Blockheads!
Essays on Ned Block’s Philosophy of Mind and Consciousness

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2 The Direct Realist Approach to Illusion: Reply to Bill Brewer

Ned Block

According to direct realism, there is nothing in the phenomenal character of experience other than the objects and instantiated properties in the environment that one is aware of. As Bill Brewer puts it (Brewer 2004, 72), “The subjective qualities of experience ... are constituted by the actual spatial distribution of the various displays as these are accessible to the subject.” In particular, the subjective quality of experience, what I am calling the phenomenal character of experience, does not include any awareness of objects that do not exist or are not in the perceptible environment, nor does the phenomenal character of the experience involve any awareness of properties or relations that are not instantiated in the perceptible environment. This view makes it mysterious how there can be illusion. Since one is aware only of things that are there, and the instantiated properties and relations of those things, how can perception get the environment wrong?

Contrast the direct realist approach with views that emphasize representation in which I can visually represent what is in the environment but also things and properties that are not instantiated in the environment. Illusion on the representation-centric view is just a matter of representational contents that do not reflect reality. (I am assuming that the representational contents are not “object-involving.”)

On Brewer’s account, the phenomenal character of perception is a matter of conscious acquaintance of objects and properties in the world and what he calls the third relatum, in which, “for example, head-on versus wide-angle, or edge-on, experiences involve different spatial points of view. Bright light versus dim light viewings involve different circumstances of perception. Still, these are all cases of conscious acquaintance with the very same mind-independent physical object—that particular round red disc—with variations in the third term of the perceptual relation.”

Unlike many other direct realists, Brewer has an account of illusion. His view is that illusory perception—like all perception—is always veridical perception of some things and their actually instantiated properties and relations, so in a sense there is no illusion. But what we call illusion is a direct awareness of a similarity relation that is instantiated, a similarity relation to “paradigms” that are not in the current environment. The
core notion for him is "looks." He says that "an object of acquaintance o looks F if and only if o has, from the point of view and in the circumstances of perception in question, appropriate visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F."

In framing the puzzle of illusion above, I said that the mystery is that our awareness does not involve any awareness of properties or relations that are not instantiated in the perceptible environment. The key move is that a relation can be instantiated even if one of the relata is not present.

Consider the Müller-Lyer illusion, in which lines that are equal appear to be unequal. According to Brewer, what one is aware of is a similarity to paradigms of pairs of unequal lines. One way to put the view is that the so-called Müller-Lyer illusion is not an illusion at all since that is what equal lines look like when bracketed by opposite-facing arrowheads. They look like paradigms of unequal lines that one has seen and that are the basis for one’s learning the concept of inequality. If the subject goes on to infer that the Müller-Lyer lines really are unequal, that would be a cognitive error, not a perceptual illusion.

What is the visually relevant similarity supposed to be between the Müller-Lyer illusion pair of lines and the paradigm pair of unequal lines that Brewer appeals to? Brewer says the notion of visually relevant similarity is a primitive, but we can guess that the visually relevant similarity in this particular case is inequality. (It cannot be looking unequal since that would introduce the notion to be explained in the explanation.) What is a paradigm of unequal lines supposed to be? As with the notion of visually relevant similarities, the notion of paradigm exemplars is supposed to be primitive. But we have this by way of explication of the latter term: “Paradigm exemplars are instances of the kinds in question, whose association with the terms for those kinds partially constitutes our understanding of those terms, given our training in the acquisition of the relevant concepts. They are paradigm exemplars of the kinds in question relative to our grasp of the concepts for those kinds.” It appears to be a consequence of this view that one cannot be subject to the Müller-Lyer illusion unless one has learned the concept of unequal lines. That seems to make seeing an illusion so … intellectual. Do illusions really require concepts? In any case the condition is pretty straightforwardly false. Pigeons and infants are subject to the Müller-Lyer illusion, and animals have been shown to be subject to many other illusions (Bååth, Seno, and Kitaoka 2014; Nakamura et al. 2006). And it is unlikely that they have anything we could call concepts of unequal lines.

Adam Pautz (2010) interprets Brewer’s notion of paradigm as instances of kinds that can play the role in the grasp of concepts by concept users in general rather than just the subject of the illusion. On this interpretation, my illusory perception depends on seeing similarities to things that I may not have seen but that members of my culture or language group have seen and used to ground their concepts. This makes my visual illusion depend on the conceptual abilities of others, a very peculiar idea. And as Pautz
notes, it is vulnerable to the difficulty that, in a world that contained perceivers but no concept users, there could be no illusions.

