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The Invalidity of the Argument from Illusion

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ABSTRACT

The argument from illusion attempts to establish the bold claim that we are never perceptually aware of ordinary material objects. The argument has rightly received a great deal critical of scrutiny. But here we develop a criticism that, to our knowledge, has not hitherto been explored. We consider the canonical form of the argument as it is captured in contemporary expositions. There are two stages to our criticism. First, we show that the argument is invalid. Second, we identify premises that can be used to make the argument valid. But we argue that the obvious fixes are problematic. If our arguments are successful, we show that the argument from illusion is even more difficult to defend than is commonly acknowledged.

1 Introduction

There is no shortage of philosophers who attempt to derive conclusions about the nature of perceptual experience by reflecting upon illusions (some recent examples: Byrne (2009), McLaughlin (2010), Smith (2010), Millar (2015)). But the *traditional* argument

from illusion is very much out of favour. There are good grounds for this: the argument involves highly questionable premises (for an overview see Crane and French (2016)). We agree that the traditional argument from illusion should be rejected. But here we advance a new criticism of the argument. The argument is in an even worse state than is usually realized since it is *invalid*, and so one can reject it even granting its highly contentious premises; but this is not a mere logical triviality, the argument is *interestingly* invalid. That is, the natural ways to fix the argument involve non-obvious premises in need of support, just like the premises of the original argument. After pointing out the invalid step (§2), we briefly consider these natural ways to fix the argument (§3). It is not our aim to decisively reject these fixes, rather we highlight that they involve non-obvious premises in need of further support. In §4 we consider replies that employ arguments other than the traditional argument from illusion.

2 The Invalid Step

The argument from illusion targets the common sense claim that we are sometimes directly perceptually aware of ordinary mind-independent material objects. Its canonical form is as follows (drawing on Robinson (1994) and Smith (2002)):

- (i) In an illusion, it sensibly appears to one that something has a sensible quality, *F*, that the ordinary object supposedly being perceived does not have.

- (ii) When it sensibly appears to one that something has a sensible quality, *F*, then there is something of which one is directly aware that is *F*.

(iii) Since the ordinary object in question is not-*F*, then it follows that in cases of illusion, one is not directly aware of the ordinary object. (Interim Negative Claim)

[L]
[SEP]

(iv) There is such continuity between illusions and veridical experience that the same analysis of experience must apply to both. [L]
[SEP]

Therefore,

(v) One is not directly aware of ordinary objects in cases of veridical experience.

(vi) If one is directly aware of an ordinary object it is either through veridical or illusory experience. [L]
[SEP]

Therefore,

(vii) We are never directly aware of ordinary objects. (Negative Claim)

The argument has two stages (Snowdon (1992)). A “Base Case” (i-iii) attempts to establish the *Interim Negative Claim*. The “Spreading Step” (iv-vii) attempts to generalize this to establish the *Negative Claim*. The Spreading Step stage is controversial, but our focus initially is just the Base Case (we return to the Spreading Step in §4). This pivots on premise (ii), Robinson’s (1994, p. 32) **Phenomenal Principle**, which reflects

the sense-datum theory of experience. On this view, an experience in which something sensibly appears some way to one, consists, at least in part, in one's being directly perceptually aware of a sense-datum that is this way. The Principle is widely rejected, but even with it the argument is not compelling. For the Base Case is invalid: *even granting its highly contentious premise*, the Interim Negative Claim does not follow. What actually follows from (i) and (ii) is not (iii) but a crucially different conclusion, namely:

(iii*) Since the ordinary object in question is not-*F*, then in illusions, one is directly aware of something else which is *F*.

But (iii*) doesn't entail that in illusions one is not directly aware of the ordinary object in question. Since although *the F-thing* of which one is directly aware is not the ordinary object, this is consistent with one *also* being directly aware of the ordinary object.

