

## THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION RECONSIDERED

**Audre Jean Brokes**  
Saint Joseph's University

The expression “the argument from illusion,” far from designating a unique argument, seems to pick out a constellation of arguments each of which is thought by sense datum theorists to demonstrate that in all cases of putative perception, both actual and merely apparent, sense data are the only objects of which we are immediately aware. Within this constellation, however, the arguments from illusion seem to fall into two broad categories: there are what I’ll call “phenomenological versions” of the argument and “causal versions.” Historically, phenomenological versions of the argument have enjoyed pride of place — A.J. Ayer’s version of the argument typifies this class (Ayer 1956). But more recently, philosophers such as Howard Robinson have developed and defended causal versions of the argument, reflecting, in part, the reasonable belief that the philosophy of perception should remain consistent with developments in neuroscience (Robinson 1994).

Though they differ in many respects, each of the various versions of the argument from illusion has been regarded by sense datum theorists as dialectically decisive — as demonstrating that some version of the sense datum theory must be correct. The following line of thought putatively sustains that dialectical outcome. The argument typically begins by observing an uncontroversial phenomenological fact: no intrinsic feature of a particular sensory experience distinguishes that experience as a perceptual experience as opposed to an ostensible perceptual experience.<sup>1</sup> Perceptual experiences are those experiences that are appropriately related to a physical object that is the object to be perceived, for example having the experience as of a red tomato in the presence of a red tomato where the physical red tomato is appropriately related to the perceiver’s red tomato experience. Ostensible

---

<sup>1</sup> Some philosophers, notably Ryle, claim that perception verbs such as “see” or more generally “perceive” are success verbs that cannot, therefore, be applied to cases of sensory experience that are not properly perceivings or seeings, e.g., to cases of illusion or hallucination. In recognition of this point, I employ the term “ostensible perceptual experience” to cover the latter kinds of cases.

perceptual experiences are experiences that lack the property of being appropriately related to the (putative) object to be perceived, either because there is no such object, or alternatively because even though there is some physical object which is the object of the experience, there is some *other* feature present in the perceptual situation, or some feature that is lacking, in virtue of which the appropriate relation fails to obtain between the experience and the physical object that is the object of perception. This line of thought has led people to suppose that there must be some kind of object, distinct from the physical object of (putative) perception, which is present in the case of both perceptual and ostensible perceptual experiences and which is the object of awareness in both kinds of cases. The existence of such an object would explain, or so it has been thought, the intrinsic indistinguishability of perceptual experiences and ostensible perceptual experiences.<sup>2</sup> But this line of thought, I want to argue, presupposes that the act of awareness ingredient in both perceptual and ostensible perceptual situations is an act of *direct acquaintance* — an act in which, whatever its character, the object of awareness is directly presented to the subject of the experience.<sup>3</sup> This presupposition, however, is not independent of the sense datum theory in the way that it would need to be if the argument from illusion were to provide a decisive argument in support of the sense data theory, or so I shall argue.

If I am correct, then it is not the argument from illusion that “does the work” of establishing the inevitability of the sense datum theory. The argument from illusion is itself driven by a particular view about the nature of immediate awareness and derivatively perception — a view that the sense datum theorist accepts. And hence the argument from illusion has dialectical currency only for those who accept that view about the nature of cognitive awareness. In none of its guises does the argument, by itself, establish the inevitability of the sense datum theory.

It is important to emphasize that I am not here offering a decisive objection against either the argument from illusion or the sense datum theory. My argument is a purely dialectical one, which, I believe, shows that the argument from illusion is in many ways a “red herring.” The central issue to be decided is whether there are acts of direct acquaintance that are ingredient in both perceptual and merely ostensible perceptual experiences. And that is an issue on which the sense datum theory has already taken a stand.

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Cass Weller for assistance in formulating this version of the argument from illusion, which is neutral between the phenomenological and the causal variants.

<sup>3</sup> I have only recently become aware of two earlier papers that make similar sorts of claims (Haymond 1969) (Kiteley 1972). My conclusions are independent of these earlier works.

