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Hrsg.**

**Beiträge
Contributions**

40. Internationales Wittgenstein Symposium

40th International Wittgenstein Symposium

Kirchberg am Wechsel

6. – 12. August 2017

**Die Philosophie der Wahrnehmung und der Beobachtung
The Philosophy of Perception and Observation**

Die Philosophie der Wahrnehmung und der Beobachtung

The Philosophy of Perception and Observation

**Beiträge der Österreichischen Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society**

**Band XXV
Volume XXV**

The Philosophy of Perception and Observation

Contributions of the 40th International
Wittgenstein Symposium
August 6–12, 2017
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Volume XXV

Editors

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Copy editing: Sebastian Kletzl

WISSENSCHAFT · FORSCHUNG
NIEDERÖSTERREICH



Printed with the support of the
Department for Science and Research
of the Province of Lower Austria

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2017
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Distributor

Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Markt 63, A-2880 Kirchberg am Wechsel
Österreich / Austria



www.alws.at

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ISSN 1022-3398

Refereed Periodical

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Die Beiträge, Abstracts und Programm wurden mit Hilfe eines von Joseph Wang, Universität Innsbruck, erarbeiteten Datenbankprogramms erstellt.
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Contributions, Abstracts and Program were produced using a database application developed by Joseph Wang, University of Innsbruck, Austria.
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Visuelle Gestaltung / Visual graphics: Sascha Windholz
Druck: Eigner Druck, A-3040 Neulengbach

Inhalt / Contents

Verstehen und Gedanke im Vorwort zur <i>Logisch-philosophischen Abhandlung</i> Rubén Aguilar	9
An Analysis of the Shift in Wittgenstein's Philosophy? A Momentary Revolution or a Dialectical Result? Musa Azak	12
From Perception to Intentionality: Husserl's <i>Noema</i> as a Meinongian Object beyond Being Giuliano Bacigalupo	17
Vom Wissen zum Denken – Wittgensteins dialektische Methode am Beispiel der Seminarnotizen G. E. Moores Alexander Berg	20
The Ethics and Limits of Understanding Literature Joy Zhu Tsz Ching	23
Direct Realism and Sense Data Claudio Costa	26
Perceptual Demonstrative Thought Sean Crawford	29
Wittgenstein and the Pluralist Theory of Truth Krzysztof Czerniawski	32
Pictures and Perception in the <i>Tractatus</i> Stefanie Dach	35
The Constancy Mechanism Proposal for the Limits of Intentionality Sergio De Souza Filho	38
Minimal Self, Mineness, and Intersubjectivity Christoph Durt & Oliver Lukitsch	41
Wittgensteinian Naïvety Jørgen Dyrstad	44
Following a Rule without the Platonic Equivalent. Wittgenstein's Intentionality and Generality Susan Edwards-McKie	47
Hypotheses on Perceptual Hypotheses August Fenk	50
Representations, Private Experiences and Brain Activity – A Brief Investigation Nara M. Figueiredo	53
The Fact of the Given from a Realist-Idealist Perspective Gregor Flock	56
Who "sees the world rightly"? The "I" as Tension in Wittgenstein's Writings Mélissa Fox-Muratou	59
Intentionality and the Content of Perceptual Experience Florian Franken Figueiredo	62
Transparency and Knowledge of One's Own Perceptions Martin F. Fricke	65
The Chinese Chess Room Ralf Funke	68
The Later Wittgenstein on Personal and Social Change Dimitris Gakis	71
How to Make Sense of the Ideas of Inner Perception and Observation According to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology? Charlotte Gauvry	74
The Form of Experience: Travis and McDowell on the Lesson of Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Considerations Johan Gersel	77
Object of Perception. A Critical Analysis of Martin's Naïve Realism Sarthak Ghosh	80

Transparency and Knowledge of One's Own Perceptions

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Abstract

So-called "transparency theories" of self-knowledge, inspired by a remark of Gareth Evans, claim that we can obtain knowledge of our own beliefs by directing our attention towards the world, rather than introspecting the contents of our own minds. Most recent transparency theories concentrate on the case of self-knowledge concerning belief and desire. But can a transparency account be generalised to knowledge of one's own perceptions? In a recent paper, Alex Byrne (2012) argues that we can know what we see by inferring from visual facts about our environment because such facts can exclusively be known by us through vision. I discuss his proposal and object that visual facts, as conceived of by Byrnes are odd: they cannot be remembered and we cannot, as yet, write them down. More needs to be said about them to make his account plausible.

