

# VISUAL CONTENT, EXPECTATIONS, AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Dominic Gregory

## I

Things now look to you to be a certain way: *thus*, let's say. And things really are the way that they look to you to be just in case things are indeed *thus* relative to your current viewpoint. Hence what we may call the *content* of your current visual sensation—the body of phenomenologically salient conditions whose obtaining or whose failure to obtain determines whether your visual sensation is accurate—is that *things are thus*.<sup>1</sup>

What sorts of materials figure in the contents of visual sensations? Some philosophers have claimed that their contents standardly include references to the later visual episodes that one would have under certain conditions. In particular, it has been held that the presence of such references within the contents of visual sensations explains how we may seem visually to encounter an outside world.

According to the resulting view, the apparent externality of the things which you currently seem to see imposes certain crucial demands upon the ways in which your future visual sensations might evolve. There is thus an obvious sense in which the apparent externality of the relevant items is supposed not just an apparent fact about *them* but also one pertaining to your subjectivity.

The current paper claims, however, that there are no good reasons for accepting that the contents of apparent visual encounters with external items incorporate materials of the proposed sorts. Instead, it is argued that the conscious phenomena which have been cited as

---

<sup>1</sup> The rest of this paper just assumes that visual sensations have contents in the sense just specified; see Siegel (2010) (and (2011)) for a recent attempt to justify the general assumption that visual sensations have contents in the sense just explained. (Siegel argues that any reasonable philosophical approach to vision—including, for instance, decent forms of 'naive realism' about sight—will need to ascribe contents to visual sensations.)

manifesting the presence within visual contents of references to ways that things *would look in the course of later visual sensations* are better explained in another manner, one whose nature is more fully explained below: in terms of references within the contents of ordinary visual sensations to ways that things *actually then look from various perspectives*.

The next section introduces the paper's main target in more detail: the view that visually apparent externality results from the inclusion, within the contents of visual sensations, of references to the ways that things would look to us if we were to alter our viewpoints. It provides some initial motivation for accepting that thesis, in terms of the nature of certain expectations which commonly follow hard on the heels of visual sensations. Section III then outlines an argument provided by Siegel for a logically relatively weak version of the position.

Section IV sketches some initial responses to Siegel's argument, along with some *prima facie* reasons for thinking that Siegel's conclusion—and, of course, any logically stronger view which entails it—must be wrong. Sections V and VI develop some novel ideas concerning visually apparent externality, while section VII articulates a response to Siegel's argument using those ideas. Section VIII further explores the framework developed in section VII. Section IX concludes.

## II

Smith summarises the import of some passages by Husserl as follows: 'Husserl here has the ... thought that a given perception would not be phenomenologically of a material object in a spatial scene at all if it did not sustain the possibility in principle of changing your viewpoint and coming to perceive [other nonvisible portions of the same thing and indeed] objects in

neighbouring regions—a possibility which we appreciate as motivated by perceptual consciousness itself'.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Noë states that 'your perceptual experience of the tomato as voluminous depends on your tacit understanding of the ways its appearance (how it looks) depends on movement. You visually experience parts of the tomato that, strictly speaking, you do not see, because you understand, implicitly, that your sensory relation to those parts is mediated by familiar patterns of sensorimotor dependence'.<sup>3</sup>

And Siegel argues that 'certain expectations are found at the level of visual experience'<sup>4</sup>, in at least the sense that their contents are incorporated within the contents of ordinary visual sensations. Siegel holds that the presence of the relevant components within visual contents enables us to answer the question 'how ... the phenomenal character of experiences that present public, external objects differ[s] from the phenomenal character of those that do not'.<sup>5</sup> Some of the relevant expectations are meant to have contents of (roughly<sup>6</sup>) the following form: 'If S [the subject of a given visual experience] substantially

---

<sup>2</sup> Smith (2003), p. 77. Husserl writes, for instance, that '[w]hen we view [a] table, we view it from some particular side, and this side is thereby what is genuinely seen. Yet the table has still other sides. ... [And] this thing is not [merely] the side genuinely seen in this moment; rather (according to the very sense of perception) the thing is precisely the full-thing that has still other sides, sides that are not brought to genuine perception in this perception, but that would be brought to genuine perception in other perceptions' ((2001). p. 40).

<sup>3</sup> Noë (2004), p. 77. The precise bearing of Noë's 'enactivist' ideas upon matters of sensory content is not always transparent: Noë's most forceful arguments for his 'enactivism' seem merely to support the relatively prosaic view that one's awareness of sensorimotor contingencies plays a crucial causal role in shaping the nature of the contents of one's perceptions (a limitation noted in Block (2005)), rather than supporting the more radical view that the contents of one's awareness of sensorimotor contingencies are somehow incorporated within the phenomenologically salient accuracy-conditions of one's perceptions. Yet Noë often clearly endorses the latter view: 'Take a fire engine. It looks red; that is, it looks such that it would vary in appearance in a range of comprehensible ways, given the color aspect profile of the relevant red' (Noë (2004), p. 140).

<sup>4</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 359. Chapter 7 of Siegel (2011) covers the same ground as her (2006), and indeed largely replicates the earlier paper; I have concentrated upon the paper throughout the following.

