Losing grip on the world: From illusion to sense-data

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During an illusory perception in which I mistakenly perceive a blue car to be purple, what I am wrong about – the mistaken aspect of the perception – is the car’s colour. My core interest is in whether or not a particular kind of successful reference, acquaintance, should be applied to this error. One analysis, famously endorsed by indirect realists, holds that in making this perceptual error one is acquainted with something other than or in addition to the blue of the car, say a purple sense-datum (i.e., a subjective perceptual object). Another analysis, familiar from the intentionalist variety direct realism, asserts that if anything one is acquainted with the blue of the car, but one is experiencing it to be purple because one is merely representing purple, or is in an unsuccessful purple-representing state. On this view in no sense is one acquainted with some purple object that exists over and above the blue car. In illusory experiences, when considering the misperceived aspect of the experience, is there successful or unsuccessful reference? This is what is at issue.

The claim that perceptual illusions can motivate the existence of sense-data is both familiar and controversial. My aim is to carve out a subclass of illusions that are up to the task, and a subclass that are not. It follows that when we engage the former we are not simply incorrectly perceiving the world outside ourselves, we are directly perceiving a subjective entity: one’s grip on the external world has been marginalized – not fully lost, but once removed. However, admitting that various illusions do not give evidence for sense-data considerably limits the power of the Argument from Illusion (§6) and brings out its distinctness from the Argument from Perceptual Relativity (§7). To reach these conclusions we will examine the role of ambiguity in perception (§3), its connection to illusion (§4), and the link reference has to every element of this discourse (§§2&5).

Reference takes center stage because at the heart of our discussion is a form of acquaintance which consists of a variety of perceptual, nonlinguistic, reference. Linguistic reference is in my view
mostly a distraction here, in large part because the publicity and multivocality of public terms relevant to perception, like ‘red’ and ‘square’, have the potential to unnecessarily wreak havoc at all stages of the discussion. I will do my best to steer the reader clear of these traps, and instead trace a clear(er) path to why some illusions support the existence sense-data.

The inference from illusions to sense-data has been used to additionally argue for indirect realism, the claim that the immediate objects of perception are always (or at least typically) sense-data. On this view our perceptual access to the external or mind-independent world is thus robustly indirect, relegated perhaps to the knowledge acquired through the representational capacities of sense-data. An evaluation of this additional claim is tangential to the present work, although its relevance will be made explicit (§§1,6,7), if only to help frame the significance of our discussion.

§1 The debate

Ours is a debate between indirect and direct realist approaches to perception, where the latter asserts that we routinely directly perceive the world and the former that we perceive the world through the aid of a subjective mediating object of perception, something I will call a sense-datum. In the terminology I will employ, indirect realists believe that when we perceive the world outside ourselves, we do so by first being perceptually aware of subjective sense-data, and in virtue of those data accurately representing the objective world thereby perceive that world. Direct realists hold the much simpler view that perceiving the world outside ourselves only involves being perceptually aware of that world. I hope that the reader does not take this axiomatic simplicity to carry more weight than it deserves. Simpler axioms are on their own preferable but not decisively so, whereas failing to accurately recover the data the axioms are formulated to illuminate is a decisive shortfall. The latter is where our debate has raged for centuries, and where our discussion is to be found.

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1 I take ‘perceptual awareness’ to inherently involve the first-person state of the perceiver and to be in this sense epistemically internalist: it is something to which the perceiver must have fairly immediate access. ‘Perception’ generally can be understood to cover both internalist and externalist conceptions of perception, unless otherwise stated. Perceptual awareness is also to be distinguished from ‘cognitive awareness’, which I take to include not only perceptual awareness but also non-perceptual thought such as contemplation.

Although the analogy is in some ways misleading, the reader might find it useful to think of the distinction between directly and indirectly perceiving something through familiar examples like live television, where one directly perceives the screen and its features and in virtue of them accurately representing what they depict one indirectly perceives those depicted items.
The only variety of indirect realism that I believe has any merit is projectivism. As I articulate the view it asserts that sense-data are reflexively projected by one’s mind into what one [preanalytically] experiences as the world outside oneself.\textsuperscript{2} Sense-data are not experienced as subjective entities but are instead experienced as items that are in the mind-independent world. An indirect realism that does not posit projectivism is hopeless, for when we perceive we directly perceive the world [we experience as] outside ourselves: when I look at the table I see in front of me I do not experience a subjective intermediary, something in between the table and me, I only experience the table. This is another way of making the familiar point that indirect realism generally is at odds with a well-informed element of common sense that direct realists often use to anchor their view.\textsuperscript{3} A projectivist indirect realism preserves this element and hence will be presupposed what follows.

In focusing on the debate between indirect and direct realism I do not mean that other approaches such as idealism are not relevant to our discussion. I mean only that in my estimation the main thread of what follows is best appreciated by a continued focus on the indirect/direct realism debate, a claim I will justify in various places. The particular variety of direct realism that will be of interest is intentionalism\textsuperscript{4}; due to length constraints, other varieties, such as qualia realism and disjunctivism, will only be mentioned in passing.

§2 Acquaintance at a glance

I am concerned with the extent to which a successful form of perceptual reference, what I call acquaintance, is involved in perceptual awareness. My interest is in a minimal acquaintance doctrine, according to which a perceiver being acquainted with an object[/property/fact] of perception consists of: a perceiver and particular object that exist (e.g., do not merely subsist) and the holding

\textsuperscript{2} On this view this preanalytic disposition to see sense-data as outside oneself can be overcome but is typically not.

\textsuperscript{3} Among other things I am referring to Harman’s (1990) influential transparency argument. See my (under review) for an explication of how projectivism undermines that argument far better than qualia realism.

\textsuperscript{4} Four of many defenses of intentionalism are Harman (1990), Dretske (1995), Tye (2000) and Byrne (2001), although Byrne interestingly maintains, in contrast to standard approaches, that his variety is consistent with indirect realism. One can argue (as Hilbert 2004 does) that the contemporary root of this movement is Armstrong (1961).
between them of the fundamental relation of acquaintance or perceptual contact. The acquaintance relation itself consists of a form of basic perceptual knowledge of that object possessed by that perceiver. It has been common to add to this for example the claim that the perceiver has infallible or complete knowledge of an item of acquaintance. I will make no use of such additions and hope the reader agrees that they are inessential to the acquaintance idea.\textsuperscript{5,6} Instead acquaintance is meant to provide for a perceiver an epistemic ground or anchor to an object, one that she can exploit to acquire knowledge of various truths (i.e., knowledge by description) about that object.

