Review of "Seeing Things As They Are, A Theory of Perception"

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T hose who know little about philosophy—a group that philosophers like to call “laymen”—would be forgiven for having a certain view of what philosophers typically worry about. No doubt, the layman thinks, philosophers worry about things like: “what is justice?” or: “how is time best understood?” or: “what does it mean to say something is ‘necessary’?” and things like that. But *perception*? You mean that thing that takes place when I simply open my eyes, there is light in the room, and I then have a visual experience? Philosophers worry about *that*?

Oh, yes, they most certainly do. Indeed, as anyone who walked out of that introduction to philosophy course after the first week knows, philosophers are, and have been (I
think it is fair to say) more or less obsessed with perception. Nothing, we might say, “stands for” philosophy more than that question, posed over and over again since the seventeenth century: what justifies my saying my visual representations of the world in fact match the world they purport to show? But in John Searle’s *Seeing Things As They Are*, we have a rich, compact, very smart book, which in turn is very much aligned with my imagined layman’s incredulity regarding the initial topic. You need a modest amount of philosophical sophistication to get there. You need to draw upon a fairly well worked out theory of intentionality overall, and you need to resist certain generally unchallenged dogmas regarding causation, but, in the end, Searle argues, (on the whole, in the opinion of this reviewer, quite persuasively), that there really is no enduring *philosophical* puzzle here at all. To the contrary, there is a straightforward account of what is going on when you open your eyes, an account that is quite continuous with what goes one when you are hungry or have a belief about the world that, once grasped, puts all philosophical questions to rest. The layman it turns out was quite right to be surprised. There *is* no deep or intractable philosophical puzzle, not here (not at this stage of the issue). The appearance of a philosophical problem, indeed the sense of there being an *unsolvable* philosophical problem, rests on the enduring, maddening persistence of what Searle calls The Bad Argument. (It is Searle who uses the capital letters.) When The Bad Argument is exposed for what it is (and I leave it to the reader to guess Searle’s estimation of its worth), the philosophical challenges that rest on its persistence quite completely disappear. There is no enduring philosophical problem raised by perception when perception is properly characterized. Well, perhaps this is not quite right. There is a very rich philosophical project in characterizing the *content* of perception, its *intentionality*. And Searle certainly has a lot of very interesting things to
say about that. But the puzzle at the center of philosophy since the seventeenth century, how can the purported truthfulness of our perceptual experience be justified? This so-called puzzle is no puzzle at all. In this sense, Searle’s title is a bit of a pun: the “things” Searle invites us to see rightly in *Seeing Things As They Are* refers not simply to states of affairs in the world. It is philosophical arguments that must be seen clearly too, and when they are so seen, set aside for the dark swamps that they are.

**THAT BAD, VERY BAD, ARGUMENT**

What is The Bad Argument? For Searle, of course, there can be no series of philosophical mistakes greater, more damaging, to philosophical progress, than those that attend virtually every theory of consciousness (10, 11). But: nearly as awful is the mistake that was made regarding perception. “A mistake of nearly as great a magnitude overwhelmed our tradition in the seventeenth century and after, and it is the mistake of supposing that we never directly perceive objects and states of affairs in the world, but directly perceive only our subjective experiences.” (11) It is a powerful claim: what is wrong with traditional philosophical accounts of perception is that it treats our subjective experience as itself an object of perception. Here is the correct, as well as intuitively plausible, account of perception:

If you have normal vision and are in reasonably good light, and you look around you as you are reading this book, you are likely to see the following sorts of things: If you are indoors, you might see the table on which the book rests….If you are outdoors, the scene is likely to be much richer, as you might see trees, flowers, the sky and perhaps
houses and streets. I will begin by trying to describe obvious facts about this scene and your perceptions that occur in the scene. First, you are directly seeing objects and states of affairs, and these have an existence totally independent of your perception of them. The perception is direct in the sense that you do not perceive something else by way of which you perceive the scene. It is not like watching television or looking at a reflection in the mirror. The objects and states of affairs have an independent existence, in the sense that they exist independently of being experienced by us. If you close your eyes, the objects and states of affairs continue as before, but the perception ceases. Furthermore, in seeing these objects and states of affairs, you have conscious visual experiences that go on in your head….So there are two distinct elements: the ontologically objective states of affairs that you directly perceive and the ontologically subjective experiences of them. All this you know before you even start theorizing about perception. … [And] as soon as you begin to theorize, you will notice a third feature in addition to the objective reality and the subjective experience: there must be a causal relation by which the objective reality causes the subjective experience. (11, 12)

