Review of “The Problem of Perception”

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A. D. Smith’s *The Problem of Perception* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002) is a remarkable book. The main theme, a defense of what Smith calls “Direct Realism” in the philosophy of perception, raises anew issues that have not been the central focus of attention since the 1950’s, when philosophers, especially in the American and British tradition, were still debating the merits of ‘sense-data’ as a foundation for empirical knowledge. I always thought Austin won that debate, which is why, in part, the philosophical community turned its attention away from foundations.

Not so, according to Smith. Austin never refuted the “Argument from Illusion,” nor the closely related, “Argument from Hallucination.” If I follow Smith correctly, our ordinary locutions of how the familiar stick in water appears, looks or seems, does not do justice to the phenomenology of that and other optical aberrations. For example, as our perspective of the stick changes when it is pulled from the water we have the experience of seeing the *same* stick, just as our perception of the size of a person is constant, whether we are walking away from or towards the individual. The person does not appear, look or seem to grow smaller or larger as our perspective changes, any more than we have the experience of seeing something that looks bent morph into something straight. We experience the same object, constant throughout. If we allow sense-data in the ‘bent’ instance, as Austin did (27) – perhaps in an unusually conciliatory mood (or just for the sake of argument) -- we are inexorably drawn to sense-data in the ‘veridical’ case as well. As a consequence, “. . . our perceptual experiences, rather than giving us an immediate awareness of our physical environment, are themselves our immediate objects of awareness, so that we are cognitively trapped behind a ‘veil of perception. . .’” (8) Focusing on the phenomenology, rather than our ordinary language, is more helpful in preventing us from falling into the trap.

What about hallucinations? Here again, Smith draws inspiration from those in the Husserlian tradition – although, they, too, are criticized. The Continental approach has always emphasized the intentionality of human experience, that our hopes, fears, wants and desires are directed to an object – but one that does not always exist. For example, in James Joyce’s *Araby*, the young hero travels on a quest to find his true love a gift, realizing in the end that his efforts are for naught. He is living a fantasy, for which there is no true love, nor any gift.

Can intentionality help to refute the Argument from Hallucination, the second obstacle to Direct Realism? Just as the hero of *Araby* fantasizes a gift, say, a silver chalice, so a person hallucinates a similar object. And as the object of the hero’s fantasy does not exist, so, too, the object of the
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person’s hallucination. And just as there is no ‘fantasy-data’ in the first case, so, neither is there ‘hallucinatory-data’ in the second.

However, as Smith suggests, hallucination is different from other intentional modalities. People describe their hallucinatory experiences as *perceptual*, the objects of which have sensory qualities, colors, shapes, even sounds, textures, smells and tastes. For example, Macbeth hallucinated a dagger as a person perceives one. The object appeared before him, as a real object appears before a normal observer. Unless we can distinguish hallucination from ordinary perception, we are left with “an impenetrable veil of intentional objects.” (259) How is this an advance over sense data?

Part of the answer is that just as perception is *de re*, so, too, hallucination. We can mistake objects of hallucination for objects of perception. However, insofar as we take hallucinatory objects to be *real*, we *systematically* mistake them for what they are not. Hallucinatory objects are *never* real. Unlike intentional objects of other modalities, they *never* exist. “. . . hallucinated objects not only do not exist, they could not possibly exist: they are necessary non-existents.” (266)

According to Smith, “Macbeth did not see a dagger.” Rather, “What he saw was something that looked like (perhaps exactly like) a dagger.” (263) Hallucinatory objects have only secondary, no primary qualities – unlike real objects. (62) We can mistake them for the real, but there is no ‘veil’ of hallucinatory objects between us and the real world in normal perception. Just because we falsely infer that there is something real in cases of hallucination, does not mean there is anything to infer in cases of normal perception. In those cases, we see objects directly.

Smith’s proposed solution to the problem of perception is enticing, but does it succeed? Direct Realism rests on two main contentions. The first, that perception is more than just sensation, is aimed mainly at the Argument from Illusion, which occupies the first half of the book. The second, that there is a class of necessary non-existent objects, is aimed at the Argument from Hallucination, which occupies the second half.

