

Perception & Context

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I develop a seeming antinomy in relation to the question, Do natural kind properties, strictly speaking, characterize the phenomenology of experience? Or, in Peacockean terms, Are natural kind concepts observational? On the one hand, naïve descriptions of experience are *rich* descriptions, often characterizing our experience in terms of the presence of natural kinds. Thus, negative answers to such questions falsify how our experience seems to us. On the other hand, attributing rich contents to experience forces us to treat certain *matching* experiences as illusions or, in Peacockean terms, purely perceptual errors. In both cases this is an implausible application of these notions, for, in such cases, all the properties seemingly being picked up on by the visual system are instantiated. The intractability of this apparent antinomy motivates a contextualist resolution: How rich a description it is appropriate to give of a stretch of someone's experiential life depends on the context we are in.

The central contention of this paper is that how we describe a stretch of someone's mental life inherently depends on our folk-psychological interests. Two speakers in different contexts, with different interests, may describe a subject's mental life using exactly the same form of words, with all those words having their same, ordinary meanings and yet only one of them speak truly. I contend that such context or occasion sensitivity is a deep fact about our perceptual vocabulary. I focus on the *richness* of our characterizations of perceptual experience, specifically the visibility or otherwise of natural kind properties. My argument can be easily adapted to many other types of property (e.g., artefactual and certain relational properties).

I begin by describing a way in which philosophers have traditionally sought to draw a distinction amongst the properties of the objects of perception (§1). With any such distinction in play, it makes sense to ask questions such as, Do natural kind properties, strictly speaking, characterize the phenomenology of experience or do they enter merely in interpreting our experience? Or, Are natural kind properties visible? I then argue that the answer to these questions goes hand in hand with the answer to the question, When is it appropriate to count an experience as illusory (§2)? A related distinction due to Peacocke divides concepts into the observational and the non-observational. This distinction explicitly rests on a certain conception of when it is appropriate to posit what Peacocke terms (purely) perceptual error or malfunction (§3).

In the central sections of the paper, I develop a seeming antinomy which arises whenever one asks of certain ordinary experiences whether a given kind property is visible or whether a given concept is observational in virtue of having such an experience. On the one hand, we naturally describe certain experiences in kind-involving terms – indeed, reference to such properties seems required if we are to give a satisfactory description of the phenomenology of experience. This evidences the visibility of natural kind properties (§4). On the other hand, the view that natural kind properties are visible commits one to an implausible account of illusion in certain matching cases where the natural kind is not present. A closely related antimony arises within Peacocke's framework (§5).

Having brought out this tension, I claim that, short of an error theory, the only way to overcome it is to diagnose it as a symptom of a false assumption, namely that how rich an ascription of perceptual content it is correct to make is independent of one's context (§6). With this assumption removed, the tension can be seen not as a reflection of an

inconsistency in our ordinary ways of thinking about experience but rather as a failure to appreciate the context-sensitivity of any sensory/cognitive or observational/non-observational distinction.

1. The Strictly Sensory

There are a large number of closely related questions answers to which invoke a distinction amongst the properties of objects of perception. For example: Which properties, strictly speaking, characterize the phenomenology of experience? Which properties are *visible* to one? For those familiar with modern representationalist theories of experience, Which properties are *represented* in experience? Or, again, leaving aside possible aspects of what it is like to have a certain perceptual experience that are not determined by the way things appear to one – subjective or dependent phenomenal properties in Martin’s sense of those terms (1998: 24) –, and remaining neutral as to the *manner* in which properties of objects are present to the mind, Which aspects of the objects of perception can be present to the mind in visual experience?

Traditionally, it has been taken for granted that there must be *some* distinction between the properties we naturally describe the contents of our perceptual experience in terms of and the properties that are, strictly speaking, made manifest to us in experience. Thus Prichard asks, “What, in what we describe as seeing this, did we really see?” (1950: 58) In this vein, the distinction is cashed out as a distinction between the properties which are actually present to the mind in visual experience – the genuinely perceptual aspects of phenomenology – and those which are invoked when we interpret the given aspects and elements (i.e. think, imagine or judge them to possess) – the strictly cognitive aspects of phenomenology. It is then natural to assume there must be a definite *limit* to the resolution into cognitive and perceptual aspects. As Prichard puts it, “at some point we must come to what we really saw, and without the existence of this the process of thinking what we see to be something else besides could never have started.” (ibid)

Sometimes it is claimed that the sensory/cognitive distinction is revealed in introspection. According to John Foster, only certain of an object’s properties are aspects of that item’s *sensible appearance* which aspects carry

the subjective impression of being... before S’s mind in a mode of absolute ontological immediacy, forming, in their own ontological person, the very content of his awareness. (2000: 50)

This immediacy is said to contrast with other non-sensible forms of appearance. With respect to non-sensible appearances (e.g., something’s appearing to be an apple or the backside of a pig), one will, according to Foster,

on introspective reflection, at once concede that, however automatic and immediate [one’s] recognition of this state of affairs, it is an aspect of how [one] (or how [one’s] experience) *interprets* the situation, rather than something which can be simply read off – as it were cognitively copied from – a pre-interpreted ‘given’. (50-1)

Such phenomenological claims would lead us to expect broad consensus as to where to draw the cognitive/perceptual line. If we were all so positioned as to be able “at once” to distinguish the sensible appearance of the scene from the way we interpreted it,

disagreement would be hard to make sense of. However, *pace* Foster, it is not at all obvious where the line should be drawn.¹ Some philosophers agree with Foster that the only properties genuinely present to the mind in experience are,

qualities of a spatial or temporal kind, and... qualities which, while not spatial or temporal, stand in the relevantly special relationship to the sense-realm involved [i.e. colours in the visual case]. (2000: 47)²

Others insist that experience can have a much richer content. For example, that *kind* or *artefactual* properties can be present to the mind in experience.³ There is logical room for a continuum of views ranging from the highly restricted to the extremely rich.⁴

In the context of a sense-datum theory of perception, the distinction under consideration can be well-grounded. Coherent versions of such theories hold that what we are aware of in perception are objects which are mind-dependent in the sense that their existence is constitutively dependent on the perceiver's awareness of them.⁵ Given this, there will be a well-grounded (if unobvious) distinction between the properties these mind-dependent objects have and those that everyday mind-independent objects have. The distinction has survived the demise of such theories. The question we need to ask is: should it have?⁶

One reason for believing that the properties present to the mind in experience are drawn from a limited class is an assumption to the effect that all experiences will draw on properties from the *same* classes (e.g., shape, colour and location properties). As David Hilbert put it in subscribing to such a view at a recent conference: the dimensions of content are always the same, experience is always a matter of filling in the same content slots.

