

The Looks of Things

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Abstract

When the stick appears bent and the penny looks oval, bentness and ovality may be and have been attributed to their appearances, to how things appear to me, to what they appear to me to be, or to the way I am appeared to by them. I argue that this is wrong: bentness and ovality do not need to figure in our account at all. There are appearances of things as oval or bent, to be sure, but they have only appearance properties – they themselves only appear oval or bent. In my talk, I will try to articulate this (perhaps Kantian) idea a bit further and explore some its consequences for the argument from illusion, McTaggart's argument against temporal *A*-determinations and Jackson's argument in favour of perceptual qualia.

Let us consider one version of the argument from illusion:

- 1 A stick in front of me looks bent.
- 2 A stick in front of you looks straight.
- 3 There is at most one stick in front of us.
- 4 No stick can be both bent and straight.
- ∴ 5 In at least one case, one of our perceptual experiences is non-veridical.
- 6 In the non-veridical perceptual experience, one is presented with a mind-dependent intentional object.
- 7 Both perceptual experiences have the same type of intentional object.
- ∴ 8 The intentional object of both experiences is mind-dependent.
- 9 Sticks are not mind-dependent.
- ∴ 10 In neither case do we see the stick.

Hence nothing that may look to have contrary properties is ever seen – a *reductio*. While most attention has been focussed on denying (6) or (7) or both, I would like to focus attention on the description of the situation, i.e. on (1) and (2). My main motivation is that already (5) is implausible: while I may certainly form false beliefs on the basis of one of my perceptual experiences, they themselves are not necessarily misleading: at least on one sense of “looks”, the straight stick half-immersed in water does look straight, i.e. looks as straight sticks half in water do.

The most promising way out, I think, is to block the deduction of (5), while preserving a sense in which both (1) and (2) may be true. Adverbialists reinterpret (1) and (2) as

- 1ⁱ I am appeared to bent-ly.
- 2ⁱ I am appeared to straight-ly.

Even though we do not then have analogues of (3) and (4), (5) *still* seems to follow: If we are appeared to bent-ly and straight-ly, then in at least one case, the perceptual experience is non-veridical. We also have trouble explaining why (4), or at least some version of it, belongs to an exhaustive description of the situation: to see this, compare the scenario with what changes when we take the stick out of the water: even if we keep our respective perspectives on the stick, an important source of conflict and disagreement disappears. This source, whatever it is, is not captured by (1ⁱ) and (2ⁱ). In this second, but not the first respect, representational views fare better:

- 1ⁱⁱ I see the stick as bent.
- 2ⁱⁱ I see the stick as straight.

Insofar as bentness and straightness may figure in contents (as represented properties, rather than as being exemplified by things as sticks), we do account for the conflict noted in (4). Given (3) and (4), however, it still follows that in at least one case one of us sees the stick as *F* where the stick is not *F* – so (5) still follows.

The sense data theorist reinterprets (1) and (2) as

- 1ⁱⁱⁱ It appears to me: something is bent*.
- 2ⁱⁱⁱ It appears to me: something is straight*.

Bentness* and straightness* are not properties of sticks, but of sense-data or of experiences: if they can both be had by the same sense-datum, then we do not have an analogue of (4); if they cannot, then we do not have an analogue of (3). The

victory is Pyrrhonic, however, because even if they can perhaps provide a reading of “seeing” on which it is true that I see the stick, I will not on their view see its bentness or straightness.

Perspectival realists also deny (5) by reinterpreting (1) and (2). Their version is:

- 1^{iv} The stick appears-bent-to-me.
- 2^{iv} The stick appears-straight-to-me.

This, I think is part of the right response to the argument. It combines the adverbial account of the (allegedly) contrary properties with the introduction of appearance properties – properties like *being bent-to-me*, or rather: *being-bent-from-here*, the relativisation encapsulating the information about the position and perceptual apparatus of the observer and the information about the perceptual *milieu* we would need to appeal to correctly predict from what other actual or counterfactual experiences the perceptual experience in question would be subjectively indiscriminable.

