

# Hill on mind

Alex Byrne<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Hill's views on visual experience are critically examined.

**Keywords** Chris Hill · Qualia · Visual experience · Appearance properties

**Hill**, n. Imposing mountain of philosophy with dizzying yet instructive views.  
'Just remember, once you're over the Hill you begin to pick up speed.'  
(Schopenhauer<sup>1</sup>)

'The King of France went up the Hill  
With twenty thousand men;  
The King of France came down the Hill,  
And ne'er went up again.' (English Nursery Rhyme)

This comment focuses on the third part of Chris Hill's marvelous collection, *Meaning, Mind, and Knowledge* (2014), which concerns the philosophy of mind. In particular, I will concentrate on two papers in that part, 'Visual awareness and visual qualia' (VA) and 'The content of visual experience' (CE). Together they provide a unified and original account of visual experience.

1. The technical term 'qualia' often appears with little explanation; Hill, however, is (characteristically) explicit:

...perceptual qualia 'are, by definition, the ways that things look, seem, and appear to conscious observers' (VA: 198, quoting Kim 2006: 225)

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<sup>1</sup> Alas, misattributed.

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✉ Alex Byrne  
abyrne@mit.edu

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, MA, USA

Perhaps the dominant use of ‘qualia’ is to pick out properties of experiences. This is different use from Hill’s, since the way something looks is not (typically) a property of an experience. One way the tomato looks is *red*, another way it looks is *round*, so on this use redness and roundness are examples of qualia.<sup>2</sup> Since redness and roundness are properties that things can look to have, we can call them (borrowing Hill’s term) *visual qualia*. Notice that qualia don’t seem to be *mental* properties—or at least, not obviously. (It will turn out that this simple definition isn’t quite right, by Hill’s lights—see sections 3 and 5 below.<sup>3</sup>)

2. Shortly after giving this first characterization of visual qualia, Hill gives a second. It leans on his distinction between the ‘phenomenological sense’ and ‘epistemic sense’ of ‘looks’. He explains the first sense as follows:

There is a sense of ‘looks small’ in which it can be correctly applied both to a toy car that one holds in one’s hand and to a real car that one sees on the road far ahead...When one says that an object looks small to an observer, using ‘looks small’ in this phenomenological sense, one is not claiming that the observer’s perceptual experience supports the judgment that the object really is small. One is not saying that the observer’s experience represents the object as small. Rather one is drawing an analogy between the observer’s current visual experience and the visual experiences he has when [he] is viewing objects that are reasonably close at hand and really are small.

The phenomenological sense of ‘looks’ is also to be found in claims about apparent shape and apparent color. It is permissible to apply ‘looks elliptical’ both to an object that really is elliptical and is perpendicular to the observer’s line of sight, and to a round coin that is slanted away from the observer. Equally, it is permissible to apply ‘looks dark brown’ both to a piece of chocolate and to a portion of a tan wall that is cloaked in shadow. (VA: 198)

In the second, epistemic sense of ‘looks small’, when we say that an object looks small to an observer,

we mean that the observer’s current visual experience provides adequate evidential support for the belief that the object is small. When we have this second sense in mind, we would not be willing to say that a car looks small to an observer if the car is at an appreciable distance from the observer, for when a car is at an appreciable distance from an observer, the observer’s visual experience presents him with “pictorial cues” that are indicative of distance... We can also use ‘looks’ in its epistemic sense to talk about appearances of other kinds. Thus, it is quite appropriate to apply ‘looks round’ to a coin that is tilted away from an observer, and to apply ‘looks tan’ to a portion of a wall that is poorly illuminated, provided that the observer’s visual experience attests to this fact about the lighting. (VA: 198)

<sup>2</sup> For another example of this use see Dretske 1995: 73.

<sup>3</sup> The sentence immediately preceding the above quotation hints that matters are more complex, because it glosses qualia as ‘properties that are *associated with* the ways that objects appear to us when we perceive them’ (197, emphasis added).