However, this assumption does not obviously lead to restrictions. For example, let us assume that experience can be modelled by sets of tuples of real numbers each number corresponding to the value of some property, e.g., three numbers corresponding to position in egocentrically defined space, (say) three to position in colour space and so forth. Positing slots for a wide range of properties allows for a correspondingly wide range of properties to figure in experience. Restrictions only follow if the tuples have no position corresponding to certain (e.g. natural kind) properties. Of course, the tuples associated with a given experience will typically contain mostly zeros on even a moderately rich picture. However, this is no objection in itself. The possibility of achromatic and form agnostic experiences or experiences where a subject simply stares at a pure blue sky where no shape properties are present demonstrate that zero must be an acceptable value for even undisputed positions such as colour and shape. It is true that, if

¹ Cf. Roderick Firth (1965) who argues that the absence of any such introspectable distinction tells in favour of Percept Theory and against a Sense-Datum Theory.

² Recently, McGinn (1982), Tye (1995), Clark (2000), Millar (2000), Burge (2003) and Price (2005) have all put forward such views.

³ Siewert (1998) and Siegel (2006) explicitly commit to this kind of view. Also cf. Brandom (2002).

⁴ Searle (1983), Fodor (1983) and Hilbert (2006) are interesting examples of people occupying what one might think of as a middle ground.

⁵ The traditional sense-datum view posited mind-independent sense-data; see, e.g., Moore (1922), Broad (1923: Ch. XIII) and Price (1932: 126). For reasons to doubt the coherence of this view see Martin (2003).

⁶ Given what follows a remark of Hyman's (made in a different context) seems appropriate: "Intellectual communities can preserve ideas as assiduously as religious communities preserve customs and even costumes from a different climate and a different age. So we can sometimes shake ourselves free from ideas that are confused or mistaken, by seeing that the purposes they served when they were invented are ones we no longer have." (2006: xvi)

one thought that a value of zero necessarily corresponded to one's experiencing a feature as absent (as one might think of grey as the absence of colour), such a view would look implausible. However, this way of thinking does not seem mandatory. Perhaps there are distinct positions for property absences.

In any case, it is not clear that such principles in and of themselves support restrictions on the kinds of properties whose presence is manifestable in experience. Moreover, in advance of theorizing, I see no reason to take it for granted that we can do more than ask, of any *particular* perceptual experience, which properties are made manifest in *that* experience. There may well be no interesting answer to the *general* question: what kinds of property are present to the mind in experience?

2. The Argument Against Richness

The sensory/cognitive distinction should be drawn at the point where it becomes inappropriate to classify certain related experiences as illusory in the relevant respect. Specifically, a property is visible in virtue of having a certain experience just if certain – what I shall call *matching* – cases where the property is not present are genuine illusions.

To see why this is so, it helps to begin with the following argument of McGinn's against the representation of natural kind properties:

...some, indeed many, general concepts apply to things in the world in virtue of properties not fully manifest to the senses, for example the concepts of *tiger* or *water*. Such concepts hold of things in virtue of their 'inner constitution' – being H₂O or having a certain genetic structure. This means that it is possible for things to have the same *appearance* as tigers and water and yet not fall under the concepts *tiger* and *water*, so there would be no phenomenological difference between experiences whose content was specified using one of those concepts rather than the concepts appropriate to the things that merely have the same appearance as tigers and water. We should therefore restrict the concepts invoked to characterize content to those that relate to the appearance of things – concepts of colour, superficial texture, shape etc. In this way we limit our ascriptions of content to how things *seem* to the perceiver (1982: 40; cf. Millar 2000)

As it stands McGinn's argument is question begging for it really does no more than *state* that the property *being a tiger* cannot be fully manifest to the senses. However, we can extract and develop an argument which begins to bring out more clearly why someone might be inclined to think this on the basis that there are things which share an appearance with tigers.

For any natural kind object or substance one can construct a ringer, something that shares a visual appearance with the kind in question. One can, for example, make a tiger-ringer which cannot be told apart visually from a tiger. (For more on the notion of the appearance or look of a thing see §5.) If a tiger and its ringer cannot be told apart visually, then an experience of the tiger in a certain location, from a certain perspective etc. will be indiscriminable through introspection of and reflection on said experience from an experience of the ringer from the same location and perspective etc. If this were not so, we would have a way of telling the experiences apart simply by reflecting on them and this would allow us to distinguish tiger from ringer.

Given this, the possibility of ringers gives rise to the possibility of what I shall call *matching* experiences: experiential situations indiscriminable through reflection from a veridical visual perception of a substance of the given kind. Thus, consider Jim the tiger-keeper. If what I have said so far is correct, so is the following claim.

- (1) For any situation, S_1 , which is an encounter with an object or substance of kind, K , there is a possible situation, S_2 , such that Jim's experience in S_2 *matches* his experience in S_1 and yet the object or substance encountered in S_2 is not of kind K .

Consider just such a pair of situations, S_t and S_r in which Jim is faced respectively with a tiger and a tiger-ringer. Ex hypothesi, Jim's experience in S_r is *indiscriminable* (by reflection on his experience) from his experience in S_t . The experiences *match*. Now, crucially, there are two possibilities here: Jim's experience of the ringer is either veridical or it is not. For the sake of the argument, let us *assume* the experience of the tiger-ringer is entirely veridical.