1. Introduction

So-called "transparency theories" of self-knowledge are inspired by Gareth Evans's famous remark that I "answer the question whether I believe that p by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether p " (Evans 1982: 225). Authors who have recently attempted to construct theories of self-knowledge on the basis of this remark include Moran (2001), Byrne (2005), Fernández (2013) and Fricke (2009). The principal interest of these authors has been to explain self-knowledge of beliefs and, secondarily, of desire. But can the account be generalised to knowledge of one's own perceptions? In a recent paper, Alex Byrne (2012) discusses several proposals for accounting of such knowledge and defends a transparency theory that is in line with his explanation of self-knowledge regarding beliefs. In what follows, I shall examine Byrne's theory and develop an objection that he does not discuss.

2. Transparency in self-knowledge of belief

To begin with, it is useful to have a look at the model for self-knowledge which is supposed to be extended to knowledge of one's perception. As has been mentioned already, the model applies to knowledge of one's own belief. Byrne encapsulates Evans's remark in the epistemic rule BEL:

BEL If p , believe that you believe that p (Byrne 2005: 95)

One follows BEL if and only if one believes that one believes that p because one recognises that p . Byrne also describes following this rule as a kind of inference from p to "I believe that p ".

BEL is a particularly reliable rule in that if one follows it correctly, i.e. if one indeed recognises that p and on the basis of this recognition forms the belief "I believe that p ", one necessarily arrives at a true ascription of belief. Even if one does not really recognise that p – say because it is not true that p – but falsely comes to believe that p , the resulting belief-ascription "I believe that p " will still be true.

It is also clear that BEL works particularly well for one's own beliefs. Consider an analogue rule for ascribing beliefs to other people:

BEL-3 If p , believe that Fred believes that p (Byrne 2005: 96)

BEL-3 is not altogether a bad rule. On the contrary, it might be a good working assumption (or even be a necessity, if Donald Davidson is to be believed), to suppose that others have more or less the same beliefs as oneself. But unlike BEL, BEL-3 is certain to lead to false ascriptions of belief to Fred at least sometimes, even if it is followed correctly.

The idea that BEL explains the knowledge we have of our own beliefs has come under several strong criticisms (cf. Boyle 2011, Gertler 2011, Carruthers 2011, Cassam 2015). It seems to me that there are some good replies to these criticisms. However, I shall not go into these arguments here, but instead examine the way Byrne attempts to generalise his explanation of self-knowledge concerning belief to that concerning one's own perception.

3. Transparency in knowledge of one's own perception

As is usual, Byrne concentrates on the case of vision. Using an example from Gilbert Ryle, Byrne supposes that he sees a hawk and asks the question "how do I know that I see a hawk?" (Byrne 2012: 185). As Ryle remarks, "My seeing of the hawk seems to be a queerly transparent sort of process, transparent in that while a hawk is detected, nothing else is detected answering to the verb in 'see a hawk'" (Ryle 2009: 134). Applying the model of self-knowledge concerning belief, it might be suggested that we know what we see by directing our attention outward at our environment. It might then be thought that we infer what we see from what we know about our immediate (visible) environment. The epistemic rule corresponding to BEL might be:

HAWK† If there is a hawk over there, believe that you see a hawk. (Byrne 2012: 191)

Byrne dismisses this rule, because there are many ways in which one might know that there is a hawk over there that do not require vision. Someone might tell me or I might hear the hawk, while actually not being able to see anything at all. In all these cases, the rule would lead to a wrong description of one's visual perception. But our self-ascriptions of visual perceptions do not seem to be prone to such errors.

The problem with this kind of rule is that the proposition expressed in the antecedent is *amodal* in the sense that it can be known in various ways, through testimony, vision and auditory experience, for example. So just having the

information expressed in the antecedent is not enough for me to infer that this information is *seen*.

However, this diagnosis indicates how a transparency account for self-ascriptions of perceptions can be made to work: it must be exclusively based on such information about my environment that can be obtained in one modality only. If I have some information about my environment that can only be obtained through vision, then I can infer that I am seeing that things are so. If I know something about the environment that can only be ascertained through hearing it, then I know that I am hearing that things are so.

Byrne thinks that there is such modally exclusive information. He notes "[a]ssume, then, that visual experiences have contents, *v-propositions*; true *v-propositions* are *v-facts*. Let '[...F(x)...]_v' be a sentence that expresses a particular *v-proposition* that is true at a world *w* only if *x* is *F* in *w*" (Byrne 2012: 197).

Granted that visual experiences have contents, it is not disputed that the content at least concerns what falls under the rubric of "mid-level vision" in vision science: shape, orientation, depth, color, shading, texture, movement, and so forth: call these sensible qualities. In fact, without begging any important questions we can restrict *v-propositions* so that they just concern sensible qualities. (Byrne 2012: 197)

He acknowledges that characterising "*v-facts* is difficult" (Byrne 2012: 199), but affirms that for the purposes of a transparency account of knowledge of perception such details are not required. The important point is that visual experiences have contents that concern sensible qualities which can only be ascertained through vision. It is from *v-propositions* about such exclusively visual qualities of the objects in our environment that we can infer that we are seeing. And analogously we can infer from exclusively olfactory facts that we smell something and from exclusively auditory facts that we are hearing something in our vicinity:

Vision, we may say, reveals the visual world: the world of *v-facts*. In the visual world things are colored, illuminated, moving, and so on, but not smelly or noisy. Likewise, olfaction reveals the olfactory world: the world of *o-facts*. The olfactory world—at least, our olfactory world—is a relatively impoverished place, consisting of odors located around the perceiver's body. The auditory world, the world of *a-facts*, is considerably more complicated, consisting, *inter alia*, of sounds of varying loudness and pitch at a variety of locations. [...] Suppose one investigates one's environment, and finds that a certain *v-fact*, the fact that [...x...]_v, obtains. Vision is, at least in creatures like ourselves, an exclusive conduit for *v-facts*. Hence one's information source must be vision, not audition, olfaction, testimony, or anything else. Although information is amodal *in principle*, for us *v-facts* do indicate their provenance—(visual) information is *practically* modal. (Byrne 2011: 200)

The epistemic rule which explains how we come to know that we are seeing something has the following form:

SEE If [...x...]_v and *x* is an *F*, believe that you see an *F* (Byrne 2012: 199)

4. Objections from memory and from known illusions

Byrne discusses two specific objections to his account: "the memory objection" and an objection from the case of known illusions.

The memory objection points out that a *v-fact* might be remembered, instead of being seen. If in this case memory, just like visual perception, provides knowledge of a visual fact [...x...]_v, then SEE would lead to the ascription of a visual experience of seeing. But in this case, it is supposed that we do not see, but only remember the visual fact. Hence SEE leads to a false result.

Byrne's reply is, roughly, that remembered visual facts are not quite as vivid as the actual visual experience. They are just a "transformed and degraded version of the visual information that characterizes successful seeing" (Byrne 2012: 202). Because of this degraded character of the information, we can know that SEE is not applicable here (but perhaps an analogous rule for the ascription of a memory is), and we will not make a false ascription of visual perception.

The second objection asks what happens in cases where I suffer from a known illusion. Following Evans, it is thought that in this case we continue to see things a certain way, but we do not form the belief that they are this way. The perceptual experience is supposed to be belief-independent. But applying SEE requires to *recognise*, hence to *believe*, that [...x...]_v and to infer from this supposed fact that one sees an *F* (because *x* is an *F*). In the case where the illusion is known, then, the antecedent of SEE cannot come to be fulfilled and we would therefore, contrary to actual life, not be able to report and know what we (seem to) see.

Byrne replies to this objection by casting doubt on the belief-independence of perception. In his view, even knowing about the illusion, we still form the belief corresponding to our visual perception (in addition to our veridical belief which is based on knowledge of the illusion). As a result, cases of known illusion will produce contradictory beliefs in us, but we will still know what we seem to see by using SEE.

5. Odd perceptual facts

Byrne's account is impressive and he has good objections to rival accounts that have not been mentioned here. But I think that there is something odd about the visual facts that are fundamental for his theory. Byrne says that it is "difficult" to characterise them, but allows that "perhaps one could in principle learn that [...x...]_v by reading it in the –as-yet-unwritten– language of vision" (Byrne 2011: 201). Of course, knowing a visual fact by reading about it, rather than seeing it, would satisfy the antecedent of SEE and probably lead to a false ascription of seeing. In practice, this problem does not arise because the language of vision has not been written yet. But it is odd that Byrne's account depends on the fact that visual facts cannot easily be communicated.

It seems to me to be even odder that visual facts can neither be remembered, for the account to work. Although he concedes that the line between vision and memory might blur such that one might mistake a memory for vision, his theory depends on there generally being a clear distinction. If I know now that there is a hawk on the fencepost, I can certainly also know a moment later that there is a hawk, even if I do no longer see it. Memory is sufficient to hold on to this knowledge from one moment to the next. But knowledge of a visual fact [...x...] is supposed to degrade and transform from one moment to the next, thus enabling us to distinguish between seeing that [...x...] and merely remembering it. This is strange when we compare the visual fact with more abstract facts such as that there is a hawk. Perhaps Byrne is right about the distinction. But it is a distinction difficult to assess given the lack of detail when it comes to characterising visual facts.

Consider, in comparison, an olfactory fact. If I smell a beautiful (or not so beautiful) odour now, why should my knowledge of this olfactory fact disappear or degrade from one moment to the next, just because I tap my nose so that I can no longer smell it and can only remember it? It is very clear that there is a great difference between smelling a strong odour and not smelling it, but just remembering it. The question is whether this difference consists in losing knowledge of olfactory facts. If memory can preserve at least some knowledge of such facts from one moment to the next, then, according to a transparency account, I would seem to be able to infer that I still smell some odour. It seems that Byrne's theory, ingenious as it is, needs to

tell us more about the perceptual facts from which we are supposed to infer that we are perceiving them.

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