All are familiar with attempts to avoid understanding perceptual awareness in this way, for example by adverbialists and more recently by intentionalists – I presuppose the latter. The rough idea is that perceptual awareness need not involve the perceiver being in perceptual contact with an existing object of perception, but instead need only involve the perceiver being in the kind of state that represents such an object. The approach is well established in domains like (non-perceptual) thought, where one can without doubt think about things that do not exist (e.g., vampires). A reasonable explanation of this capacity holds that this is achieved by representing those non-existing things, thus bolstering the idea of representational states that do not refer. It also applies straightforwardly to other propositional attitudes such as desires, fears, et cetera. The relevant intentionalist thought is that we should extend this approach to perceptual awareness, so that to be perceptually aware is to be representing [in the perceptual way]. This opens the door for

\textsuperscript{5} On at least one reading Russell (e.g., 1912, 1913) himself did not take acquaintance to imply infallibility in any robust sense. When acquainted with an item one knew that item with certainty (had knowledge by acquaintance of it), but did not because of this possess knowledge of any truths about (had no knowledge by description of it). Indeed given Russell’s own scepticism about the reliability of memory it is reasonable to hold that one’s knowledge by acquaintance of some item need not extend to future perceptions of it. For similar reasons I reject the claims that acquaintance with something entails complete knowledge of it, and that acquaintance can only be had with simple (as opposed to complex) objects. Regrettably, my positive characterization of knowledge by acquaintance will be minimal.

\textsuperscript{6} I take it as straightforward that this acquaintance doctrine satisfies a robust form of perceptual presence, and assume that ‘relationalists’ (as, e.g., discussed in Crane, 2006) are for our purposes individuals who see something like this minimal acquaintance doctrine as definitive of perceptual states. Relationalists of course come in both direct and indirect realist strains – I will be concerned solely with the latter. Acquaintance is also often taken to be a form of nonconceptual perceptual awareness. With a few exceptions to follow, I wish to remain mute on this issue. I see it working in the background in various places, but would have to greatly lengthen the work to bring them all out. [Note that relationalists like McDowell and Brewer take the relations to the world afforded by perception to be thoroughly conceptual.]
representational states whose objects do not exist (hallucinations), and states some of whose represented elements do not exist (illusions). My interest is in the latter.

Thus whereas for the acquaintance theorist being perceptually aware of redness requires that the perceiver be acquainted with an instance of red, for the intentionalist being perceptually aware of redness requires being in a state that is about or directed toward redness, with no commitment to an existing redness being perceptually present to her. This disagreement, as it manifests itself in illusion, is our topic. I will call a perceptual state that is about (e.g.,) redness but does not involve acquaintance with an existing instance of redness a merely representational state. It is somewhat like the difference between shaking hands (acquaintance) and pointing fingers (nonacquaintance): the former cannot be achieved unless the item of interest is present or actually exists, whereas the latter has no such requirement – one can point in the direction in which one takes the item of interest to be without that item actually being there.

It is common for theorists to be dogmatic on this issue and presume that acquaintance (or nonacquaintance) is central to all perceptual states. Such an acquaintance theorist holds that being in a perceptual state consists of being acquainted with something, and the corresponding nonacquaintance theorist holds that being in a perceptual state consists of being in a representational state of the perceptual sort. These platitudes are a mistake. Methodologically, we should be open to the possibility that some phenomena suggest an acquaintance approach (to them) and others do not. More pointedly, the idea of acquaintance (or nonacquaintance) should not be an operational constraint or basic assumption a theorist subsequently fits phenomena into. The idea should instead be applied when appropriate and withheld when not, and we should be doing our best to mine, from

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7 In case there is doubt, note that sense-data are for the indirect realist the primary objects of perception, and thus are elements of what is commonly called the ‘intentional content’ of perceptions (see, e.g., Brown 2010). The disagreement we are focused on is therefore not about whether or not there are nonintentional aspects of experience – that is the core dispute between intentionalists and qualia realists (e.g., Block) –, it is about whether or not certain elements of the intentional content of perceptual states exist as particulars at the time of perception. Regrettably, explaining how universals fit into this dispute would require unnecessarily muddying our discussion.

8 In the case of the disjunctivist, a direct realist, acquaintance is definitive of all veridical perceptual states. By contrast for the sense-datum theorist it is definitive of all perceptual states. Disjunctivists, however, do not agree on how to positively characterize misperceptions like illusions.
phenomena like illusions, information that can help us make these decisions – or so I will purport to demonstrate.9

§3 Ambiguity

In a perceptual circumstance I will take the stimulus or given to mean the object or scene as it is currently presenting itself to the perceiving agent.10 Consider a scenario in which a perceiver finds herself in front of a wire cube oriented with the front face slightly pitched up and to the right [UR oriented], as the Necker Cube is sometimes drawn. The cube and this particular way it is presenting itself to our agent is the stimulus. In this case the stimulus is objectively ambiguous – stimulus ambiguity – in the sense that various objectively different objects could present themselves to the agent in a way that is perceptually indistinguishable from the way this cube is now presenting itself to her.11 An obvious alternative would be a wire cube with the front face pitched down and to the left [DL oriented]. Other alternatives include a roughly two-dimensional wire figure [2D Figure] whose shape traces a flat drawing of the Necker Cube; a Stretched Cube, that is a figure with square front and back but horizontally elongated (roughly) rectangular sides and either UR or DL oriented; and so on. Each such alternative marks a candidate disambiguation of our stimulus.

Perceptual ambiguity requires that the agent see or perceive a stimulus as ambiguous. In keeping with our example, for our purposes this means that she sees the stimulus one moment as being one thing, say a UR oriented cube, and at the next as being some other thing, say a DL oriented cube. She can of course also see the stimulus as being a 2D Figure, as a UR or DL oriented Stretched Cube, et cetera. However, some of these disambiguations are perceived more readily than others. I would venture to say that seeing this stimulus as a UR or DL oriented cube is easiest, and that it is roughly

9 This methodological openness is thus consistent with but does not entail a ‘hybrid’ approach to perception according to which some elements of perceptual content are subjective and others are not (e.g., Maund 2004, Hellie 2006).
10 I thus do not mean by ‘stimulus’ or ‘given’ the pattern of light reaching the eye, although the term is sometimes used in this way. A stimulus in my sense is objective, consisting of the objects and properties (perhaps also facts) being perceived along with the ways those entities are presenting themselves to the agent at the time of her perception. Compare with Schellenberg’s (2008) situation-dependent properties and the objects possessing them. Her view will be discussed in §7.
11 Gupta (2006) argues for a robust form of ambiguity in the perceptual given, though he construes the phenomena as one of functionality instead of ambiguity (and for good reasons). I regret that I am unable to devote any space to his view in the present work but wish to acknowledge his influence on my thoughts.
equally easy to see the stimulus as being either of these ways. By contrast seeing it as a 2D Figure is somewhat more difficult, and as a Stretched Cube (of either orientation) more difficult still. There may furthermore be other disambiguations of the stimulus that the agent cannot see it as (think for example of Moretti’s Blocks).