### **PHENOMENOLOGICAL VERSIONS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION**

Phenomenological versions of the argument from illusion emphasize the phenomenological indistinguishability of cases of actual and merely ostensible perception. Such arguments, for example A.J. Ayer's classic treatment of the argument (Ayer 1956), typically proceed in two stages. In the first stage attention is drawn to the fact that one and the same physical object, for example a straight stick, seems to provide the percipient with contradictory visual appearances under different circumstances. It is pointed out that when placed in water the stick appears bent, but when removed from the water the stick appears straight. Since it is unreasonable to conclude that the stick, the physical object itself, becomes bent when placed in water (or, as the point is sometimes put, that the stick can be both straight and bent), the visual experience (which might be described as a visual experience as of a bent stick) is thought to be delusive, to use Ayer's terminology. But, the argument continues, there must have been something of which the percipient was aware when she had the visual experience as of a bent stick. It is therefore supposed that she must have been aware of a sense datum.

As Ayer correctly points out, particular examples of delusive perceptual experience (what I am calling "ostensible perceptual experiences") establish, if they establish anything, only that in some cases are percipients aware of sense data. The second stage of the argument is designed to establish that in all cases of putative perception, the percipient is immediately aware of sense data. There are a variety of additional premises that can be supplied to generate the desired general conclusion. Most frequently, however, it is pointed out that a) the actual properties of physical objects do not vary depending on the conditions under which those objects are observed, b) the character of sensible experience does vary depending on the conditions of observation, hence physical objects are, in no case, the objects of sensible awareness.

Another version of the phenomenological argument from illusion lends support to the above line of reasoning. The argument from hallucination, as this argument is usually called, draws attention to the fact that under certain circumstances delusive perceptual experiences are commonly taken to be actual perceptual experiences. When I have an experience as of a desert oasis under conditions of great heat, thirst, etc., I will typically suppose that there is, in fact, an oasis before me. Indeed, the conviction that an oasis is present can be so compelling that individuals having such experiences and forming the relevant beliefs have been known to eat sand. When conjoined with premises (a) and (b) above, the argument from hallucination is, like other versions of the phenomenological argument from illusion, thought to demon-

strate that in all cases of putative perceptual experience the object of cognitive awareness must be a sense datum.

I intend the criticism I sketched above to apply to both phenomenological and causal versions of the argument from illusion equally. But the manner in which the argument from illusion tacitly presupposes an important and substantive point about the nature of perception can be most clearly seen by considering the causal argument. For that reason, it will be useful to focus immediate attention on a causal version of the argument.

### CAUSAL VERSIONS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION

Causal versions of the argument from illusion trade on the possibility of imagining cases of actual and ostensible perception which have type-identical proximate neural histories. Specifically, we are asked to imagine circumstances in which the same type of brain process results, under one set of conditions, in perception and, under another set, in mere hallucination, e.g.. The only way to explain this possibility, it is argued, is to suppose that in both cases the percipient must be immediately aware of a sense datum. Robinson's version of the argument is as follows:

1. It is theoretically possible by activating some brain process which is involved in a particular type of perception to cause an hallucination which exactly resembles that perception in its subjective character.
2. It is necessary to give the same account of both hallucinating and perceptual experience when they have the same neural cause. Thus, it is not, for example, plausible to say that the hallucinatory experience involves a mental image or sense-datum, but that the perception does not, if the two have the same proximate — that is, neural — cause.
3. These two propositions together entail that perceptual processes in the brain produce some object of awareness which cannot be identified with any feature of the external world — that is, they produce a sense-datum (Robinson 1994, 151).

It is difficult to assess the force of this argument. Robinson seems to believe that the argument is *as written* deductively valid; he uses the term "entail" to signal the argument's conclusion. I want to suggest that the argument, however, is enthymematic. The suppressed premise is that cases of hallucination involve an awareness of a sense datum. This premise when conjoined with the others does render the argument valid. Since the suppressed premise is one that already supposes that the proper way to understand cases of hallucination is in terms of acts of awareness of sense data, this particular version of the argument should be seen as a form of the generalizing argument that attended the phenomenological versions of the argument from

illusion. Robinson's argument is an argument that establishes (if it establishes anything) that *since* cases of hallucination involve awareness of sense data, "perceptual processes in the brain ... produce a sense-datum" (Robinson 1994, 151). I want to argue that the line of thought employed by Robinson antecedently supposes, however, that the act of awareness of sense data is an act of direct acquaintance in which the sensible features of the object are presented to the cognizer. Let's begin with a closer look at Robinson's argument.

