

Comments on ‘Naïve Realism and Illusion’ by Boyd Millar

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Given the poor reputation of the argument from illusion, it is surprising that a considerable amount of effort has lately been focused on the rehabilitation of its primary tactic. Paralleling classic versions of the argument¹, some prominent contemporary philosophers have proposed that substantive facts about the nature of perceptual experience follow from the idea that illusions and non-illusory perceptual experiences can, in some contexts, be indistinguishable.² Boyd Millar’s essay³ continues in this vein, aiming to undermine the pretensions of naïve realism as a theory of perceptual experience by arguing that its central claims are incompatible with the task of providing an explanation of illusions. Since illusions are supposedly well accounted for by alternative theories, such an argument, if sound, is meant to be a devastating blow to naïve realism. While I am not unsympathetic to the idea that naïve realism might be false (the most compelling arguments I know of in its favor rest on quite substantive assumptions about the nature of empirical knowledge), all of the fuss about illusions leaves me quite unmoved. In this comment on Millar’s essay, I will explain why.

Given the interest in illusions among opponents of naïve realism, one would think that that we are in a possession of a theory-neutral definition of the target phenomenon. Are we? According to Millar: “Both illusions and hallucinations are non-veridical experiences ... When you have an illusory perceptual experience you still perceive a particular object but that object does not have at least one of the properties you experience it as having” (p. 609). We should take note that if this characterization of illusions as “non-veridical experiences” were accurate, Millar’s argument could have been much shorter, for the distinctive explanatory strategy of naïve realism is to claim that veridical/non-veridical distinction has no application to perceptual experiences, illusory or otherwise.⁴ Naïve realists are committed to denying the very possibility of illusions so defined.

What naïve realists would not deny is that perceptual experience can sometimes be misleading. This suggests a neutral starting point for debate: can naïve realism explain why some perceptual experiences are misleading, and others are not? To answer this question, we need to understand a bit more about the naïve realist analysis of perceptual experience. According to naïve realism, perceptual experience is constituted, at least in part, by perceived objects and their properties.⁵ The motivations for this claim are phenomenological and epistemic. To hold otherwise, naïve realists argue, is to forgo the common sense idea that an experience of objects and properties other than those presently perceived would be an entirely different experience (whether one recognized this or not), and would afford knowledge of something other than what the present experience does. Recast in non-question begging terms, the challenge that Millar and other defenders of contemporary arguments from illusion wish to press is this: how can a theory that analyzes perceptual experience as constituted by perceived objects and properties explain why perceptual experience sometimes leads us to form false beliefs? To his credit, Millar focuses his challenge on an issue that is central to debates between defenders of naïve realism and their detractors: the nature of appearances.

¹ E.g., Ayer 1940.

² See Byrne 2009, Siegel 2010, and more cautiously, Schellenberg 2011.

³ Millar 2015.

⁴ Some naïve realists (e.g., Kennedy 2009, Logue 2014) accept the veridical/non-veridical experience distinction. As I discuss elsewhere (Genone forthcoming), this approach makes naïve realism a variant of competing representationalist views, rather than a genuine alternative to them.

⁵ See Campbell 2002, Ch. 6, and Martin 2004.

When one encounters an object in the surrounding environment by becoming perceptually aware of it, there is invariably some way that it appears. An object's appearance, given the circumstances in which it is perceived, is that in virtue of which we come to know what the object is like: what properties it has, what behaviors it exhibits, what changes it is undergoing. Importantly, the circumstances in which an object is perceived are variable: one is not always at the same distance from the object, facing the same side, in the same lighting, with the same level of background noise, and so on. These factors are responsible for objects appearing various ways, depending on the circumstances. According to opponents of naïve realism, variation in appearances is a feature of psychological reality: it is explained entirely in terms of facts about the consciousness of the perceiver. Naïve realism, however, is in a position to claim that appearances are mind-independent. According to this approach, the phenomenology of perceptual experience is explained by the appearances of objects and properties perceived, given the circumstances in which they are perceived. It is the variation in the circumstances in which perception takes place that accounts, at least in part, for variation in appearances.⁶

Among the central aims of Millar's essay is to criticize the view of appearances just sketched as inadequate to explain the phenomenon of an appearance being misleading. His first complaint is that appearances understood in this way do not reliably mislead, so cannot by themselves provide an account of misleading experiences: "what makes an experience illusory is...that you perceive a look characteristic of a kind of which the object you perceive is not an instance—perceiving this look is sufficient for suffering the illusion. But whatever looks are, perceiving such properties is not sufficient for suffering an illusion" (p. 621). Millar points out that in many cases we are perfectly capable of knowing which properties an object possesses despite the variation in its appearance across circumstances, so the naïve realist needs to say more to distinguish what qualifies an appearance as a misleading one.

The mistake here, however, is to think that there must something about an appearance itself that makes it misleading. This is not a claim that a naïve realist is committed to—what determines whether the beliefs one forms upon perceiving an object are true or not is whether one understands how an object with those properties appears in that sort of circumstance. Whether the experience of an object is misleading or truth-conducive depends upon the perceiver's understanding of appearances, not on anything about the object's appearance by itself. One guide to whether an appearance is likely to mislead is the subject's familiarity with the circumstance: if the perceiver has never seen an object with a particular set of properties in this lighting, or from this distance, this may make it more difficult to recognize the object's properties for what they are.

In discussing his objections to naïve realism, Millar employs a curious bit of terminology by speaking of "the property an illusory experience concerns" (p. 622). What exactly does this locution mean? For a naïve realist, there is the property that is perceived, the way that property appears in the present circumstances, and the property the subject judges the object to have. Whether an experience is misleading is a matter of whether or not perceiving the object's appearance prompts a judgment corresponding to the perceived object's actual properties. Millar claims that naïve realism cannot account for illusions because neither the perceived property, nor its appearance, explains why the subject is misled. This is surely correct, but objecting on these grounds is a bit like complaining

⁶ I develop the account briefly described here in considerably more detail in Genone 2014. For related proposals, see Kalderon 2011 and Travis 2004. An important predecessor of these views is that of Austin (1960).

that the complexity of the crime all by itself should explain why Holmes solved the case, but Inspector Lestrade did not. Don't we need to know something about Holmes and Lestrade?

Perhaps one would like to hear something more about the knowledge of appearances that allows a perceiver to recognize an object's properties in some circumstances, but not in others, and this is certainly a topic to which more attention is due. But I doubt that concerns about the prospects for an account of such knowledge are a barrier to the acceptance of naïve realism. Rather, I suspect that the difficulty that Millar and others face in appreciating the distinctiveness of the approach that naïve realism offers has its source in the modern conception of consciousness, going back at least to Descartes. To anyone who takes consciousness to be an event unfolding within the mind, it will be incomprehensible that the way the world is could possibly be constitutive of perceptual experience. This perhaps explains why arguments against naïve realism are so often question begging, relying as they do on definitions of the basic phenomena that naïve realists reject. If so, one might hope that as naïve realism continues to attract attention, somewhat less of it will be spent on details about its explanatory payoffs (or lack thereof) from within the framework of our current normal science (i.e., representationalist theories of intentionality and standard characterizations of consciousness as "what an experience is like"), but instead will focus more on the fundamental issues naïve realism raises about the very nature of consciousness and empirical knowledge.

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