Bent-to-me and *straight-to-me* are not incompatible, so we do not have an analogue of (4); but neither are they properties of experiences, nor of sense-data, nor of points of views or observers. Are they properties of sticks? In a sense yes, but also in another sense no. The property the half-immersed stick appears to have from here, i.e. the one I can correctly describe by painting a inflected line, is a property the stick no longer appears to have once I have taken it out of the water. It is very well possible, however, that the half-immersed stick did not to you appear to have this property, e.g. if you were looking at it from another angle it may have looked straight to you, even when half-immersed in water. When we took the stick out, it started to appear differently to me, but not to you. While *bent to me* certainly was a property the stick appeared (to me) to have, it was not so for you and is now not so for me. When we immersed it in water, there was a look the stick acquired, a look it did not have before: by changing the perceptual milieu and the set of available perspectives on the stick, the stick acquired a new look it did not have before, a look I describe ascribing the perspectival property *bent-to-you* and you describe ascribing the different, but not incompatible property *straight-to-me*.

These perspectival appearance properties are thus not features of perspective-independent things, but rather of appearances, appearances of perspective-independent things, to be sure, but not things that are themselves independent of perspectives. Kant is right in thinking that the perception of appearance properties is the perception of appearances, where such appearances are grounded in the things they are appearances of. It is the appearance of the stick half-immersed in water that looks bent-from-here and the same appearance that may look straight-from-here with respect to some other location or observer. It is the change in appearance that is responsible for the fact that once the stick is taken out of the water and seen by both of us in clear air, it may no longer be said to appear bent in any sense. Because appearances are grounded in the things appearing, together with their environment, they are appearances of things – things with which we are in perceptual contact when we perceive the appearances. Can we thus say that the things are only indirectly seen, through their appearances as it were?

We should not, however, in the way of sense-data theorists, take these appearances to be the direct objects of perception – rather, it is their grounds that are seen through them. This explanation of appearance properties thus takes us to

- 1^v The stick-as-seen-by-us appears-bent-to-me.
- 2^v The stick-as-seen-by-us appears-straight-to-you.

We thus have two perceptions, but still just one stick appearing to both of us. (5) does not follow if the two appearances really have their appearance properties. Such a reply to the argument from illusion, I surmise, is not only independently plausible, but also generalises to the analogous arguments by McTaggart against temporal *A*-determinations and and by Frank Jackson in favour of perceptual qualia.

Before drawing such morals, however, we have to know more about sticks-as-seen-by-us, i.e. appearances of sticks.

The case of colours

When I say that the wine tastes sweet, I am qualifying the taste as sweet, and only secondarily the wine as having a sweet taste.¹ On one reading, the first qualification is not subject to doubt: in this sense, I am qualifying the taste as tasting-sweet-to-me, something which you cannot dispute. Sometimes, however, I make a stronger claim, not only that the taste is sweet-to-me, but that it is sweet *tout court*, and so that you should taste it as sweet as well, if you are tasting properly. Here we have conceptual space for taste courses and experts, judges and faultless disagreement.

Another dimension of possible disagreement opens up with the secondary qualification: I may be wrong that it is the wine that tastes sweet. This suggests that the ‘extension’ of my assertion is via a *causal* link: I am saying of the taste that it is sweet (and there cannot be doubt about this) and of the wine that it has that taste, i.e. causally produced it (and about this I could be wrong).

Things stand differently with colours, or rather with chromatic profiles:²

1. The “primary”/“secondary” contrast is from Martin (2010: 183).
2. The switch to chromatic profiles is needed to preserve Aristotle’s claim that they are the proper sensibles of sight: we also see black and white things, transparent things and things that do not have surfaces, such as shadows, holes, holograms and rainbows.

“What puts vision apart from hearing, smell, and taste is that we do not conceive of the visible world as offering us objects of visual awareness and attention distinct from (but coincident with) the concrete objects that we also see.” (Martin 2010: 187), citing O’Shaughnessy (2000: 571–572)

The chromatic profile of a coloured thing (its visual appearance, its look) is more closely tied to it than its taste or its visual shape: the being-the-appearance-of relation here is not causal, but constitutive. Looks are nothing but looks of things, i.e. things looking a certain way. In other terms: for *a* to have a visual look that appears red is both, for the look to be red and for the thing itself to appear red. Two possible sources of error present in the case of taste are thereby eliminated: it is not possible that only its look, but not the thing looking a certain way appears red, and the look itself cannot just appear red but fail to be red.

What Mary gets newly acquainted with, when she gets out of her black-and-white room, are not new properties, but new things: the looks things have when they appear to you e.g. in clear daylight. Being an eminent colour scientist, she knew everything there is to know about colours; being equally an eminent psychologist of colour perception, she also knew everything there is to know about visual appearance properties, properties such as *looking red from here*. What she did not know, however, are an important class of things, visual looks – i.e. the things that primarily have the colours and in virtue of which coloured things appear the way they do. Instead of

- 1^v The patch-in-this-light looks-red-to-me.
- 2^v The patch-in-this-light looks-green-to-you.

we thus have the simpler:

- 1^v The patch-in-this-light is red.
- 2^v The patch-in-this-light is green.

