Gestalt Switch, Illusion and Epistemic Switch

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There is a tendency to separate (1) visual phenomena as of essence non-propositional from (2) beliefs as of essence propositional. A reason is that phenomena are occurrent, whereas beliefs can be dispositional and as such they surely lack phenomenal content. But the claim that all beliefs are exclusively propositional is false: there are perceptual beliefs which are something more than propositional beliefs added to visual phenomena. That perceptual beliefs create a species would be proved if there are genuine perceptual beliefs which do not map phenomena; if some inferential beliefs transcend phenomena but remain perceptual. A fundamental question in this context is what factors limit the range of permissible inference for perceptual beliefs. How synthetic can they be? Which inferences from perceptual premises do preserve the perceptual core of the conclusions and which violate it?

Basic thresholds of inference within the perceptual are easy to count:

1. From non-conceptual looks, to look-beliefs.

2. From look-beliefs, to object-beliefs.

There is a well known dilemma: Which beliefs are ontologically primary: look-beliefs or object-beliefs? Strawson famously claimed that perceptual object-beliefs are primary and look-beliefs have only the epistemic implication of uncertainty. The opposite view is that object-beliefs are results of inference from ontologically basic look-beliefs. The ontological dilemma often reduces philosophical curiosity to the question how object-beliefs map pieces of the external reality. I will call such beliefs "tautological" and my thesis is that we gain nothing cognitively interesting from tautological beliefs. That is why I suggest that a further stage of inference is of a special epistemic significance:

3. From tautological beliefs-*that*, to synthetic beliefs-*as*.

Not to complicate, I assume that perceptual beliefs-*that* are unproblematic and I ask a general question which, I think, is not much in focus: What are the limits of perceptual cognition? I do not contest either the view that some perceptual beliefs map phenomenal contents or even external facts *via* some propositional contents nor the view that typical beliefs are just tokens of a particular propositional attitude. Some examples, however, suggest that there are perceptual beliefs which do more because they are either (1) against phenomena, especially against something that is visible or (2) against the ontological identity of external objects. I also assume that beliefs do not modify the phenomenal content of my vision. I am interested solely in how inferences modify perceptual beliefs with a robust phenomenal content. I start with perception of ambiguous figures which somehow shake the truism that objects themselves causally determine the phenomenal content of visual experiences. My special aim is to accentuate differences between seeing ambiguous figures and correcting visual illusions. So, let us check what can go on when I look at (1) Jastrow's duck-rabbit picture and (2) Müller-Lyer lines. I think that both acts involve different forms of seeing-*as*.

Fiona Macpherson proposes the term "Gestalt switch" for what I undergo when I look at an ambiguous figure (Macpherson 2006). When I look at the duck-rabbit picture I am aware, she says, of two different phenomenal characters that are in dynamic succession and never occur simultaneously. Why not simultaneously? Because the picture is ontologically inconsistent and I cannot visually absorb an inconsistent picture as a whole. An intriguing question for her is whether this explanation covers all ambiguous pictures, i.e., whether visual ambiguity is generally based on ontological inconsistency. MacPherson answers in the negative. So-called Mach's figure, i.e., a square/regular diamond figure, is according to her (1) ambiguous and (2) ontologically consistent. I find both theses inspiring though contestable.