Is perception more than just sensation? Smith emphasizes that we perceive objects in a three dimensional space, that we can achieve different perspectives of the same object by our movements, and, in the course of moving, we experience *Anstoss*, “… a check or impediment to our active movement: an experienced obstacle to our animal striving, as when we push or pull against things.” (153) The idea is that perception, when understood in this full-fledged way, cannot be reduced to the discrete elements of sensation, to the bits of colors or shapes that served as the data of sense for the sense-datum theorists. Part of the argument is that perceptual sensations, like bodily sensations – discrete aches and pains – are not objects of experience, but the experience itself. As Kripke argued in a very different context, in the way that heat as kinetic molecular motion can be distinguished from the sensation of heat, pain cannot be distinguished from the sensation of pain. Pain just *is* the sensation of pain. If the sensations of light and sound are part of our experience, like the sensation of pain, then sensation is insufficient to explain perception. Perception includes objects that are independent of us.

Are perceptual sensations like bodily sensations? Smith is not clear about this. Not all perceptual sensations are alike. Tastes are close to bodily sensations since they are always in the mouth. Touches, too, seem part of us. But smells, sounds, and sights are distant. If perception is ‘directed to an object,’ why not sights, sounds and smells? Just as we distinguish heat from the sensation of
heat, so we distinguish light -- as electromagnetic wavelengths -- from the sensation of light. Part of
the traditional problem of perception is to account for the connection between the two. If one causes
the other, we have indirect realism; if we conflate the two, we have naïve realism. Smith’s Direct
Realism is supposed to be neither causal nor naïve, but, without a further account of sensation and
perception, the defense is insufficient.

To buttress the case, he introduces the idea of “Anstoss,” a kind of experiential reality check.
According to Smith, “In the case of the Anstoss . . . it is just such focal sensations that are absent.
There is simply no such sensuous item to interpose itself between us and the external physical force
that we experience. We experience it, therefore, directly.” (165)

The idea is that as we move about, we experience things that get in our way, for example, an old
sofa in a darkened basement. We try to push it out of the way, but it offers resistance. When we
push, we experience an “external physical force,” but we do not have a sensation of force. “There is
no sensuous item. . .”

Is Anstoss perception without sensation? Not clear. What sort of “force” is Smith talking about?
Does he mean that as we push against the sofa, we have no sensation of the sofa pushing back?
True enough, but only because sofas don’t behave that way. Heavy, inanimate, stationary objects
resist our mobility; we do not resist theirs.

Elbowing my way into a crowded subway car is a different matter. There, I have the sensation of
being pushed from all directions. I don’t just experience the pressure of the crowd. I feel it, which is
one reason why riding crowded subway cars feels so uncomfortable.

What about the ‘necessary non-existent’? According to Smith, “True characterizations of
hallucinations cannot exceed what is sensorily given to the subject.” (264) He elaborates that
“although Macbeth did not see a dagger, what he saw was shaped thus and so, had such and such a
color or luster, and so for all sensible qualities perceptible by sight.” (264) Sensible shapes? Colors?
What exactly are these “qualities perceptible by sight”? Sense-data? If so, then hallucinatory objects
are nothing more than sense-data. But that is what sense-datum theorists argued all along. If the
sense-datum approach fails, how is Smith’s better?

Smith suggests that hallucinatory objects are intentional objects, that our experience of them is like
our perception of real objects. Fair enough. But what more is there to an hallucinatory-intentional
object other than sense-data? If I understand Smith, there is nothing more.

The problem is this – if our experience of sense-data, in the case of hallucination, is like the
perception of real objects – so much so that we confuse one for the other – why isn’t the perception
of real objects, outside of hallucination, also the experience of sense-data? Smith’s answer is, “In a
hallucination and its minimally different veridical counterpart, we do, indeed, have qualitatively
identical kinds of object of awareness; but in a hallucination this object is not real, whereas in the
veridical case it is.” (235)

Of course, Smith is correct. Unless we hallucinate, we see real things that are there. But that’s not
the issue. The question is, do we see real things directly? In the end, A. D. Smith does not show
that we do.
The questions that *The Problem of Perception* raises are central and have been neglected too long. Smith is in the unenviable position of having to convince us that there is a problem of perception before offering his solution, like a missionary having to teach sin before offering salvation. But he pulls it off. His exegesis combines different traditions, drawing inspiration from philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic as well as the Channel. His scholarship is thorough, his criticisms sharp. The analysis is penetrating, the solution tantalizing though it leaves more work to be done. For those wishing a concise review of issues in perception that lead back to the roots of modern philosophy, the book is invaluable.

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