

Comment on 'Experimental Ordinary Language Philosophy'

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Fischer *et al.*'s paper presents a novel and exciting attempt to experimentally vindicate the kind of ordinary language philosophy associated famously with J.L. Austin (and sometimes with Wittgenstein). Fischer *et al.*'s basic idea goes like this: competent speakers draw stereotypical inferences licensed by dominant senses of polysemous words; these default stereotypical inferences are sometimes inappropriately made when the word is used in another, less common way; this happens, e.g., when the dominant sense is used to interpret less common uses; such inappropriate inferences cause apparent philosophical paradoxes like the Argument from Illusion to arise. Uncovering our propensity to make and accept these contextually inappropriate inferences, according to Fischer *et al.*, thereby provides a way of dissolving the 'problem of perception'.

The stereotypical inferences fundamentally relevant to Fischer *et al.*'s project are inferences from the appearance verbs 'looks', 'appears', and 'seems' to ascriptions to perceivers of doxastic states (belief and judgement): that is, 'X looks F to S', 'X appears F to S', and 'X seems F to S' \rightarrow *S is inclined to judge that X is F*. According to Fischer *et al.*, such inferences are made and accepted automatically even when appearance verbs are used in the so-called 'phenomenal' sense, where they are intended to only ascribe experiential states to subjects. For example, according to the phenomenal sense of 'see', it is true that 'Macbeth sees the dagger in front of him' even though there is no dagger to be seen, and Macbeth need not believe that there is. Applying this to the Argument from Illusion, Fischer *et al.*'s key thought is that presentations of the Argument involve contextually inappropriate stereotypical inferences from phenomenal uses of appearance verbs to doxastic conclusions.

Taking as an example of an illusion the tilted penny that appears elliptical, Fischer *et al.* present a traditional version of the Argument as follows:

1. When a subject looks at a round coin sideways, the coin appears elliptical to her.
2. When a subject looks at a round coin sideways, she is not (directly) aware of the round coin.
3. When a subject looks at a round coin sideways, she is (directly) aware of *something*.
4. By (2) and (3), the subject is then (directly) aware of something other than the round coin (namely, a 'sense-datum').

'Appears' in premise 1) is intended to be understood in the phenomenal, non-doxastic sense. However, due to automatic but stereotypical inferences, people typically conclude inappropriately that the subject believes or judges that the object viewed *is* elliptical. This contextually inappropriate inference in turn licenses the inference to premise 2): given that the subject believes or judges that there is something that *is* elliptical and the round coin is not, the subject must not believe there is a round coin. If the subject does not believe there is a round coin, the subject does not know there is a round coin. As epistemic features are very strongly associated with the word 'aware', people typically conclude

automatically that the subject is not aware of the round coin. Moreover, the use of the common qualifier in the Argument, 'directly', according to Fischer *et al.*, strengthens this conclusion instead of weakening it, because it imposes the stronger requirement that the knowledge be acquired without inference.

This analysis is extended to modern versions of the Argument from Illusion that appeal to the so-called Phenomenal Principle: 'Whenever something appears a shape, size, or colour F to observers, they are (directly) aware of something that actually is F'. Appealing to the Phenomenal Principle is supposed to provide an independent means to the positive conclusion that we are (directly) aware of something other than the round coin.

According to Fischer *et al.*, there are two ways of interpreting the Phenomenal Principle: literally, according to which there really is something that has the relevant shape, size, or colour; and metaphorically, according to which it merely looks like something has the relevant shape, size, or colour, but there is no commitment to whether it actually has that property. The Argument from Illusion requires the literal interpretation of the Phenomenal Principle, but Fischer *et al.* argue that this principle only appears intuitively plausible if we presuppose the 'negative' conclusion of the Argument (premise 2 in the traditional argument above), namely that we *not* directly aware of the physical object; but if this is right, then it cannot legitimately be appealed to as a premise in the argument for this conclusion.

This is an incredibly rich paper that raises a wide range of fascinating questions. The paper develops a psycholinguistic explanation of when and why even competent speakers make inappropriate stereotypical inferences. Cross-linguistic experiments provide evidence of inappropriate doxastic inferences from appearance-verbs. The empirical findings are deployed to develop the diagnostic analysis of the Argument from Illusion we outlined. Here, we just want to raise two concerns about this specific philosophical application:

1. The overarching aim of the paper is to contribute towards the project of showing how experimental analysis can help to dissolve traditional philosophical puzzles like the Argument from Illusion. However, one general concern is whether the Argument from Illusion *does* seem to cognitively dissolve even after you know about these stereotypes in the way you might expect if it truly were the result of such confusions.