We thus have two distinct dimensions to an account of perceptual ambiguity, one consisting of the candidate disambiguations of the objective stimulus (the disambiguation dimension), and the other of the extent to which the agent can see the stimulus in accordance with each of these disambiguations (the seeing-as dimension). I suspect but will not argue in detail for the claim that the seeing-as dimension can involve some level of cognitive penetration: the age-relative reactions to the Dolphin illusion give decent evidence for this, as does the general fact that with practice/education it can become easier to see an ambiguous stimulus in accordance with various disambiguations. Nonetheless much work is done subcognitively, independently of higher-level cognitive penetrations. The fact that seeing the stimulus in our example as a UR or DL oriented cube are easiest, and roughly equally easy, suggests that our subcognitive systems have honed in on these disambiguations and judged them to be the most probably correct ones (and equally probably correct ones). I will generally say that the set of disambiguations an agent most easily sees an ambiguous stimulus as is the set of disambiguations her perceptual system judges (be it subcognitively or through both cognitive and subcognitive mechanisms) to be the most probable disambiguations of the stimulus. Disambiguations that it is harder to see the stimulus as are thus judged to be less probable, and so on.\footnote{These judgements are likely informed by evolutionary pressures, life learning and perhaps other elements of the perceptual scene. They are thus to some degree contingent. Stimulus ambiguity is the norm in most perceptual research. One common response is to isolate operational constraints that are used or could be used by our vision system to cut down on the possible disambiguations. With respect to shape perception familiar constraints include ‘objects are rigid’, ‘objects persist’, etc. (see, e.g., Spelke, 1990); in colour perception constraints might include assumptions about the composition of common light, and so on (see, e.g., Wandell, 1989). These constraints are presumed (by this author and others) to operate subpersonally in an intermediate stage of visual processing and to be at least largely impenetrable by higher-level cognition (see, e.g., Raftopoulos 2009, 2010). The vision system applies them to illumination information retrieved by the retina (in early vision) and computes or ‘judges’ which disambiguation(s) represent the most probable objects of (i.e., external objects causing) that perceptual state. What I suggest follows squarely in this framework, although I am not committed to excluding the variety of cognitive impenetrability that, e.g., Raftopoulos argues against.}
§4 Perceptual illusions and ambiguity

I do not have a fully precise or adequate conception of [perceptual] illusion on offer. I instead put forth a conception determinate and adequate enough for our purposes. Illusions and hallucinations both involve some form of perceptual error. But they are different. When one hallucinates, one experiences something (or has an experience as of something\(^\text{13}\)) that does not exist: if one hallucinates one’s mother’s voice one seems to hear one’s mother’s voice when in fact no voice is present. By contrast an illusory experience involves in some way misperceiving something that does exist, as when in twisted cord illusions one experiences, as bent, cords that are in fact straight.

We are interested in a wider and a narrower conception of illusions. The wide one holds that all misperceptions are illusory and the narrower that some misperceptions are mere errors as opposed to illusory experiences, perhaps reserving the term ‘illusory experiences’ for misperceptions involving a robust form of deception or sensory trickery.\(^\text{14}\) Adherents of the narrower conception demand that for a stimulus to be considered an illusion it must be capable of producing misperceptions more than by accident, and ideally in most or all [human] perceivers. Thus the Müller-Lyer Illusion continues to generate misperceptions even once we know and perhaps to some extent can see that the two lines are of equal length. Further, we can imagine the narrow advocate wanting to exclude some misperceptions from the class of illusory experiences, perhaps an isolated case in which I misperceive my sister’s voice to be my mother’s. The narrower conception is limited because an explication sensory trickery is difficult to muster, because the line between stimuli that cause misperceptions by accident versus by trickery is vague, and so on. Although I prefer the narrower one, my aim is not to

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\(^{13}\) These phrases are one way to differentiate between acquaintance and non-acquaintance approaches to illusions and hallucinations. For now I am noncommittal on the matter, but that will soon change.

\(^{14}\) Crane adheres to the wide conception, for according to him “illusion…need not involve deception” (2006, p. 132). Smith is also a plausible candidate (2002, esp. p. 23).
defend it, but instead to explain how different conceptions have had and should in future have on some key philosophical disputes.

A concrete connection to illusions is now possible, for many illusions are intimately connected to perceptual and stimulus ambiguity. On the wide conception of illusions all misperceptions due to stimulus ambiguities are illusory. On the narrow one stimulus ambiguity that gives rise to misperception does not on its own entail sensory trickery or therefore illusion. Misperceptions like mistakenly seeing the wire cube as DL oriented are arguably not due to any kind of trickery, but simply to mistaken judgement about a paucity of object information, and hence can reasonably be deemed non-illusory in the narrow sense. However, narrowly illusory perceptions due to ambiguity do exist, for an ambiguous stimulus can contain enough cues to prompt one’s visual system to judge that an incorrect disambiguation is most probable, and as a result trick the perceiver into reflexively seeing the perceptual object as being that incorrect way. An example is The Mysterious Floating Vase. One reflexively sees this as a floating vase, despite the otherwise improbability of such an event, when in fact the vase is sitting on the perceived surface and an elliptical dark patch has been added to trick the vision system into interpreting it as a shadow projected by the vase and hence the vase as floating. The shadow cues are so strong that it is difficult to view the scene in the veridical way, but one can do it with some effort, and when one does so the ambiguity of the stimulus becomes apparent (more on this below). That there is sensory trickery here is beyond dispute, and because of that this ambiguous perception should be regarded as illusory even in the narrow sense.15

Another ambiguous stimulus is the famed tilted penny, where the stimulus is at least geometrically ambiguous between an elliptical object being viewed head-on (elliptical disambiguation), or a round one being viewed at an angle (round disambiguation). In this case (like

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15 For simplicity I will assume the dark patch is paint as opposed (say) to a shadow cast by something other than the vase. ‘Floating illusions’ can be created in other ways. E.g., one can suspend an object by invisible wires or occluded rods, place it on transparent glass, and so on. There are many examples available in the public domain. My source for the Floating Vase Illusion is Seckel (2003), which I have regrettably been unable to get permission to reprint. The Floating Man, to which all that follows is directly applicable, is readily available online. Note also that many other illusions work because of stimulus ambiguity. The Old-Young Woman is a classic, and the Dolphin Illusion one of my favourites. The difference is that for these last two examples the ambiguity concerns what these images or drawings represent, not (as in the vase and man case) the fact that distinct objects can present themselves in indistinguishable ways. The latter is our focus.
the floating vase and unlike the wire cube) the visual system does not treat both disambiguations as equiprobable but instead favours the round one, we tend to see this stimulus as a tilted penny instead of as an untilted elliptical object. There are many reasons we can offer for why this preference obtains (e.g., the object has other penny features such as being copper in colour, having a head stamped on its side and so on, and pennies are round; our environment has far more round things than elliptical things; etc.). The important point for our purposes is that the preference does obtain, and that it obtains independently of the actual stimulus in a given case. If, as supposed, the object is a tilted penny then one’s seeing it as such is accurate, no sensory trickery is present and hence no illusion (in the wide or narrow sense) should be ascribed. However, if in another circumstance the object is in fact elliptical and untilted – an appropriately oriented faux penny – then one’s vision system would still prefer the round disambiguation and hence one would be prompted to incorrectly see it as a tilted penny. This misperception is arguably arising because of misleading cues, for it takes a rather special (given our environment) object being oriented in a rather specific way to prompt the misperception. One could thus argue that it is illusory in both the narrow and wide sense.