Our experience of time and change

The argument from perspective may be applied to ‘temporal denominations’ of the A-type as in McTaggart’s argument for the unreality of time:

- 1 2017 was future.
- 2 2017 will be past.
- 3 There is at most one year 2017
- 4 Nothing can be both future and past.
- ∴ 5 In at least one case, one of our temporal experiences is non-veridical.
- 6 In the non-veridical temporal experience, one is presented with a mind-dependent intentional object.
- 7 Both temporal experiences have the same type of intentional object.
- ∴ 8 The intentional object of both experiences is mind-dependent.
- 9 Temporal properties (such as *being past* and *being future*) are not mind-dependent.
- ∴ 10 I neither case are we aware of mind-independent temporal property.

As before, the right interpretation of (1) and (2) yields only the harmless:

- 4^{iv} The same temporal entity may be *future from certain points of view* and *past from certain other ones*.

We avoid the conclusion that time is unreal, but have to accept irreducibly tensed temporal qualifications: the full story about temporal reality has to be told from a certain temporal standpoint. The fact that this-or-that event is present is itself perspectival, it is internally related to an instant of time. We thus reject the premise ? : 273 calls “Absolutism”, i.e. the view that the composition of reality is not irreducibly relative, that its relative composition by the facts must be explained in terms of its absolute composition by these facts:

“For the non-standard realist [...], reality at another time is an alternative reality. It is neither a facet of the one true reality nor a hypothetical determination of the one true reality, but another reality on an equal footing with the current reality ...” (? : 279)

In the case of a temporally changing object such as the year 2017, we thus have to qualify further:

- 1^v 2017-as-present was-future-from-2016.
- 2^v 2017-as-present will-be-past-from-2018.

Contrary to the case of visual shape, however, there is no temporally unqualified way of saying what the year 2017 is. “2017-as-present” and “2017” are really just the same thing.

Temporal standpoints are thus irreducibly involved in the constitution of tensed facts. But what are temporal standpoints? Recent discussion of temporal consciousness have concentrated on our perception of duration, taking our present perception of present events as a supposedly unproblematic starting-point. The question then becomes: how do we perceive past events *as* past, thereby achieving a perception of duration. Three answers have been proposed:

1. auditory and visual perceptions are themselves temporally extended processes, so they are themselves in need of an experiential unification which must be located in the present, be point-like and momentary
2. temporalised contents are self-revealing, welded together by nothing other than direct experience
3. we enjoy special representations – retentions – which present us with something in the past as past

These three strategies may be applied to two different problems: to explain how we experience an intentional object as extended in time, or to explain how we are aware of our own experiences as extended in time (the “problem of inner time-consciousness”). In our view, the problems are connected, because mental states are events as well.

The first view presupposes a present nexus and leads to a regress. The second wrongly explains the experience as of past and as of future by expanding the present, which leads to a dilemma: either the present is intrinsically structured temporally or it is not; if it is, then it’s not present, but “past flowing into future” (taking the metaphor literally); if it is not, then it does not do it’s job – both the object’s having been F and it’s going to be $\neg F$ are part of it, which is still contradictory. The third position, however, is ambiguous: is the pastness in the act or the content (i.e. content + MOP); it cannot be in the acts (that would reduce it to (i)), so it must be in the contents; but then the contents are tensed, but atemporally had – this is the defining feature of the A-theory:

“A perception cannot merely be a perception of what is now; rather any perception of the present phase of an object includes a retention of the just-past phase and a protention of the phase of the object about to occur [...] Inner-time consciousness is not an object occurring in time, but neither is it merely a consciousness of time; rather it is itself a form of temporality...” (? : 464)

Being a form of temporality precisely is having an intrinsically tensed content. A retention of a as having been F cannot be the same act as a direct apprehension of a as being F – the two acts have different veridicality conditions: the retention is veridical iff a *was* F , while the apprehension is veridical iff a *is* F .

To explain this, we

- 1^v 2017 is-from-2017-future-from-2016.
- 2^v 2017 will-from-2017-be-past-from-2018.

References

Martin, M.G.F., 2010. What's in a Look? In Nanay, Bence (editor) *Perceiving the World*, pp. 160–225. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Shaughnessy, Brian, 2000. *Consciousness and the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.