<sup>5</sup> Siegel (2011), p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> Siegel stresses that she should not be understood as endorsing the view that the following sentence exactly captures the content of the expectations with which she is concerned ((2006), pp. 358 – 9); it may be that the contents of the relevant expectations cannot accurately be captured using natural languages. (Similarly, it may not be possible using words to capture precisely the contents of the visual sensations that you are now having; but you are probably able verbally to get across some facts about what you are apparently seeing, perhaps just by roughly characterising what you seem to see.) An analogous point applies to all of the claims made below concerning the nature of the contents of apparent visual encounters with external items.

changes her perspective on [apparently viewed item] o, her visual phenomenology will change as a result of this change'<sup>7</sup>.

Why might one make claims like the ones just quoted? Isn't the general idea that they all share—that the contents of visual encounters with apparently external things bear upon the visual sensations that we would have if our perspectives on the apparently seen items were to alter—slightly implausible? Don't the contents of ordinary visual sensations just relate directly to the layouts of our surroundings?

Look around you. You seem to see things of various sorts that are laid out in space, where the relevant items look to you to have certain three-dimensional shapes. The fact that you seem to see things of various sorts that are 'laid out in space' and which 'look to you to have certain three-dimensional shapes' is intimately linked to certain corresponding expectations that you possess. You expect that suitable changes in your position relative to the apparently seen things will lead to you to have visual sensations that reflect the shapes of the relevant items, for instance.

Those expectations are very elementary ones. My expectations concerning the ways that the teacup just in front of me will look if I move my head slightly are rather different from, say, my expectations concerning the ways that the teacup will look if I set upon it with a blowtorch. While the latter set of expectations evidently call upon things that I have learned over time, the former set of expectations seem hardly to reach beyond my immediate appreciation of the ways that things then look to me to be. I assume that a small child to whom the teacup looked as it now looks to me would share the first set of expectations but not the second, for instance.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 358. Siegel claims that another family of expectations are also 'found at the level of visual experience'. These latter expectations are meant to have contents of roughly this form: 'If S changes her perspective on o, then o will not thereby move' (p. 358). I have not addressed these further claims in the main text, but see fn. 25 below for a brief discussion of them.

<sup>8</sup> Dummett says that 'seeing an object *as* this or that shape or nature' '[p]lainly ... has much to do with the expectations generated by the perception'; he says, too, that 'we are in fact here operating at a level below that

How to cater for the elementary nature of the expectations just remarked? Here is one thought: the contents of the expectations simply reflect the contents of the visual sensations by which they have been prompted. But if that is right, the contents of our visual encounters with apparently external items must make reference to the visual sensations which we would have if our outlooks on the apparently seen things were to alter in suitable ways. Hence, it might be claimed, the phenomenology of everyday visual episodes—and, in particular, the distinctive sorts of primitive expectations to which visual sensations generally give rise—indicates that visually apparent externality involves references within visual contents to potential future visual sensations.

### III

Siegel presents a more refined argument leading to the conclusion just voiced.<sup>9</sup> She asks the reader to imagine having an ordinary visual encounter with a tiny doll. The episode's mundaneness means that the one's visual sensations will be accompanied by expectations whose content might be given using (1) below:

- (1) If one suitably<sup>10</sup> changes one's perspective on the relevant item, one's visual phenomenology will thereby change.

---

of thought as expressible in words; at that level, namely, at which animals devoid of language operate' (see Dummett (1993), p. 121 for the preceding quotations—he suggests that the relevant 'thoughts' are best described as 'proto-thoughts' (p. 122)). Dummett proposes that 'the vehicle of such thoughts ... should be said ... to consist in visual imagination superimposed on the visually perceived scene' (p. 122 again).

<sup>9</sup> Siegel takes the following case also to support the conclusion that the contents of our ordinary visual sensations incorporate conditionals to the effect that apparently seen items will not move as a result of our own movements; see fn. 25 below for some brief discussion of this aspect of her arguments. Siegel's arguments are meant to illustrate how conclusions concerning the contents of visual sensations may be established using explanatory considerations relating to 'phenomenal contrasts' rather than just by, say, swapping intuitions concerning the conditions under which visual sensations count as being accurate; see section 4 of her (2006) and chapter 3 of her (2011) for more discussion of this general strategy.

<sup>10</sup> Siegel's discussion in fact focuses on the claim that 'substantial' changes in one's perspective on apparently seen items will lead to changes in the nature of one's visual sensations. I have replaced her 'substantial' with

We are to suppose, furthermore, that one's visual encounter fully bears (1) out. Take an experience in this first sequence of sensations; the chosen visual sensation is the *Good* one.

Siegel next asks the reader to imagine that she returns to the scene of the previous doll-watching. This time, however, things take a turn for the weird.

For no matter what one does, one's doll-related visual phenomenology remains constant; whether one's eyes are shut, open, moved leftwards ... the apparently seen doll's look—which is otherwise just as it was in the Good sensation—remains utterly fixed. Siegel holds that, in the course of this second series of sensations, one's expectation that (1) holds will eventually lapse; the 'doll' will come to be akin to visual items like phosphenes and after-images, which do not seem to us to be placed in the outside world.

Take one of the visual sensations towards the end of the second series; assume further that the relevant visual sensation matches the Good one as much as it can do given its surrounding context. The chosen visual sensation is the *Odd* one. Siegel holds that the Good and the Odd visual sensations 'plainly differ phenomenally'<sup>11</sup>, even though they match in certain respects. What accounts for the phenomenological contrast?