Let us use ‘looks<sub>p</sub>’ for the alleged phenomenological sense of ‘look’ (following Hill) and ‘looks<sub>e</sub>’ for the epistemic sense. The interminable puzzle about the look of the tilted coin is then diagnosed as a failure to recognize a lexical ambiguity. With the ambiguity made explicit, the coin looks<sub>p</sub> elliptical (not round) and looks<sub>e</sub> round (not elliptical). And Hill uses the phenomenological sense of ‘looks’ to give his second characterization of visual qualia:

...we can define visual qualia as characteristics that we are aware of in virtue of the ways that objects look<sub>p</sub> to us. (VA: 199)

3. The first characterization of visual qualia (Kim’s, endorsed by Hill) does not explicitly employ the phenomenological sense of ‘looks’, but it is clear that Hill has this sense in mind. And with this clarification made the two characterizations of visual qualia turn out to be pretty much equivalent. What is the visual quale associated with seeing yellow objects in suitable lighting? On the first characterization, it is the way something looks<sub>p</sub> when it looks<sub>p</sub> yellow to us—yellow, presumably. On the second characterization, the visual quale is a ‘characteristic [i.e. property] that we are aware of when something looks<sub>p</sub> yellow to us’ (VA: 200)—again, presumably yellow.

However, Hill never straightforwardly calls this visual quale ‘yellow’; he calls it ‘phenomenal yellow’ instead (VA: 204), the contrast being with ‘objective yellow’ (cf. VA: 229). The implicit suggestion is that to use ‘yellow’ to label a visual quale would either be wrong or misleading. (More on this in section 5.)

In any case, whatever phenomenal yellow is supposed to be, it is, like yellow, a property that environmental objects like lemons can appear to have:

[W]hen an object *x* looks<sub>p</sub> *F* to an observer *y*, *y* is aware of *x* as having a certain property, a property that is invoked by the locution ‘looks<sub>p</sub> *F*.’ (VA: 206)

Hill continues:

I will henceforth speak of this form of awareness as experiential awareness, and I will say that the properties that are objects of experiential awareness, the properties that are invoked by predicates of the form ‘looks<sub>p</sub> *F*,’ are *appearance properties*...visual qualia are appearance properties, and...experiential awareness is the form of awareness that puts us in touch with qualia. (VA: 206)

4. According to Hill, appearance properties or qualia are unusual in a number of respects. For instance:

[W]e are strongly inclined to think that our awareness of qualia is not governed by an appearance/reality distinction...it is impossible for it to seem to one that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red to one without its actually being the case that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red to one.

And:

[W]e are inclined to think that experiential awareness provides us with full access to the essential nature of qualia. Our grasp of them is not perspectival

or limited in any way. They do not have a hidden dimension that experience fails to reveal. (VA: 199)

Because of these and other features of qualia:

[It seems] there is nothing in the physical world that answers to our conception of qualia. Hence, qualia cannot be physical characteristics. The physical world does not exhaust reality. In Jaegwon Kim's apt phrase, there is a 'mental residue'. (VA: 200)

5. Visual experience, according to Hill, 'represents appearance properties' (for the purposes of this comment we can take the idea that visual experience represents properties for granted<sup>4</sup>). We have already seen some hints that the appearance property invoked by 'looks<sub>p</sub> yellow' is not, in fact, yellowness. And on closer examination it clearly isn't. Recalling the quotation in section 2 above: when one sees 'a portion of a tan wall that is cloaked in shadow', and it looks<sub>p</sub> dark brown, Hill does not want to say that one suffers an illusion—the wall really does have the appearance property invoked by 'looks<sub>p</sub> dark brown'. But since the wall is tan, not dark brown, this means that the appearance property is not dark-brownness. (See CE: 221.)

For similar reasons, the appearance property associated with 'looks<sub>p</sub> elliptical' is not ellipticality: the tilted coin, Hill thinks, does have (or could well have) the appearance property associated with 'looks<sub>p</sub> elliptical.' And so this raises a question:

Does [visual experience] also represent properties of other kinds? More specifically, does it also represent the objective correlates of appearance properties—objective sizes, objective shapes, objective colors, and the rest? (CE: 229)

Hill answers by distinguishing two conceptions of experience, one explained in using 'appearance', the other using 'what it's like'. He argues that the first 'is the only notion of visual experience currently in our conceptual lexicon that is in reasonably good shape' (CE: 231). And on that conception, the answer to the question is no:

...visual experience is the realm of appearance: to have a visual experience of an object is for the object to look some way to you—to look small, or to look oval, or to look red...<sup>5</sup>

...it is clear that [this] conception of experience precludes experiential awareness of any characteristics other than appearance properties... (CE: 229)

6. What are visual appearance properties, according to Hill? An apparent color is:

...a color that an item appears to have in virtue of the way in which lighting interacts with the objective color (CE: 221)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Hill-style representationalism is the view that 'perceptual experiences are partially constituted by representations, and also by the representational contents that those representations possess' (CE: 218); 'Representationalism promises to solve the metaphysical conundrum that Kim has called the problem of 'mental residue' (VA: 200).

<sup>5</sup> I.e. to look<sub>p</sub> small, or to look<sub>p</sub> oval,....

