

Book Reviews

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Seeing Things as They Are: A Theory of Perception, by John R. Searle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 240 pages, ISBN: 9780199385157.

In *Seeing Things as They Are*, Searle aims to expose what he takes to be one of the greatest mistakes in the philosophy of perception: that of confusing the content of perceptual experience with the object of perceptual experience. The result of this confusion, according to Searle, is that we take ourselves to be aware of a table in the same sense that we take ourselves to be aware of our experience of that table; in other words, that we take ourselves to be seeing our own experience of the table. As soon as one accepts *that*, then Direct Realism, the view that we directly perceive objects and states of affairs out there in the world, will definitely be in trouble.

According to Searle, all of this will be seen as part of the Bad Argument against direct realism once we accept his *intentionalistic* theory of perception. On this theory of perception, ordinary cases of perception consists of two phenomena: first, “ontologically subjective, conscious perceptual experiences in the head” (52), and second, “ontologically objective states of affairs and objects in the world perceived, typically outside the head” (*ibid.*). The subjective perceptual experiences are *about* the objective state of affairs and objects in the world; they are direct intentional presentations of them. You perceive only the objective state of affairs, but you do so by means of the subjective perceptual experience. In terms of awareness, you are *intentionally* aware of the objective state of affairs and *constitutively* aware of the subjective experience (25). On this theory, there really is no question whether awareness of one’s experience blocks awareness of the world, as these are simply different kinds of awareness.

The first three chapters of Searle’s book are devoted to spelling out the Bad Argument against direct realism and providing a bare-bones account of his own intentionalist view (with two appendices

summarizing Searle's theories of intentionality and consciousness). Chapters 4 and 5 constitute what Searle takes to be the main intellectual thrust of the book (9): they attempt to show how the raw phenomenology of perceptual experiences determine their content. Chapter 6 criticizes Disjunctivism, a modern opponent of intentionalist views of perception according to which there is a crucial mental difference between cases of hallucination and cases of veridical perception. Chapters 7 and 8 can almost be seen as an afterthought to the contents of the book, where 7 briefly discusses unconscious cognition and 8 briefly considers the classical philosophical problems of perception.

There is no doubt that Searle provides a provocative discussion of some interesting topics within the philosophy of perception. Searle has little patience with sometimes "obviously false" (192) alternative views, and so his discussion of these views and their motivations tends to be brief. Instead, Searle focuses on getting across his own theory of perception, highlighting where other theories have failed to incorporate some of its crucial aspects. The upside of this style is that one does not have to go through several interpretations of an argument or endless back and forth between author and opponent, but can instead easily grasp the ideas the author is putting forward. The downside of course is that many opponents will find their own views to be brushed aside without proper consideration, and will not be easily convinced by Searle's claims in the absence of additional arguments. In what follows I will discuss a few crucial points of Searle's theory of perception that appear in need of such additional arguments, i.e., the causal self-reflexivity of perceptual experience and the backward road from features in the world to intentional contents of perceptual experiences. Given that this is part of the main intellectual thrust of the book, this will provide the best way to critically assess its content.

Let's start with the notion of *causal self-reflexivity*. As already mentioned, Searle takes perceptual experiences to be direct intentional presentations of states of affairs and objects in the world. Every perceptual experience has an intentional content which specifies the way the world perceptually seems to be (56). This content fixes the conditions of satisfaction for the perceptual experience: only if the world actually is the way specified in the content of the perceptual

experience, will this perceptual experience be satisfied (57). This is related to the fact that perceptual experiences have a mind-to-world direction of fit: the perceptual experience is supposed to match the world rather than that the world is supposed to change to match the perceptual experience (as is the case with desires and intentions) (56-7).