Siegel suggests that the differences are to be tracked back to differences between the contents of the Good and the Odd visual sensations.<sup>12</sup> This seems to be correct; anyway, I will not argue with the suggestion below. For the phenomenological contrast between the Good and Odd cases comes from the fact that the apparent doll in the former sensation looks to be

---

'suitably', however, as we clearly do not expect *all* substantial changes in our perspectives on apparently external seen things to yield alterations in visual phenomenology. In particular, items that look to be apparently external may nonetheless possess such a level of apparent uniformity that, for at least some substantial changes in perspective, we would not expect those shifts to affect the ways that things look to us. (Imagine, for example, seeming to see a perfectly homogeneous sphere, evenly illuminated from within, while apparently situated in a wholly dark room. You would not, in that case, expect things to look different to you from a perspective that faces the sphere from its opposite side but which is placed at the same distance from the sphere's centre as your current perspective.) Even in those instances, though, there are still suitable shifts in our perspectives on the apparently seen things that we would expect to affect our visual phenomenology: we will still expect the apparently seen items to look different from very much further away, for instance.

<sup>11</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 369.

<sup>12</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 373.

external but the ‘doll’ figuring in the latter sensation does not.<sup>13</sup> And that last difference between the sensations surely amounts to a difference in their contents.

But, Siegel holds, the ‘simple contents of the Good and the Odd experiences are plausibly the same. The “doll” in the Odd case does not seem to be behind you; it seems to be in front of you. As the case is described, in each experience the doll looks to have the same color, shape, and texture properties; the faces look the same, their hair looks the same, and so on’<sup>14</sup>. Yet how else might the contents of Siegel’s Good and Odd cases differ?

One clear difference between them has already been identified: the fact that your expectations in the Good case but not the Odd one take the form provided by (1). Siegel thus suggests that we should explain the phenomenological contrast between the Good and Odd cases by relating it to that last observation.

More fully, Siegel suggests that the visually apparent externality of the doll figuring in the Good case corresponds to the fact that (1) forms part of the Good sensation’s content; while the phosphene-like status of the ‘doll’ featuring in the Odd case corresponds to the fact that (1) is not part of the Odd sensation’s content.<sup>15</sup> The Good visual sensation is, however, a typical visual sensation; whereas the Odd one is definitely odd. Generalising, then, it is claimed that we should accept that conditionals having the form provided by (1) figure in the contents of ordinary visual sensations.

---

<sup>13</sup> Siegel considers the option of denying that her Good and Odd cases differ phenomenologically ((2006), pp. 372 – 3). One of her responses is that ‘there are other cases in which one does not expect [conditionals like (1)] to hold, and which are markedly phenomenally different from ordinary experiences of object-seeing. These include experiences such as seeing “stars” from being hit hard on the head. Together these conditions make a case that can supplement the initial intuition of phenomenal contrast’ ((2006), p. 372). She also writes (pp. 373 – 4) that one reason to believe her claims concerning the contents of ordinary visual sensations is ‘suggested by the phenomenal similarity between the Odd experience and typical “visual sensations” [like phosphenes or “seeing stars”], and the phenomenal similarity between the Good experience and other typical experience of object-seeing, on the other. A natural suggestion about how these classes of experience differ is that in the typical experiences of object-seeing, objects are presented as being denizens of the external world rather than as mind-dependent entities of some sort. Phosphenes do not typically look to be denizens of the external world.’

<sup>14</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 373.

<sup>15</sup> Siegel also holds that the ‘no movement’ condition mentioned in fn. 7 above is relevant here; see fn. 25 below for more discussion..

## IV

Siegel's argument illustrates one route to the thesis that the contents of standard visual sensations are *counterfactually subjective*: to the claim that their contents include components relating to the sorts of visual sensations we would have if our outlooks on apparently seen items were suitably to alter. The particular version of that thesis which her argument supports—the view that the contents of visual sensations featuring apparent encounters with external items incorporate conditionals having the form given by (1) above—also has the virtue, for illustrative purposes, of being logically fairly weak.<sup>16</sup>

We saw above that Noë endorses a related position, for instance. But he assumes that the contents of ordinary visual sensations include conditionals featuring pretty specific information concerning the ways in which the looks of apparently seen things would change in response to movements. (He writes, for example, that '[t]o experience [a] figure as a cube, on the basis of how it looks, is to understand *how* its look changes as you move'<sup>17</sup>.) Siegel's conditionals provide far less definite information about potential visual sensations; the conditionals merely state that suitable shifts in the viewer's perspective will lead to changes in what things are like visually for the subject.

Siegel's unspecific conditionals provide a particularly useful illustration of the idea that the contents of visual sensations are usually counterfactually subjective. For their lack of specificity means that all of the conclusions drawn below that bear upon the idea that visual contents generally include aspects having the form given by (1) will also bear directly upon the view that visual contents generally include richer conditionals of the sort cited by, say,

---

<sup>16</sup> Siegel notes the relative logical weakness of the expectations upon which she focuses (Siegel (2006), p. 359); she remarks (p. 359) that 'it is compatible with [her claim] that the relatively unspecific conditional [(1)] is represented in experience that certain more specific conditionals are represented in addition'.

<sup>17</sup> Noë (2004), p. 77.



Noë. I shall therefore treat Siegel's position as a paradigm of the idea that the contents of visual sensations are counterfactually subjective.

Reconsider Siegel's argument. The argument is an explanatory one. We are asked to imagine a Good visual sensation and an Odd one. We are then asked to agree that the Good and the Odd visual sensations would differ phenomenologically, because of the visually apparent externality that attaches to the doll in the former but not to the 'doll' in the latter. And it is claimed that the best explanation of the remarked phenomenological differences is that the Good and Odd visual sensations have different contents, where the relevant differences simply reflect the expectational contrasts noted in the course of the argument.