In this respect I partly agree and partly disagree with Smith’s and Shellenberg’s analyses. Both correctly assert that a perception of a tilted penny does not constitute an illusory experience. In the past various thinkers have held otherwise, and their mistake was a failure to recognize what has just been stated: (a) that stimulus ambiguity need not yield perceptual illusion, for various disambiguations of stimuli are given a zero or low probability rating by our visions systems and hence not even perceivable by us; and more directly (b) that perceptual ambiguity only yields illusion in the wide or narrow sense when misperception occurs, and we do not usually misperceive a tilted penny to be an untilted elliptical object.

However, Smith’s and Shellenberg’s claim that viewing a tilted penny does not constitute an illusory experience is importantly limited, for perceptions of an appropriately oriented faux penny are

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16 This phenomenon is connected to shape constancy, a connection that has been removed to meet length restrictions (but see Brown, forthcoming).

17 “[I]n no sense, not even in the extended sense given to the term in these pages, is the look of such a tilted penny an illusion” (Smith, 2002, 172). See Shellenberg (2008, esp. pp. 74-5, and §7 of this paper).
illusory, even in the narrow sense. Thus on a charitable reading the point of the tilted penny case has never been primarily to suggest that we typically misperceive tilted pennies, it has been to suggest that perceptual ambiguities can yield illusions, even narrowly construed. On the present account we typically avoid misperceiving tilted pennies because of evolutionary and earlier life experience, factors that have been adjusted by reference to our environment and hence have absorbed relevant contingencies like the Euclidean character of local space, the relative absence of elliptical objects (when considering evolutionary and life learning) and the roundness of pennies (when considering life learning). As we will see (§§6-7), the above errors have a cost: the familiar but mistaken idea that perceptions of tilted pennies are illusory was incorporated into some influential formulations of the Argument from Illusion, thus weakening them; but the idea that there is no illusory element to perceptions indistinguishable from those of tilted pennies (e.g., suitable perceptions of faux pennies) has been ignored by Smith and Shellenberg, and weakens their critiques of indirect realism.18

§5 Revisiting acquaintance

Recall that when I mistakenly perceive a blue car to be purple, the indirect realist holds that in making this perceptual error one is acquainted with something other than or in addition to the blue of the car, say a sense-datum that is or at least seems purple – call it a purple sense-datum.19 By contrast the intentionalist asserts that if anything one is acquainted with the blue of the car, but one is experiencing it to be purple because one is merely representing purple, or is in an unsuccessful purple-representing state. In illusory experiences, when considering the misperceived aspect of the experience, is there successful or unsuccessful reference?

The epistemology of acquaintance generates difficulties: How do I know if, during some illusory experience, the erroneous aspect of that experience consists in me experiencing something that exists, or me merely representing something that does not? Given space constraints I cannot

18 My critique of Smith appears in Brown (forthcoming).
19 It is open to the sense-datum theorist to hold that sense-data are coloured and thus that the purple sense-datum is purple, but also for her to hold that sense-data are not coloured and thus that the purple sense-datum seems but is not purple. Nothing I say hinges on this dispute: the acquaintance dispute is about whether or not the sense-datum exists (and is an object of acquaintance), not about whether or not the sense-datum is coloured. This is one respect in which considerations regarding linguistic, instead of perceptual, reference can lead us astray.
delve into the plethora of ways this epistemic rut has become so difficult to maneuver out of. I will simply assert that in my estimation the rut is so deep that many now feel that the best way ‘forward’ is to search for other reasons to prefer an acquaintance or nonacquaintance approach to perceptual awareness more generally and import that result – should it ever emerge – into one’s account of illusion.\(^\text{20}\) This is a mistake.

\textit{§5.1 In support of intentionalism.} A sample case which arguably does not favour an acquaintance interpretation is the floating vase illusion, but we must take care in our deliberations. When one sees the black ellipse in front of the vase as a shadow one is not seeing an objective shadow, for there is no shadow in that portion of the scene.\(^\text{21}\) But this alone does nothing to decide the case, for we as yet have not explained how this misperception has arisen and in turn why its presence does not motivate the existence of a subjective intermediary, a sense-datum that at least seems black, elliptical, and shadowlike. We begin to see why this case does not support an acquaintance interpretation when we recognize that the black ellipse itself can be seen as a shadow cast by the vase or as a region of paint in front of the vase. That portion of the stimulus is ambiguous and hence susceptible to multiple interpretations by our visual systems. Similarly, the presented information regarding the spatial distance between the front of the ellipse and the front edge of the base of the vase is ambiguous regarding whether or not there is a vertical component. If there is a vertical component then the vase is floating and if there is not then the vase is on the ground. But the stimulus itself is consistent with both interpretations.

Thus, key aspects of this stimulus are objectively and inherently ambiguous: the way this scene is presenting itself to the agent is perceptually indistinguishable from the way a very different scene (e.g., one with an actual floating vase) presents itself to the agent. Let us accept this. One’s vision system prompts one to see the stimulus as a determinate state of affairs, in this case as a floating vase, and one subsequently can undo this prompting and see the stimulus as a determinate nonfloating vase behind a black blob of paint. The act of turning this objectively ambiguous stimulus

\(^{20}\) Some, like disjunctivists, take a rather different approach.

\(^{21}\) Note that I am not treating ‘see’ as a guaranteed success term.
or given into a perceived determinate state of affairs can be aptly deemed *disambiguating-by-representing.* Importantly, the act is something done to what is given in perception, as what is given is itself indeterminate and perceivably so, and it is the heart of the misperception giving rise to this illusion, for it is a kind of act whose result can be correct, or can be incorrect. The explanatory challenge is to understand how the ambiguous stimulus with which one is engaged can be, through our representational perceptual capacities, not only experienced as determinate, but experienced incorrectly.

When one erroneously sees the Floating Vase stimulus as a floating vase the familiar indirect realist strategy has been to postulate a determinate given, sense-data that have the ‘floating’ property (whatever that means). This is just an instance of their general acquaintance approach to illusions, hallucinations and misperceptions generally, namely to hold that when one sees something to be \( x \) that is in fact not \( x \) (e.g., sees the Vase stimulus as containing a floating vase), one must thereby be acquainted with or in a state referring to something that is \( x \). Since the relevant parts of the external world are not that way, what is must be something else, call it a sense-datum. The trouble is that this strategy loses what is most central and interesting about the Vase case and others like it. One is in a perceptual state that is directed toward if not referring to the objects (/properties/facts) in this scene (i.e., the actual vase, the actual blob of paint, etc.). However, one’s understanding of what those objects are must be gleaned from the way those objects are presenting themselves to one in this circumstance, and in this circumstance those presentations do not uniquely determine those objects, they instead determine a collection of candidate disambiguations. So one has to disambiguate what is given and see the stimulus as a determinate state of affairs. But, importantly, even once this is achieved, once one say sees the stimulus as a floating vase, one can still recognize that the stimulus is consistent with a very different determinate state of affairs. Thus the inherent ambiguity of the stimulus cannot be removed from one’s account of this illusion, and postulating that what is

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22 Instead of ‘representing’ one could use ‘interpreting’, ‘conceiving’, and so on. All choices come with costs and benefits, and it is my hope that as little of the baggage owned by ‘representing’ is read into my account as possible. For example, as earlier mentioned I wish to avoid discussion of whether or not the act of disambiguating-by-representing can involve the concepts of higher-cognition.
perceptually given is a determinate sense-datum with the floating property seems to do exactly that, thereby losing what is at the heart of the case.