So far, being an intentional presentation like perceptual experience seems similar to being an intentional representation like belief. Beliefs also have intentional contents with a mind-to-world direction of fit which specify the way the world needs to be for the belief to be satisfied. However, one crucial difference between the intentional *representation* of belief and intentional *presentation* of perceptual experience is that the latter is “experienced as directly caused by the conditions of satisfaction” (61). Not only does Searle claim that perceptual experience has a *causally self-reflexive* feature to it in the sense that its intentional content is not satisfied unless it is caused by the state of affairs and objects that it represents (58); Searle also claims that we *experience* the objects of perception as directly causing our experiences of them (61). Taken at first glance, this seems to imply a hyper-intellectualization of perceptual experience that Searle is intent on avoiding: experiencing objects as causing our experiences of them seems to imply that a perceiving subject is somehow both aware of the world and his experience of that world. But Searle explicitly claims that his account should also apply to animals (103), for which such experiential self-awareness seems too cognitively demanding to achieve.

Searle already addresses this worry in the introduction, where he mentions that “a persistent misunderstanding was that my [i.e., Searle’s] account made perception too complicated for animals to grasp” (5). In response, Searle claims that animals can have complex intentional structures without having to think about the content of those complex structures. The claim is merely that “when they [i.e., animals] perceive something, they actually perceive it only if the object perceived causes the very perception of it” (ibid.). However, *this* claim is crucially different from the earlier one. Although most people will agree that to perceive an object that object must also cause the perception of it, significantly less people will agree that, in perception, we experience perceived objects as causing our

perceptual experiences of them. The latter claim goes beyond the mere conditions of satisfaction for perception to a claim about what is phenomenologically present in a perceptual experience.

Searle's only argument in favor of this strong claim focuses on the phenomenological difference between perception and imagination:

Close your eyes and form a mental image of the scene around you and imagine that you had the capacity to form a mental image that had as much "force and vivacity" (to use Hume's expression) as actually seeing the scene. All the same, there would be a tremendous difference in the phenomenology, because in the case of seeing the scene, you experience the visual experience involuntarily. If you have your eyes open, you are forced to experience the visual experience by the presence of the scene in front of you. You experience the experiences as caused by the scene you are seeing, whereas the visual images that you voluntarily form are experienced as caused by you. (62)

In this line of argument, Searle again moves from a fact that most people will accept, i.e., that there is a phenomenological difference between seeing and visualizing a scene, to a more controversial explanation of this fact, i.e., that only the visual experience is experienced involuntarily, and ends up (even more controversially) identifying this explanation with the explanation that you experience only the visual experience as caused by the scene you are seeing. The first explanation is in need of further argument, as involuntary imagination could very well still be phenomenally different from perception. The second also needs further argument, as involuntary experience might also just be experienced as *not caused by you* rather than as caused by the scene in front of you. Note that I am here just mentioning a few alternative hypotheses, plenty of others can and surely have also been proposed (see Harmen Ghijsen, "Phenomenalist dogmatist experientialism and the distinctiveness problem", *Synthese* 191, 2014, 1549-66 for some of my own thoughts on this). The fact that Searle does not even consider these possibilities is especially problematic given his contention that the causal component of perception is "central to the explanation of how the sheer phenomenology of the subjective visual experiences fixes their intentional content, their conditions of satisfaction" (63).

This last remark brings us to the second point I would like to discuss, namely, Searle's explanation of how raw phenomenology determines intentional content. To start this explanation, Searle in-

introduces the notion of *basic perceptual features*, where a basic perceptual feature “is a feature you can perceive without perceiving any other feature by way of which you perceive it” (112). According to Searle, perceptual experience is hierarchical in the sense that some higher level features, such as being a (specific kind of) car, can only be perceived by perceiving lower level features, such as shapes, sizes and colors. This hierarchical structure bottoms out in basic perceptual features, which can perhaps be thought of as colored shapes, although Searle does not claim to provide a fully satisfying answer to the question of which features are perceptually basic (113).

Searle can now focus on the question of how raw phenomenology is able to determine the conditions of satisfaction for the basic perceptual features. How can the raw phenomenology of an experience of red, say, come to determine that red must be present for this experience’s content to be satisfied? Searle’s answer depends partly on the earlier discussed causal self-reflexivity of experience and partly on what one may call a dispositionalist account of basic perceptual features: “that qualitative character fixes red as the conditions of satisfaction because (in part) the essence of redness is the ability to cause experiences that have this character, and any perceptual experience is experienced as having its cause as its object” (124) — the ‘in part’ is meant to convey that we might come to know more about the physics of how these experiences are caused exactly (123). Note that both parts are crucial to Searle’s proposal: it’s not just the fact that redness causes this experience that makes it an experience of redness; it is the combination of the fact that redness causes this experience and the fact that this experience presents its perceptual object (i.e., redness) as causing it. Mere causation would lead one to the mistaken conclusion that painful sensations caused by red objects would also present redness (119-20).