<sup>6</sup> This quotation implies that apparent colors are *colors*, and so presumably have corresponding color terms in English (e.g. 'yellow'), which can't be Hill's considered view. Apparent *shapes* and *sizes* are certainly not shapes and size—see the following paragraph.

Hill spends more time giving an account of apparent size. Suppose one sees a distant tree and it looks<sub>p</sub> small. If the tree subtends an angle  $V$  on the retina (for short, ‘subtends visual angle  $V$ ’, then to a first approximation the relevant appearance property is: subtending visual angle  $V$ . But, as Hill notes, if that is right then we often misperceive appearance properties: a brick ten feet away subtends half the visual angle of a brick five feet away, ‘but it does not look half as big as the latter’ (CE: 232). Hill has a (schematic) amendment (CE: 234–235); for present purposes it will be harmless to think of apparent size along the lines of the first approximation.

7. That completes my summary of some of Hill’s main claims about visual experience. The remainder of the paper tries to sharpen some disagreements. Specifically, *contra* Hill:

- A. The idea that our awareness of qualia is not governed by an appearance/reality distinction is quite superficial.
- B. There’s not even the appearance of a ‘mental residue.’
- C. There’s no ‘looks<sub>p</sub>’ sense.
- D. Experience does represent ‘objective sizes, objective shapes, objective colors, and the rest’.

8. First, (A). By saying that ‘our awareness of qualia is not governed by an appearance/reality distinction’ Hill is *not* saying that it is impossible that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red without its actually being the case that the object *is* red. It is our *awareness* of qualia that (‘we are strongly inclined to think’) is not governed by an appearance/reality distinction:

...it is impossible for it to seem to one that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red to one without its actually being the case that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red to one.<sup>7</sup>

What sort of seeming does Hill have in mind? Presumably not *experiential* (*perceptual*) *seeming*. Although it may experientially seem that an object is red, it does not experientially seem that it experientially seems that an object is red.<sup>8</sup> A better candidate is *evidential seeming*, which we may take to be belief, or an inclination to believe. So the claim at issue can be put this way:

It is impossible for one to believe (or have an inclination to believe) that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red to one without its actually being the case that an object looks<sub>p</sub> red to one.

Against this, one might believe that an object in the periphery of one’s visual field looks (or looks<sub>p</sub>) red, only to discover later that it doesn’t (cf. Dennett 1991: 53–54). Of course Hill only says that ‘we are strongly inclined’ to endorse this claim. But as far as I can see any such inclination cuts little philosophical ice, and does not deserve the emphasis Hill puts on it.

<sup>7</sup> Hill offers a different account of the appearance/reality distinction for qualia at VA: 200, but I shall stick to the one expressed by the quotation.

<sup>8</sup> A familiar point from Rosenthal’s discussion of the inner-sense or higher-order experience theory of consciousness (Rosenthal 2005: 5).

9. What about (B), and the ‘mental residue’ (Kim’s phrase) that qualia threaten to leave behind? Qualia, on Hill’s construal of them, do not present themselves as *mental* in any way. They appear to be properties of external objects like lemons and tomatoes, and indeed on Hill’s view they are. Suppose that ‘there is nothing in the physical world that answers to our conception of qualia,’ because they are ‘simple and primitive’ (VA: 204). Qualia, then, are non-physical.<sup>9</sup> But the mental is not defined as the non-physical; the mental and the physical are both characterized positively, primarily by means of examples; this leaves open the possibility of a third category, partly disjoint from the other two. Hill, it seems to me, should have said that Kim’s phrase is *inapt*.

10. As to (C), Hill’s contrast between ‘phenomenological’ and ‘epistemic’ sense of ‘looks’ is a descendant of a similar contrast drawn by Chisholm (1957) and Jackson (1977). They draw a three-way distinction between different ‘senses’ or ‘uses’ of ‘looks/appears’: epistemic, comparative, and noncomparative (in Chisholm’s terminology) or phenomenological/phenomenal (in Jackson’s).<sup>10</sup> Hill’s ‘epistemic’ sense is close to Chisholm’s and Jackson’s.<sup>11</sup> According to Hill, the tilted coin looks<sub>p</sub> elliptical—that is, it looks elliptical in Hill’s phenomenological sense. What do Chisholm and Jackson say?

According to Chisholm:

- a. [S]quare things ‘look diamond-shaped’ when approached obliquely (1957: 44) is true in the *comparative* sense of ‘looks’. Chisholm thinks that a rough paraphrase of (a), understood in the comparative sense, is:
- b. The way square things look when approached obliquely is the way diamond-shaped things look when viewed head-on.

