

## Visual Perception and Visual Experience

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My interest here is in reports of visual perception, visual hallucination and visual experience of the forms:

- (VP) S sees that p
- (VH) S hallucinates that p
- (VE) It looks to S as if p

By an instance of (VP), (VH) or (VE) I mean any sentence obtained by replacing “S” by a name for a perceiving/hallucinating/experiencing subject and “p” by a declarative sentence. “Sarah sees that there is a red object on her desk” is, for example, an instance of (VP), “Sarah hallucinates that there is a red object on her desk” is an instance of (VH), and “It looks to Sarah as if there is a red object on her desk” is an instance of (VE). Specifically, my interest is in this question: What is the relation between the concept SEES that we express with “sees” in sentences of the form (VP), the concept HALLUCINATES that we express with “hallucinates” in sentences of the form (VH), and the concept LOOKS AS IF that we express with “looks as if” in sentences of the form (VE)?

It seems possible for a case of seeing and a case of hallucinating to involve a common visual experience, so it seems natural to think that LOOKS AS IF is more basic than both SEES and HALLUCINATES, and that the latter two concepts can be given an analysis in terms of the former. One such analysis is the following “causal” theory of perception:

- (CTP) “It looks to S as if p” expresses the brute fact that a certain property of S obtains. S sees that p iff each of the following is true:
- (a) It looks to S as if p;
  - (b) p;
  - (c) The fact that p played the right kind of causal role in bringing about the fact that it looks to S as if p.
- S hallucinates that p iff each of the following is true:
- (a) It looks to S as if p;
  - (d) If it is the case that p, then the fact that p did not play the right kind of causal role in bringing about the fact that it looks to S as if p.

This is not the most concise way of expressing (CTP). If (c) is true then so must (a) and (b), so the analysis of SEES could be expressed more simply by saying that S sees that p iff the fact that p played the right kind of causal role in bringing about the fact that it looks to S as if p. But I want to consider conditions (a) and (b) separately from condition (c), and I want the expression of (CTP) to make those conditions apparent.

It is not interesting that (CTP) claims that conditions (a) and (b) are individually necessary for S to see that p. Most of us will accept, and I will assume, that it is part of our concept SEES that S cannot see that p unless it looks to S as if p, and that S cannot see that p unless it is the case that p: anyone who claims that S sees that p while denying that it looks to S as if p, or while denying that it is the case that p, seems not to understand the concept SEES. Nor is it interesting that (CTP) claims there to be a

further condition necessary for S to see that p - a condition that is not met in cases of true hallucination. If it looks to Sarah as if there is a red object on her desk and there is a red object on her desk, we do not necessarily think that Sarah sees that there is a red object on her desk. We do not think so if Sarah is hallucinating that there is a red object on her desk and it just happens to be the case that there is a red object on her desk - there is some further condition necessary for S to see that p that is not met in such a case. What is interesting is that (CTP) claims that that further condition is some kind of *causal* connection between the fact that p and the fact that it looks to S as if p, and it is this that qualifies it as a “causal” theory of perception.

(CTP) grants that in cases of true hallucination (like the one just considered) conditions (a) and (b) are true even though S does not see that p. Indeed, that is its motivation for introducing condition (c). It also grants that in cases of false hallucination condition (a) is true even though condition (b) is false - that it looks to S as if p even though it is not the case that p. Such is the case when it looks to Sarah as if there is a red object on her desk but there is no object at all on her desk - she is having a false hallucination. According to (CTP), cases in which S sees that p, or S has a true hallucination that p, or S has a false hallucination that p are all cases in which it looks to S as if p. What distinguishes them is whether or not p is true and, if so, whether or not the fact that p is playing the right kind of causal role.

This feature of (CTP) has been used to argue against it.<sup>1</sup> (CTP) takes the concept LOOKS AS IF as more basic than that of SEES and that of HALLUCINATES, and specifies the conditions under which S sees that p and S hallucinates that p in terms of the condition under which it looks to S as if p. What can it say about this last condition? It cannot specify it in terms of the other two, for to do so would render the analysis circular. It must be a condition that can be causally effected by the fact that p, but one that can obtain whether or not it is the case that p and, if so, whether or not the fact that p has a causal effect on it. So we must be able to specify the conditions under which it looks to S as if p independently of the way the world is and of the way the world causally effects those conditions. I find the argument against (CTP) that I have in mind difficult to express clearly (perhaps because it is mistaken), but this is it: We take it that our visual experiences (among others) are a source of knowledge about the world. But according to (CTP) it can look to S as if p regardless of the way the world is, and if that is true then we cannot take our visual experiences to be a source of knowledge about the world. So (CTP) is false. (There is a similar argument based on the content of our beliefs rather than on our knowledge of the world, but I shall not consider that here.)