Siegel considers a range of possible alternative accounts of the differences in the contents possessed by her Good and Odd cases. She considers, for instance, the view that the 'doll' in the Odd case is located in 'mental space' rather than in external space. And I think she provides convincing arguments against them.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the pros and cons of the alternatives that she discusses, though, reflection upon possible cases might lead one reasonably to wonder whether Siegel's own claims about the contents of visual sensations aren't a little strong.

Look around you. Stay still for a few moments. Did the visually apparent externality of the items that you just seemed to see itself imply that, if you had suitably altered your perspective upon the relevant scene during the time in which you in fact stayed still, things would have looked different to you? Well, let's suppose so. Then assume, further, that a mischievous Evil Demon—one who operates by invisible means from a great distance away, say—was somehow monitoring your recent visual episodes; and suppose that it would have frozen your visual phenomenology if you had at all altered your perspective on what you were seeing. It follows straightaway that your recent visual sensations were inaccurate.

---

<sup>18</sup> See Siegel (2006), p. 374 – 8.

But that is very counterintuitive. It is much more natural to think that your recent visual sensations were accurate just in case the visible portions of the outside world were arranged in an appropriate manner relative to the perspective that you then occupied: the remote presence of a potentially interfering but actually inactive Evil Demon appears off the point. It is tempting to suspect, in particular, that the apparent externality of the things that you recently seemed to see pertained simply to their apparent natures at the very times that you seemed to see them, rather than to facts about how things might have stood sensorily for you at later times.<sup>19</sup>

Is there some decent way of accounting for the differences between Siegel's Good and Odd cases without ascribing counterfactually subjective contents to visual sensations, though? Sections V and VI develop some novel alternative ideas about visually apparent externality, while section VII illustrates the potential of those ideas by showing how they may be applied to illuminate the phenomenological contrasts between the Good and the Odd sensations.

## V

Take the banal point that things tend to look different from different perspectives. That thought might be taken to amount to something like the following: the precise nature of the various visual sensations enjoyed by a subject who is viewing an object generally depend

---

<sup>19</sup> Siegel (2006), pp. 385 – 7 considers a case that is somewhat related to the one just presented, in which 'the content of a visual experience of seeing a table is evaluated with respect to a world in which the perceiver's eyes are closed' (p. 385). The relatively abstruse nature of the case which Siegel discusses means that it does not adequately dramatise the counterintuitive aspects of her position, however.

upon the relationships holding between the subject and the object itself. That experiential construal of the claim is not forced upon us, however.<sup>20</sup>

Consider some viewpoint  $p$ .<sup>21</sup> What is it for things actually to look a certain way from  $p$ ? Here is an initial suggestion:

(A) Things look way  $T$  from perspective  $p$  just in case one would have a visual sensation of type  $T$  if one were to occupy  $p$ .

Claim (A) has a counterfactual and subjective character that sits nicely alongside Siegel's counterfactually subjective account of the contents of apparent visual encounters with external things.

But (A) is clearly wrong. It is perfectly conceivable, for instance, that if you or anyone else were to occupy  $p$  then an Evil Demon would ensure that the subject's visual sensations would fail totally to capture what things are like around there. Yet, in that case, the way that things would look to you if you were to occupy  $p$  is not a way that things actually look from there.

Here, then, is another account of what it is for things to look a certain way from a perspective; this alternative preserves (A)'s counterfactually subjective character but seeks to rule out the sort of visual derangement just envisaged in connection with (A):

---

<sup>20</sup> See Gregory (2010) for a use of this point in relation to questions about the contents of mental imagery; and see Gregory (2013) for uses of it in relation to a very broad class of 'distinctively sensory' representations that includes pictures, sensory mental images, and many other similar cases.

<sup>21</sup> What are 'perspectives'? There is not space in this paper for a thorough discussion of this question—see chapter 2 of Gregory (2013) for a detailed treatment of sensory perspectives in general and of visual perspectives in particular—but I take the idea of a visual perspective basically to be a functional notion: a visual perspective is a bundle of contextual features relative to which the contents of visual appearances are capable of being accurate or inaccurate. (Visual perspectives are thus naturally taken to incorporate spatiotemporal locations, for instance, along with groups of directions running through those locations.)

(B) Things look way *T* from perspective *p* just in case, if one were to occupy *p* and one were to have a visual sensation of type *T*, the way that things would then look to one would accurately reflect what things were like *p*.

That won't do either, though, for the simple reason that one's presence at *p* might alter the visible character of the world around that perspective. But a visual sensation that accurately reflected what things *were then* like around *p*—that is, in those counterfactual circumstances—would not reflect what things *are actually* like around *p*. The visual sensation therefore would not capture the way that things in fact look from *p*.

Another go:

(C) Things look way *T* from perspective *p* just in case, if one were to occupy *p* and one were to have a visual sensation of type *T*, things would then look to one to be the way that they *actually are* around *p*.

Claim (C) avoids all of the problems afflicting (A) and (B) above. But it is also very easily stripped of its counterfactually subjective character. For its essence is simply that a type of visual sensations is a way that things look from a perspective just in case the relevant sensation-type captures what things are in fact like around the perspective, in a manner now to be explained.