The causation issue will occupy us later on. Here the crucial point is the claim that we see the external world directly; we do not see it “by way of” anything else. The rejection of the television or mirror analogy is I think quite
suggestive and quite powerful. Our perceptions have a content, of course, but this *content* is not itself the *object* of perception, (whereas the representation of something on television via thousands of pixels *is*, in that particular case, the object of perception). It might be tempting to think so, and we will soon turn to why, but this is the mistake that must at all costs be avoided. Indeed, once you see the *content* of the perception as itself an *object* of perception, the so-called “argument from illusion” is guaranteed, and so is the impossibility of having anything satisfactory to say in reply to it. It is just this seemingly irresistible, and allegedly irrefutable, argument that purportedly prevents our being able to affirm Direct Realism. And so if there is to be any progress on this issue, clearly, this is the argument that must be refuted. Searle sums up the argument quite nicely as follows:

Step One: In both the veridical (good) case and in the hallucination (bad) case, there is a common element—a qualitative subjective experience going on in the visual system.

Step Two: Because the common element in qualitatively identical in the two cases, whatever analysis we give of one, we must give of the other.

Step Three: In both the veridical case and in the hallucination case, we are aware of something (are conscious of something, see something).

Step Four: But in the hallucination case, it cannot be material object; therefore, it must be a subjective mental entity. Just to give it a name, call it “a sense datum.”

Step Five: But, by step two, we have to give the same analysis for both cases. So in the
veridical case, as in the hallucination case, we see only sense data.
Step Six: Because in both hallucinations and in veridical perceptions themselves we see only sense data, then we have to conclude that we never see material objects or other ontologically objective phenomena. So Direct Realism is refuted. (22—23)

Indeed, this seems a pretty fair summation to me, in no small part because the initial power of the argument is very much on display. Each claim seems independently correct, and the last claim certainly does follow from all the ones before it. What could possibly be wrong? The crucial move, the one doing the damage, is found in step (3). The fallacy in the argument lies in an equivocation over what it means to be “aware of” or “conscious of” something. Searle distinguishes between the “aware of” of intentionality, and the “constitutive” use of the term, or, a use which is essentially an expression of identity. So, consider: (a)I am aware of this table and (b)I am aware of a painful sensation in my hand. In the first case, there is an intentional relation between me and the table; I have an inner state where the table is that inner state’s intentional object. To anticipate the general argument, and the connection between perception and other forms of representing the world (such as belief), Searle would say the presence of the table, and the features of the table, are “the conditions of satisfaction” for that state. (My awareness here has a distinctive intentional content, and this “content” also tells me what in the world would “satisfy” such content; i.e., make it the case that the perception is veridical, when it is.) By contrast, in the second case “the only thing I am aware of is the painful sensation itself.” (24) Here the “aware of” is the “aware of” of identity; we simply say what in fact constitutes the
experience. The “object” I am aware of (misleadingly so called), and the sensation, are identical. Keeping this point, this distinction, in mind when taking up the argument from illusion, we get the following re-description of what is going on:

In the case of the veridical perception, I am literally aware of the green table, nothing more. But what about the hallucination? In the sense in which I am aware of the green table in the veridical perception, in the case of the hallucination, I am not aware of anything. In the ordinary sense [of seeing], when you are having a hallucination, you do not see anything [there is no object satisfying this content—by definition one might say - SR], you are not aware of anything, you are not conscious of anything. (25)

It is an understandable confusion. When we have a hallucination, we are of course having a conscious perceptual experience. And ordinary language allows us to use a noun phrase to describe that experience and to treat that noun phrase as the direct object of “aware of.” (25) In that sense, of course, I am “aware of” a visual experience. Searle has no quarrel with the forgiving nature of ordinary language. It is just that we must not forget that here, the “awareness” and “the thing we are aware of” are in fact the same; we are simply picking out this same mental state twice over. But while we use the same phrase, the same language of “being aware of” in the veridical perception case too, the story now is a very different one. Here I am “aware,” in a different sense, of something, of something quite apart from my mental state, of that which the visual experience describes as it were. Of course, there is always this other sense of “being aware of” too. I can always be
aware of my mental state as such. But in some cases this mental state has intentional content. That is the perceptual case. And in that case, we are aware of an object in the world when there is an object, and we are not aware of anything (in this sense of “being aware of”) when there is no object. Thus we can make sense of how it is that the veridical case and the hallucination share something important—as in fact they do. They share the same intentional content, the same conditions of satisfaction. That is a description of the perception’s content, as it were. When that content is caused by the object it describes, then, we can say you are aware of that object. When it is caused by LSD, then you are not seeing, not aware of, anything in the world at all. The perception has content, but it is a mistake to think of this content as the object of perception. Only what the content describes is that. (And when you are hallucinating, then, there is nothing in the world that answers to, or “satisfies” this content.)

