

Aspect-perception

Contemporary literature on aspect-perception, of which there is surprisingly little (but see Gilman, Orlandi), starts with the famous sec. xi of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. One immediately thinks of the duck-rabbit and other ambiguous figures. But it is important to realize that there are different subspecies here, e.g.:

(i) Perceiving ordinary objects under aspects. A human head can be perceived as a coconut perched on an inverted dinner plate (Booth Tarkington's *Penrod and Sam*). And, contra Wittgenstein, a human head can be perceived as a human head. A doorknob, normally and correctly seen as convex, can at will be seen as concave. (As Rolando observed during our meeting, all objects are visually ambiguous. When we refer as Macpherson does to "non-ambiguous figures," we mean only ones whose ambiguity is not often noticed.)

(ii) Perceiving ordinary objects under *very high-level* aspects. A cloud can be seen as the head of Thomas Eakins. (An ancient "Peanuts" reference.) The shrunken snowcaps on the southern Alps of New Zealand can be seen as global warming.

(iii) Pictorial seeing-as (the duck-rabbit).

(iv) Attentional phenomena (Nickel's figure, Peacocke's dot arrays, etc.).

(v) Using ordinary objects as aspect representations. In Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin novels, naval officers sometimes while away sociable drunken dinners in the gunroom by refighting old battles at the table, using pieces of dinnerware such as plates, glasses and cutlery to represent ships and their tactical movements. In such a case a wineglass can be seen as H.M.S. *Unspeakable*.

Different subspecies may need different treatments. The obvious big difference is between seeing an object as F and seeing a picture as a picture of something F. The late Richard Wollheim (1996) made a valuable distinction between seeing-as and "seeing *in*." It is less that we see the duck-rabbit figure as a picture of a duck (though of course we can do that) than that we see a duck and alternately a rabbit *in* the picture. And it is fairly clear that there is a stricter sense in which (unless visual conditions are very unusual) an ordinary wineglass cannot be seen as a ship of the line.

Wittgenstein's mystery was this: Seeing an aspect seems a matter of interpretation and sometimes a voluntary one at that; yet it is not merely interpretation, a cognitive construction put on what is strictly seen, but itself a kind of seeing, a specifically visual phenomenon that (as Wittgenstein would not have put it) is part of visual phenomenology.

So what does vision represent in such cases? Does it represent a coconut when Penrod sees Georgie Bassett's head as one? (In the story, the drowsy Penrod did sincerely take Georgie's head to be a coconut, but we should also consider the case where Penrod is aspect-flipping at will and whimsically chooses to see it as one.) I am reasonably sure that in the second case at least, Penrod's visual system does not represent the property of being a coconut, and I am even more sure that in the Aubrey case the officers' visual systems do not represent wineglasses as being ships, but I could not confidently defend those views against the rhetorical question: If seeing-as is a

specifically visual and not merely cognitive phenomenon, then how is seeing a head as a coconut not, at least in part, visually representing the head as a coconut?

Aspect-perception and the Representational theory

Macpherson argues that aspect-seeing of an ambiguous figure makes a phenomenal difference that is hard to cast as a content difference.

(Two side issues: First, Macpherson's official target is only a Representational theory, Tye's (1995), that restricts itself to *nonconceptual* content. She simply ignores layering views, not to mention a Representationalism based on Fodor's Roschified modularity view. –But then, we do not know that vision does represent ordinary objects.

Second: In the matter of psychosemantics, Macpherson again singles out Tye and (in passing) uses his particular covariation psychosemantics against him. That is his problem, not one for Representationalism generally. –But then, if there is any correct psychosemantics for vision, it is probably comparably simple.)

Peacocke claims to handle the Mach square/diamond, and without resorting to higher-level properties such as “diamond.” He appeals to representation of the “symmetry-about” relation: when we see a square as such, vision represents the figure as symmetrical about the bisectors of its sides, but when we see the same figure as a diamond, vision represents a different property, that of symmetry about the bisectors of its angles. Macpherson makes several objections, of which the most trenchant is that some ambiguous figures are not symmetrical at all (Distorted Square, Kite).

Following Ferrante, Gerbino and Rock, Macpherson considers the suggestion that in aspect-seeing an ambiguous figure we subjectively impose axes, which apply regardless of the figure's actual orientation with respect to the viewer. Thus, the visual experience may represent properties that parts of the figure have in relation to the axes, such as “having an angle pointing directly up.” I like this view.

Macpherson objects that it fails to account for the shape constancy of *unambiguous* figures. Representationalists “must explain either why only one set of axes can be imposed upon certain figures (the non-ambiguous ones) and why more than one set can be imposed upon other figures (the ambiguous ones), or they must explain why the experiences that represent different properties do not give rise to experiences with different phenomenal characters in non-ambiguous figures, but do so in the other ambiguous figure cases” (108).

The former at least does need explaining. But I do not agree that the burden is on the Representationalist. What first and foremost needs explaining is why some figures are ambiguous and others not, and that is everyone's problem. Once that explanation is provided, the Representationalist can (probably) buy into it.

In any case I am inclined to take seeing-as to be an attentional phenomenon (Chastain and Burnham 1975, Ricci and Blundo 1990, Kleinschmidt et al. 1998, and cf. what Walter said about scanning). That at least reduces Wittgenstein's mystery to Nickel's puzzle about attending.