Consider, say, the type *Your View* of visual sensations covering precisely those actual and possible visual sensations that are subjectively indiscernible from the visual sensation that you are having right now. A visual sensation is an instance of *Your View* only if things look to the sensation's subject to be like *that*. But things doubtless are not like *that* relative to the viewpoint *p* chosen previously. So *Your View* doubtless is not a way that things look from that

viewpoint, just because *Your View* does not capture what things actually are like around there. If there is some other actual perspective relative to which things are like *that*, though, *Your View* is a way that things look from that other perspective, just because it does capture what things are actually like around there.

More generally, suppose that *T* is a way for things to look. And suppose that there are certain shared ways that things inevitably look to be to the subjects of *T*-sensations, just as things inevitably look to be like *that* to the subjects of *Your View*-sensations. Assume, finally, that the contents of those shared visual appearances may be summarised by saying that things always look to be *thus* to the subjects of *T*-sensations. Then the *appearance-content* of *T* is *things being thus*: extrapolating, the appearance-content of a way for things to look summarises the combined contents of all and only those sensory appearances which inevitably accompany visual sensations in which things look the relevant way.

Sensation-type *T* is a way that things look from perspective *p* just in case *T* captures what things are like relative to *p*. Generalising from the previous discussion, though, that last holds just in case things are *thus* relative to *p*. It holds, that is, just in case *T*'s appearance-content is true relative to *p*. Putting all the pieces together, we get the following:

- (2) Visual sensation-type *T* is a way that things look from perspective *p* just in case *T*'s appearance-content is true relative to *p*.

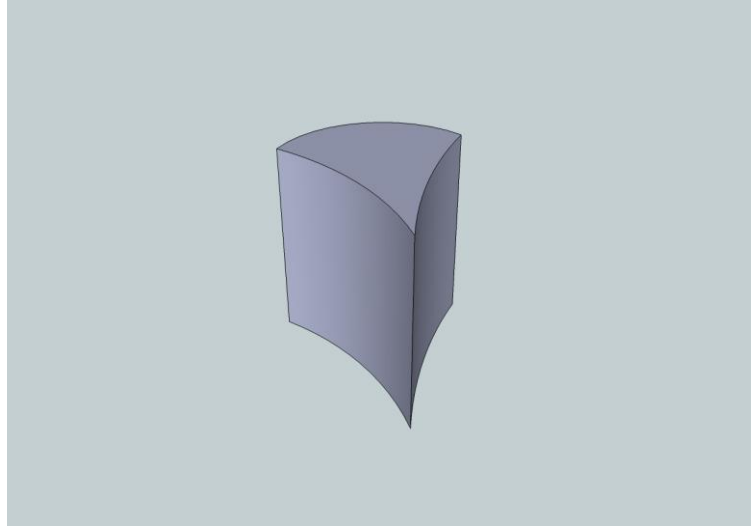
Principle (2) is what results when principle (C) is shorn of its counterfactually subjective coat: it embodies the simple point that things look a certain way from a perspective just in case the relevant way for things to look captures what things are actually like around the perspective.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> In correspondence, Neil Mehta has cited an interesting and potentially troublesome class of cases for principle (2) above (and the related principle (C)). Imagine, for instance, a white room whose walls would look red to you if you were standing in the room's centre, on account of trick lighting. Then doesn't (2) predict that the room really looks white from that central perspective? Yet that consequence is surely unacceptable—for the claim that

To conclude this section, consider the following diagram:

*Figure 1:*



Imagine that, while you occupy some viewpoint  $p$ , things look to you the Figure 1 shows them as looking: like *that*, as one might put it. Then an externally situated item of a distinctive sort looks to you to be present.<sup>23</sup>

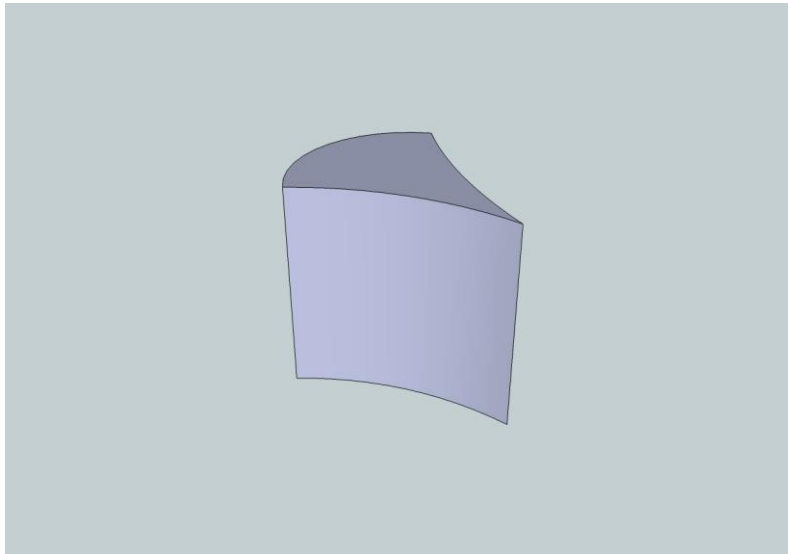
But the presence of an externally situated item of the relevant kind would evidently have consequences for other perspectives besides  $p$ . For the apparently seen thing, being apparently external, looks to be located in a space that simultaneously contains viewpoints other than your own. If things are indeed like *that* relative to  $p$ , for example, then things must at the same time look, from a perspective  $p^*$  that is somewhat to the left of  $p$ , the different way that Figure 2 shows things as looking:

---

the room really looks white from the perspective fails to cater for the presence of certain assumed lighting effects. (A similar putative counterexample can be generated using the ‘bent-stick’ illusion caused by the refractory effects of water upon light.) This case deserves more extended discussion than I am able to provide here, but I am inclined to accept that the ‘illusion-involving’ way that things would look to you, if you were to occupy the envisaged perspective, in fact does reflect what things are like around the envisaged perspective; I take it that the ‘illusion’ is thus strictly speaking cognitive—a product of one’s interpretation of the relevant sensory appearances—rather than properly sensory.