Searle extends this account to the presentation of higher-level features. For instance, for something to look like a California coastal redwood is for it to cause a certain complex visual experience having to do with shape, color, texture, etc. (144). So a visual experience presents something as a California coastal redwood when it presents a certain complex of visual features because for something to look like a California coastal redwood just *is* for it to cause this complex visual experience (and this complex visual experience in turn pres-

ents the California coastal redwood as causing it). In effect, Searle has constructed a “backward road” (130-1) from object to intentional content because the object and its effects are crucially involved in the way in which a perceptual experience is able to present it.

Now, we have already discussed some worries about the supposed causal self-reflexivity of perceptual experience, so here I want to focus on a rather different worry, related to the brain-in-a-vat scenario. It seems that, if Searle’s account of how phenomenology determines content is correct, a brain-in-a-vat will be perceiving the world *accurately* (contrary to intuition). This would be especially problematic given that Searle heavily criticizes causal externalist theories of meaning for entailing a similar result for belief (157-8). But it’s not clear how Searle can avoid this unwanted conclusion on his own account; given that being red just *is* being capable of causing certain sorts of experiences, brains-in-vats will be having accurate perceptual experiences of the electrical stimuli that give rise to them. For instance, the “Electrical Stimulus Red” (ESR) is what causes red-experiences for the brain-in-a-vat, and so the brain-in-a-vat will be correctly presenting ESR when it presents that something red is present and is causing the experience of red.

Searle responds to this worry by appealing to a difference between intentional causation and other types of causation:

In the veridical case, the object of perception is not just any old cause, but the object which is presented to me in the perceptual experience. But in the brain-in-a-vat case, the causation is not intentional causation. The causation is just like the neurobiological causation, which is essential to any perceptual experience but which is not itself the object of the experience. In the case of intentional causation, perceptual experience must be experienced as caused by its objects and the intentional content occurs as part of a Network of intentional contents and against the Background of capacities. (159)

The idea of this response is that the perceptual experiences of a brain-in-a-vat present objects that are colored, have a certain shape, are part of an independent world, etc., and also present that *these* objects are responsible for causing these experiences, whereas none of these objects are in fact causing the experiences. It’s just colorless, shapeless, electrical stimulation (neurobiologically) causing the experiences, so there is in fact no intentional causation. However, this response forgets that, for the brain-in-a-vat, colors and shapes just

are those electrical stimulations, given that they are the ones causing these experiences. So when the experience presents that there is a red, round object causing this very experience, then that experience is accurate: the thing normally causing this experience is in fact causing this experience of the thing, and is also presented as causing it. So it seems that intentional causation will not get Searle off the hook so easily.

Some crucial claims in Searle's book thus appear in need of additional arguments to be fully convincing. However, it will certainly work as a provocative introduction to some of the philosophical problems of perception.

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Semantic Externalism, by Jesper Kallestrup. London: Routledge, 2012, x+271 pages, ISBN 9780415449977 (pbk).

As Kallestrup announces at the introduction of *Semantic Externalism* (2), the book examines the debate between semantic externalism and semantic internalism: is meaning wholly determined by internal features of the speaker (internalism) or is it at least partially determined by external such features (externalism)? Throughout the book's seven chapters the author presents and discusses a variety of interconnected topics in philosophy of language, mind and epistemology with the aim of arguing for semantic externalism. Two useful features of the book that make it a good introduction to the topic are that every chapter ends with a summary and annotated further readings. Another important feature is that the author critically assesses the main arguments for and against semantic externalism and semantic internalism; this allows the reader to have a proper understanding of the debate and of the metaphysical and epistemic implications of the conflicting theories. In short, the book offers an excellent description and an excellent introduction to one of the liveliest