I would like to stress first that there is a significant epistemic difference between visually ambiguous figures and visually illusory figures. The difference is that genuine ambiguous figures are in a sense epistemically unilluminating. When I look at the duck-rabbit picture, I experience two spontaneously changing figures and to have a cognitive success, e.g., to acquire a true belief, I need simply to interpret them tautologically at every moment of the switch: it is sufficient to identify them in accordance with phenomena. In the case of Müller-Lyer illusion, however, to have a cognitive success I must interpret the lines against phenomena. In both cases I face robust phenomena, i.e., so independent of my beliefs that I cannot modify their character by making inferences. But in the second case the phenomena are distorted and I obtain a true belief only if I start believing against phenomena. Since I interpret in accordance with phenomena, in the case of the duck-rabbit switch there is no doubt whether my beliefs are perceptual. But in the case of Müller-Lyer illusion, the big question is whether I acquire a perceptual belief if I interpret against phenomena. This question becomes dramatically important always when in order to acquire a true belief I must interpret against phenomena. For example, suppose that for some reasons I already truly believe that Müller-Lyer lines are equal though they still look unequal: Do I perceptually believe that they are equal or my true belief is non-perceptual? I am faced with a dilemma of perceptual asymmetry. If I acquire a corrected belief, the belief is inferential. As far as I am solely under the pressure of phenomena I cannot start believing that the lines are equal. If my newly acquired inferential belief is non-perceptual, the consequence is that when viewing illusory pictures I cannot have true perceptual beliefs. Further, if my reasons are strong I can say: "I know that the lines are equal". Am I entitled to say: "I perceptually know that the lines are equal"? It may seem that I either have false perceptual beliefs about Müller-Lyer lines in accordance with phenomena, or I have true non-perceptual beliefs when I interpret against phenomena. I think that the dilemma is false and my corrected belief about Müller-Lyer lines remains perceptual. Anyway, the view that while looking at illusory pictures I can have either false perceptual beliefs or corrected non-perceptual beliefs seems to me counter-intuitive. I wonder why this dilemma is overlooked even by Bill Brewer, who says that both false and true illusory beliefs are results of making comparisons, i.e., both are essentially inferential (Brewer 2008).

I admit that ambiguous figures are ontologically interesting. My opinion, however, is that the ontologically determined switch is epistemically un-illuminating because it involves no phenomenal distortion and awaits, as it were, only for tautological interpretations. First, undergoing such a switch results in no cognitive success. It is a beginning but not an end of cognition. This is so because one thing is to undergo the Gestalt switch, another is to interpret it propositionally and the final thing is to draw of the interpretation some consequences. Propositional interpretation is surely a cognitive end. But only the syntheticity of consequences is a measure of cognitive success. The ontologist is satisfied when he is able to explain why I undergo the switch, whereas the epistemologist asks about (1) a propositional interpretation and (2) what can be inferred from the interpretation. If undergoing is a spontaneous fact, the epistemic question is: Does anything follow from the fact? From the fact itself nothing special. Shortly, that I see a duck and then a rabbit does not mean that I see the duck-rabbit *as* a duck or the duck-rabbit *as* a rabbit: that I recognize the phases of the switch. Further, that I recognize a duck is epistemically valuable only if the recognition motivates my activity. To undergo a switch, a phenomenal change is sufficient, to recognize the switch, a doxastic change is necessary.

No doubt, my short analysis of the duck-rabbit switch is oversimplified as I present a radically non-conceptualist view whereas the question whether concepts initiate the switch is discussed quite often. Michael Tye, for example, says that concepts trigger the switch without contaminating its non-conceptual contents (Tye 1995). But ontological discussions over whether concepts are involved when I undergo the switch do not matter much for me. What matters is the epistemic claim that to recognize phases of the switch I need concepts. I am ready to accept a simple order of priority: a phenomenal switch is prior to concepts but concepts are prior to the recognition of the switch. If I undergo the duck-rabbit switch, I also need concepts to recognize what I look at *as* a duck or a rabbit. For me it is important that the recognition in this case is fairly easy as it is made in accordance with phenomena and my beliefs sanctioning it are obviously perceptual.

Basing on the difference between perceiving ambiguous and illusory figures I propose to distinguish between ontological and epistemic inconsistency. Generally, I produce epistemic inconsistency when looking at an object I impose on the object an interpretation that is alternative to the tautological one. I interpret tautologically when I look at a duck and create the perceptual belief: "This is a duck". Epistemic inconsistency arises when motivated by a chain of reasons I impose an alternative interpretation that is against both phenomena and the tautological interpretation. Alternative interpretations of a seen duck would be, for example, such beliefs as "This is a four-person-dinner" made by a cook, or "This is a twenty-euro-banknote" made by a poultry-seller. Such epistemic inconsistencies radically violate ontological determinacy of objects by placing them in various teleological contexts; when the ontological question: What is this? is suppressed by the instrumental question: What can I do with this? Motivated by aims and reasons I can quite freely present ontologically determined objects as epistemically ambiguous, i.e., I have the ability to provoke their various epistemic switches. My central question is whether the re-interpreted beliefs, beliefs resulting from epistemic switches, remain perceptual beliefs. When I look at a duck, and I interpret it tautologically: "This is a duck", my belief is perceptual. Can I also see the duck *as* a four-person-dinner?