Thus consider Smith's presentation: First, take the Wall Case: *S* sees a purely white wall in peculiar illumination conditions such that it looks yellow to her. Second, by the Phenomenal Principle, *S* is aware of something that is yellow (a yellow sense-datum). And finally (for the Base Case), 'what [*S* is] immediately aware of cannot be the wall', where '[t]his third step is but an application of Leibniz's Law to illusory situations' (Smith (2002, p. 25)). But what actually follows from Leibniz's Law is that the yellow thing of which *S* is immediately aware is not the wall. This is quite different from saying that *S* is not immediately aware of the wall, since *S* might be immediately aware of both the wall and the yellow sense-datum.¹

3 Fixes

Is the argument subject to a quick and easy fix? No. On the contrary, two natural suggestions as to how to fix the argument invoke non-obvious premises in need of support. So the argument from illusion is *interestingly* invalid.

3.1 Strengthening (ii)

One approach here is to strengthen the Phenomenal Principle, that is, (ii) in the argument. Accordingly, the argument would instead rely upon the following claim:

Strengthened Phenomenal Principle: It sensibly appears to *S* that something has a sensible quality, *F*, if and only if there is something of which one is directly aware that is *F*.

How does this help? Well, take Smith's Wall Case. The original argument concludes that in this case *S* is directly aware of a yellow sense-datum. But as we noted, it is consistent with what the argument establishes that *S* is also directly aware of the wall. But in light of the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle can we maintain that in this case *S* is directly aware of both the wall and the yellow sense-datum? It seems not. For the wall is white, and we are supposing that *S* is aware of it, yet applying the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle to this situation implies that it sensibly appears to *S* that something is *white*. However, nothing appears white to *S* in this case, the wall appears only *yellow* to *S*.

We don't accept the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle, but it is not our aim to argue against it here. We just want to highlight that it is non-obvious and in need of support. On this we have two points to make. First, it is a *strengthening* of an already controversial and widely rejected principle – the Phenomenal Principle. Those who reject the argument from illusion because they reject the Phenomenal Principle will likewise reject the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle. (For discussion of how different theories of experience are united in rejecting the Phenomenal Principle, and so the strengthened version, see Crane and French (2016)).

Second, the strengthening itself has counterintuitive consequences. For it delivers counterintuitive verdicts on ordinary non-illusory cases. For instance, suppose a square shaped object is partially occluded such that its square shape is not apparent to *S*. In this case, nothing appears square to *S*. Still it seems that *S* can directly perceive the partially occluded object. But this is ruled out by the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle; the object is square shaped, so if *S* is directly aware of it something must appear square to *S*.

3.2 An Additional Premise

An alternative, and perhaps more promising approach, is to add an additional premise to the argument to make it valid. To this end, the arguer from illusion can add the following *Exclusion Assumption*:

(EA) If in an illusion *S* is directly aware of a sense-datum that is non-identical to the ordinary object *S* is putatively perceiving in an illusory way, then *S* is not directly aware of the ordinary object.

Thus, a valid version of the Base Case, concerning the Wall Case, is as follows:

- (a) It sensibly appears to *S* as if something is yellow, yet the wall is not yellow

- (b) *S* is directly aware of a yellow sense-datum (from (a) and the Phenomenal Principle)

- (c) The yellow sense-datum *S* is directly aware of is non-identical to the wall (from (a), (b) and Leibniz's Law)

Therefore,

- (d) In the Wall Case, *S* is not directly aware of the wall (from (b), (c), and (EA)).

As with the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle, we don't want to argue that (EA) is false. But we do want to highlight how that it is far from obvious.

Suppose that *S* is directly aware of a yellow sense-datum, why should that mean that she is not *also* directly aware of the white wall? Why should awareness of the yellow sense-

datum exclude awareness of the white wall? Cases where one is directly aware of multiple non-identical things are quite familiar, after all: *S* looks out into the field and sees an array of things all at once: the grass, the sky, the clouds, birds, the lake, the tree, the apples on the tree, and so on. Perhaps, then, the case we are imagining is a case where one is directly aware of multiple non-identical things, a yellow sense-datum and an ordinary object, the wall.