- (2) Assumption: Jim's experience in some particular situation S_r is entirely veridical.

Since no tiger is present, it cannot look to Jim as if a tiger is present: that would be for the experience to be illusory. Rather it can at most look to Jim as if something which has the appearance of a tiger is present and, likewise, that something stripy, tiger-shaped and so forth is in front of her. Though this is clearly not a *complete* characterisation of the experience, there can be no further property that looks to Jim to be present that is not instantiated. This is just what we mean when we say that the experience is veridical. Hence,

- (3) There does not look to Jim to be a tiger present in S_r . At most there looks to him to be something which has the visual appearance of a tiger present.

With the veridicality assumption in place concerning the ringer-experience, turn back to Jim's experience of the real thing in S_t . His experience of the tiger in S_t is visually indiscriminable from his experience of the tiger-ringer. If we want to insist that it looks to Jim as if a tiger is present in S_r , then things look a way to Jim according to his experience in S_t which they did not in the case of the ringer-experience in S_r . But how can this be so since surely then the two experiences would be discriminable? If an experience of a tiger-ringer counts as entirely veridical, there cannot be a *distinct* or *additional* way things look to the subject solely due to the presence of a tiger in its stead. If there were such a way things looked to the subject, the ringer would not be a ringer after all.⁷

Thus, given (1) through (3), (4) follows:

- (4) There does not look to Jim to be a tiger present in S_t either. At most there looks to him to be something which has the visual appearance of a tiger present.

⁷ Note that I am not assuming that if things look the same, experiences will thereby be indiscriminable: perhaps experiences can vary discriminably in phenomenal character despite things looking the same. The claim here goes in the other direction: if two experiences are indiscriminable, then things look the same to their subject.

Since this argument is entirely general it seems we are forced to conclude that, amongst the features visible, it is only the appearances of things which are visible, or can be represented or made manifest in experience.

The claim made in moving from (1), (2) and (3) to (4) above, namely that things must look just the same to subjects across matching experiences may look dubious. Indeed, it might be thought to ignore a key tenet of disjunctivism viz. that indiscriminable experiences can differ in phenomenal character. It is important to see that this is not so. The claim is quite compatible with a disjunctivist commitment to indiscriminable experiences differing in phenomenal character. What I have insisted is that where phenomenal character differs (with respect to the features as opposed to the individuals visible) across indiscriminable experiences, one of the experiences must be illusory to some degree.

Someone might question this claim and insist that two veridical experiences could be indiscriminable from the subject's point of view despite their differing in how things looked (feature-wise) to the subject. However, our difficulty here in making sense of this suggestion arguably reflects something fundamental concerning our ordinary conception of experience, something that disjunctive and common-factor theories alike should agree on. The point can be made without appeal to potentially tendentious 'looks' locutions.⁸ The thought is simply that our conception of experience does not leave room for two *indiscriminable and veridical* experiences to differ in their correctness conditions (again, with respect to features as opposed to individuals).⁹

To see this note first that all such theories should allow for a conception of kinds of visual experience inclusive of illusions, hallucinations and veridical perceptual experiences.¹⁰ As Martin argues, in this respect the following condition, "just taken by itself ought to be interpretable as at least extensionally adequate on all theories of perceptual experience,"

The notion of a visual *experience* of a [Bengal tiger] is that of a situation being indiscriminable through reflection from a veridical visual *perception* of a [Bengal tiger] as what it is. (2006: 363-5)¹¹

Thus, take any given veridical visual perception of a Bengal tiger as a Bengal tiger. According to our ordinary conception, we can then form the class of matching experiences – those indiscriminable from this veridical perception. If a veridical experience of something other than a Bengal tiger is indiscriminable from a veridical perception of a Bengal tiger, then it will be part of this class and thus still count as an experience of a Bengal tiger by this criterion. However, this is incompatible with its being a veridical experience since, by assumption, it differs in correctness conditions from an perception of a Bengal tiger as a Bengal tiger.

⁸ Though 'looks' locutions might well be thought to be latching on to precisely this core conception of experience. Thus, Sellars argues that "when I say, "X looks green to me now" I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green" (1956: §15).

⁹ I take it that experiences *do* have correctness conditions *contra*, e.g., Travis (2004) and Brewer (2006). The idea that an experience is veridical if a description of what the experience is like is also a correct description of the perceived world seems to me an unobjectionable aspect of our ordinary thinking about experience.

¹⁰ Of course, not all parties will agree that indiscriminability divides all experiences into their most fundamental kinds. Precisely not in the case of disjunctivism.

¹¹ My emphasis. Martin's own example is a white picket fence.

The argument stands. Of course, as it stands, it rests squarely on the assumption flagged, namely that Jim's experience in S_2 is entirely veridical. If a non-tiger can on some or all occasions look to a subject to be a *tiger*, these experiences will be illusory: things will not be as they look. In advance of argument, there is no reason to think that an encounter with a non-tiger where things look just the same to you as when you encounter a tiger must be a *veridical* experience.

A defender of the visibility of natural kind properties cannot simply point out that the argument rests on an assumption. In response, a proponent of the argument will insist that the assumption is at least sometimes correct since it is implausible to posit illusion in every situation where a non-tiger looks like a tiger. At the heart of the debate, then, is precisely the question, *When is it appropriate to posit illusion?*

3. Peacocke on Observational and Non-Observational Concepts

Before considering how we should answer this question, I want to introduce a related but different distinction proposed by Peacocke. Peacocke's distinction may appear more attractive than the one outlined above since it avoids the counter-intuitive introduction of interpretation (surely something we *do*) as a way of making sense of apparently perceptual aspects (with which we seem *passively* acquainted).

