

Chapter 9

Appearance and Orientation



Grace A. de Laguna
Edited by Joel Katzav, and Dorothy Rogers

1 **Abstract** In this chapter, Grace Andrus de Laguna presents and argues for
2 perspectivism about perception.

3 Despite the divergencies in contemporary epistemological theory there is one point
4 that is rarely questioned. This is the assumption that something, or somewhat, is
5 immediately given in cognition. If it is not the object itself, as all but the neo-realists
6 agree, then it must be a matter, or datum of some sort which is given. If cognition can
7 not itself be immediate, for reasons with which the dualists have made us familiar,
8 then it must be mediate, i.e., must involve a process of mediation. But how can
9 mediation occur and knowing take place unless there be something immediate to be
10 mediated? The conclusion seems inescapable—as it is, provided the alternatives are
11 exhaustive. But may it not be possible to analyze cognition in other terms, and to
12 deny that knowledge is immediate without being committed to the doctrine that it
13 consists in a process of mediation? A possible theoretical alternative is suggested
14 by perspectivism, although it has not, so far as I am aware, been formulated by the
15 advocates of perspectivism themselves.

16 According to this doctrine, the percipient—and in an extended sense, the
17 knower—apprehends things from a particular standpoint. This means that what
18 he knows is not things in themselves, but aspects of things as determined by the
19 perspective in which they stand with reference to the percipient. This is admittedly

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G. A. de Laguna · J. Katzav (✉)
School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD,
Australia
e-mail: j.katzav@uq.edu.au

G. A. de Laguna · D. Rogers
Department of Educational Foundations, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA
e-mail: rogersd@montclair.edu

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20 a relativism, but inasmuch as perspectivity is itself objective, and since a character
 21 ascribable to an object in a given perspective really belongs to it in that perspective,
 22 the relativism is held to be objective. Now there is a certain ambiguity in this doctrine
 23 which is the cause of considerable confusion of thought. What the perspectivist should
 24 assert is that perception does not consist in the presentation of an appearance, but
 25 in the apprehension of an object *from* a standpoint. What he often seems to hold,
 26 however, is that aspects are somehow given in perception as bare appearances, and
 27 the problem with which he is concerned seems to be the construction of the object
 28 from these appearances. In short, he seems to treat the standpoint of the percipient
 29 as a merely external fact, a circumstance to be noted by the outside observer, and not
 30 as a factor internal to perception itself. Yet it is surely evident that it is meaningless
 31 to talk of the apprehension of an aspect unless it be from a standpoint. It is only the
 32 reference to standpoint which can make possible the objectivity of what is perceived.
 33 The apprehension of what is relative can be objective only if it be apprehended *as*
 34 relative, and not as simply given.

35 The theoretical implications of perspectivism are then, I think, more radical and
 36 more far-reaching than has usually been recognized. Standpoint, or orientation, is
 37 not merely a fact about perception; it is a factor internal to perception. From this it
 38 follows: first, that whatever is apprehended is apprehended *from* a standpoint; there
 39 is no bare given as such; a datum is not immediately presented and then referred
 40 or synthesized. Secondly: while the percipient perceives from a standpoint, he does
 41 not perceive his standpoint. To borrow the terminology of Hobhouse, standpoint
 42 is “in consciousness” but not “for consciousness.” The distinction between content
 43 and orientation is thus an ultimate one for epistemology; orientation is a factor in
 44 perception which is irreducible to content.

45 Let us consider the specific case of the visual perception of shape. According to
 46 traditional theory, an object placed below or at one side of us, as, for example, the
 47 familiar penny lying on the table, presents an apparent shape which is other than
 48 its real shape. The penny appears elliptical, although it is perceived as it really is,
 49 as round. Our perception of its roundness is supposed to be in some way mediated
 50 by the immediate apprehension of its apparent shape. The ellipse is given in some
 51 sense in which the circle is not. If one asks just how and in what sense it is given,
 52 however, the answer is not simple. We see the penny quite unquestionably as round;
 53 we must make a distinct effort to catch the apparent ellipse. Seeing appearances is
 54 an art we acquire in childhood when we learn to draw. Yet common sense, as well
 55 as traditional theory, regards the apparent ellipse we catch by an effort as somehow
 56 there, in a sense in which the real circle is not. An adequate epistemological theory
 57 must account for this natural belief as well as for the psychological phenomenon.