<sup>23</sup> In the light of the contrast between Siegel’s Good and Odd cases, it may be that there is a way of interpreting Figure 1 on which the way that it shows things as looking does not involve the apparent presence of an externally situated item, but rather of a phosphene-like counterpart of the ‘doll’ present in her Odd visual sensation. The discussion in the main text obviously is not working with that unusual construal of the image.

*Figure 2:*



The previous example illustrates a general point: our visual sensations tend to be accompanied by expectations relating to the ways that things look from perspectives besides the very ones that we ourselves then occupy. The next section relates that general point to visually apparent externality.

## VI

Consider some way for things to look  $T$ .  $T$  may involve the presence of various sorts of visual items, in that anyone who has a visual sensation in which things look the relevant way thereby has a visual sensation featuring visual items of suitable kinds.  $T$  will ‘involve’ an apparently external table, for instance, just in case anyone who has a  $T$ -sensation thereby seems to see an apparently external table. And  $T$  will ‘involve’ a certain pattern of phosphenes just in case anyone who has a  $T$ -sensation thereby enjoys a visual sensation featuring some phosphenes that instantiate the relevant pattern.

Consider an arbitrary subject who has a *T*-sensation. Suppose, first, that *T* involves an apparently external item; an apparently external table, perhaps. Then it looks to one who has a *T*-sensation as though a table is present within outside space: a space that includes her own viewpoint but which simultaneously includes plenty of other viewpoints, ones that stand in different relationships to the apparently seen table. The presence of the apparently external table within our subject's visual sensation will thus naturally correspond to the subject's possession of appropriate expectations relating to the ways that things then look from perspectives that are distinct from her own.

In particular, it will seem to the subject that things must then look *different* to the way that they look to her from at least some viewpoints that are suitably located in relation to the apparently external table.<sup>24</sup>

For the table will seem to stand in varying relationships to the manifold viewpoints that are included within the external space that apparently incorporates both the subject's own perspective and the table itself. Yet those varying relationships will be registered in the different ways that things look from suitably situated perspectives. Even the ways that the most uniform external things look from viewpoints that are very near to them are different to the ways that they look from viewpoints that are suitably far away, for instance.

By contrast, suppose that *T* involves a visual item that is not apparently external; a phosphene, say. The presence within the subject's visual sensation of the phosphene will not seem to the subject to have any consequences at all for the ways that things look at that very time from viewpoints distinct from her own. For the phosphene does not seem to the subject to be situated in a single space which includes her own viewpoint as well as a plurality of

---

<sup>24</sup> The above claim, and the various related claims which follow, like (3) below, should not be read as assuming that the subjects in question use explicitly self-referential ways of identifying ways for things to look. I take it that the identifications of ways for things to look are rather basically demonstrative in nature ('things look other than *this!*') rather than ones employing self-referential descriptions.



distinct viewpoints. Hence the phosphene's visual presence will not itself lead the subject to expect that things then look different from any suitably located perspectives.

More generally, then, the presence of apparently external items within vision corresponds to our possession of expectations concerning the ways that things *then look from other viewpoints*.<sup>25</sup> The next section shows how that point can be used to produce a content-based account of the phenomenological differences between Siegel's Good and Odd cases, without introducing a commitment to the view that the contents of visual sensations are counterfactually subjective.

## VII

Reconsider Siegel's Good case. That visual sensation features an encounter with an apparently external doll. The apparent doll's seeming externality—and hence its apparent location in a space that contains other perspectives besides your own—leads you to have expectations taking the following form:

- (3) Things then look different to the way that they look to you from some perspectives that are suitably located in relation to the relevant item.

---

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that the ideas about apparent visual externality developed above also promise to generalise to cover the appearances of externality that are owed to the operation of at least some nonvisual sensory faculties. So, stamp your foot. The apparent externality of the resulting sound involved its apparently being located within a space that included many auditory perspectives besides the one that you happened to be occupying, where the sound then bore a diverse range of relationships to those various distinct perspectives. The sound's apparent externality thus involved its seeming to you that the sound's occurrence had consequences for the ways that things then sounded from a host of perspectives distinct from your own. But sounds which do not seem to be apparently external—as involved in some forms of tinnitus and mental illness, say—will not seem to have any consequences for the ways that things sound from perspectives distinct from your own.

In the light of the earlier discussion of what it is for things to look some way from a viewpoint, note that the content of those expectations merely concerns the nature of the world around certain places; their contents are not counterfactually subjective.

Let's again compare the Good case to the Odd one. At the start of the sequence of visual episodes leading to Siegel's Odd case, you naturally presume either that a real doll is behaving very weirdly or that you are having a hallucinatory experience of an external item. By the time of the Odd sensation, though, the completely localised nature of the recurrent oddities present in the immediately preceding visual sensations will have affected your visual phenomenology. In particular, the repeated presence of the 'doll' within the visual sensations occurring in the Odd sequence's later portions will not seem to you to have any bearing upon what the outside world is really like.