Peacocke claims that one can divide the concepts which are part of the representational content of experience into observational and non-observational concepts. Thus, even though there is no clear restriction on the concepts which can be part of an experience's representational content (certainly, Peacocke thinks concepts of natural kind properties can be so present to the mind), there remains a distinction analogous to the strictly perceptual/cognitive distinction mooted above. Here I summarize the way that distinction is drawn in Peacocke (1986: Ch 2 esp. pp. 14-23).¹²

According to Peacocke, if one judges a content at some time, t , in which an observational concept, F , is predicated in the present tense of a demonstratively presented object, o , one incurs a nondefeasible commitment just in virtue of this judging. Specifically, one is committed to believing that for any position from which one were to perceive o at t in *normal external conditions* with one's perceptual mechanisms *minimally functioning*, one would experience o from that relative position as falling under F , or as an object which falls under F would be perceived from that relative position (in both cases assuming o does still fall under the concept F).¹³

Roughly speaking then, we have the following condition applying to all and only observational concepts (reading ' $F(x)$ ' as ' x falls under the concept F ' and '*Looks* $F(x)$ ' as ' x looks to the subject of experience to fall under the concept F ').

¹² This way of drawing the distinction is a modification of the earlier presentation in his 1983: Ch. 4. See also fn. 14 below.

¹³ This last qualification is designed to handle shape-shifters: objects which change their shape depending on the perspective one takes on them (see p.18). Arguably, further qualification is needed to handle objects which retain their shape but which can track perceivers such that they always show, say, a cubic profile despite not being cubic. For example, a cube with a dimple on one face could turn in order always to hide this dimple since there is always one face of a cube that cannot be seen. I will ignore such worries in what follows.

[External conditions are normal & Perceptual mechanisms are minimally functioning] \rightarrow [*Looks* $F(x) \leftrightarrow F(x)$]

On the basis of this definition of observational concepts in terms of their consequences, Peacocke draws the following implication using the judgment, ‘That block is cubic’ as an example.

[If] a thinker continues to believe the content ‘That block is cubic’ in the face of one of his experiences of the block which represents it as curved, say. Then he is committed to believing that either external conditions are not normal or that his perceptual mechanisms are not functioning properly. (1986: 21)

It is not entirely clear what the normality of external conditions involves. However, lighting conditions are certain included (19) whilst sceptical scenarios are not ruled out (18). The notion of a minimally functioning perceiver, one whose “perceptual mechanisms are in order” (19) is given greater attention.¹⁴ Minimal functioning does not rule out things looking other than they are. It is a more restrictive notion than our ordinary notion of illusion. However, in order to rule out certain cases, especially geometrical illusions (20, fn.9) from counting as cases of minimal functioning, Peacocke imposes the following pair of necessary conditions.

[A] subject is a minimally functioning perceiver only if two conditions are met when he has a perceptual experience in normal external circumstances: (i) the description under which the experience represents things in the environment as falling is in the projection class of the pattern of retinal stimulation [the class of environments which would causally explain a pattern P_i assuming the normal behaviour of light] which causes the experience, and (ii) suitable relations of causal explanation obtain between the occurrence of that pattern and the experience. (20)

This detail does not impact on the tiger/tiger-ringer debate above since the two conditions here are fulfilled in the ringer case. In any case, the fundamental point to appreciate is that the observational is defined in terms of the notion of the minimal functioning of perceptual mechanisms. For an observational concept C_1 , one incurs a commitment to there being an abnormality in external conditions or a purely perceptual malfunction if one insists on believing that an object falls under C_1 despite it being demonstratively presented as falling under an incompatible concept C_2 . At this point, the connection with McGinn’s argument is apparent for, again, the debate comes down to the fundamental question, *When is it appropriate think of perceptual systems as malfunctioning?*

In what follows I briefly set-out the key reason for thinking that natural kind properties are (however strictly one is speaking) present to the mind in experience (or that natural kind concepts are observational) (§4). I go on to highlight the commitment this incurs to positing illusions (or purely perceptual errors) in certain cases. I then argue that positing illusions or perceptual errors in such cases is highly counter-intuitive (§5). Accepting this result and contraposing forces us to deny that natural kind concepts are present to the mind (or are observational). This leaves us with a seemingly irresolvable tension.

¹⁴ In his (1983) “normal circumstances” (e.g., p. 100) alone do the work normality and minimal perceptual functioning are doing in his (1986). This may explain why little time is spent cashing out normality in the latter work since minimal functioning is the more important notion – the notion of normality being a commitment to little more than (e.g.) normal lighting conditions.

I end by suggesting a radical way of alleviating this tension (§6). This is to abandon the assumption that there is any context-independent way to understand the notion of an illusion or a purely perceptual error. The contradictory intuitions above arise in different contexts due to our differing folk-psychological interests. As a result, the antinomy disappears.

4. Richness and illusion

4.1 *In support of richness*

In advance of argument, it is sorely tempting to side with the rich-content theorists. Even the proponents of restrictions acknowledge (it would be hard to dispute) “it is very natural to think that visual experiences do represent these [richer] properties.” (Price 2005: 361) In order to bring out the force this natural judgment has, consider Strawson’s classic discussion as to how experience must be strictly characterized.¹⁵

Responding to Ayer’s claim that “our ordinary perceptual judgments have the character of *interpretations*, in the light of theory, of what sensible experience actually presents us with” (1979: 42) – a view invoking precisely the kind of distinction outlined above –, Strawson insists that the following

be required of a *strict* account of our sensible experience[: ...] it should in no way distort or misrepresent the character of that experience as we actually enjoy it, i.e.... it should be a true or faithful account. (43; my emphasis)

In order to establish when a description is faithful or otherwise, Strawson suggests that we should ask a naïve subject to give a description of his current visual experience.

Uncautioned as to exactly what we want, he might reply in some such terms as these: ‘I see the red light of the setting sun filtering through the black and thickly clustered branches of the elms; I see the dappled deer grazing in groups on the vivid green grass...’ and so on. (43)

Strawson is talking about object-perception here but the clear implication of the choice of words is that the experience is of deer as deer and elms as elms. (With respect to the point in the next paragraph, contrast how natural it is to retreat to talking of specks instead of sheep on a distant hillside.)

Strawson goes on to point out that the only obvious way the subject can weaken his account in order to avoid the commitments made in the above account is to describe his experience as one it would have been natural to describe in the manner above had he not needed to avoid commitment. As one in which it looked as if the red light of the setting sun was filtering through the black and thickly clustered branches of the elms, one in which it looked as if dappled deer were grazing in groups on the vivid green grass.

