality is a genuinely phenomenal feature just as the appearance of movement, shape and colour are. Berkeley¹² not only denied that we really experience 3-dimensional depth, he casually suggests this is something “agreed by all”. Some, e.g. Prichard¹³, have even denied that we really experience movement.

It is notable, however, that philosophers never deny that the appearance of colours and shapes are genuinely phenomenological features. I think it is fair to say then, in light of the disagreements between sense-data and intentionalist theorists, that neither mind-independent-ness nor actually-instantiated-ness are properties that are as straightforwardly phenomenal as shape and colour. To put the point in terms of representational content, an intentionalist faces the question: is mind-independence a property that our visual experience represents objects as having just as it represents their shape, colour, position etc?

According to strong transparency, when we try to pay attention to experience all that we find seem to be visible features of the objects of awareness. So then if apparent

¹⁰ Martin (2004) argues that Naively direct realism is best placed to capture our natural/intuitive view of experience as, in the perceptual case at least, it can endorse both the theses of actualism and transparency. I would agree with Martin that both actualism and transparency are part of our natural conception of experience so long as we bear in mind that it is not just mere introspection that recommends these theses to us, but also, in Martin's terms, “reflection” upon our experience.

¹¹ Michotte 1963.

¹² In Berkeley 1709.

¹³ See Prichard 1950.

mind-independence is one of the phenomenal features of visual experience we discover in this way, mind-independence must be a property of objects that is a *sensible* or *visible* property, just like an object's shape or its colour etc. But do we really want to say that we can see an object's mind-independence in the same way that we can see its size or its shape? Shifting to weak transparency, we might try to maintain that the mind-independence of the objects of awareness is a phenomenal property of experience but one that is not transparent – i.e. unlike shape and colour, paying attention to the apparent mind-independence of the objects of awareness is *not* to pay attention to a feature of those objects of awareness, it is paying attention to a feature of experience itself, perhaps like blurriness is supposedly a feature of visual experience itself. But does this even make sense? Can it be an intrinsic feature of the act/faculty of awareness itself, as opposed to the objects of awareness, that the objects which the act/faculty is engaged with are mind-independent? Is it an introspectible quality of visual experience itself, separate from the qualities of any of the objects we are apparently presented with, that the experience is apparently latching onto mind-independent items?

Similar questions arise for the property of actuality if one is a Naively-direct theorist committed to both transparency and actualism. Is the, so to speak, actuality of an object (as opposed to merely being some representational content) a property of it that forms part of the phenomenology of seeing it? To restate the general question, are either actuality or mind-independence properties that form part of the visual appearance of objects as we see them?

I have not, I confess, provided decisive arguments for giving negative answers to these questions. But I hope I have raised some problems for treating, in line with N-IDEA2, either mind-independence or “actuality” as genuinely visual-phenomenal properties on a par with shape, colour, movement etc.

As Spener (forthcoming) emphasises, the very existence of disagreement about our introspectible phenomenology is problematic for any theorist who appeals to the deliverances of introspection in support of some thesis. For such disagreement casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the introspective method, a method which is supposed to be easily employed by anyone and which is supposed to reveal shared phenomenological features. In the face of such disagreement then, a theorist must try to explain away her opponent's claims in such a way that the opponent's introspective powers are not blamed, for this would be to cast doubt on the very method of introspecting one's experience. Rather, the blame must be laid elsewhere. The plausible move here would be to suggest that one's opponent's introspective powers are working fine and revealing, in fact, just the same as one's own introspection is, but that one's opponent is failing to accurately report, or is somehow misconceiving, their own introspected phenomenology due to some theory-led bias.¹⁴

¹⁴ Note that for this move to be available, one must have a model of introspection that allows for there to be a gap between how one's phenomenology, as correctly revealed by introspection, actually is and how one sincerely judges and reports one's phenomenology to be.

5. Final dialectical remarks

I've argued that visual phenomenology *in itself* is neutral between the various competing theories – sense-data, intentionalism, naïve-realism – so that naïve-realism's place as the natural starting point of the dialectic must be due to our natural way of *conceiving* of experience. But then if all that can be said is that we tend to naturally *think* of experience as being the presentation of environmental mind-independent features, why should any weight be given to this natural tendency? Is there any good *reason* for wanting to avoid revising this natural view, or is it just innate prejudice to put the burden of proof onto the opposing theorists? Is our natural conception of experience a folk theory on a par with the non-rotating earth?

Different proponents of the “relational” conception of experience have claimed different philosophical virtues for it. McDowell (2008) claims that certain epistemological benefits flow from accepting naïve-realism, whereas Putnam (1994) claims that it is important for cognitive science and for the mind-body problem. Campbell (2002) and Brewer (2005) both argue it is essential for an account of reference. These are what you might call sophisticated reasons for being naïve. They are hardly reasons that could be adduced for favouring “naïve” realism at the outset of philosophical inquiry. I have argued against the idea that one resource available to the non-philosophical naïf – the introspectible nature of experience – can (in itself) justify favouring naïve-realism over its rivals at the start of the debate (before arguments from illusion etc are invoked). But this leaves it open that there could be other reasons, perhaps reasons available to the naïve, in favour of their natural view of experience^{15,16}

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¹⁵ For what its worth I think that there are good reasons to favour “naïve realism”, but capturing the view of the “naïve” is not one of its important virtues.

¹⁶ I would like to thank audiences in London and Lausanne, where earlier versions of this paper were presented. Thanks in particular to Wylie Breckenridge for helpful comments and suggestions.

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