In earlier work Fischer and Engelhardt (2016) present this example of how inappropriate stereotypical inferences can cause confusions and problems:

(R) A young man and his father had a severe car accident. The father died, and the young man was rushed to hospital. The surgeon at the emergency room refused to operate on him, saying, 'I can't. He's my son.'—How is this possible?

The confusion motivating R's final question is that we have assumed the surgeon is a man. Once we know we have made this assumption, it is easy to see 'the problem' and the paradox vanishes. No confusion remains, and it is no longer intuitive that the scenario is impossible due to the fact that the father died and so cannot be the surgeon.

Now consider the Argument from Illusion. Once we know that there is a

tendency to associate looking, seeming, and appearing with believing and thinking does that really help? More generally, once we know Fischer *et al.*'s story for how the Argument is the result of inappropriate stereotypical inferences does the Argument vanish, seen for what it is—a mistake? Does the Phenomenal Principle seem less intuitive? It is not clear that it does.

One might respond that the relevant confusions are so ingrained that simply knowing the relevant stereotypes is not sufficient to cause the Argument to cognitively dissolve for most people. However, in reply, if the Argument does not dissolve when the relevant stereotypical mistakes are known, then the question is what proof do we have that the argument is really the result of such inappropriate stereotypical inferences in the first place? Just because people have a tendency to make such errors does not mean that such errors are what explains why philosophers have endorsed the Argument.

2. This brings us to our second comment: proponents of the Phenomenal Principle do not simply claim that it is something that is intuitively plausible as a general abstract principle in and of itself which could be easily undermined by looking at our language; they claim that it is supported by reflection on experience. The sense-datum theorist H. H. Price, for example, says the following:

When I say 'This table appears brown to me' it is quite plain that I am acquainted with an actual instance of brownness (or equally plainly with a pair of instances when I see double). This cannot indeed be proved, but it is absolutely evident and indubitable. (Price, 1932, p. 63)

Price is inviting the reader to carefully attend to a particular perceptual experience, and he is assuming that their phenomenal judgement will support the view that there exists something or other that is, say, brown: that there is a phenomenological similarity between the experience of something that is really brown and the experience of something that *merely* appears brown in a particular set of circumstances (e.g. due to the lighting or background).

The force of the intuition can be drawn out in various ways. One way, for example, is by thinking about what is required to produce a realistic depiction of a scene. In his famous presentation of the Argument from Illusion, Russell draws this comparison stating that 'the painter has to unlearn the habit of thinking that things have the colour which common sense says they "really" have, and to learn the habit of seeing things as they appear' (Russell, 1912, p. 2). Although Russell's focus here is on colour, the same applies to shape and size. So, the painter who wants to depict a tilted penny, for instance, needs to represent the penny by drawing an ellipse. One way of understanding the appeal to the 'painterly' or 'analytic' attitude is as an inference to the best explanation of how certain images are able to represent objects in the world. The two-dimensional image represents the three-dimensional scene, because it represents properties that are also present in our experience of the three-dimensional scene.

A slightly different way of bringing out the force of the intuition is by asking *why* a tilted penny appears the particular way that it does, and not any other way. Given that it *is* round, why doesn't it appear round? And if it doesn't appear round even though it is, then why should it appear elliptical rather than some other non-

round shape? As C.D. Broad remarks, for instance, ‘If, in fact, nothing elliptical is before my mind, it is very hard to understand why the penny should seem elliptical rather than of any other shape’ (1923: 240; cf. Crane and French 2015).

There is a lot that can be said about this kind of attempt to attend to your experience, and whether the phenomenology of the experience so described is accurate. So, for instance, we can disagree about whether tilted pennies *really* appear elliptical (e.g. Schwitzgebel 2006), whether their appearing elliptical is consistent with their simultaneously appearing round, and more generally about whether their appearing elliptical is consistent with our being directly aware of the coin itself—if, for instance, the ellipticality of the coin is a relational, apparent property of *the coin* (and not anything else) that the coin has when viewed from an oblique angle (see e.g. Allen 2019 and Roberts 2016 for further, related discussion). However, these are, at least on the face of it, phenomenological questions and phenomenological disagreements that cannot be explained in terms of stereotypically inappropriate inferences.

References

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