Disjunctive theories of perception claim to avoid this objection. They take the concepts SEES and HALLUCINATES as more basic than that of LOOKS AS IF, and specify the conditions under which it looks to S as if p in terms of the conditions under which S sees that p and S hallucinates that p. Here is one such theory:

(DTP) “S sees that p” expresses the brute fact that a relation holds between S and p, so that, in particular, if S sees that p then it must be the case that p. “S hallucinates that p” expresses a brute non-relational fact about S, and may be true even though it is not the case that p. It looks to S as if p iff one of the following is true:

- (a) S sees that p, or

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Snowdon (1980-1).

(b) S hallucinates that p.

We can think of one difference between (CTP) and (DTP) in terms of their ontological commitments to truth-makers. According to (CTP), if “it looks to S as if p” is true then there is one thing that makes it true - there is a single truth maker for it. And if “S sees that p” is true or “S hallucinates that p” is true then part of what makes them true is that it looks to S as if p - they have a common truth maker; each is made true, in part, by the fact that it looks to S as if p. In cases of seeing and hallucinating in which it looks to S as if p we have the same state of affairs being brought about in different ways. According to (DTP), reports of seeing and hallucinating have no common truth maker - if it is true that S sees that p then what makes it true is the obtaining of a *relation* between S and p, if it is true that S hallucinates that p then what makes it true is the obtaining of a *non-relational* property of S, and the obtaining of a relation is quite a different thing from the obtaining of a non-relational property. And, according to (DTP), if “it looks to S as if p” is true then there is not one thing that makes it true. What makes it true is *either* that S sees that p *or* that S hallucinates that p - there are two things that can make it true, and what makes it true must be one of them. In cases of seeing and hallucinating in which it looks to S as if p we have the obtaining of two quite different states of affairs.

How is (DTP) thought to avoid the objection raised against (CTP)? The objection is that, according, to (CTP), visual experiences truly describable as “it looks to S as if p” can only be made true by a state of affairs that can obtain even if it is not the case that p, and so these experiences cannot be a worthy basis for knowledge. But according to (DTP), these experiences can be made true (in cases of seeing) by states of affairs that can only obtain if it is the case that p, and so they can be a worthy basis for knowledge. So (DTP) is not open to the same sceptical objection as (CTP).

I am not attracted to (DTP), for three reasons. First, as far as I can see it is no more immune to the sceptical objection than is (CTP). Although, according to it, visual experiences in which it looks to S as if p *can* be made true by states of affairs that can only obtain if it is the case that p, it does not follow that any of them actually *are* – it may well be, as far as we can tell from our visual experience, that all such experience is hallucination – made true by states of affairs that can obtain even if it is not the case that p. And this is just the charge that is made against (CTP). Having said that, I don’t see how the sceptical objection is a problem for *either* theory. We should grant that if (CTP) is right then our visual experience, if it is not causally connected to the world in the right kind of way, is not a source of knowledge. But we should also grant that if it *is* causally connected in the right kind of way then it *is* a source of knowledge. The conclusion of the sceptical objection should not be that visual experience *is* not a source of knowledge, but that it *might* not be a source of knowledge. Similarly, we should grant that if (DTP) is right then our visual experience, if it is a case hallucination rather than perception, is not a source of knowledge. But we should also grant that if it *is* a case of perception then it *is* a source of knowledge. Here too, the conclusion of the sceptical objection should not be that visual experience *is* not a source of knowledge, but that it *might* not be a source of knowledge. Second, I find (DTP) explanatorily unsatisfying. According to it, cases of perception in which it looks to S as if p and cases of hallucination in which it looks to S as if p have nothing in common – they just both fall under a higher level category described by “it looks to S as if p”. Why? (CTP) offers an answer to this: they have something in common – they are both cases in which obtains

the state of affairs in which it looks to S as if p. Other things being equal, and for all I have said so far they are, explanation beats no explanation. Third, it would be nice to give an analysis of “it looks to S as if p” that covers not just instances of reported perceptual experience but also instances of the form “it looks to S as if that coat is expensive”, “it looks to S as if the argument is valid”, and so on. But I don’t see how (DTP) can be extended to cover new cases without simply adding a disjunct for each case that we want it to cover. But this would make it even more explanatorily unsatisfying than I already find it. If we can find an analysis that explains, or purports to explain, *why* we use the same form of words to describe each case – why we think they are members of the same higher-level category – then we should reject (DTP) in favour of that. I think, as I hope to show next, that (CTP) holds more hope of being extended into such an analysis.