This sounds somewhat similar to Hill’s characterization of his phenomenological sense (see the last sentence of the first quoted paragraph in section 2), but on closer examination they are quite different. First, Chisholm hasn’t really identified a comparative *sense* of ‘looks’, but rather a special *construction* involving a comparison. (b) uses the word ‘looks’ with (apparently) the very same sense or meaning that it has in (a); the difference is simply that the paraphrase has an explicit comparison. It would thus be misleading to give ‘looks’ in (a) a subscript (e.g. ‘looks<sub>c</sub>’) because that suggests a special sense of the word. Further, Hill’s definition of qualia as ‘the ways things look<sub>p</sub>’ is hard to interpret if ‘looks<sub>p</sub>’ is supposed to be replaced by some comparative construction involving ‘looks’ (*what* comparative construction?).

The best Chisholm-Jackson candidate for ‘looks<sub>p</sub>’ is evidently the non-comparative or phenomenal sense. And Jackson, at least, disagrees with Hill: he thinks that in the phenomenal sense the tilted coin does *not* look elliptical:

<sup>9</sup> Hill himself thinks that appearances are misleading, and that qualia are physical.

<sup>10</sup> Chisholm and Jackson both use ‘use’ and ‘sense’ interchangeably.

<sup>11</sup> Although no two are equivalent.

Allowing that the world of sense-data is three-dimensional, enables a simple treatment of the point emphasized by Gilbert Ryle that ‘round plates, however steeply tilted, do not usually look elliptical’. (1977: 103)

As Jackson correctly points out, the most natural way to describe how tilted coins and plates look is ‘round *and at an angle*’ (104); similarly, Hill’s tan wall (section 2) looks tan *and in shadow*.<sup>12</sup>

11. In Hill’s discussion of the phenomenological sense of ‘looks’, there seems to be the suggestion that this sense is only operative in sentences where the complement denotes a basic visual attribute like shape, size, and color (see section 2).<sup>13</sup> Hill does not deny, of course, that ‘looks’ can take a much broader range of adjectival complements. For instance, smileys (e.g. ☺) *look happy*. Similarly, people from Scandinavia often (but by no means always) *look Scandinavian*. Again, Rolexes and luxury watches in general (as well as some cheap knock-offs) *look expensive*. Does ‘looks’ in these constructions bear some *other* sense, perhaps an ‘epistemic’ one?

Standard tests for ambiguity show that ‘looks’ is univocal in these constructions: a yellow smiley looks yellow, and looks happy, and so looks yellow and happy.<sup>14</sup> If Hill’s epistemic and phenomenological ‘senses’ of ‘looks’ are supposed to be different *meanings* (like the different meanings of ‘pen’), then there are no such senses.

Smileys have no emotional lives; they are not happy, and so are not the way they look. Similarly for people who look Scandinavian but aren’t from Denmark, Norway, or Sweden, and cheap watches that look expensive. Are we then to say that a typical visual experience of a smiley, or Renée Zellweger, or a cheap Rolex imitation, is a *visual illusion*, like the Müller-Lyer?

No. A smiley looks happy, but that’s not the end of the story. It looks happy because it looks to have *another* property—one that’s readily detectible by sight but hard to specify with precision. It is that abstract ‘gestalt’ spatial-geometrical property that cartoonists try to instance when drawing a happy person (or happy elf, donkey, or whatever). Let us denote this property by the adjective ‘happy\*’; it is clearly not happiness. Smileys really are happy\*, but are not happy; conversely, one may be happy without being happy\*. The two properties do have some interesting connection, though: restricted to humans, happiness\* is a good indicator of happiness. Similarly for the distinctive Scandinavian and expensive-for-watches gestalts: Renée Zellweger really is Scandinavian\* (she has that visible combination of facial features), despite being born in Katy, Texas, and convincing fake Rolexes are expensive\*.

<sup>12</sup> What about Chisholm? He thinks that the tilted coin ‘looks elliptical’ in the (mis-named) ‘comparative sense’, which amounts to saying that the tilted coin looks the way elliptical coins look when viewed head-on. Since elliptical coins look elliptical when viewed head-on, it follows that the tilted coin looks elliptical. What is the sense of ‘looks’ in the previous two sentences? It must be the non-comparative sense, since Chisholm thinks that the tilted coin looks round in the epistemic sense. But whether Chisholm would accept this consequence is not clear to me.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jackson 1977: 33.

<sup>14</sup> See Thau 2002: 230 and for more discussion Byrne 2009.

