Chapter 9
Appearance and Orientation

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

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

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

According to this doctrine, the percipient—and in an extended sense, the knower—apprehends things from a particular standpoint. This means that what he knows is not things in themselves, but aspects of things as determined by the perspective in which they stand with reference to the percipient. This is admittedly
a relativism, but inasmuch as perspectivity is itself objective, and since a character
ascrivable to an object in a given perspective really belongs to it in that perspective,
the relativism is held to be objective. Now there is a certain ambiguity in this doctrine
which is the cause of considerable confusion of thought. What the perspectivist should
assert is that perception does not consist in the presentation of an appearance, but
in the apprehension of an object *from* a standpoint. What he often seems to hold, however,
is that aspects are somehow given in perception as bare appearances, and
the problem with which he is concerned seems to be the construction of the object
from these appearances. In short, he seems to treat the standpoint of the percipient
as a merely external fact, a circumstance to be noted by the outside observer, and not
as a factor internal to perception itself. Yet it is surely evident that it is meaningless
to talk of the apprehension of an aspect unless it be from a standpoint. It is only the
reference to standpoint which can make possible the objectivity of what is perceived.
The apprehension of what is relative can be objective only if it be apprehended *as*
relative, and not as simply given.

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

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

A real shape differs from an apparent shape, let us assume, precisely in the fact that
it presents a determinate set of appearances. A circle, for example, might be defined
as that figure which presents a determinate series of apparent ellipses as its position
relative to the observer is changed in a determinate manner. To perceive the penny as
round as its position is varied must mean, then, not merely that a particular ellipse is
given, but that it is apprehended as a member of the circle-series. If the ellipse is given
as matter it must be synthesized by the imagination in accordance with the formal law.
But this account will not do. It presupposes that the circle presents the appearance of an ellipse. But an ellipse can no more be identified with a given appearance than can a circle. An ellipse, too, is a figure that presents a determinate series of appearances other ellipses—in a determinate series of positions. Thus we seem committed to an endless regress in which the merely given appearance constantly recedes. On the other hand, if we succeeded in overtaking the given as such it would be a mere phantom. An appearance which is not an appearance of something is nothing at all.

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

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

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

That such a reference actually occurs is evident from the fact that the representation of the appearances of things that we draw is intended to be looked at straight front. The ellipse drawn on paper to reproduce the appearance of the circular object must be held straight in front else it too will present an “appearance” representable as a thinner or shorter ellipse than the one originally presented by the circular object. No representation, however faithful and photographically exact, ever literally reproduces what it represents. The identity between the structural pattern of the representation and the pattern of what is represented, which is essential to representation, is exhibited
only when the representation is regarded from the proper standpoint, and this is, of course not itself contained in the representation. We are here concerned with perception and perceptual representation, but it may be suggested that something analogous is true of conceptual representation or symbolism.

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

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

It has just been stated that reference to standpoint is a condition of objectivity. But it is also true that if we necessarily apprehend things in reference to a standpoint, there must be a certain indetermination in our knowledge of them. Objects which are different from one another are indistinguishable with relation to a given referent. Differing figures yield identical projections. However complete our orientation, and however explicit the reference to standpoint, it would still remain true that things really different must appear alike. The penny in the privileged O-position,
for example, is indistinguishable from the end of a long cylindrical copper bar. Shall it then be said that we see only appearance and never reality? No; for appearance must be the appearance of something, else it is nothing at all. Although we can not be sure that what we see straight front is really a penny, or the end of a bar, or even a shaved-off slice of a penny, we actually do—in most cases—see it as a penny and we must see it as an object. We do not and can not see a mere surface which is not the surface of a solid. Our perception then is liable to error, but it is not and can not be the indubitable apprehension of a mere given.