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HALLUCINATION, SENSE-DATA AND DIRECT REALISM

INTRODUCTION

Although it has been something of a fetish for philosophers to distinguish between hallucination and illusion, the enduring problems for philosophy of perception that both phenomena present are not essentially different. Hallucination, in its pure philosophical form, is just another example of the philosopher's penchant for considering extreme and extremely idealized cases in order to understand the ordinary. The problem that has driven much philosophical thinking about perception is the problem of how to reconcile our evident direct perceptual contact with objects and properties with the equally evident fact that there is no phenomenological signal separating error and truth. "The obscure object of hallucination" offers a subtle and plausible solution to this problem and one that solves the problem generally, not just in the special case of hallucination. Johnston's objective is to offer a theory of perception that meets two constraints: (1) that it provide an explanation of the possibility of delusive and veridical sensings that are indistinguishable from the first-person perspective and (2) that it count as form of direct realism where this is taken to involve acquaintance with the objects of perception. Johnston uses the first constraint to rule out disjunctivism. The second constraint is used to rule out conjunctivism, which as Johnston uses the term, includes most of the widely adopted philosophical theories of perception. Johnston also develops his own sophisticated and interesting theory of perception. In what follows, I will discuss the relation of Johnston's theory to conjunctivism, examine one of his anti-conjunctivist arguments and finally compare Johnston's theory with some other versions of direct realism. These topics constitute a very incomplete selection of the important issues discussed in this rich and interesting paper. I will also not disagree, in any fundamental way, with any of the central theses of Johnston's discussion. My aim is merely to elaborate and



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clarify a handful of the issues he discusses and suggest that in one respect there are more options than he has fully considered.

PROPERTY COMPLEXES, SENSE-DATA,
AND THE ANALYSIS OF SEEING

Johnston offers an account of seeing that bears an interesting structural similarity to some versions of representative realism. This is no accident since many of the motivations for Johnston's theory are the same as those that have driven philosophers to representative realism since the early modern period. To illustrate in the familiar case of a hallucination that is qualitatively matched to a case of veridical seeing, the problem is the twofold one of explaining the phenomenological similarity between hallucination and veridical perception while at the same time defending a genuine difference in the objects of awareness in the two cases.¹ For both Johnston and the representative realist the phenomenological similarity is to be explained in terms of there being a common object of awareness in both cases. And for both Johnston and the representative realist the difference between veridical and hallucinatory seeing is explained, in part, by appeal to a relation obtaining between some particular and the object of awareness that the veridical and hallucinatory cases have in common. In spite of their similarities there are differences between the two approaches. For the representative realist the common objects of awareness are sense-data, while for Johnston they are complexes of (possibly uninstantiated) properties and relations, sensible profiles. For the representative realist the relation obtaining between a particular and the common object of awareness in the veridical case is commonly taken to be (appropriate) causation while for Johnston the relation is instantiation. Nevertheless there is an important sense in which Johnston's response to the problem of hallucination follows a well-worn path. Johnston, however, seems uncomfortable with his fellow-travelers and his definition of "conjunctivism" is clearly a part of his attempt to disassociate himself from the disreputable company of sense-data theorists and other devotees of causal theories of perception. It would be better, perhaps, for Johnston to embrace his conjunctivist heritage, for the issues that separate him from his fellow conjunc-

tivists have nothing specifically to do with the proper response to the argument from hallucination. On that I think Johnston's strategy is exactly right: combine a common qualitative object of awareness with awareness of particulars in the veridical case. In what follows I will take it for granted that Johnston's interesting and sophisticated arguments have carried the day for conjunctivism over disjunctivism and concern myself with his efforts to differentiate himself from other variants of conjunctivism.

DIRECT AWARENESS AND THE PHENOMENAL BOTTLENECK

The main factor that separates Johnston's theory from other versions of conjunctivism is his insistence that we can have direct and unmediated awareness of the particulars that instantiate sensible profiles. In the course of defending this view Johnston identifies an important principle whose acceptance, he argues, provides powerful support for the claim that awareness of particulars can't be unmediated in the way Johnston claims that it is. This principle, The Phenomenal Bottleneck Principle, says that, "If two acts of awareness are qualitatively indistinguishable for their subject then objects of the very same type are directly presented in each act of awareness" (Johnston, p. 37). Taken one way, this principle is simply a statement of the basic tenet of conjunctivism, phenomenological similarities between hallucinatory and veridical perception are to be explained by appeal to objects of awareness that are in common between the two cases. Taken a different way, the principle asserts that for qualitatively indistinguishable acts of awareness *only* objects of the very same type are directly presented. In this sense the principle rules out the possibility that Johnston wants to allow: some of the direct objects of awareness can be shared between veridical and hallucinatory perception but not all. In particular, the difference between the two cases, according to Johnston, is that in veridical perception there is direct awareness of a particular and in the hallucinatory case there is not. This possibility is ruled out by the second reading of The Phenomenal Bottleneck and thus it is important that Johnston argue against the principle.

Before discussing the reasons Johnston gives for rejecting The Phenomenal Bottleneck it is worth observing that the ambiguity

present in Johnston's statement of the principle helps to lend legitimacy to the second, stronger version of the principle. Conjunctivism is, after all, a very plausible view and consequently the first version of the principle is very appealing. It is, however, all too easy to slide from the plausible idea that defective and successful cases of seeing have objects of awareness in common, to the stronger and less plausible idea that they have all their objects of awareness in common. Johnston himself comes very close to making this mistake and displays no awareness of the ambiguity in the principle he is discussing.