58 A real shape differs from an apparent shape, let us assume, precisely in the fact that
 59 it presents a determinate set of appearances. A circle, for example, might be defined
 60 as that figure which presents a determinate series of apparent ellipses as its position
 61 relative to the observer is changed in a determinate manner. To perceive the penny as
 62 round as its position is varied must mean, then, not merely that a particular ellipse is
 63 given, but that it is apprehended as a member of the circle-series. If the ellipse is given
 64 as matter it must be synthesized by the imagination in accordance with the formal law.

65 But this account will not do. It presupposes that the circle presents the appearance of
 66 an ellipse. But an ellipse can no more be identified with a given appearance than can
 67 a circle. An ellipse, too, is a figure that presents a determinate series of appearances
 68 other ellipses—in a determinate series of positions. Thus we seem committed to an
 69 endless regress in which the merely given appearance constantly recedes. On the
 70 other hand, if we succeeded in overtaking the given as such it would be a mere
 71 phantom. An appearance which is not an appearance of *something* is nothing at all.

72 And yet there is some meaning in the statement that the round penny appears
 73 elliptical. The fact that we can and do make the distinction between real and apparent
 74 shape demands explanation.

75 The statement that the penny on the table appears elliptical is in truth a condensed
 76 statement. We should say that it appears as an elliptical penny would appear if it
 77 were straight in front and in a plane perpendicular to the line of vision. We omit
 78 the reference to position because the position in question (which will be termed
 79 the *O*-position) is a peculiarly privileged one. It is so privileged, indeed that we
 80 tend to identify the appearance of the round penny in this position with its real
 81 shape, and to say that a circle seen thus is seen as it really is. Now there are, of
 82 course, psychological reasons for this; we see more clearly what is straight in front,
 83 for one thing, and for another, the pose of the body is one of organic equilibrium,
 84 a most favorable orientation. Moreover, we never “catch” from this standpoint an
 85 apparent shape, as we are able to do from other standpoints. But this psychological
 86 state of affairs does not justify the epistemologist in identifying the real circle with
 87 its appearance from this privileged standpoint, and thus ignoring the reference to
 88 standpoint altogether.

89 What happens when, by an effort, we catch from other standpoints the apparent
 90 ellipse, is that our normal orientation is shifted and partly suppressed, so that we
 91 see the penny *as if* straight front. The apparent shape is due to its reference to the
 92 *O*-position. Yet this reference can not be complete or unequivocal, since we never
 93 actually mistake the penny lying below and to one side for an elliptical one at *O*. The
 94 ellipse is seen by us as an illusion in that it gives us no sense of reality; when we catch
 95 the elliptical shape we seem to have lost sight of the penny, and the shape appears as
 96 a mere shape curiously disembodied. Moreover, we do not see it as actually straight
 97 front, but still vaguely below and to one side, although it is flat and unsubstantial and
 98 at no determinate distance away. Now all this may be explained, I think, as due to a
 99 change in orientation, and a partial reversion to the privileged *O*-standpoint resulting
 100 in an incomplete and distorted localization of the object such that it is implicitly
 101 referred to the *O*-position.