Here is another way into the same point: In both the sensation case and in the hallucination case, we can say, truthfully “There is no object in the world corresponding to this perception.” But in the sensation case, this is true in virtue of the mental category in play; it is what philosophers used to call a “logical” point. It is what follows from the sort of thing a sensation is—it does not have intentional content and so of course it does not have any intentional content that could be satisfied but here happens not to be. This, by the way, is very much in line with how Hume understood what he called the “passions,” which he understood as “original existences” that cannot be true or false. In the hallucination case, it is the exact opposite. Here the mental state does have content that could be satisfied, it just happens here not to be. So of course, the hallucination and the veridical perception share something. This is like the way in which the false belief and the true
belief share something—if I believe “there is a deer hiding behind that tree,” obviously the content of that belief is identical whether or not a shifting world (and a shifting deer) makes it true some of the time, and not true others. But we must not treat a feature of perception as an object of perception. Searle again:

The reason we feel an urge to put sneer quotes around “see” when we describe hallucinatory “seeing” is that, in the sense of intentionality, in such cases we do not see anything. If I am having a visual hallucination of the book on the table, then literally I do not see anything. Since I am aware of something [I am conscious, after all—SR] the temptation is to put in a noun phrase to form the direct object of “see.” [And it seems natural to make the experience itself this object—SR] ... This shift from describing the ontologically objective state of affairs in the world to describing the ontologically subjective conscious intentional state itself underlies the whole epistemological tradition. The mistake derives from a failure to understand the intentionality of conscious perceptual experience. How exactly? There is obviously something in common between the veridical perception and the indistinguishable hallucination. They are after all indistinguishable. If you fail to see that the something in common is a conscious intentional experience with conditions of satisfaction, you are likely to think that the something in common is itself the object of perception. That is, if you fail to understand the intentionality of the
experience, you are likely to think the experience is the object of the experience in the hallucinatory case. (26-27)

What happens is this: first, there is this talk of “being aware of something” in both the veridical and hallucinatory cases. (Never mind the fact that the expression has two very different senses in these two cases.) Then, there is the framework of the perceptual context, where our perceptual state takes an object. Talk of perceptual states taking an object, and the requirement that we are “aware of something” in the same sense in the veridical and hallucinatory case drives us to say then that we are aware of a certain sort of “object” in both cases. Whatever could this be but “the experience itself”? (An object in the world is ruled out of course by our having to have an analysis that equally well fits the two cases.) And this mistake is especially pernicious, especially hard to root out, because it is of course quite natural to say we are aware of “the experience itself”—in the sensation context.

The Bad Argument, Searle thinks, is in fact but an instance of more general error, an error that results from making a mistake about the very nature of intentionality. It is, as I hope is clear by now, roughly the confusion between the content of an intentional state and the object of that state. A child’s belief that Santa Claus will come to the house, and his belief that his father will come to the house both have content. But as there is no Santa Claus, the belief in the first case fails to refer to (or “take”) any object. Philosophers sometimes, in the grip of a need for symmetry, make up a special kind of “intentional object” for intentional states about non-existent things (and that is the so called “object” of the child’s belief in Santa Claus). But it should be pretty clear at this point in the argument that that is a rather sad
way to go. If we keep the content/object distinction clear, we can avoid these confusions altogether.