Perhaps, though, we should ignore Brewer’s explanation of the notion of paradigm and just take paradigms to be cases of unequal lines that one has seen. So in the Müller-Lyer illusion one is seeing similarities to pairs of unequal lines that one has seen, and the same is true for pigeons and infants. This idea still has a strong and empirically false consequence—that a creature cannot experience the Müller-Lyer illusion without having seen a pair of unequal lines in a nonillusory situation. Giorgio Vallortigara and colleagues (Salva et al. 2013) have done a series of controlled-rearing experiments on chicks. In these experiments, the experimenters are in control of everything that the animal sees. The chick hatches in darkness, a screen goes on and various displays are shown, and then some related stimuli are repeated later. These experiments make use of perceptual imprinting in which a chick prefers to huddle close to an object that it has seen moving. Perceptual similarities can be assessed by imprinting the chick on a moving object and then later giving the chick a choice of an illusorily similar object. These experiments have shown that chicks are subject to a wide range of perceptual illusions, including stereokinetic illusions such as the Saturn illusion. In many of these experiments, there is no display of an analogue of the unequal lines.

I put this issue aside, though, and focus on Brewer’s approach to cases in which attention changes perception.

In “Attention and Mental Paint” (2010), I argue against direct realism (and representationism) on the basis of Marisa Carrasco’s finding that attention affects appearance: in particular, attention raises apparent contrast (Carrasco, Ling, and Read 2004). One result of Carrasco’s work is that in seeing a single object, say, one of the grids (Gabor patches) that Carrasco often uses as stimuli, one can attend to it to different degrees, and there will be a phenomenal difference in apparent contrast. I argue that when there is a phenomenal change between different degrees of attention to the grid, neither percept is illusory. (There can be an illusion of comparison if there are two grids but no illusion in the percept of a single grid. And I stick to the example of a single grid seen with differing degrees of attention.) In moving attention, one does not change the objects in the environment or which of their properties are accessible to one, so I argue that it is hard to see how direct realism can account for the change in appearance.

Brewer’s account of the Carrasco phenomenon is that different degrees of attention involve “registration of different visually relevant similarities that these objects have… with paradigm exemplars of various physical kinds.” The question leaps to mind, With what degree of attention is the subject supposed to be seeing the paradigm exemplars? Are we supposed to believe that when we learned the concept of contrast—for those of us who did acquire that concept—there was some sort of standard amount of attention directed to the thing whose contrast was at issue? Or is there supposed to be a paradigm of attention? There are no answers to these questions in Brewer’s chapter.
I very much doubt that there is any degree of attention that is paradigmatically associated with learning observational concepts. The amount of attention devoted to a perception depends in part on what other attentive projects are being done at the same time. Famously, Brian Scholl showed that talking on a cell phone drains attention from a spatial vision task, causing subjects to fail to notice large objects in the center of their visual field (Scholl et al. 2003). Is there a paradigm of what else one is doing while learning a term? I don’t think so. Further, the amount of attention involved in tasks when one is doing nothing else very likely differs from person to person—given the wide variation in attentional effects in different persons (Carrasco 2011).

Brewer’s account of the attentional phenomenon is this: “So greater attention involves registering similarities with higher-contrast paradigms, and less attention involves registering similarities with lower-contrast paradigms.” For concreteness, let us suppose the subject is looking at a 22 percent contrast grid. Attending to the grid involves registering similarities in contrast with, say, a paradigm of seeing a 28 percent grid. Of course, there are no such paradigms. People can see contrast differences without any concept of contrast, and the appearances change with attention even if they have never learned these concepts. But forget that problem. I have been asking, With what attention is one seeing the 28 percent grid? Let us refer to the amount of attention with which the paradigm 28 percent grid is being seen as x. That is, we stipulate that the 22 percent grid seen with the relevant amount of attention looks the same in apparent contrast as the 28 percent grid seen with x attention. But that look will be the same as that of a 29 percent grid seen with an amount of attention slightly smaller than x and a 30 percent grid seen with a still smaller amount of attention. Attentional amplification is variable and not an on-off matter (Datta and DeYoe 2009). Which paradigm is the right one? One could say that they form an equivalence class, and it is that equivalence class that determines the “visually relevant similarities.” But what is the principle of equivalence? That they look the same in contrast? But then Brewer’s account presupposes the very notion it was supposed to explain.

I am grateful for this chance to respond to Bill Brewer better than I did in my previous writings (2010, 48–49; 2015n14). In those, I did not appreciate the work that the concept of paradigm was doing for Brewer, but I hope that I have refuted his actual view here and not a simplistic form of it.

References