102 That such a reference actually occurs is evident from the fact that the representation
 103 of the appearances of things that we draw is intended to be looked at straight front.
 104 The ellipse drawn on paper to reproduce the appearance of the circular object must
 105 be held straight in front else it too will present an “appearance” representable as a
 106 thinner or shorter ellipse than the one originally presented by the circular object. No
 107 representation, however faithful and photographically exact, ever literally reproduces
 108 what it represents. The identity between the structural pattern of the representation
 109 and the pattern of what is represented, which is essential to representation, is exhibited

110 only when the representation is regarded from the proper standpoint, and this is,
 111 of course not itself contained in the representation. We are here concerned with
 112 perception and perceptual representation, but it may be suggested that something
 113 analogous is true of conceptual representation or symbolism.

114 It might seem that all this is too obvious to need pointing out much less arguing.
 115 But it is precisely this necessary reference to standpoint, this irreducible factor of
 116 orientation, that theories of presentationism, and in particular the theory of repre-
 117 sentative ideas, neglect entirely. The representative idea, or image was originally
 118 conceived, of course, after the analogy of the physical representation, like a picture
 119 just there before the mind's eye, as it were, where it could be seen for what it was.
 120 But ideas are not, after all, it was recognized, like "pictures on a panel," and they
 121 came to be regarded as pure psychical representations. An idea, it was held is given
 122 directly as no object could ever be given; it is no longer conceived as *before* the mind,
 123 but *within* the mind, and so completely is it apprehended that its very being is its
 124 being perceived. In brief, the very notion that there remains any vestige of externality
 125 or objectivity, or that any standpoint of the mind with reference to such an imme-
 126 diate idea is possible, is vigorously repudiated. Nevertheless, because the essential
 127 reference of a representation to the standpoint from which it is to be regarded is not
 128 recognized, the idea is still confusedly conceived as a representative image.

129 So far we have argued that orientation is an irreducible factor in all perception and
 130 that reference to standpoint is essential to the apprehension of anything as objective.
 131 The fact that we can apprehend things only from a standpoint ceases to imply a limita-
 132 tion to mere relativity and subjectivity just in so far as our orientation is adequate and
 133 complete, and so far as the reference to it in our apprehension is explicit. In Hegelian
 134 terms, reference to standpoint involves transcendence of standpoint. It has, however,
 135 been evident that, at least in the ease of visual perception, there is one particular
 136 standpoint that is privileged; that the distinction between reality and appearance is
 137 dependent on this fact, and that furthermore there is a tendency to identify reality
 138 with appearance from this standpoint, and thus to ignore the reference to standpoint
 139 altogether. Various important questions present themselves: granted that orientation
 140 always occurs and that some reference to standpoint is involved in all cognition, in
 141 what sense may this reference be more or less explicit? Again, is the existence of
 142 a privileged standpoint peculiar to visual perception, or is it characteristic not only
 143 of all perception, but of all cognition, and is the tendency to ignore it in reflective
 144 thought and to identify reality with appearance from a privileged standpoint a perman-
 145 ent source of confusion? These questions I shall not attempt to answer here. There
 146 is, however, one further consequence of the recognition of orientation, to which
 147 attention must be called.

148 It has just been stated that reference to standpoint is a condition of objectivity.
 149 But it is also true that if we necessarily apprehend things in reference to a stand-
 150 point, there must be a certain indetermination in our knowledge of them. Objects
 151 which are different from one another are indistinguishable with relation to a given
 152 referent. Differing figures yield identical projections. However complete our orienta-
 153 tion, and however explicit the reference to standpoint, it would still remain true
 154 that things really different must appear alike. The penny in the privileged *O*-position,

155 for example, is indistinguishable from the end of a long cylindrical copper bar. Shall
156 it then be said that we see only appearance and never reality? No; for appearance
157 must be the appearance of something, else it is nothing at all. Although we can not
158 be sure that what we see straight front is really a penny, or the end of a bar, or even
159 a shaved-off slice of a penny, we actually do—in most cases—see it as a penny and
160 we must see it as an object. We do not and can not see a mere surface which is not
161 the surface of a solid. Our perception then is liable to error, but it is not and can not
162 be the indubitable apprehension of a mere given.

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