Our observer... does not start talking about lights and colours, patches and patterns. For he sees that to do so would be to falsify the character of the experience he actually enjoyed. (43)

¹⁵ In ‘Perception and its Objects’ (1979). Cf. Heidegger (1977: 156) quoted in Smith (2002: 105).

Moreover, nor does our subject start talking about seeing things that have the look of deer, nor a substance that has the appearance of grass. Rather, the naïve subject's descriptions which Strawson suggests are *rich* descriptions – they characterize experience in terms of deer and grass and sun-presence – not in terms of objects coloured and shaped like deer or grass or objects with the visual appearance of the sun.¹⁶ The same goes for the natural kind properties *being a tiger* and *being water*. If one agrees with Strawson – and I find him entirely compelling here – one must conclude that the only way to give “a strict, *and strictly veridical*, account of our sensible experience” is in *rich* terms (my emphasis). The etiolated content theorist is guilty of falsifying how our experience seems.

Another way of defending the claim that natural kind properties are made manifest in experience relates to the role we attribute perception with respect to our mental economies, in particular, how experience positions us cognitively. Perception is our primary means of contact with the world. It enables us to attend to and act on that world, providing us with non-inferential knowledge about our environment. And it positions us in this way with respect to a much wider range of properties than colours, locations and shapes. Given this, one might argue, quite plausibly, that such a role could only be served with respect to kind properties if experience made manifest those properties in experience.

I do not want to attempt to make such an argument here. That would require blocking the sophisticated epistemological moves which those who posit etiolated content will likely rely upon.¹⁷ The Strawsonian considerations are alone sufficient to support the rich thesis.

One might worry at this point that Strawson's considerations do not tell against Peacocke's views as strongly as they do against the standard interpretational account. Certainly, Peacocke agrees natural kind concepts enter the representational content of experience – “We see tomatoes as *tomatoes*, and not as anything weaker” (1983: 93). The phenomenological implications of this claim are unclear, however. Resolution of the unclarity turns on how one interprets Peacocke's insistence that the concept TOMATO is not observational “because its *experiential component* could be shared by someone” (1983: 92, my emphasis) who represented things only as falling under an unstructured concept, application of which was solely determined by whether some object has the look (and perhaps feel and taste) of a tomato. The question is then, What does Peacocke mean by an ‘experiential component’?

If the notion of an experiential component is intended to be strictly phenomenological, then, regardless of the above claim about seeing tomatoes as tomatoes, the Strawsonian considerations tell against Peacocke as much as against McGinn. To think that the judgment, ‘I see the dappled deer grazing in groups on the vivid green grass,’ can be a strict and accurate description of the *phenomenology* of a mental life at some time is incompatible with holding that the ‘experiential components’ of natural kind concepts as understood in this phenomenological sense are shared with non-kind items. According to Strawson, our strictest descriptions go beyond statements to the effect that we see dappled deer-lookers grazing on a vivid green grass-looking substance. In insisting on

¹⁶ Thus, Strawson's point is not merely that terms like ‘tiger’ and ‘grass’ are used in naïve descriptions. They are used *free-standing* and not simply by way of picking out a kind of look tigers and ringers might share.

¹⁷ Cf. Peacocke (1983: 91).

matching experiential components combined with an absence of perceptual error when confronted with natural kinds and their non-kind ringers, this interpretation of Peacocke's account restricts the concepts available to characterize the *phenomenology* of experience to *looking like* a tiger as opposed to *being* one. To this extent, then the Strawson point still holds.

On the other hand, the notion of an experiential component may be intended solely to indicate the *epistemological* import of certain aspects of experience. If so, Strawson and Peacocke can agree. Peacocke's point would then seem to be the following. The phenomenological character of experience is as we normally describe it. However, certain aspects of experience bring with them normative commitments that others do not. Thus, the crucial point about observational concepts is that we incur certain commitments in virtue of being in an experiential situation where it seems appropriate to apply them which do not hold in experiential situations where it seems appropriate to apply a standard non-observational, recognitional concept. Once again, for an observational concept like CUBIC,

[If] a thinker continues to believe the content 'That block is cubic' in the face of one of his experiences of the block which represents it as curved, say. Then he is committed to believing that either external conditions are not normal or that his perceptual mechanisms are not functioning properly. (1986: 21)

This epistemological reading of 'experiential component' concedes phenomenological richness. As a result it faces the argument from illusion set out above and can be convicted of abusing illusion as I argue in §5. In response, Peacocke might claim that our intuitions about illusion there relied upon are really tracking intuitions about perceptual malfunction. However, even if one found this plausible, this reconciliation will only succeed if Peacocke's *epistemological* conception of purely perceptual malfunction is stable. I suggest otherwise below (§4.3).

4.2 Rejecting McGinn's Argument

The rich content theorist must respond to McGinn's argument. To do so she must posit illusion in situations like the following.

I am on my annual safari and plainly see a tiger. As Strawson urges, it is overwhelmingly natural to describe my experience as a tiger sighting; it is natural to think that the phenomenology of my experience involves tiger presence; it looks to me as if there is a tiger yonder. Now imagine that a bored local craftsman with a penchant for practical jokes has decided to create a number of ringers which he has deployed around the reserve. He is skilled enough to make them true ringers – visually indiscriminable from the real thing. Alternatively, imagine a mad geneticist who creates the schmiger which looks and moves just like a tiger but is in fact a quite different species. I turn to look at such the ringer. Again, it is overwhelmingly natural to describe my experience in terms of tiger-presence – here too it looks to me as if a tiger is present. But, then, to the extent that this is the strictly correct characterization of my experience, my experience is illusory. No doubt if I learn of the deception, I may refuse to believe I am seeing a tiger. But the crafted ringer and the schmiger still *look* to be a genuine tigers. Even if I realise

my predicament, I will still describe my experience as an experience it *would* have been natural to describe as a sighting of a tiger. The experience remains illusory.¹⁸

Once this possibility is allowed for, the rich content theorist has a general strategy for resisting arguments of the above form. There are complications of course. Indeed, quickly it becomes apparent that some seemingly analogous cases will have to be given different treatments and that it will not always be easy to decide how to treat them. In the rest of this subsection, I outline some of these complications – they are not essential to the main point of the paper.