Alternatively, the indirect realist could postulate sense-data that generate an ambiguous stimulus, but then we would still have yet to introduce disambiguating-by-representing into our account of the illusion, and doing so by reference to these sense-data gets us no further along in understanding how disambiguating-by-representing works generally, let alone for sense-data or for the external world specifically. There is furthermore no antecedent reason to suppose, indeed we should resist the suggestion, that disambiguating-by-representing can only be done to something subjective. It is true that in the end the best explanation of this illusion may involve postulating an additional, subjective perceptual given, other than the vase illusion stimulus – something like a sense-datum. But at first (and second) glance it is entirely unclear why this additional subjective object would aid in one’s explanation. In short the indirect realist approach affords no insight into this illusion.

The intentionalist approach (as I construe it) is by contrast centered precisely on the mark. It begins by accepting that the vase stimulus is itself objectively ambiguous, and that it if anything is the object of acquaintance of one’s floating vase perceptions. However, when one sees that stimulus as a floating vase one is taking that stimulus and representing it in an incorrect way.23 One is not constructing a subjective object of acquaintance with the incorrectly ascribed properties, one is taking an objective object that is from one’s perspective indeterminate, and incorrectly (or merely) representing it. Thus, the only object of the perception is the stimulus itself.

To summarize, an approach that postulates a determinate given to explain this misperception might afford a means of explaining disambiguating-by-representing, but does so by leaving behind

23 In this respect Brewer’s (2007a,b) relationalist account of illusions is for our purposes no different from the intentionalist’s. Both can agree that there is an existing object that is the object of this perceptual state. They disagree on how this object gets to be the perceptual object: for the intentionalist it is through being represented by one’s current state and for Brewer it is simply by one’s being ‘perceptually open to the world’. Once this difference is registered, their accounts of illusion are not obviously different, for both agree that in illusory perceptions one is conceiving of or representing the perceptual object to be some way that it is not. Whatever difference is between them hinges on how this ‘conceiving of’ or ‘representing’ gets fleshed out, something Brewer does not say much about, and intentionalists typically say what I’ve been presuming.
the core fact that what is given is inherently ambiguous. By contrast one that postulates an inherently ambiguous but subjective given leaves the inherent ambiguity of the given in tact, but affords no obvious insight into how disambiguating-by-representing might work, let alone why it cannot simply work on the objectively ambiguous. The correct approach takes the objectively ambiguous Vase stimulus as the heart of one’s account of the perceptual objects of this illusion, and seeks to explain the misperception by explicating how disambiguating-by-representing can be applied by our minds to such a thing. This is how I understand the intentionalist strategy, and it involves utilizing the failed referential capacity of mere representation. To be sure I do not believe that this explanation of the vase illusion is complete, or even near complete, for there is as yet no explication of disambiguating-by-representing. My point is that it is correctly oriented, on the right path; whereas the indirect realist explanation seems to be on the wrong one. The conclusion that this correct path points toward is that the vase illusion, and perhaps all illusions due to ambiguities, do not give evidence for sense-data. Fortunately for the indirect realist, other illusions do.

§5.2 In support of sense-datum theory. Consider the Hermann Grid Illusion. When one engages with such a grid one sees in front of one, at many intersections of the grid on the page, items one is apt to describe as ‘small black dots’. Misperception is occurring because there objectively are no dots at these intersections or anything mind-independent – like peculiar light reflectances – which could answer to ‘black dots’. To be sure the dots have strange properties, for example when one focuses on a particular intersection no dot is there seen, but a dot does appear there when one shifts

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24 One can see Macpherson’s (2006) argument from ambiguity against intentionalism as fitting here, as an argument for why in some alternative cases (e.g., the square-diamond case) what I’ve called disambiguating-by-representing cannot be glossed in the manner dictated by intentionalism. I regret not being able to remark on her contribution here, except to say that the vase case is, from the perspective of her discussion, much more like the duckrabbit than the square-diamond. The reason is because the floating and nonfloating disambiguations of the vase stimulus have distinct objective characteristics, much like ducks and rabbits do, and unlike (in Macpherson’s view) the square-diamond does. For this reason she is likely to endorse my claim that the vase case can be given a reasonable explanation by intentionalism. It is also worth noting that her opposition to intentionalism is not married to a defense of indirect realism specifically. See Raftopoulos (2010) for a response to McPherson’s argument.

25 Other illusions one could straightforwardly apply to following analysis to include Spreading Illusions, the Watercolour Illusion, etc.

26 In case there is doubt I think that it is safe to say that one sees these dots in both the doxastic and phenomenal sense, and that the grid looks to have these dots in both senses (see, e.g., Dretske 1995). Focusing on differences such as this are important in some contexts, but not in this one.
one’s focus to an adjacent area of the grid. The strangeness of these experienced dots are not at issue. And, as per our above discussion (cf. note 19), the issue is also not whether or not it is correct to call the dots ‘black’. Issues about linguistic reference are informed by but not constrained to first-person experience and report. The core issue is whether the mistaken aspect of the experience is best described as one involving the perceiver being aware of some existing thing (which she is inclined to refer to as a ‘black dot’), as the acquaintance theorist would hold; or whether the experience is best described as one not involving the perceiver being aware of some existing thing, but instead as seeing in a particular ‘black-dot-ish’ way or being in a perceptual state that merely represents black dots (that in fact do not exist), as the non-acquaintance theorists (adverbialists and intentionalists, respectively) would hold. When engaging the Hermann Grid are the experienced black dots best construed as items one actually experiences, or items one merely represents?

The fact that there is nothing in the objective stimulus that can help explain the illusory experience, an exact opposite to the vase case, is important, because it means that the bulk of our explanation should be subjective: one’s mind is doing something peculiar, it is adding something to the experience that is in no way part of, suggested by, or even consistent with the stimulus itself. The curious thing is that one’s mind is not merely adding something to the experience, it is adding features to the object of the perception, the little black dots you experience to be at the grid intersections.27 The existential import of such descriptions often make intentionalists cringe, but they are not the indirect realist’s construction. (1) If you ask a perceiver whether or not she actually experiences little black dots at various grid intersections she answers affirmatively. (2) If you ask her whether or not she can understand those little black dots as non-existing entities, as things that she is merely representing, she does not answer affirmatively, but instead asks what you mean. (3) If you ask a perceiver to draw or paint a snapshot of what she sees in the vase case (i.e., the scene as it is viewed from her perspective),

27 This is why the projectivist variety of indirect realism is needed for the present work, these purportedly subjective perceptual objects are experienced as being in the world outside oneself, on the grid’s surface. This is also why the analysis given by the typical qualia realist (e.g., Block and Stoljar), according to which the mind is adding nonintentional qualitative aspects to the experience, is inadequate. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss the latter here.
the drawing would be the same in the floating and nonfloating experiences of the stimulus. A drawing of a snapshot of what she sees in the grid case would consist of a grid with little black dots at various intersections. In the latter something is being added to what one is experiencing, whereas in the former one is merely interpreting what one is experiencing in a certain way. (4) If you ask her if she sees white at the relevant grid intersections she will say ‘no’, that even though she knows there is white there, the black dots are in the way, they are intervening between her and the objective colour of those intersections. This is the phenomenon that needs explanation, that from one’s perspective one is actually experiencing a class of features – black dots – no members of which match up with anything in the objective stimulus. And the most reasonable starting place is to accept that these are existing perceptual features that are subjective but projected, to accept the orientation afforded by sense-datum theory. Indeed the whole reason the grid case is of interest is because it gives evidence for our minds’ capacity to add features to the objects of perception.