Interestingly, when we focus on the belief case, the error Searle speaks of is much less likely. We see straightforwardly that the content of the belief, and whether or not there is some fact in the world the belief describes, are quite distinct, and we are unlikely to offer a picture of things that rests on taking one for the other. But, probably because we have this very vivid sense of our inner states when they are perceptions, it is easier to mistake that feature of the experience for the detection of an object. Grammar is nice enough to oblige us with an appropriately “fitting” way of talking, and voila! We have The Bad Argument, the Argument From Illusion, and the impossibility of Direct Realism. But Searle wants to say, quite persuasively I think, that the right way to carve this issue up requires thinking more generally about intentional states as such and applying what we say there to the case of perception. There are informative generalizations to be made for all intentional states where here, “intentional states” means not some “act of intending,” but any state (such as perception, or desire) that has intentional content. This does not mean there are not some very special features to perception; there are. Perception, as Searle very suggestively says, is a presentation, not merely a representation. It has its intentional content not by convention (as a sentence does) but intrinsically, essentially. Many important things follow from this, and we will turn to at least some of them shortly. But still: when we recognize perception as a species of the larger genus, a mental state with intentional content, we are on the right path. And when offering an analysis of intentional states generally, we must never confuse the content of the state with the thing in the world that would match it. And that distinction, that difference,
means keeping the two senses of what we might “be aware of” very distinct too.

THE DISTINCT INTENTIONALITY OF PERCEPTION

One of the great rewards of this book is the exceptionally rich analysis of what is distinctive to perception. This is a short book, but no time is wasted, and in Chapters 4 and 5 (particularly 4, “How Perceptual Intentionality Works”) the density of the argument, the wealth of first class remarks coming thick and fast upon one another, is truly exemplary. Searle has a lot to say, and there is no point in padding. The result is one of the more satisfying, and edifying, reading experiences you are likely to have.

So what is distinctive about perception? Funnily enough, Searle’s background in language was a great springboard for his view about perception. By that I mean, while Searle is anxious to stress affinities, where there are such affinities, between sentences that represent the world and perceptual experience, it was in gradually coming to be struck by the irreducible differences between language and perception that Searle finds the beginning of his road to a satisfactory account. Sure, perceptual experience represents the world all right, but it also does something else: it presents it; it presents bits of the world to us directly. And this suggestive way of putting “what perception is” or “what perception does” it is tied to what it is about perception’s intentional content that requires special attention.

Searle has been tussling with mental states and mental content for some time, and, in one of the more interesting sections of the book, he charts out his own intellectual journey over the past thirty years or so, laying out the reasons that led him to set aside his earlier views and take up his current position. In Intentionality (1983) the
distinction between “intrinsic” and “derived” intentionality was already there, and already important, but one might say, insufficiently appreciated. For Searle, the sentence “there is a red ball there” has what he would call derived intentionality—the phonetic utterance as natural object clearly could have meant anything (or nothing at all); a convention happens to have it mean this and not that. But “if I literally see that there is a red ball there, my visual experience has intrinsic and not derived intentionality.” (114) And this “intrinsic” status seems to present us with something of a very short road when it comes to saying how the experience has the conditions of satisfaction that it does. “There seems no answer to the question how it fixes the conditions of satisfaction other than to say it is already intrinsic to the experience that it sets those conditions: it could not be that type of experience if it did not have those conditions. [On this view, -SR] the only characterization of the relation between the intrinsic intentionality and the state of affairs [that satisfies it - SR] is the trivial one of disquotation.” (114—115)

With sentences and pictures there is a gulf between the object (naturalistically understood) and its conditions of satisfaction. This gulf actually makes it easier for us when offering an explanation in philosophy. The gap is crossed in the case of a sentence by this extra thing, the meaning of the sentence (and so an account of how meaning works). In the case of a picture, it is crossed by the representational features of the picture (and so an accompanying account of representation too). But in the case of conscious perceptual experience, the raw experience allows for no gulf between the experience and the determination of the conditions of satisfaction, because the conditions of satisfaction just are part of the experience. (115)
Well, to say this, that “the conditions of satisfaction” are “woven into” or are part of “the experience itself” might well seem true, or plausible, as far as it goes. But Searle came to find this claim (and so his view in *Intentionality*) an unsatisfactory stopping point. After all, the visual experience is “an event in the world like any other.” And so, “there ought to be a question of how it relates to its conditions of satisfaction, and that question has to be [or should be—SR] answered non-intentionalistically.” There must be some account of some non-intentional features of the visual experience that fix the conditions of satisfaction, or explain why the conditions of satisfaction are fixed as they are; otherwise we haven’t yet really explained anything. This is what Searle means when he speaks of the “trivial” nature of “disquotation,” should we say something like: “the condition of satisfaction just is the content of the visual experience, but now understood as a description of something in the world.” Well, *that* was illuminating!