This shift in the nature of the visual appearances involved in your visual sensations will be matched by a corresponding shift in the expectations that you have come to possess by the time that you reach the Odd visual sensation. In particular, the presence of the 'doll' within the Odd sequence's later sensations will not seem to you to have any bearing upon the ways that things then look from other viewpoints besides your own. Hence the presence of the 'doll' within the Odd case will not lead you to have expectations of the form given by (3).

The *counterfactually subjective* expectational difference between the Good and Odd cases noted by Siegel is thus accompanied by a *categorical* and *objective* expectational difference. That observation indicates how we may provide an alternative to Siegel's own content-based explanation of the differences between the Good and Odd cases. For it may be claimed that (3), as applied to the apparently seen doll, figures in the content of the Good case; whereas the content of Odd case does not feature an application of (3) to the 'doll' figuring therein.

That account of the contrast between the Good and the Odd obviously raises further questions. In particular, what are the precise nature of the causal processes that lead to the proposed contrasts between the contents of the Good and the Odd cases? Do the changes in the expectations present in the Good and Odd cases themselves cause the changes in the contents of those sensations, for example? Or do changes in the sensations' contents rather generate the shifting expectations?

I will not attempt to address those questions of explanatory priority here. Taking the first option would lead to a position that directly corresponds to what seems to be Siegel's view of the relationships between the Good and Odd cases. (So, she writes that '[a] second reason to believe [that (1) forms part of the Good case but not the Odd one] is that in the doll case, it is losing one's expectations that [(1) holds] *that makes a phenomenal difference between the Good and Odd experiences*'.<sup>26</sup>) The resulting view would have the virtue of promising an explanation of the shift that is involved in the passage from the Good case to the Odd one. But a lot more work would be needed to show that the position can actually deliver the goods.

In particular, how exactly is one's eventual relinquishing of the expectations described above meant to affect the content of the visual sensations occurring in the Odd sequence? Is the thought meant to be that, when the expectations disappear, part of the contents of the earlier visual sensations thereby vanish too, just because the expectations themselves—those very states!—somehow formed part of the previous visual sensations? Siegel's own approach to the Good and Odd cases faces directly analogous questions, of course; so the fact that these questions arise for the view just formulated does not put it at a disadvantage relative to the competition.

---

<sup>26</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 373; italics added.

While the issues of explanatory priority just broached are rather puzzling, the ideas presented in the earlier parts of this section generate an alternative content-based account of the phenomenological differences between the Good and Odd cases. And they do so without claiming to uncover counterfactually subjective elements within the content of the Good case. But why prefer the resulting view to Siegel's approach?<sup>27</sup>

## VIII

One obvious complaint about Siegel's view is that it overcomplicates the contents of ordinary visual sensations.<sup>28</sup> One might be tempted to level the same complaint against the view that the contents of ordinary visual sensations feature elements having the form provided by (3) above.

The view that (3) captures aspects of the contents of typical visual sensations clearly does ascribe to them a certain level of complexity. But vision commonly does supply us with extraordinarily rich and complex information about the outside world. In particular, it is not greatly implausible to suppose that the complications involved in (3) are present within the characterisation of the external world that visual contents provide, for reasons supplied in the next paragraph. Siegel's alternative approach, by contrast, introduces ingredients that are far less palatable, as we will again see shortly.

---

<sup>27</sup> As mentioned in some earlier footnotes, Siegel takes the contrast between her Good and Odd cases to support the view that ordinary visual sensations incorporate a 'no-movement' condition: the condition's import is, roughly, that '[i]f S changes her perspective on [apparently seen item] o, then o will not thereby move' ((2006), p. 358). Siegel's Odd visual sensation amalgamates the failure of both that no-movement condition and the failure of (1) above ('If you substantially change your perspective on the seen doll, your visual phenomenology will thereby change'), but they can easily be dissociated: imagine, for instance, an alternative Odd sequence of visual sensations in which (to put things using some spatial vocabulary that may cease happily to apply in the sequence's later episodes) a 'doll' comes closer, then moves further away, then comes closer again, ... every time you move your eyes. It is, I think, fairly plausible that the 'doll' figuring in that last sequence of visual sensations would eventually come to seem phosphene-like. If that is right, though, the visual item's resultant status as lacking visually apparent externality can be handled in the way that the phosphene-like status of the 'doll' in Siegel's Odd case is handled in the main text: it corresponds to the fact that, in the course of the sequence's latter parts, suitable applications of (3) are absent from the contents of the relevant visual sensations.

<sup>28</sup> Siegel responds to some concerns like this on pp. 382 – 4 of her (2006).

So, suppose that you have a visual sensation which things looked to you the way that Figure 1 shows them as looking. The sensation involves an apparent encounter with an external item that has a particular shape. The visual sensation thus presents the item as then bearing varying relationships to a host of viewpoints that are also situated within a space that contains the apparently seen item. Yet (3) just provides a way of registering that last point, using materials—like viewpoints and ways for things to look—which are fundamentally visual in nature. Indeed, how one could register the point without ascribing a fair amount of complexity to the manner in which the contents of ordinary visual sensations characterise the layout of the world?