The intentionalist will try to preserve each (or at least most) of these descriptions without committing herself to the existence of the black dots, so that when pressed he can always reply, ‘but one is not actually experiencing the dots, one is instead merely representing them, or having a representation as of them’. Consider some possible replies. (1&3) She says the dots actually exist/she draws dots in her depiction of what she sees, but she is mistaken, they only seem to her to exist. (2) She does not understand why I would try to convince her that the dots do not exist, or even what that might mean (for her experience), but the correct perceptual theory must be learned, not gleaned from a subject’s untrained response. (4) She cannot see the whiteness at the grid intersections because she is not representing it, not because she actually sees something that is in the way. This overall strategy is in effect to deny the very phenomenon that is the illusion. In this sense an error-theory about phenomenology and first-person descriptions is required by the intentionalist approach to this and like illusions. Intentionalists are aware of this, but see this skepticism about phenomenology as a minor tax for upholding their view. This explanation is inadequate.
The key question is to ask whether or not the tools of one approach, those of the sense-
datum theorist or the intentionalist, better explain the subtleties of the case. The phenomenology of
Grid perceptions, or the Grid stimulus as it is experienced from the first-person perspective, consists
of an actual grid with actual dots at various intersections – call this the agent’s data. These dots are not
objective and so are most likely subjective features added, for whatever reason, by our vision systems.
The acquaintance interpretation gives a straightforward, natural explanation of this illusion. The
direct realist explanation begins by denying the agent’s data: the agent doesn’t actually experience these
dots, it only seems to her as though she does. What is actually happening, on this view, is the agent is
merely representing these dots, she is in a dot-representing state that is in fact representing no dots.
But this only generates a new puzzle: How does the idea of mere representation explain the agent’s
data? The direct realist is arguing that what the agent is actually aware of is opaque to her, that the
agent’s data is, for some reason, fundamentally erroneous.\(^28\) The idea of mere representation does
nothing to assist in our understanding of this. Let me briefly elaborate.

The idea of mere representation (i.e., representation with whole or partial reference failure),
whose home is secure in non-perceptual thought and various other propositional attitudes, was never
supposed to immediately and fully explain perceptual illusion (or hallucination). It was supposed to
be a model that could be developed to do so. And I think it can, but only to a limited extent. The
underlying issue is the extent to which being in a particular mental state gives one evidence to believe
in the existence of the objects of that state. Call this the existential commitment of a state. Setting aside
issues regarding purportedly necessary objects like numbers, and pace Meinong, representation in
thought comes with virtually no existential commitment to its objects. Thinking about vampires gives
me no reason to think that they exist, it in no straightforward way makes it even seem like they exist.
This is so in part because thinking about them as existing or not is arguably equally easy, all else being

\(^28\) I take it as given that this challenge is not met by speckled hens or finger counting (see Dretske, 1995, ch. 5
for the latter). Given a large Hermann grid and a long period of time I may still be wrong about how many dots
I see. That is quite different from saying that I can be wrong about whether or not I actually see dots. And that
is quite different from saying that it is wrong that I actually see dots. This last judgement must overcome the
existing evidence to the contrary, and it must do so through an argument, not merely through an intentionalist
theory that entails it.
equal.\textsuperscript{29} One can (though I would not) argue that representation in fears and desires can bring slightly more existential commitment. I am locking the door because my fears of being bitten by a vampire make it seem like there are such things, even though I have ample alternative evidence to the contrary. On such a view ‘seem’ is read as ‘give evidence for the existence of’.

Regardless, perception is the opposite of thoughts, fears, and desires on this issue, for it is generally held to involve a considerable degree of existential commitment. Unless one is a skeptic about the external world, being in perceptual states is generally taken to give one reasonable evidence for the existence of the objects of those states. We thus have a principled reason to not extend this reasoning about thoughts, fears and desires to perceptual states, and to instead with perceptual states begin at the opposite end of the existential commitment dimension. If the intentionalist wishes to inject into perceptual states the kind of skepticism needed to jettison the first-person evidence for sense-data in grid and like illusions, she needs more than a loose analogy to nonperceptual states and their use of mere representation.\textsuperscript{30}

This doesn’t prevent us from giving alternative arguments to assess the existential commitment of troublesome perceptual cases. On my account, the vase case brings with it about as much existential commitment as does the fear that prompts one to lock the door (which is very little): it seems like that’s a floating vase, even though (without moving) I can now see it as a vase sitting on the ground. We should seek an explanation, like the intentionalist one, that preserves the inherent ambiguity of the stimulus, and one that does not add things to our ontology that are not suggested by the case. The grid case, however, involves much greater existential commitment to what objectively is not present in the stimulus: there is simply no other way to see the stimulus other than as a grid with black dots at various intersections. Telling me that these dots do not actually exist (as objects added by my mind to what I experience), that instead I am merely representing them, does nothing to

\textsuperscript{29} And part of the reason some concerned with the a priori believe in the existence of numbers is because, as Frege says, if one denies the laws of arithmetic ‘to think all becomes impossible’.

\textsuperscript{30} Thus, whatever the merits of Harman’s (1990) Ponce de Lyon argument, it cannot be expected to apply to perceptual illusions \textit{en masse}. 
illuminates why I am wrong, it simply tells me that I am. We here see the explanatory limits of the mere representation tool, and a distinct advantage of sense-datum theory. It may help to think of it in this way. We shouldn’t feel the need to postulate something that actually has the floating property because we can see the stimulus itself as something that need not have that property. The same is not true of the dots: when I see them, I can’t help but see them. Particularly once we consider the possibility that the dots are subjective objects, it is as easy to doubt that I am actually seeing them as it is to doubt that I am seeing the grid. And the mere representation tool gives no insight into how to motivate the level of skepticism needed to uphold the intentionalist analysis.

My general point therefore is twofold. Neither the sense-datum theorist nor the intentionalist should be trying to fit phenomena into his view, he should be trying to take from phenomena data that supports some view or other. I believe I have shown that, at least to a greater extent than is typically presumed, this is possible. Secondly, some illusions support the intentionalist approach, and others the sense-datum approach. It is from here that we move forward and assess the impact illusion has on philosophical argumentation about perceptual theory. Let me give you one example of how this might work.