Searle came to think that visual experience must be understood “hierarchically,” where this hierarchy reflects a counterpart hierarchy in the objective world. So, to illustrate: to see this car as *my* car (a case of seeing rich in aspect), I must first see it is a specific type of car; to see it as “that type of car” (and clearly, it is a magnificent Porsche), it must have certain colors and shapes. And so on. Eventually we must come to a “basic” perceptual experience, seeing a feature you can see without having to perceive anything else in order to see it—very far from seeing *that* “this is my Porsche.” (Searle draws on Arthur Danto’s idea of a “basic action” for this idea.) But that there must be “basic” perceptual experiences does not yet give us the non-intentional description we need. We could hold (as Searle once did) that such basic perceptual experiences, basic as they may be, nevertheless can be characterized only in terms of their intentionality. But, to
repeat the earlier point—the earlier aspiration—that would be an unsatisfactory stopping point for Searle now. Sure, the perceptual experience of the basic features (or: “the basic perception”) has “intrinsic intentionality,” but surely those intrinsic intentional features are intentional in virtue of something. That they are basic, and that they are intrinsically intentional might well, and understandably, lead someone to think there is nothing more to be said. “But that is a mistake.” (117) There has to be something more to be said, something more about the distinctive story in virtue of which such basic perceptual experiences come about, and how, in their coming about, they are also intrinsically intentional. There must be a naturalistic, or quasi-naturalistic, account of what is going on in virtue of which the result is a basic perception of a basic feature that in turn has its conditions of satisfaction rigidly determined by the world.

The question before us here is very much not “how is intentionality possible at all?” Searle does not think that is a terribly deep or even meaningful philosophical question. That is no more mysterious than how it is that an animal might feel thirsty (for that is state with intentional content, and a distinctive mind-world fit); biology and neurology will answer that question. The question instead is “how do specific features of the ontologically subjective visual field present features of the objective visual field as their conditions of satisfaction?” (118; italics added)

In taking up this question, traditional analytic philosophy has drawn heavily on two sorts of answers: resemblance and causation. Searle is scornful of both, and anyone who has blithely appealed to these ideas in explaining how it is that the particular features of our perceptual experience pick out this, not that, bits of the world, would do well to review his reasons why. To begin with, any appeal to
“resemblance” is beset with all sorts of threshold difficulties. The visual experience of a red square is not itself red or square. But even if we leave all that aside and just assume, whatever that inner perceptual experience is, it somehow just does “resemble” the objective thing in the world, “resemblance by itself explains nothing.” (119) “The fact that there are two resembling entities does not make one a representation of the other in either perception or in language. Who sees the resemblance? My left hand and my right hand resemble each other as much as any two objects in the world, but the one is not a picture or statue or representation of the other.” Resemblance on its own, unsupplemented by a further story, can have no explanatory power here. Two objects “resembling” each other does not yet, by any stretch, give us representation, much less the distinctive intentional-content presentation of visual perception.

What about causation? Well, here too, while causation is going to have a central role in any final story we are to endorse, “on its own” it has no substantive explanatory power. After all, “anything can cause anything” (119) and a causal relation is not the same as, is much weaker than, a relation of satisfaction. Let us suppose that seeing red objects caused me to feel pangs of anxiety. This would not make the anxiety into an intentional state that had redness in the world as its condition of satisfaction. The “matching” dimension we are looking for here, the mind-world fit aspect we are trying to explain, is, clearly, not going to be captured in a purely causal story at all. It seems obvious that from the fact that A causes B, this is not going to be enough to make B a state with intentional content that has A as its conditions of satisfaction. And so: “If we are going to show how the raw phenomenological character of the subjective visual experience presents its conditions of
satisfaction, neither resemblance nor causation by itself is going to do the job.” (120; italics added)

Here is Searle’s theory. And it is important to emphasize this is indeed a *theory*. Searle is not saying the picture he is going to defend follows from some conceptual analysis of perception, nor is it an interesting criticism to say, or imagine, that things “could be” different from how Searle speculates they are. Things could always be different from how in fact they are. This is simply an account that handles, Searle thinks, the features of perception we most want to handle, congruent with what we generally want to say elsewhere in philosophy. We want to be able to say how the distinctive internal components of perceptual experience, the bits that (for the moment let us say) seem yellow and black have bits of yellow and black in the world as their conditions of satisfaction, and have them “necessarily.” For after all, when we are talking about the basic perceptual experience at least, this story cannot be a story that draws on some convention.