To bring out a bit more fully how (EA) is non-obvious and in need of argument we will briefly articulate an alternative conception of the Wall Case, consistent with what we are given in the argument from illusion, and the phenomenological facts, yet inconsistent with (EA). (Note we don't endorse this alternative, it is merely for the dialectical purpose of highlighting that (EA) is in need of support).

Compare the Wall Case to a case where we see a white wall covered with a piece of yellow film. In this latter case, we see something yellow, the film, but this does not preclude us from seeing the wall as well. For all we have said so far, a similar account of the Wall Case could be given: we see a yellow sense-datum (a claim licensed by the Phenomenal Principle), but we see the wall through this sense-datum.

Note that this conception of the Wall Case is not ruled out by the argument from illusion. As others do in this context, we have introduced sense-data into the discussion. The term 'sense-datum' here is a *functional* term. It picks out *whatever it is* that one is aware of in an experience which bears the qualities which characterize the way things appear to one

in that experience. From the Base Case of the argument from illusion we know that the sense-data present in such cases must be entities that are (a), objects of awareness, (b) entities that can instantiate sensible qualities, and (c) non-identical to the putative ordinary objects of awareness. But these conditions don't individuate a specific and unified ontological category or kind (Austin (1962)). So insofar as the Base Case of the argument from illusion commits us to sense-data, it is to a *thin*, as opposed to a thick, metaphysically substantive, conception. So, we are not entitled to the usual claims about sense-data, e.g., that they are mental, private, non-physical etc; such claims require further argument. In particular, we are not entitled to claim that one cannot see ordinary objects through sense-data.

This account of the Wall Case is not completely satisfactory as it stands, however. For, it appears to us in the Wall Case that there is something that is both yellow and opaque. But if the sense-datum is both yellow and opaque, then we cannot see the wall through the sense-datum (see Smith (2002, p. 26), on the sense-datum infection). But again we can take inspiration from the case where we see the white wall through the yellow film. In this case too it appears to us as if there is something yellow and opaque, so granting the Phenomenal Principle, there is something yellow and opaque of which we are aware. But given that the film is not opaque and the wall is not yellow, this opaque yellow thing is not identical to either. In this case, what we are aware of is an amalgam or composite of the film and the wall, and this amalgam is yellow and opaque. Returning to the Wall Case, it is consistent with what we know about the yellow opaque sense-datum, *D*, that *D* is constituted by the wall, and some more elementary sense-datum, *E*, which is yellow. In

being such a composite sense-datum, *D* is yellow (in virtue of having *E* as a part), opaque (in virtue of having the wall as a part), and is non-identical to the wall (in that it and the wall differ in properties). And again, this is all consistent with the thin notion of sense-data licensed by the Phenomenal Principle.

Now, having said this about *D*, is *D* such that if it is directly perceived by *S*, then the wall is not also directly perceived by *S*? No. Although being directly aware of a composite object does not entail being directly aware of all of its parts, being directly aware of a composite is consistent with being directly aware of some of its parts. Moreover, when we see a whole, we often do see some of its parts, just as we do when we see the amalgam of the film and the wall. So if we are directly aware of a composite sense-datum consisting of an elementary sense-datum and an ordinary object, as this construal of the Wall Case has it, then, for all that has been said, we can also be directly aware of the wall, contra the *Interim Negative Claim*.