Often the adjectival complement of ‘looks’ does not specify a property represented by our visual systems. Plausibly—and here Hill would agree (see CE 229-3)—the visual system is not in the business of representing properties like being happy, being Scandinavian, or being expensive. But (plausibly) sometimes the adjective and the visual system are in harmony: when something looks green, the visual system is representing greenness. This is not, however, something that can be read off the semantics of ‘looks’.

If a visual illusion is a case where the output of the visual system (taken to be a module in the sense of Fodor 1983) is *misinformation*, then seeing a smiley not a case of illusion: the output of the visual system is accurate. We can keep the intuitive explanation of illusions as cases where an object isn’t the way it looks—provided ‘the way it looks’ is restricted to properties like happiness\* and expensiveness\*.

12. Summing up, when something looks F, we may distinguish *two* salient ways it looks: F and F\*. Sometimes Fness and F\*ness are the same property, but often they aren’t. When they aren’t, if x looks F\* and (thereby) looks F, this is a case of illusion only if x is not F\*. What we (typically) *convey* when we say x that looks F is that (inter alia) it looks F\*, but this is not what ‘x looks F’ *means*. A shabby pedagogue, unacquainted with the visual gestalt distinctive of expensive watches, is not prevented from understanding ‘Her watch looks expensive’.

13. Let us put this to work to see what’s going on in the case of the tilted coin. Sometimes ‘F’ can connote different looks, depending on the context. Consider clothing. Ripped, torn and shabby clothing has a distinctive look. A certain distressed pair of jeans with horizontal tears on the legs, for instance, looks worthless. It has that visual appearance characteristic of clothing that’s not even fit for the thrift store. In fact, this pair of shredded jeans retails at \$795 from Dolce and Gabbana. To the fashionistas, the pair of jeans looks expensive: it has that expensive look (for jeans), just as Porsches have that expensive look (for cars). If Jack says ‘Those jeans look worthless, not expensive’ and Jill says ‘Those jeans look expensive, not worthless’, one can at least count them as both *conveying* truths, whatever the correct account of the semantics.

A similar diagnosis applies to the tilted coin. Elliptical objects have one sort of distinctive look; objects that present an elliptical visual angle, or have an elliptical silhouette, have another sort of distinctive look. The phrase ‘looks elliptical’ might be used to connote the first sort of look (objectively-elliptical) or it might be used to connote the second (silhouette-elliptical). With the phrase used the first way, what is connoted is false; used the second way, what is connoted is true. Although someone who claims that the tilted coin looks elliptical must admit that the coin is not *one* way it looks—namely, elliptical—she may nonetheless insist that she succeeded in conveying *a* way that the coin both looks and is—namely, silhouette-elliptical. Even if we convince her that Ryle is right, and the tilted coin does *not* look elliptical, this conveyed truth is still available as a consolation prize.

14. The practice of painting and drawing demonstrates that we can visually detect appearance properties, albeit with some difficulty. (Whether monkeys could be trained to detect them is another matter.) But appearance properties do not have a proprietary sense of ‘looks’. The semantics of words like ‘looks’ and ‘appears’ give



us no reason to privilege appearance properties in an account of perception—they are just some of the many ways things can look.

15. This brings us to (D), and Hill's claim that we are only experientially aware of appearance properties, in what he thinks is the most natural sense of 'experientially aware'. He reaches this conclusion from the premise that 'visual experience is the realm of appearance: to have a visual experience of an object is for the object to look some way to you—to look small, or to look oval, or to look red' (see section 5). That premise seems very plausible. But Hill needs a particular understanding of it, with 'looks' interpreted as *looks<sub>p</sub>*. If, as argued, there is no such sense of 'looks', the conclusion does not follow.

16. Finally, here is an argument we *are* experientially aware of the objective correlates of appearance properties, in particular shape. Imagine seeing a spinning coin on a table top, illuminated so the coin casts a clear shadow. The coin and the shadow have similar spatial appearance properties, which change as the coin rotates, but look palpably different. In particular, the coin appears to have a constant objective shape, while the shadow appears to be changing shape.<sup>15</sup> Surely this is a point about the realm of appearance, on any understanding of that phrase. Perhaps Hill has an alternative explanation of this sort of phenomenon, but pending that, we can conclude that perception affords experiential awareness of the objective shapes of things.

I have only discussed two papers out of fifteen, and only fragments of those two—a small sample of the rich ore to be mined from *Meaning, Mind, and Knowledge*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, <https://youtu.be/cfe7BR9tOD0>; Hill discusses this sort of example at CE: 222—minus the shadow.

<sup>16</sup> Many thanks to Chris for his stimulating reply to an earlier version of these comments.