There is red in the world, the objective stuff, and then there is the subjective experience, which, if we like (and, if we are careful) we can call the experience of red (“careful” because of course, this subjective experience is not itself colored). Searle wants to tie them together in the following way. For something to be red in the objective world is for it to be capable of causing subjective visual experiences “like this” (pointing, of course). But this causal relation, or causal capacity, is special; there is an “internal relation” between the fact of being red and the fact of causing this sort of experience. What does that mean? As a first step, as a matter of conceptual definition, it means this: it could not be, it would not be, *that color* if it were not systematically related to experiences like this. Second, for something to be the *object* of a perceptual experience is for it to be
experienced as the cause of that experience. “Your background disposition, biologically given, is to presuppose that the object you are perceiving is whatever caused the perception, and the ‘object’ in question, a token of the color red, consists (at least in part) in the ability to cause experiences like this.” (123) The experience of having this conscious visual experience necessarily “carries” the intentionality it does because the feature in question is experienced as caused by its object. And this “taking the object as the cause” is crucial to our perceptual life generally, not only to our visual life. If you hear a strange noise in the dark and do not know what it is, you nevertheless assume that your subjective auditory experience was caused by whatever it was that made that noise. If you run your hands over a surface (again, in the dark) and do not know what it is you are feeling, nevertheless you rightly assume whatever it is you are running your hand over is what is causing the subjective sensation you are presently experiencing. “You simply take it for granted that the subjective experience is caused not by just any objective state of affairs but by the very one that you are perceiving” (127). We are often blinkered in our treatment of causation by an unfortunate reliance on the Humean picture, where causation is typically pictured as one event (somehow) leading to another; otherwise, causation is simply not before us. To the contrary Searle argues, causation is ever present, continuous, and central to how we make sense of our experience. Hume famously speculated that causation eludes us; perhaps indeed we never really encounter it at all. To the contrary Searle says, “we experience causation pretty much all of our waking life” (124). This is a crucial point in the counter analysis Searle wants to offer. Our experience has a certain sort of content, but we also instinctively, naturally, take that content to be caused by its object. That, surely, is part of “the experience.” And so: subjectively, the feature of the
experience in question is experienced as caused by its object (by this the particular thing, with just this content); objectively, we must say this object, (this particular bit of red in the world) is precisely constituted by its ability to cause this type of experience.

Have we succeeded in our initial ambition? Surely to some extent we have. We have said something in “non-intentionalist” language that makes sense of why the subjective visual experience has the intentional content, and so the conditions of satisfaction, that it has. And we have done so by going outside the purely “internal” story. It is not just the account of “what is in our heads” that figures in the relevant story. We are also now drawing on the right analysis of what the world is like, how “objects of experience” must be characterized. Searle now says that it is “an essential feature” of red things in the world, for example, that they cause experiences like this. (We could equally well say the objective stuff and the experience enjoy an “internal” relation; i.e., it would not be red-in-the-world if it did not typically cause experiences of this kind.) This might seem a stipulative definition, but it is not. It is rather best thought of as a “requirement” on how we understand color in so far as we think of it as an objective property in the world. Given that an object is red, one might say, well then, what makes it red? The fact that makes it red, at least in part, is that it is capable of causing a certain sort of experience. (124) On the subjective side, Searle thinks he is pointing to a deep and insufficiently appreciated feature of our experience, that we take the object as its cause; that we experience the causation, not simply whatever it is that the causation story causes. Causation, the way the world forces itself upon us, is woven into the experience, when it is perceptual experience. This is what makes perception special, and this is what makes our knowledge of the world “bottom out” in perceptual experience. Searle says: “The
presentational intentionality of perceptual experience always has the cause of the experience as its object.” (125). Remember, the causal relation is not enough. If seeing red caused pain, pain does not become an intentional state with red things its condition of satisfaction. The specificity of the intentional content has to be determined by something essential to the visual experience. And this is what we now have been able to describe. If part of what it is to be that thing in the world (a red thing) just is to cause experiences “of this type,” and part of what it is to have “this (particular) experience” is to take the particular object one is experiencing as the cause, we can make sense of why the subjective state is like this, and most importantly, why it could only be satisfied by the particular object it presents (should there be such an object). We have indeed significantly improved upon mere disquotation.