Complications arise for two reasons. Firstly, in some cases, *which* of S_1 or S_2 we are to think of as involving illusory experience is highly sensitive to the situation or environment the subject is in. This is especially clear where two distinct kinds are encountered in the matching experiences. Secondly, not every pair of cases of the form described in premise (1) of McGinn's argument does involve illusion. That is, there may be two situations which are respectively encounters with an object of kind-K and an object not of kind-K, where things look the same to the subject in each situation (the experiences *match*) and where there is no perceptual error in either case. If there is no illusion in these situations, then the earlier argument is sound and kind-properties cannot form part of the correct description of these experiences. In order to resist a generalizing move here, the rich content theorist must insist that *whether* matching experiences involve an illusory case is sensitive to the situation or environment the subject is in. Putting these points together, the rich content theorist must insist that for many kind-pairs which can lead to matching experiences, there are, depending on the subject's situation, cases where there is no illusion in either matching experience as well as cases where the illusion occurs in the experience of one kind and not the other and vice-versa.¹⁹

Three examples should make this clear. Let us assume that vodka (or some particular vodka) looks just like water. (All that is really needed is the claim that on some occasions, encounters with water and vodka can lead to matching experiences.) Given this, I sketch cases where the most natural thing for the rich content theorist to say is (a) that vodka is encountered illusorily, (b) that water is encountered illusorily and (c) that neither matching experience is illusory – in other words the experiences are both neutral with respect to the properties *being vodka* and *being water*.

Case (a)

As an elaborate practical joke I attempt to make my neighbour drunk by filling his water tank with vodka. My neighbour's experience as he turns on the tap is of a substance visually indiscriminable from water. Such an experience matches the experience he would have had if water has been gushing out. Here, we would naturally characterize his experience by saying that it looked to him as if water were pouring out of his tap as usual. Thus, arguably, there is something illusory about his experience. We characterize his

¹⁸ Prichard makes the common claim that “the characteristic which we should say distinguished being under an illusion from just making a mistake is that, while when we discover that a mistake is a mistake we can no longer make it (...), when we discover an illusion to be an illusion, we still have the illusion.” (1950: 50) This robustness test is passed here just to the extent we regard our experience in the tiger case as an experience of a tiger as a tiger.

¹⁹ Effectively, this is just an appeal to what is discussed under the label ‘subject-sensitive invariantism’ in the epistemology literature. See, for example, Hawthorne (2004).

experience by reference to water even though what he saw was vodka *and even though vodka looks just like water.*

Case (b)

The second example is a case where the asymmetry is the other way around. I know my friend Jim drinks so heavily he cannot tell from smell or taste whether he is drinking water or vodka. For the sake of Jim's liver and my wallet I decide to give Jim a shot of water whilst buying everyone else a shot of vodka. How would we characterize Jim's experience when I put the shot of water in front of him? Not implausibly, there is something illusory about it. In this context, we might say, that the drink looked just like vodka – and on this basis that his experience is illusory: the water is seen as vodka. Thus, though water looks just like vodka, we employ the predicate 'vodka' to describe an experience of water here. Again, this suggests that the property *being vodka* is characteristic of the experience.

Case (c)

Finally, consider a household in the Russian steppe in which equal quantities of vodka and water are drunk from glasses of the same kind at every meal. Thus, the family sits down for breakfast, lunch and dinner with a tumbler of water and a tumbler of vodka. The glasses are not placed in any special way on the table. Those seated cannot tell which is which until they taste their glasses. (Add, if one likes, that water is never used to bathe in etc. either.) In such a case I think we might admit that neither *being water* nor *being vodka* should be used to characterize their experience. Such a case will illustrate a *no illusion* situation. We would not naturally favour a characterization of his experience in terms of water as opposed to vodka or vice-versa. To do so would be ad hoc.

Such situation sensitivity, blocks any *general* inference to the conclusion that kind properties are not represented in experience. What my experience presents or represents depends (amongst other things) on the subject's environs, be it the bathroom, the bar or the steppe. I conclude, therefore, that arguments for restricted content can always be resisted in these kinds of ways. However, as I shall bring out in §5, there is a cost.

4.3 Rejecting Peacocke's distinction

As I mentioned there are two ways to understand Peacocke's claim about matching experiential components. Read phenomenologically, the discussion can parallel the discussion above. Strawsonian considerations evidence the observationality of TIGER and thus evidence the claim that matching experiences are purely perceptual errors.

However, on an epistemological reading of shared experiential components richness requires positing illusion but not necessarily purely perceptual error since this may be understood in a more narrowly circumscribed way. When it comes (as it will shortly) to calling the invocation of illusion an abuse, it can then be suggested that our intuitions here are tracking not illusion but perceptual malfunction. Here then it is crucial to consider whether Peacocke can circumscribe that notion adequately. In particular, in such a way that the ringer cases where illusion is posited will not count as perceptual errors.

Consideration of whether ringer cases are perceptual errors is equivalent to consideration of whether TIGER is observational. According to Peacocke it is not. Such concepts “do not possess the connections with perceptual experience distinctive of observational notions” (22). Let us apply his tests above to the tiger case assuming, for the moment, *pace* Peacocke, that *tiger* is an observational concept. If that is so, then:

If one judges that ‘That animal is a tiger’ at *t*, then one incurs a nondefeasible commitment just in virtue of this judging. One is committed to believing that for any position from which one were to perceive the object at *t* in *normal external conditions* when one’s perceptual mechanisms are *minimally functioning*, one would experience the object from that relative position as falling under *tiger*, or as an object which falls under *tiger* would be perceived from that relative position (in both cases assuming it remains a tiger).