Despite having judged (CTP) more favourably than (DTP), I think it can be improved. Imagine a world in which whenever it looks to S as if p it is always the case that p, but only ever because God is the common cause both of p being the case and of it looking to S as if p – there is no causal connection between p being the case and it looking to S as if p. In such a world, S has visual experiences, the content of those experiences is always true, and it is not a matter of chance that it is always true – God ensures that it is. I think that such a world is conceptually possible, and I’m inclined to think that in such a world S sees. But if (CTP) is right then I ought not to – S cannot see that p because the fact that p never plays the right kind of causal role in bringing it about that it looks to S as if p (it plays no causal role in bringing this about at all). I think this is a genuine problem for (CTP).

But not a devastating one. I want to propose a theory that is in the spirit of (CTP), but one that I think is more general and that can thereby avoid this problem. I suggest that we think of visual experience as a kind of evidence. To say that it looks to S as if p is to say that S has a particular kind of evidence that p, call it “visual evidence”. To say that S sees that p is to say that this evidence is reliable (and, therefore, true). To say that S hallucinates that p is to say that this evidence is unreliable (whether or not it is true). I propose, then, that we analyse our concepts of visual experience, visual perception and visual hallucination in terms of the more basic concepts of evidence and reliability:

(ETP) “It looks to S as if p” expresses the brute fact that S has a certain kind of evidence that p, call it “visual evidence”. S sees that p iff S has reliable visual evidence that p. S hallucinates that p iff S has unreliable visual evidence that p.

(I have chosen the more concise form of expression that I could have used, but didn’t, to express (CTP)). It may be that our concept of reliability is such that reliable visual evidence that p is just evidence that has been causally brought about by the fact that p in the right kind of way. In that case, (ETP) amounts to (CTP). But I think that our concept of reliability is not like that - I think that in the world described above in which God acts as common cause S has reliable visual evidence, and that this and the truth of (ETP) explains why I’m inclined to think that S sees. So I think that (ETP) does not amount to (CTP). You and I may agree that (ETP) gives a correct analysis of SEES, but disagree in particular cases about whether or not S sees because we disagree in those cases about whether or not S’s visual evidence is reliable. Disagreements like these are not marks

against (ETP). That it can accommodate such disagreement is why I take it to be more general than (CTP), and one reason that I take it to be better than (CTP).

I said above that it would be nice to have an analysis of “it looks to S as if p” that applies not just to cases of visual experience but also to cases of the form “it looks to S as if that coat is expensive”, “it looks to S as if the argument is valid”, and so on. I have suggested that in the case of visual experience we take “it looks to S as if p” to be saying that S has a certain kind of evidence that p. The extension to more general cases is obvious:

(L) It looks to S as if p iff S has evidence that p.

According to (L), to say that it looks to S as if that coat is expensive is to say that S has evidence that that coat is expensive, and to say that it looks to S as if the argument is valid is to say that S has evidence that the argument is valid. There are different kinds of “looks” that S can have, one of which she has when she has a visual experience. (L) can explain this - there are different kinds of evidence that S can have, one of which is visual experience.

It would also be nice to have an analysis of “S sees that p” that applies not just to cases of visual perception but also to cases of the form “S sees that that coat is expensive”, “S sees that the argument is valid”, and so on. It may be possible to modify (CTP) to achieve that, but I suspect that our concepts of visual experience and causation are too narrow to allow extension into an elegant theory that can cover all of the cases that we’d like it to. But our concept of evidence has sufficiently broad application to allow the more general analysis of “it looks to S as if p” given by (L), and our concept of reliability is also, I think, sufficiently broad in application to allow the following analysis:

(ETS) S sees that p iff S has reliable evidence that p.

According to (ETS), to say that S sees that that coat is expensive is to say that S has reliable evidence that that coat is expensive, and to say that S sees that the argument is valid is to say that S has reliable evidence that the argument is valid. There are different kinds of “sees” that S can do, one of which she does when she has a visual perception. (ETS) can explain this - there are different kinds of evidence that S can have, one of which is visual experience.

So, by thinking of visual experience as a kind of evidence and visual perception as a kind of reliable evidence we can think of instances of each as instances of a more general phenomenon, and thereby offer a unified account of the meaning of *all* statements of the form “it looks to S as if p” and “S sees that p”. What I have said here is little more than motivation. The matter needs to be examined in much more detail.

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