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John R. Searle. Seeing Things As They Are

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Book Reviews:

John R. Searle. *Seeing Things As They Are* (Oxford University Press, 2015). ISBN 978-0-19-938515-7. \$24.95. Reviewed by Michael S. Dauber.

John Searle is no newcomer to philosophy: he has written several influential books on the philosophy of mind, language, and perception, and is perhaps best known for his Speech Act Theory and his work on intentional consciousness. *Seeing Things As They Are*¹⁶³ picks up on his earlier theory of intentionality established in 1983¹⁶⁴, expanding the theory to include an account of perception and how the nature of objects helps determine our subjective experiences. Searle's theory is well argued, well written, and accurately and methodically responds to the errors of some of the most famous and influential philosophers of consciousness and epistemology.

The first several chapters set up an evaluation of the philosophical landscape before our current research. Searle is primarily concerned with individuals that support Conceptual Dualism, the view that we never actually perceive real objects or the real world itself, but only ever perceive sense data, or representations of the things themselves. This interpretation of the world leads some to conclude that the world itself is ontologically subjective, meaning that the world is essentially composed of subjective experiences. This either leads one to worry that what they are experiencing is not actually the way the world objectively is (i.e. the sense data does not accurately depict the world), or that the world actually *is* just a collection of subjective sense data

without any ontologically objective objects. Instead of perceiving objects, we only perceive sense data. Support for Conceptual Dualism turns on the skeptical worry that one is constantly in a state in which one may or may not be hallucinating: it is always possible that what I see is simply a hallucination. Since the subjective experience is the same in both the veridical case in which the sense data corresponds to the actual object *and* in the hallucination, in which there is no object, we must treat the two experiences as the same. Thus the only conclusion one can draw is that you only ever see sense data since that is what is present in both cases.

Searle labels this “The Bad Argument”¹⁶⁵ because it commits a fallacy most philosophers have traditionally overlooked. The traditional argument uses the notion of “awareness of” or “consciousness of” in two senses: one can be aware of an object, in one instance, or aware of the experience or sensations the object gives you (Searle uses the example of pain caused by an object without necessarily being aware of the object itself).¹⁶⁶ The difference between the hallucination and the veridical case is thus clear: in the veridical case I am aware of the object itself and the intentional content, whereas in the hallucination I still have intentional content but *there is no object to be aware of*. The result of such a fallacy leads one to reject Direct Realism, the notion that we perceive ontologically objective objects themselves that give us subjective experiences, in favor of Conceptual Dualism or Disjunctivism.

Having thus done away with Dualism, Searle proceeds to explain his own theory of perception and intentional consciousness. With the worry over sense data removed, we can easily conclude that we directly perceive the objects themselves,

¹⁶³ John R. Searle. *Seeing Things As They Are* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁶⁴ John R. Searle. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁶⁵ John R. Searle, *Seeing Things As They Are*, 20.

¹⁶⁶ Searle, 24.

which, as Searle points out, makes intuitive sense and corresponds to our implicit conventional and operational wisdom as we go through life. When we fix our intention on an object (meaning we direct our conscious perception at something), we directly perceive the ontologically objective object. It is crucial to note, however, that our experience of that object is not itself objective, which explains why we may be misled, as skeptics have argued. Instead, we have ontologically subjective experiences of ontologically objective objects and features of the world. But if our experiences are subjective, how can we know what properties the objects possess? Because the experiences are causal in the sense that our perception of the objects causes us to have a certain experience, Searle argues that for an object to have a certain property it must be capable of causing that subjective experience. Searle presents the example of the color red: for an object to be red, it must be capable of causing subjective experiences of red. At the same time, a person with spectrum inversion might see this object as green, and so unless there is one objectively correct way of seeing (which is largely in doubt), then the object is also green in the sense that it is capable, in certain cases, of causing a perceiver to experience a green object. What is always the case in veridical situations, however, is that there *is* an object of perception; in hallucinations, we are having subjective experiences without an object of perception.

The final section of the book focuses on refuting the position known as Disjunctivism, the view that there is no content in common between veridical perception and hallucinations. The theory is posed as a way to avoid the Cartesian skeptical worry that we are all enjoying a grand hallucination without refuting the fallacious sense data theory. However, as Searle notes, this theory runs completely

counterintuitive to our own experiences of hallucinations, does not resolve the skeptical worry, does little to explain how perception operates, and is in some sense impossible: the Disjunctivist must show that the content in each case is different, which he cannot do, nor has he attempted to do.¹⁶⁷

There are only two deficiencies that stick out in Searle's work. The first is that, while stating that hallucinations are subjective experiences without an object of perception, he does little to explain *why* they occur or how to distinguish between veridical cases and illusions (although the latter, he says, is not his project)¹⁶⁸. In the classic brain-in-a-vat scenario, the hallucination is simply due to being fed a specific subjective experience. But what about other situations? We are left to assume that in cases of mental illness some internal physical or cognitive error causes the experiences without us actually perceiving an object. The same holds true in what he calls "recreational"¹⁶⁹ cases: the illicit substance causes subjective experiences without an object of perception.

The other flaw lies in his account of how we distinguish between familiar, identical objects (for example, between my car and an identical copy). Although there is no feature of the object itself that enables us to distinguish between the two, Searle asserts that repeated exposure to one of the objects and the experiences it causes somehow gives one a feeling that one is familiar, and thus belongs to them. This is perhaps the weakest moment in the book: he admits in the identical case that there is no perceptual difference, but we recognize one simply because it is ours. There is no perceptual claim involved in such a

¹⁶⁷ Searle, 173.

¹⁶⁸ Searle, 217-218.

¹⁶⁹ Searle, 163.

distinction, but rather a claim about metaphysics that we have no way of explaining. In addition, the argument falls apart insofar as it is purely theoretical: he uses the example as a case of something that occurs in real life, when in fact no two objects are identical; I recognize my car because of its license plate, a stain near the gas cap, and two small dents in the bumper. If there were truly an identical car next to it, I would have no earthly way of distinguishing between the two and would need to resort to an arbitrary choice.

Overall, Searle presents a clear, disciplined approach to perception and intentionality that is well worth the read. While the work has been described as well-written and easily accessible to the average reader, professional philosophers may find this book extremely repetitive: Searle often repeats the same distinctions unnecessarily in successive paragraphs or sections, making it easier for the average reader to follow but monotonous and redundant at times for experienced philosophers. As far as the theory goes, however, Searle's work is excellent and just may change how we think about traditional philosophies of perception.