Consequently:

If a thinker continues to believe the content ‘That animal is a tiger’ in the face of one of his experiences of the tiger which represents it as a non-tiger, say. Then he is committed to believing that either external conditions are not normal or that his perceptual mechanisms are not functioning properly.

The second test suggests the obvious apparent counter-example to TIGER being observational. Say we paint a small tiger and make it look like a black panther. (Imagine, if you like, we give it a heavy-duty make-over, major plastic surgery, &c., so it really does *look* like a panther even to an expert, yet genetically remains a tiger.)

Imagine further that I am wise to what is going on so I judge that *that animal is a tiger*. If TIGER is observational, I am thereby committed to believing that external conditions are not normal or that my perceptual mechanisms are not functioning properly. (This follows from the first test given that the tiger doesn’t *look* like a tiger.) Is such a commitment plausible?

It would certainly be implausible, given the weak notion of normality at play, to think we would be committed to holding that such a situation would be one in which external conditions were abnormal.²⁰ As remarked above, Peacocke explicitly states that normality cannot rule out sceptical hypotheses and we can easily stipulate that the lighting is normal. So the question becomes, Is it plausible that such a judgment incurs a commitment to perceptual malfunctioning?

Perception is a discriminatory capacity. For relevant subjects, not least tiger-keepers like Jim, it is not unnatural to think of perception in part as a capacity to discriminate natural kinds such as tigers. That is, our perceptual mechanisms are in part *tiger-detection* mechanisms. If the function of perceptual mechanisms is partly to discriminate tigers (at least when they are in good light and near enough to us), then they are failing to do this if they do not so discriminate. In the situation as characterized above, they are failing to discriminate the tiger from a black panther. In this respect they are failing to perform their function. They are *malfunctioning*.

In this light we might compare a notorious passage from Bob Brandom.

²⁰ Of course, they will be abnormal in the everyday sense of the term.

If it turns out that I can reliably differentially respond to a certain sort of state of affairs by noninferentially reporting the presence of a state of affairs of that sort, and if I know that I am reliable in this way, then I think that true reports of this kind deserve to be called observationally acquired knowledge. This is in some ways a fairly radical view... For one consequence of thinking of observation this way is that there is no particular line to be drawn between what is in principle observable and what is not. The only constraints are what a reporter can be trained under some circumstances reliably to differentiate, and what concepts she can then key the application of to those responsive dispositions. (2002: 96)

Brandom is explicitly concerned here with observationally acquired *knowledge*. This (partly) explains why he considers that someone needs not merely to be able to reliably, differentially respond but also needs to know they are so reliable. However, in other respects what Brandom says is congenial to the challenge to Peacocke just suggested. Brandom ties the observational to that which we can reliably differentiate.²¹ To the extent that someone can normally, reliably differentiate tigers, ‘tiger’ ought to be classed an observational predicate. Of course, reliability does not rule out occasional lapses. It is just that such lapses will count as perceptual failures on this view.

If this is right, Peacocke’s averment that his epistemological distinction between observational and non-observational concepts clearly places natural kind concepts such as TIGER on the non-observational side is objectionable and under-motivated. Consequently, my interpretation of his attempt to hive off perceptual errors from illusions collapses and he remains in the same position as McGinn.²²

5. Abusing Perceptual Error

I have argued that securing rich content in one of two matching experiences where only one involves a genuine instance of the relevant kind requires positing illusion in the other. In this section, I argue that this is surely an abuse of our ordinary notion of illusion. As a result, we seem to face an antinomy.

Consider the fake tiger case where we are forced to posit some kind of illusion because, (a) our natural description of the tiger case involved tiger presence – its looking to the subject that a tiger was present – and, (b) we assumed that a non-tiger experience might nevertheless match the genuine tiger experience. Now, what we are claiming, in positing such illusion, is that when we look at the tiger ringer, part of what it is like to have the experience is for it to seem as if there is a property present when, in fact, there is no such property instantiated.

However, Jim can describe his experience in the ringer case just by describing the ways the objects *actually* present and properties *actually* instantiated do look to him.²³ To press

²¹ I would add ‘on the basis of sensory experience’. Brandom neglects as ‘mere detail’, to use a phrase of McDowell’s, what one might regard as the essential role of the experiential in thinking of the capacities here.

²² Note that, as mentioned above, Peacocke’s necessary conditions for minimal functionality expressed in terms of retinal pattern stimulation classes do not help here. They seem to be fulfilled in the relevant cases since “the description under which the experience represents things in the environment” viz. as a non-tiger is “in the projection class of the pattern of retinal stimulation which causes the experience” since it is a pattern typically produced by black panthers i.e. non-tigers.

²³ Cf. Martin’s discussion of his burglar behind the curtains case (forthcoming, Chapter 4: 21).

the point compare cases where we do want to posit illusion. Imagine a subject who is looking at a white cloud but who is subject to neurological stimulation such that the cloud looks purple to him. We can imagine this occurring in a number of ways, but, at least in some of these, the natural inclination is to think that we *cannot* describe his experience just by describing the ways the objects actually present and properties actually instantiated do look to him. The cloud's colour is not being picked up on at all – with respect to colour the experience is entirely illusory. Likewise, assuming one thinks of the partially submerged stick as illusory, one will consider that the experience must be described in terms of the stick looking *bent* when it is not bent but straight. Finally, with relational illusions such as the Müller-Lyer, a strict description of one's experience will refer to the relation '...being longer than...' which, again, is not instantiated.

In the fake tiger case on the other hand, our description can make reference to a property the ringer actually and objectively does possess namely the its visual *appearance*, its *look*. A property it possesses in virtue of the fact that it can't be told apart from a tiger using our eyes alone. This is not to impute the illusory presence of an uninstantiated property, *being a tiger*, to the experience. It is true that the ringer has a look it shares with a tiger; it is false that it is a tiger.