Notice, this account leaves open, as it should, whether the experience is veridical or not. To say that every conscious experience is experienced as a perception of the thing causing the experience is not to say there is always such a cause. The answer to that question would be established by a separate investigation. The right account of perception should not make it impossible to make sense of non-veridical cases. Searle is most emphatically not a disjunctivist. But with this point in mind, a quibble, or emendation, is inevitable. Readers may have been puzzled to read Searle saying, as I quote him as saying above, “the presentational intentionality of perceptual experience always has the cause of the experience as its object.” This cannot be quite what he means, for if it were, he could not then make sense of what he wants to make sense of—the possibility of the non-veridical experience and the veridical one having the same content. I think he should say: “The presentational intentionality of perceptual experience
always takes the object of the experience as its cause.” And almost always, it is indeed.

A final remark or two: This is, needless to say, a very ambitious book, and in some ways, it wears its ambition on its sleeve. From the start, Searle presents his arguments with terrific force, taking on a framework where perception is concerned that he argues is both widespread and pernicious. And he does an excellent job of making good on both these claims, showing the pervasiveness, and the mistakes, as clearly as one could wish. But there is another sense in which this book is ambitious, a sense not entirely clear to Searle or to anyone else for that matter. In this book, Searle offers a certain model of philosophy, of what it is to approach, or demystify, a philosophical problem. Of course, Searle spends a lot of time on past arguments and what is wrong with them; nothing terribly new there. But in addition, Searle wants to offer an account that is both naturalistic and yet answers the relevant normative question too. And the reader may be uncertain how much is solved with all this description. When Searle says it is just part of what it is to be a red thing that it causes this sort of experience (or if you will, a “necessary” part), and part of what it is to have this experience is that one takes the object as the cause, is he simply saying what we want to say, what is natural to say, from the standpoint of demystification? Starting with a philosophical puzzle, do we simply then posit the right internal-causal story that makes the puzzle go away and then say, it must be like this? And, if the answer to that question is “yes, more or less,” is that so wrong? Many years ago, positivists, gripped by a mistakenly truncated conception of language, tried to claim that many philosophical questions could be dismissed for failing to be congruent with the language of science (as it was then understood). Writing now in what is a kind of heyday of naturalism, Searle might be taken to be thinking something
like this: surely there is some true account of perception in virtue of which we really do see the real world, and sometimes, for all that, have hallucinations. And surely this account, being true, will be congruent with whatever else is true of persons in so far as they have other states with content, like beliefs or desires. This can hardly be denied or resisted. So, why not just try to figure out what that account might be, why not just spell it out? What would things be like if everything did make sense? Why take whatever philosophical positions we have inherited as constraints, in any way? Why not just say what must be so if we are to make sense of what we do—see the world, have beliefs, and so forth? Of course, what we say is so here, how we characterize the relevant mechanisms, and what we say in order to be able to say the other things we want to say too—all of this will always have a whiff of the deeply contingent about it. The expression “it is just a fact that…” is one we see a great deal of in Seeing Things As They Are. But perhaps this is what philosophy is becoming, at least in those parts of it that strongly implicate our material or biological nature, like mind and perception. And perhaps “talent in philosophy” will increasingly mean talent at telling a non-mysterious naturalistic story, leaving the constructed arguments, the traps, of the past behind. It is, to me at least, a suggestive thought, and it marks, as I say, a further sense in which the argument here is very ambitious. It offers something of a model for how philosophy might, at least on subjects like this, be in the future. In the opinion of this reviewer, Searle certainly, and comprehensively, tells that story, leaving the reader quite settled with the sense that perception, while not simple, of course, really can be rendered non-mysterious. Yet, to Searle’s great credit, it is simply the philosophical puzzles that are tamed. It is another deep feature of Seeing Things As They Are, one I have simply set aside in concentrating on the philosophical arguments within it, that it is, as a matter of fact,
consistently faithful to what is simply magical about our visual life. In his discussion of paintings and landscapes for example, as well as in his accounts of simply looking out our window, Searle shows great attunement to the complex, fantastic, and intensely satisfying nature of our visual life. The ordinary, here, will always present itself, will always seem, extraordinary. Searle never forgets this, nor ever lets his reader forget it either.