Johnston argues against the Phenomenal Bottleneck by drawing from it the consequence that the direct objects of perception must be just as they appear to us to be. He then argues that this consequence leads to absurd consequences when applied to a course of experience involving gradual change. In his example, there is a gradual increase in the brightness of illumination in a room and a corresponding experience of continuous change in brightness. But if the change happens slowly enough we can have awareness of changes in the illumination without ever being aware of the illumination changing. That is to say, for each short time period there is no awareness of change but over larger periods of time we are aware that the illumination is different at the end than it was at the beginning.² This awareness of change is not accompanied by any awareness of the change happening in any portion of the time period. Assuming the phenomenal bottleneck, if we are not aware of any change in the brightness then the direct object of perception is not changing. But now we have no explanation of the fact that we are aware of a difference between the brightness at the beginning of the sequence and the brightness at the end. This argument is a vivid presentation of the difficulties that failures of transitivity in perception can pose to theories that are committed to the thesis that the immediate objects of perception are just as we take them to be. Whether these difficulties are insoluble is another question and one, I wish to suggest, we need not concern ourselves with. What reason, after all, is there for taking The Phenomenal Bottleneck seriously? In the current context, once we separate out the illegitimate slide from the weak to the strong version there is no reason at all. The

strong version adds nothing to the account of hallucination or any other feature of perceptual phenomenology.

DIRECT REALISM

Johnston admits the possibility of subjectively indistinguishable hallucination-veridical seeing pairs and argues that explanation of this possibility requires that there be some common object of awareness between the two cases. He also claims that he is a direct realist: which he takes to include the claim that we have an awareness of particular external objects that is not mediated by an awareness of any other object. He reconciles these two requirements by having two objects of awareness, property-complexes and particulars. There are other theorists who also describe their theories as direct realist. It is instructive, and in the end somewhat puzzling to compare Johnston's view to some of these alternative versions of direct realism and in particular to those that attempt to understand perception in terms of representation.

Armstrong, famously, compared perception to belief (Armstrong, 1961). To perceive is just to represent the world in a way that is fundamentally similar to having a belief about the world. To misperceive is just to misrepresent. This basic idea is a very powerful one and the core idea, that perception is representation, has been adopted by a number of philosophers although most would deny the strong connection with belief. So far nothing has been said about the objects of perception and from this point there are two possible ways one might go.³ Some philosophers, Dretske for one, takes the representational states to be *de re* and thus there is, in the veridical case, an object of perception (Dretske, 1995). Views of this sort strike me as having an excellent claim to be called direct realist. Visual representations are about specific objects, and they don't come to be about them in virtue of any other visual representation. The relation that connects the object to the representation is not itself represented and it is not the represented properties themselves that constitute the relation. Armstrong, I believe, held a variant of this view in which it is always the local environment or the scene before one's eyes that is the referent of the representation.

Alternatively, and Tye is an example of this approach, the content need not involve reference to particulars (Tye, 1995). Experience has

as its content an abstract proposition whose truth or falsity doesn't depend on particulars. In the veridical case, however, there will always be some particular that has the represented properties and in this sense is the object of perception. Again, awareness of the object is not obtained via visual awareness of anything else and this theory also seems to defend what is worth defending in direct realism.⁴

Johnston would not be happy with either of these alternatives, although they both bear a recognizable similarity to his own views. One problem, the problem with which he began, is that he takes it to be "natural" to understand hallucinations as having objects and on both the views just described this will be false. It's not clear to me just what the force of this consideration is since whatever its naturalness there are no uncontroversial facts that require that we introduce objects for hallucination. Moreover, on these representational views we are aware of property complexes, namely the visually represented properties and relations. There may be subtleties here, perhaps there is a difference between an act of awareness of a property complex and a visual representation of the same, but any such differences are subtle indeed.

The only alternative direct realism that Johnston considers in detail is the intentional object view defended by Gilbert Harman (1990). Harman's view, although important in reviving the interest in understanding perception entirely in representational terms, is idiosyncratic in its understanding of perceptual representation. For Harman there is a particular that we are aware of in both veridical and illusory perception. Although this view has its attractions it also has, as Johnston argues, some serious drawbacks. Dretske's view, on the other hand, has representations of properties in common between the hallucinatory and veridical case and, because of its commitment to *de re* representation, direct awareness of particulars in the veridical case. The structural similarities between this view and Johnston's are striking and, in fact, it is not easy to say exactly what difference there is, if any, between the two theories. Johnston's paper beautifully clarifies a number of important issues in contemporary philosophy of perception. It is less clear, however, that the property-complex theory represent a genuinely novel approach philosophical thought on perception.

NOTES

- ¹ A representative example is found on pp. 9–10 of Johnston's paper.
- ² Johnston muddies the waters here by bringing up the concept of a just noticeable difference. Just noticeable differences concern the relation between awareness and physically characterized stimuli. The current example concerns only the nature of our awareness and not its relationship with physical causes. What Johnston needs is only that there is not time at which we are aware of changes in the relevant aspect of our phenomenal state.
- ³ I am indebted to Alex Byrne in this section for providing me with a copy of some comments of his on an earlier version of Johnston's paper and for helpful discussion of some vague thoughts of mine.
- ⁴ The point is not that this is the right theory, there are obvious problems that arise when the object that matches the visual representation is inappropriate, but that there is no worrisome indirectness that it involves.

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