The looks of things, their appearances, are perfectly objective properties which tigers and their ringers share. Someone who doubts this should consider our ubiquitous talk concerning the appearances of things. A few examples. We take care of our appearances, or spend too much time glancing at them in shop windows. We seek the advice of beauty magazines on how to achieve 'the natural/latest/gentle/formal/youthful look'. We buy home-decorating manuals for guidance on how to achieve 'that finished/expensive/designer/professional look'. Indeed in the united states alone there are nearly a million 'personal appearance workers' – barbers, cosmetologists, hairdressers, stylists, manicurists and pedicurists – people who have acquired a level of expertise in altering the looks of things. Similarly, part of the lore of visual artists and designers is an understanding of the looks objects have in certain conditions. Such lore is acquirable since looks are objective, rule-governed and investigable. Other examples are easy to find.

To reiterate then: illusions involve the seeming presence of an uninstantiated property. But granting the adequacy of descriptions which only mention instantiated properties, all the properties being picked up on, or seemingly picked up on, by the visual system in the tiger ringer case *are* instantiated. If a subject describing her experience failed to mention the fact that the object had the look or visual appearance of a tiger, then she would be failing to properly describe her experience but she would equally be failing to register something about the world namely that it contained a tiger ringer. So her experience can hardly be making a mistake in making manifest the presence of *this* property. Thus, the case cannot be thought of as illusory – or indeed, modulo what I have said above, as a purely perceptual error.

Now, in situation S_t the animal instantiating the property *being a tiger* also instantiates the property *having the appearance of a tiger*. If the intuitions about the absence of illusion are endorsed, then we have established that the character of the experiences in both situations is fixed by *common* properties. This leaves the property of being a tiger redundant. The property is not an aspect of what it is like to have the relevant experiences.

Endorsing this line of thought, it turns out, then, that perception at best makes present to us the appearances of things. Since natural kind properties are not individuated by the way their instances look, we should conclude that such properties cannot be made manifest in experience just as McGinn claimed.

6. A Contextualist Resolution

The upshot of the last two sections is that answers to our original question, ‘Which aspects of the objects of perception can be present to the mind in visual experience?’ are beholden in two incompatible ways. Naïve descriptions of experience are *rich* descriptions, often characterizing our experience in terms of the presence (or seeming presence) of natural kinds. Such descriptions are the only way to give, as Strawson puts it, “a strict, *and strictly veridical*, account of our sensible experience”. Thus, the etiolated content theorist falsifies how our experience seems to us. On the other hand, attributing rich contents to experience, forces us to treat certain matching experiences as illusions or cases of purely perceptual error. This is an implausible application of these notions, for, in such cases, all the properties being picked up on, or seemingly picked up on, by the visual system are instantiated.

The tension here is not a direct inconsistency, there are consistent stories to be told on both sides. It is rather that whichever story we tell we find ourselves in tension with things we are naturally inclined to say about one of the matching situations. An error theory may seem unavoidable – certain natural ways of thinking about experience must be discarded. Accordingly, *all* the theorists noted at the start are error theorists no matter how natural they consider their views.

There is another, more radical way to alleviate the tension, however. The tension is driven by an assumption, namely that the truth-conditions of perceptual content ascriptions are context-independent – independent of our folk psychological interests as content-ascribers. If we abandon this assumption, one can arguably make better sense of the opposing intuitions so far encountered.

If we abandon context-independent truth conditions for perceptual content ascriptions, then, we can insist, when our concern is with *describing our experience in ordinary cases*, that the rich content theorist does give a correct answer to our original question. In such contexts, it will be appropriate to posit perceptual illusion in matching cases. However, when the implausibility of positing illusion in such cases is raised, this will typically shift the context to one where the restricted content theorist’s account is correct. Alternatively, on Peacocke’s way of setting things up, context will shift the boundary of the observational and hence of the purely perceptual error.

This kind of move is suggested in the context of the related issue of whether we only see the surfaces of objects by Thompson Clarke (1964). Recently, Clarke’s position has been developed and defended by Mike Martin (2005 and forthcoming).

Clarke might put the point I am suggesting this way (cf. 1964: 111): ‘Noting’ certain facts – here that there exists a matching situation in which there is no illusion or purely perceptual error and yet things look just the same – alters the situation exactly to the extent required in order for it to be true that all we can see of the physical object is its location, shape, colour and look. This is slightly unhappy since it suggests that the experience itself is altered by shifting the context. The view here is absolutely not

committed to that. Rather the thought is that whether a certain predication is correct depends in part on the context in which it is made. Shifting context may alter the proposition expressed by a sentence uttered if that sentence contains relevant perceptual vocabulary. For example, the sentence, “The natural kind property *being a tiger* is visible to Jim in virtue of his current experience” may express a truth when I utter it and a falsehood when you do if our contexts differ in appropriate ways. Jim’s experience is and remains Jim’s experience and is not, for example, relative to our contexts.

To put the central moral the way Martin might (cf. forthcoming: Ch.4: 26): Where philosophers are tempted to appeal to the contrast between the sensory, or observational, and cognitive, or non-observational, perceptual properties they are so induced by being sensitive to this context-sensitivity but mistaking what its import is.²⁴

In conclusion then, I have argued that how richly we ought to describe a stretch of someone’s experience inherently depends on our folk-psychological interests. Two speakers in different contexts, with different interests, may describe a subject’s experience using exactly the same form of words, with all those words having their same ordinary meanings and yet only one of them speak truly. When it comes to questions like, Do natural kind properties, strictly speaking, characterize the phenomenology of experience or do they enter merely in interpreting our experience? there is no context-independent answer to be given. It is no surprise that, having failed to see this, the debate has seemed so intractable.²⁵

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²⁴ All this, of course, on the assumption that Clarke and Martin would endorse treating the issue of perceptual *features* in a manner analogous to the way they treat the surfaces/objects debate.

²⁵ I have given earlier versions of this paper in Warwick and London. Many thanks to the audiences there and to my respondents on those occasions: Nigel Leary and James Genone. I am also particularly grateful to Anil Gomes, Hemdat Lerman, Rory Madden, Richard Price, John Schwenkler, Charles Travis and members of the Vicious Circle in Oxford. Above all thanks to Mike Martin.

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