§6 Where’s the Fire? (The argument from illusion)

I do not think there is any one argument that owns the term ‘Argument from Illusion’, but the broad aim of all such arguments is to persuade us that:

(1) illusory perceptions involve awareness of sense-data, and thus

(2) all perceptions plausibly involve awareness of sense-data (i.e., direct realism is false).

The move from (1) to (2) is non-trivial, and is of little interest should (1) be unsustainable. To be assessed (1) must be supplemented with a conception of illusion (e.g., narrow or wide) and with guidance regarding how many illusions plausibly involve awareness of sense-data. Thus an

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31 There are many other illusions that are subject to one of these two analyses, and many others that are not illusions that arguably require additional arguments to incorporate them into this dispute include the Twisted Cord Illusions, various colour, stereo, and motion illusions, etc.

32 Smith (2002) and Gupta (2006) are two recent and very worthwhile discussions of the topic.
unrestricted reading of (1) presumes a wide conception of illusion and that all illusions involve awareness of sense-data, whereas a restricted one might presume a narrow conception and that only some illusions involve awareness of sense-data. This flexibility naturally interplays with the inference from (1) to (2). If one accepts an unrestricted reading of (1), then all misperceptions involve illusion, and since misperceptions can be had with any perceivable object and in virtually all perceptual circumstances (that allow at least some contingencies) the leap to the claim that (2) all perceptions involve awareness of sense-data is not far. By contrast on a restricted reading of (1) only a small subset of misperceptions involve illusion, those containing sensory trickery, and perhaps only some of those require us to postulate a perceiver’s awareness of sense-data. From here the leap to (2) is substantial, for admitting that some instances of sensory trickery require the presence of sense-data does not straightforwardly generalize to the conclusion that all perceptions do too. As the reader may already have guessed, on my view the latter option is preferred.

The core issue underlying our assessment of (1) is the extent to which acquaintance interpretations should be given to perceptual illusions. If an acquaintance interpretation is warranted, then the perceiver’s misperception entails the awareness of something which has the erroneously attributed features. Given that the perceived part of the external world does not have anything to answer this call, the item of awareness cannot be in the external world, making it most plausibly part of the internal or subjective world of the perceiver (i.e., sense-data). I have argued that there are illusions that should be given an acquaintance interpretation, and thus that during these illusory perceptions agents are aware of sense-data. It does not follow that all narrow illusions should be understood similarly (e.g., the vase illusion should not), or that wide illusions should be (e.g., randomly mistaking by sister’s for my mother’s voice). In other words, I support a restricted reading of (1), a starting point that I hope is amenable to enough readers, and that will help us to see one place in perception where we plausibly begin to lose grip on the external world. However, getting from here to (2) – to a conclusion about the extent to which we have lost grip on reality – requires
some ingenuity. That matter I regrettably leave to another time, for enough has been given to expose the shortcomings of an important direct realist trend.\footnote{This strategy is quite different from the more familiar one that employs a broad reading of (1). In outline, the latter strategy holds that: for any given perceptual object there is a feature that can be misperceived; misperceptions constitute perceptual illusions (i.e., illusions are wide); and all illusions should be given an acquaintance interpretation. The first claim is doubtless true, and the second, while subject to definitional disputes, is not the philosophical heart of the approach. The heart is the last step, which in another incarnation is the infamous sense-datum inference: “whenever something perceptually appears to have a feature when it actually does not, we are aware of something that does actually possess that feature” (Smith, 2002, 25). See also Robinson’s ‘phenomenological principle’ (1994, p. 32). [It is not clear to me that most indirect realists have explicitly defended this idea, but I can appreciate how its seed can be drawn from their views.] As these authors argue, there are various difficulties with the sense-datum inference and various ways to modify it to make it more palatable (see Smith, Chapter 1; Robinson, 1994). With respect to this issue my claim is that the sense-datum inference is too coarse to be of much use. I unfortunately cannot give a full discussion of this matter.}

§7 The Arguments from Perceptual Relativity and from Illusion.

The key difference between the Argument from Perceptual Relativity and the one from Illusion is that the former asserts that mind-dependent perceptual objects are needed to account for the \textit{ways} that objects perceptually look in various circumstances, and the latter asserts that mind-independent objects are needed to account for \textit{misperception} (or at least the special kind peculiar to illusions). The two collapse if all of these ways are presumed misperceptions and all misperceptions are presumed illusory (i.e., illusions are wide). Both assumptions were arguably widely held in much Early Modern Philosophy, but I have already explained why in our current climate both assumptions should be rejected. What remains is to appreciate the difference between the argument from illusion and the one from relativity that emerges, and in particular the additional demands of the former.

There is a sense in which the shape of Russell’s table\footnote{See the opening pages of \textit{Problems of Philosophy}.} looks different as one moves around it, that there are various ways the table’s shape looks to be. One could hold that these ways can only be explained by positing mind-dependent perceptual objects, and hence use this data – as Russell perhaps does – to argue for indirect realism. But why would we ever expect the way an object’s shape looks to be the same in all or even most circumstances? The answer is that in perception we should not expect this, and it is not true.\footnote{This point was emphasized by Dawes Hicks (1912) and Demopoulos (2003). The issue, however, deserves closer scrutiny than space permits.} This does not remove the burden of explaining how these differing looks arise, but it does open the door for doing so by appeal to mind-independent relative
features. The trick to making this response work is to give a coherent account of these relative properties, and that is one aim of Shellenberg’s (2008) account of situation-dependent [SD] properties.36

Shellenberg’s core distinction is between SD and intrinsic properties of perceived things. Intrinsic properties are “the properties that an object has regardless of the situational features…[they do] not depend on the object’s relations to other individuals distinct from itself” (2008, 55). By contrast situational features are “the features of the environment that determine the way an object is presented” and include for example “lighting conditions and the subject’s location in relation to perceived objects” (56). SD properties are the way an object is presented in some perceptual circumstance, and are a function of its intrinsic features and the prevailing situational ones. Her thesis is that in perception “the way an object is presented is best understood in terms of external, mind-independent, but situation-dependent properties that the object has given its intrinsic properties and the situational features” (56-7). And, more boldly, she closes her article with the following: “If one recognizes situation-dependent properties, no appeal to mind-dependent properties is necessary to explain how it can be that there is a way that objects look that is not accounted for by representing their intrinsic properties. If this is the reason for introducing mind-dependent properties (or objects), then one might as well drop them once situation-dependent properties are acknowledged” (84). I take the implication to be that this last conditional’s antecedent is plausible.