The alternative construal of the Wall Case, then, is as follows: (1) in the Wall Case *S* is directly aware of a sense-datum *D* (non-identical to the wall), and (2) also directly aware of its constituent parts, the yellow elementary sense-datum, *and the wall*. If this construal of the case is correct, then (EA) is false. But this seems like a legitimate construal of the Wall Case, since it is consistent with the premises of the argument from illusion (prior to the introduction of (EA)), and respects the phenomenological facts: the appearance of a wall like structure in the experience comes from the presence of the wall itself, and the appearance of yellowness comes from the elementary sense-datum (compare again a

white wall seen in a situation in which it is covered with yellow film). If, instead, we are to suppose that this is not how to conceive of the Wall Case, and that we are to maintain (EA), we need an argument as to why the construal we've just offered is implausible. In other words, (EA) is non-obvious and needs argumentative support.

4. The Spreading Step

The Base Case of the argument from illusion, then, does not establish the Interim Negative Claim, and the obvious ways to fix the argument are controversial. It seems, then, that all the arguer from illusion is entitled to claim is that in cases of illusion one is aware of a complex sense-datum comprised of the ordinary object and a distinct elementary sense-datum. Still, it might be thought that this is enough to cause trouble for the common sense picture of veridical experience, since, by something like the Spreading Step, if we are aware of elementary sense-data in the illusory case, then we are aware of such sense-data in the veridical case. As Broad (1952) puts a related point:

No doubt it would be possible in theory to admit [that illusions require sense-data], and yet to maintain that in the one case of direct vision through a homogeneous medium one really is (as one appears to oneself to be in all cases) prehending a part of the coloured surface of a remote foreign body. But, in view of the continuity between the most normal and the most abnormal cases of seeing, such a doctrine would be utterly implausible and could be defended only by the most desperate special pleading (p. 9)

And Robinson agrees: 'It is, therefore, very implausible to say that some of these cases involve direct apprehension of an external object and in the others of a sense-datum. So the argument generalises easily.' (1994, p. 57).

Broad and Robinson are working on the assumption that the Interim Negative Claim has already been established, and so conclude that it would be implausible to go from being aware of an ordinary object in a case of veridical perception to instead being aware of just a non-ordinary sense-datum in cases of illusion. As Smith (2002, p. 28) puts it 'it is crucial to our understanding of illusion... that we are aware of the same object in an illusion that we could perceive veridically. Thus the very nature of illusion demands acceptance of the generalizing step of the argument.'

But as we have shown, the Interim Negative Claim has not been established. Rather what has been established is that in an illusion one is aware of an elementary sense-datum non-identical to the ordinary object one is purportedly perceiving. But as we have highlighted above, this is consistent with Smith's desideratum that we are aware of the same object in illusory cases – the ordinary object – that we perceive veridically in non-illusory cases. Further, if we consider a case of veridical experience where we seem to be aware of ordinary objects, and then introduce an illusory aspect, e.g., by bathing a white wall in yellow light, it seems very odd to say that we go from seeing the wall to not seeing it, even if we endorse the Phenomenal Principle. So if we hold on to the Phenomenal Principle it seems natural to posit elementary sense-data only when they are needed to

explain how things appear. And given that they are not needed in veridical cases, there is no need to posit them in such cases. So, the Spreading Step, does not force a revision of our common sense picture of veridical perception.² There is, however, another way in which the Spreading Step might be thought to undermine our pretheoretic picture of veridical experience though.

The discussion so far has concerned what we have called the 'canonical' version of the argument from illusion, where it sensibly appears to one that something has a sensible quality, *F*, that the ordinary object supposedly being perceived does not have. Indeed, premise (i) takes this to be constitutive of what an illusion is. There are, however, cases where there is no ordinary object to be aware of. There are at least two possible sorts of such cases.

First, consider a traveler walking in the desert who sees a publically available mirage of an oasis, a silvery-blue expanse (so our traveler is not hallucinating or dreaming). In such a case, it is not clear, perhaps, what the ordinary object apparently being perceived is. One response is to admit that here we have a perceptual experience without an appropriate object. Let's call such an experience an 'illusion*' to distinguish it from hallucinations and the more familiar type of illusion considered above. Another response, however, is to deny that an illusion* is possible by claiming that there is always an appropriate ordinary object, in our case of the mirage this might be the desert or the ground where the mirage appears.