By contrast, Siegel's counterfactually subjective approach posits complexities of an altogether different kind. Given (3) above, the contents of visual sensations featuring apparent encounters with external things involve relatively refined elements just bearing upon the actual layout of the world at one time. But according to Siegel's alternative view—and also according to logically stronger counterfactually subjective positions like Noë's—the contents of the relevant visual sensations involve elements bearing upon the kinds of visual sensations that we ourselves would have at a range of times.

Section IV used a thought-experiment featuring a mischievous Evil Demon to dramatise that last aspect of Siegel's position. But the alternative approach to visually apparent externality developed earlier handles that case without upset. The envisaged Evil Demon was capable of scrambling the ways that things looked to you in the moments following a certain visual sensation that occurred at a certain time. But it was not, at that very time, able to affect the ways that things then actually looked from the viewpoints in your surrounding environment. The actual layout of your surroundings at the time of your sensation settled those last matters; what an Evil Demon might have done to your visual faculties in the future has no bearing upon them.

It is undeniable, though, that visual encounters with apparently external things generally are accompanied by counterfactually subjective expectations of the sorts concentrated upon by Siegel and others. And, as remarked in section II, those expectations are very elementary ones. Why are they there, then? And what is ‘elementary’ about them? I shall conclude the main part of this paper by offering some answers to those questions.

Consider a visual episode which features an apparent encounter with an external thing: Siegel’s Good case, for example. The item’s visually apparent externality leads to you having expectations taking the form provided by (3) above: one will expect that things look different from perspectives round at the doll’s sides, for instance. Just as a matter of fact, though, you will also naturally assume that, if you were to occupy those other perspectives in the immediate future, the ways that things would then look *to you* would reflect the different relationships still holding between those perspectives and the doll. We all just do tend to assume, in practice, that we will visually register salient and relatively stable visible aspects of our environments.

Your expectations in the Good case about the ways that things would look to you, if you were suitably to alter your perspective on the apparently seen doll, thus result from two factors: first, your expectations concerning the different ways that things then look from suitably located viewpoints besides your own; and, second, the natural presumption noted in the previous paragraph. As a result of those two factors, you expect your visual phenomenology to alter if you appropriately change your perspective upon the apparently seen doll. But those counterfactually subjective expectations are not themselves ‘found at the level of visual experience’<sup>29</sup>, even though they do flow in part from notable aspects of visual content.

---

<sup>29</sup> Siegel (2006), p. 359.

## IX

Visual sensations typically involve apparent encounters with an external world. Some philosophers have claimed that the apparent presence within vision of external items corresponds to our possession of certain expectations concerning the ways that things would look to us upon altering our perspectives. Various more or less logically strong theses of that general sort have been proposed; Siegel endorses a relatively weak version of the view, for instance, while Noë advocates a stronger one.

Siegel has presented an argument for her version of the position. Her argument turns on the phenomenological contrast between two hypothetical visual sensations, her Good and Odd cases. In the Good case—which is a perfectly ordinary visual sensation—expectations with counterfactually subjective contents are present; but, in the Odd case, the expectations are absent. She claims that the phenomenological contrast between the relevant sensations corresponds to the presence of counterfactually subjective elements within the content of the Good case and their absence from the content of the Odd one. Yet Siegel’s theory, and others like it, have implausible implications.

Some alternative ideas about visually apparent externality were consequently proposed, in the light of a prior account of what it is for things to look a certain way from a perspective. It was noted that, when a visual item looks to us to be external, we expect it to affect the ways that things then look from viewpoints besides our own. By contrast, we do not expect phosphenes and the like to affect the ways that things look from other viewpoints. In particular, then, Siegel’s Good and Odd cases are subject to another important expectational contrast besides the counterfactually subjective one that she herself considers.

It was suggested that the difference in content between Siegel’s Good and Odd cases corresponds to this further expectational difference, rather than to the counterfactually

subjective expectational difference noted by Siegel. The proffered account allows us to trace the phenomenologically distinctive nature of visually apparent externality back to the special nature of the contents of apparent visual encounters with external items, without ascribing counterfactually subjective contents to the latter. It thus avoids the unwelcome consequences that were noted to flow from views like Siegel's and Noë's; but it also helps us to explain in more basic terms why counterfactually subjective expectations do in fact accompany apparent visual encounters with external items.<sup>30</sup>

## REFERENCES

- Almog, J., J. Perry and H. Wettstein eds. (1989), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Dummett, M. (1993), *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Gregory, D. (2010), 'Imagery, the imagination and experience', *Philosophical Quarterly* 60, pp. 735 – 753.
- Gregory, D. (2013), *Showing, Sensing, and Seeming: Distinctively Sensory Representations and their Contents*, Oxford University Press: Oxford
- Husserl, E. (2001), *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. A.J. Steinbock, Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht
- Kaplan, D. ([1977] 1989), 'Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals', in Almog, Perry and Wettstein eds. (1989).
- Nanay, B. ed. (2010), *Perceiving the World*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Noë, A. (2004), *Action in Perception*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

---

<sup>30</sup> Many thanks to Rosanna Keefe and Neil Mehta for their very helpful comments on this material. Many thanks also to those who attended a departmental seminar at the University of Cardiff, at which I presented an earlier draft of this paper.



Siegel, S. (2006), 'Subject and object in the contents of visual experience', *Philosophical Review* 115, pp. 355 – 88.

Siegel, S. (2010), 'Do experiences have contents?', in Nanay ed. (2010).

Siegel, S. (2011), *The Contents of Visual Experience*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Smith, A.D. (2003), *Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations*, Routledge: London.