All should agree that ‘ways of appearing’ is one reason indirect realists postulated mind-dependent perceptual objects. But is it the chief reason? Shellenberg notes some others: “One is that [mind-dependent perceptual objects] make an experience an experience. A second is to account for the possibility that hallucinatory and veridical experiences are phenomenologically indistinguishable. A third is to account for the possibility of spectrum inversion” (71). Interestingly, illusions are not on this list. She seems to take her argument for SD properties and for the non-illusory status of some

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36 It is also an aim of Dawes Hicks’s (1912, 1913/4) contributions, Dummett’s (1979) absolute and relative descriptions of the world, Demopoulos’ (2003) use of Dummett’s distinction, Maund’s (forthcoming) account of constancy, and so on. I focus on Shellenberg because of the relative ease with which her work fits into the present discussion.
familiar examples of illusions (e.g., of Peacocke’s trees and the half-submerged stick; see pp. 74-5) to undermine any residual Argument from Illusion. If this is so\(^37\), then she has erred, largely for the reasons stated earlier, and it is worth rearticulating this point with reference to Shellenberg’s view.

When we say that the table looks trapezoidal from here we can add that it also looks rectangular from here. A contradiction can be avoided when we clarify that the first description is referring to a relative or SD shape property and the second to an absolute or intrinsic one. Only if relative shape properties require the existence of mind-dependent perceptual objects (and they do not) does this give evidence for indirect realism. This is Shellenberg’s (and Dawes Hicks’s, Dummett’s, Demoopoulos’, etc.) point. However, another argument for indirect realism can still be marshaled, for once we accept that we can simultaneously perceive relative and intrinsic shape properties of the table the stimulus it constitutes becomes ambiguous: it is consistent with there being a trapezoidal table that one is viewing head-on, or a rectangular table one is viewing from an angle.\(^38\) Our vision system does not give these disambiguations equal weight. Using background assumptions and additional cues in the scene it [by hypothesis] correctly gives the highest weighting to the ‘rectangular and viewed at an angle’ disambiguation, prompting us to reflexively see it as rectangular. But as earlier noted this same set of background assumptions and cues can be used to generate a stimulus that prompts our vision systems to give the wrong disambiguation the highest weighting and thereby results in perceptual illusion. A trapezoidal table viewed head-on would, with some additional controlling features, suffice for this purpose. Two points need emphasis.

Shellenberg states that “If one recognizes [SD] properties, then many cases of perceptual experiences that in the philosophical literature are typically categorized as illusory or as misrepresentations will turn out to be accurate perceptions – at least with regard to their representations of [SD] properties” (74-5). This is correct, but it is so because of our adeptness at

\(^{37}\) One could instead speculate that she means to include illusions with hallucinations. However, in the article she cites Smith’s (2002) book which is painfully clear about why the Argument from Illusion is crucially different from the Argument from Hallucination.

\(^{38}\) This is not to suggest that simultaneously perceiving some absolute and relative property of an object will always or even usually foster perceptual ambiguity. It is to say that in this case the simultaneous perception of such properties is doing so. I regret not being able to analyze the more general issue.
perceptual disambiguation, the explanation of which requires much more than the admission of SD and intrinsic properties into our theory. It additionally requires some mechanism for disambiguation which I suspect must be mental or cognitive, and in any case in our situation is mental, some specification of the preferences subpersonally associated with each disambiguation and some account of why these preferences are present. SD properties on their own represent on one small (albeit important) step in this explanation. In other words, if one recognizes SD properties many purported illusions ‘turn out’ to be accurate perceptions, but the reason they turn out that way has to do with much more than the involvement of SD properties.\footnote{Note also that this concession does not immediately support anything akin to indirect realism – although may well on further analysis – but does prevent a purely objective analysis of the content of these perceptions, in conflict with at least the spirit of Shellenberg’s contribution. I regret not being able to discuss this matter here.}

Secondly, and more pointedly, admitting relative shape properties into one’s ontology does not remove the threat of illusion, it only displaces it, and once illusions are present a wholly different problem emerges: we need an explanation of the contained misperceptions that does not postulate mind-dependent perceptual objects, for otherwise we are again confronted by indirect realism. SD properties do nothing to aid with this struggle. Indeed the first point lays the groundwork for the second: it is because the admission of SD properties does not explain why familiar examples of purported illusions are not illusions that SD properties give no insight into how we should understand the misperceptions inherent in illusions. Unfortunately, Shellenberg shows no awareness of this point, no awareness of the difference between the Argument from Perceptual Relativity and the Argument from Illusion. In this, however, she is not alone: many indirect realists, like Russell, have failed to clearly make the distinction.

§8 Conclusion

Understanding why some illusions do and some do not support the existence of sense-data is a nontrivial task. In this work the core issue is whether the misperceived aspect of an illusory experience should be given an acquaintance or merely representational interpretation, whether or not it should be understood as involving successful perceptual reference. To elucidate the latter I focused
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on illusions due to ambiguous stimuli that trick us by preying on the interpretive biases in our vision systems. In these cases what is given to a perceiver is inherently ambiguous and the vision system’s task is to select the correct disambiguation. The difficulty is that these stimuli prompt the vision system to select an incorrect one, thus generating an illusory experience. In such an experience the perceptual object is most plausibly taken to be the ambiguous stimulus, for that is what the perceiver sees to be some way or other. And even when we see it determinately (whether correctly or not), we can still see its inherent ambiguity, at minimum by subsequently seeing it in some other determinate way. The heart of this illusion is thus the act of disambiguating-by-representation an objectively and perceivably ambiguous stimulus and understanding why an incorrect disambiguation is being favoured by one’s vision system. The idea of mere representation – the intentionalist’s tool – has elegant application here: when the vision system selects an incorrect disambiguation, it is not creating objects of acquaintance with the incorrectly attributed properties, it is merely representing the ambiguously presented object of acquaintance erroneously. Introducing subjective perceptual objects to explain the illusion is not only misdirected, it leaves the core puzzle untouched.

By contrast some illusions are only obscured by attempts understand them in this way. In the Hermann Grid the features relevant to the mistaken aspect of the illusory experience, the black dots, have no objective trace, and when I see them I cannot help but see them. The level of first-person experiential doubt needed to deny this is much greater than that supported by thoughts about nonexistent things, intense desires/fears about nonexistent things, the Vase illusion, and so on. The intentionalist explanation for the opaqueness of the nature of the experience to the perceiver consists of an application the mere representation tool: the perceiver is not actually aware of dots but is merely representing them. The difficulty is that this tool offers no insight into why the true nature of the experience is opaque to the perceiver or why the perceiver phenomenologically experiences what she does. Mere representation has worthwhile applications elsewhere but falls flat as an explanatory tool here. By contrast the black dots are naturally viewed as things subjectively added to the object of one’s perception – they are sense-data.
What emerges from the thesis that some illusions do and some do not support the existence of sense-data is that the Argument from Illusion is far from compelling, removing much of the force behind calls to reject sense-data for fear doing so will lead to indirect realism generally. In addition the framework used to articulate these ideas exposes a fundamental difference between Arguments from Illusion and Arguments from Perceptual Relativity, and explains why defeating the latter has little effect on the former.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{40} Early stages of this paper benefitted from funding from the Vice President Academic at Brandon University and the assistance of Wes McPherson. Earlier versions prompted helpful reactions from audiences at my keynote address at the University of Regina and University of Manitoba Graduate-Student Symposium (March 27, 2010), and at the Bucharest Colloquium in Analytic Philosophy (June 3-5, 2010). The paper also owes a debt to Thanos Raftopoulos’s comments.
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