On the one hand, premise one appears to be relatively unproblematic. It asserts, in effect, that the fixing of certain neural facts is causally sufficient for the production of an experience phenomenologically indistinguishable from a (genuine) perceptual experience. The first premise expresses the intuitive plausibility of the general claim "same type of cause, same type of effect."<sup>4</sup> While this claim may not qualify as a logically necessary truth, it is, at least, an extremely secure, arguably empirical, truth — perhaps on the same epistemic footing as the principle of sufficient reason.

Premise two is where the suppressed additional premise is evident. Premise two claims that one and the same explanatory hypothesis must explain equally the experiences associated with both hallucination and perception. This is likewise a not-implausible claim. But the suppressed claim is that hallucinatory experiences are to be explained in terms of awarenesses of sense data. This is not clearly evident in Robinson's formulation. Let me reformulate the argument in the following way, then:

1. It is possible for there to be type identical neural processes which give rise in one case to an hallucination and in another case to a veridical perception, where *qua* experiences, the hallucination and the veridical perception are phenomenologically indistinguishable. (Same neural cause, same phenomenological effect.)
2. In hallucinations, neural processes produce an object of awareness that cannot be identified with any feature of the external world.
3. Since the neural processes that give rise to the hallucination and the (veridical) perception are type identical, whatever hypothesis is employed to explain the production of one experience must apply equally to the other.
4. Therefore, in the case of perceptual experiences, neural processes produce an object of awareness not identical to any feature of the external world.

---

<sup>4</sup> There is independent reason to suppose (given the rest of his theory) that Robinson does not endorse a form of materialism often called "type-identity theory." According to this view, mental states are identical to brain states at the level of types, viz., the same type of mental state is identical to the same type of brain state. Even if Robinson is not supposing some form of this thesis, premise two of his argument (in some form) seems intuitively defensible.

AUDRE JEAN BROKES

But even if all of this is granted to Robinson, the point remains that the argument presupposes that in all cases of putative perceptual experience one is directly aware of an object. But this is a substantive claim not independent of the sense data theory itself.

For the sake of symmetry, I would like to return briefly to the phenomenological version of the argument. The argument, like its causal counterpart, contends that the only plausible analysis of perceptual experience that preserves the phenomenological indistinguishability of hallucinatory and (actual) perceptual experiences is one that supposes there to be sense data. But in establishing that conclusion, proponents of the argument have already foreclosed the possibility that sensory experience does *not* involve immediate awareness or acquaintance with an object at all.<sup>5</sup> And since, it seems, the latter must be admitted as a serious possibility, the phenomenological version of the argument from illusion is likewise dialectically effective only at one remove, so to speak.

The foregoing discussion suggests that there is an important issue, consideration of which logically precedes both forms of the argument from illusion: does perceptual experience involve immediate awareness of or acquaintance with an object or not? If the answer to this question turns out to be “no,” then the argument from illusion loses its dialectical pull. And it suggests, therefore, that this issue must be faced before a decision can be made between the sense datum theory and its competitors.<sup>6</sup>

Audre Jean Brokes  
Saint Joseph's University  
Department of Philosophy  
5600 City Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19131, USA  
brokes@sju.edu

---

<sup>5</sup> One could claim, as Austin sometimes seems to do for example, that perception does involve some sort of immediate awareness while hallucination and illusion do not. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer from *Disputatio* for pointing out this possibility.

<sup>6</sup> This paper was greatly improved by comments from Cass Weller and an anonymous reviewer at *Disputatio*. I thank them both. Mistakes are mine alone, of course.

**References**

- Austin, J.L. 1962. *Sense and sensibilia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayer, A.J. 1956. *The problems of knowledge*. Edinburgh: Penguin.
- Haymond, W.S. 1969. The argument from illusion. *The Modern Schoolman* 46: 109-134.
- Kiteley, M. 1972. The argument from illusion: Objects and objections. *Mind* 81: 191-207.
- Robinson, H. 1994. *Perception*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ryle, G. 1949. *The concept of mind*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books.