Whatever one thinks of the possibility of illusion*s, there is a second kind of perceptual episode where there is not, or at least need not be, any appropriate ordinary object, namely hallucinations. As Crane and French (2016) put it, an “hallucination is an experience which seems exactly like a veridical perception of an ordinary object but where there is no such object there to be perceived”.

Now in hallucinations, and illusion*s if we admit them, we do not need to run anything like the Base Case of the argument of illusion to establish an analogue of the Interim Negative Claim – it is constitutive of such cases that there is no ordinary object of which one is aware. But with this claim granted, cannot the arguer from illusion run the Spreading Step above to conclude with the Negative Claim that we are never aware of ordinary objects:

- A. In a case of hallucination or illusion*, one is not directly aware of an ordinary object.

- B. There is such continuity between hallucinations and illusion*s on the one hand, and illusions and veridical experiences on the other, that the same analysis of experience must apply to both.

Therefore,

- C. One is not directly aware of ordinary objects in cases of illusion or veridical

experience.

- D. If one is directly aware of an ordinary object it is either through veridical or illusory experience.

Therefore,

- E. We are never directly aware of ordinary objects. (Negative Claim)

There are three points to note in response to this argument from hallucination and illusion*. First, our focus has been on the argument from illusion and how *it* seeks to establish a revision of common sense. It is worth getting straight on whether this argument achieves its aims even if there are other arguments which establish the same conclusion.

Second, it is far from clear that the Spreading Step in the argument from hallucination and illusion* is as plausible as it is in the argument from illusion. We agree with Smith that “it is crucial to our understanding of illusion, as opposed to hallucination, that we are aware of the same object in an illusion that we could perceive veridically” (2002, p. 28). So one may happily concede that one is not aware of ordinary objects, and even that one is aware of a sense-data distinct from ordinary objects, in cases of hallucination and illusion*, without conceding that one is not aware of ordinary objects in cases of perception, whether veridical or illusory. The types of considerations that have motivated

the arguer from illusion do not carry over, *mutatis mutandis*, to cases of hallucination and illusion*. So whereas (iv) in the argument from illusion is plausible, (B) in the argument from hallucination and illusion* need not be granted.

Finally, even if we grant (B) it is not clear that (C) follows. For what is it to give the same analysis of experience in each pair of cases? The argument from hallucination and illusion* assumes that to give the same analysis of experience requires not invoking an ordinary object. But why accept that? Granting the Phenomenal Principle, all four cases, veridical perception, illusion, illusion*, and hallucination, are given the same analysis in the sense that they are all given relational treatments. In each case, the experiencer is related to a sense-datum. But remember that the Phenomenal Principle licenses only a thin conception of sense-data on which it is consistent that ordinary objects are amongst the sense-data. So even granting (B), the argument does not establish the Negative Claim.

None of this is to deny that there are other considerations which might support an argument against the common sense picture of perception from, e.g. the possibility of hallucination. But this would be a different type of argument (e.g., Martin (2004)). As a result, there is, as yet, no suasive argument from illusion, or from the considerations that drive it, against the common sense picture of veridical perception, even granting the Phenomenal Principle.

NOTES

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¹ The invalid step shows up not just in Robinson and Smith, but also in Coates (2007) and Fish (2010), as well as in older formulations (e.g., Moore (1913–14), Broad (1923), and Ayer (1940)). Following various proponents and exponents of the argument, we’ve formulated the discussion in terms of *direct* awareness, but such a formulation is inessential. For scepticism about philosophers’ employment of the distinction between direct and indirect perception see Austin (1962).

² We concede, however, that admitting elementary sense-data in illusory cases may require revision of our ordinary conception of illusion, at least in the sense of adding to our ordinary picture of illusion.