I classify corrections of illusory beliefs as standard examples of the epistemic switch that remains perceptual. This provokes me to ask a further question whether I can successfully produce an ontological inconsistency: perceptually absorb a new identity. That is, whether I can look at something that has an established identity and see it *as* something of a different identity. Another intriguing question is whether I can look at something that is phenomenally present to me and see it *as* something else that is phenomenally absent to me. This is a feature of epistemic ambiguity that making a switch I can go against phenomena in a radical way, namely, against what is visible. Since my switch initiates then a particular form of phenomenal inconsistency it is important to decide whether I can perceptually absorb its final phase. If some counter-phenomenal beliefs are genuinely perceptual they must be such despite the fact that the modifying factor is a genuinely doxastic rule of inference. I think that Wilfrid Sellars' examples are particularly useful to show what the problem consists in. Let us compare the following situations. First, I see a brick-like surface and I infer that this is a brick (Sellars 1977). Should I agree with the phenomenologist who claims that only my surface-belief is genuinely perceptual? Second, I am in a shop that is lighted yellow and I watch a tie that looks green. I infer that the tie is blue (Sellars 1997). Do I see a blue tie? Third, I look in the sky, I see a vapour trail and I instantly infer that there is an airplane over there (Sellars 1977). Is my belief about the airplane perceptual? If the brick-belief and tie-belief are perceptual why not the airplane-belief ? Sellars describes such stories to show that perceptual situations evidently involve rules of inference that can be called "translation principles". Although he does not solve the problem of visual absorption he proposes to distinguish between "the object I see" and "what I see *of* the object": if I see something *of* the object it entitles me to say that I see the object. Following Sellars, I provisionally suggest that as far as the ontological identity of an object is not broken my epistemic interpretation imposed on the object can remain perceptual.

Discussing Mach's figure Macpherson wonders why an ontologically consistent object is phenomenally ambiguous. Even if she is right about ambiguity, she can be wrong about consistency. A reason for inconsistency would be that a square and a diamond, although internally consistent, are externally inconsistent in virtue of their alternative orientation in space. The explanation covers some external context; something beyond the object itself. The internal inconsistency would consist in having "two in one" (two inconsistent figures in one picture), the external in having "one in two" (one figure in two inconsistent contexts). The possibility of external inconsistencies is crucial for me because epistemic ambiguities concerning an object involve some intellectual contexts of translation principles that are external to the tautological interpretation of the object. These intellectual contexts may be given various labels but I think that Sellars' "spaces of reasons" is one of the best.

I hope it is clear why Sellars' examples involving inferential re-definitions of perceptual beliefs are examples of the epistemic switch. As to my provisional diagnosis which of the re-defined beliefs remain perceptual I am of opinion that the brick-belief is non-controversially perceptual if I accept Strawson's principle of object-beliefs priority. Strawson's principle teaches me that if my inference fails I see another object and not that I do not see any object. As to the tie-belief, it seems that epistemic ambiguity connected with objects' "primary" or "secondary" properties is relatively easy to absorb. If I apply the translation principle "If this yellow lighted tie looks green, then this tie

is blue", then I truly see that the tie is blue. The airplane-belief seems to me a boundary one since it is extremely difficult to decide whether looking at the vapour trail alone I can see something "*of* the airplane". Personally, I would say I can. Surely, the hardest to accept is a switch against the ontological identity of an object. Nevertheless, the last criterion is provisional because (1) the ontological identity of some objects can be shaky and (2) various "spaces of reasons" can exert irresistible influence on us.

Literature

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