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“A Contrast between Two Pictures”: The Case of Perception

Jennifer Hornsby

Birkbeck, University of London, and C.S.M.N., University of Oslo.

Frederick Stoutland's¹ early work in philosophy of action was critical of Donald Davidson. In Stoutland's last published piece (2011c), he brought together Davidson's accounts of action and of perception. He took both accounts to belong in a picture “of how we are related to the world” which “has its roots in the Cartesian revolution”. And he contrasted Davidson's picture with a different one. I think myself that Stoutland's early criticisms of Davidson show up faults in Davidson's picture, not just in his account of action, so that they point to the attractions of the different picture. In the present paper, I explore how this thought bears on the case of perception, specifically the case of vision. At one time perception was understood along the same sort of lines as the account of action that Stoutland criticized: we had “the causal theory of perception”. It can be a question what might replace this causal theory if Davidson's picture is rejected. I shall say just a little towards an answer in what follows, and shall connect what I say with some of Stoutland's thinking over the years.

1. Stoutland presented his “contrast between Davidson's picture and a different one in a paper in which he set out to place G.E.M. Anscombe's book *Intention* in context: the picture different from Davidson's of which he spoke is to be found in Anscombe. Stoutland wrote:

In the Davidsonian picture, the fundamental relations human beings as such—as knowing the world and acting intentionally in it—have to the world are causal. . . We know the objects and events in the world, not directly but through their causing beliefs in us that are about them. . . Our acting in the world is similarly indirect. We act when our beliefs and desires cause bodily movements that cause events outside our body. . . [By contrast, in Anscombe's picture] the knowledge we gain through perceptual experience is of the world directly without the mediation of beliefs. . . Action is also direct. To act is not to have one's bodily movements caused by one's beliefs and desires; it is to exercise the power to move one's body directly and intentionally.

.. The Davidsonian picture has its roots in the Cartesian revolution, which conceived of the physical world as consisting only of what plays a role in the new physics, a physics purged of the teleological, intentional, and normative terms of Aristotelian physics. . . Anscombe's conception of the physical world is not physicalist, and hence her conception of agents, which she took to be physical beings, is not simply physicalist either. This allows the relations of agents to their world to be much closer and richer than causal relations.²

This passage can suggest that Stoutland took the difference between the two contrasting pictures—Davidson’s and Anscombe’s—to be a difference between a picture in which relations between human beings and the world are causal, and a picture in which they are *not*. Certainly Stoutland makes it seem as if person/world relations being “close and rich” might rule out connections of a causal sort between persons and their worlds. Well, it would certainly be right for Stoutland (or anyone else) to rule out relations that are close and rich *and* causal if events were the only causally related things, and if “throughout nature, all events are entirely loose and separate”, as Hume says that it appears to be.³ But if one wishes to quarrel with Hume’s starting point, as Anscombe did, then one will reject the basis of Hume’s account of causality, and then one may think that causality could perfectly well be present in an Anscombian picture. Davidson’s neo-Humeanism is in evidence in his defence of the nomological character of causation. Anscombe’s *anti*-Humeanism is in evidence when she says that we are able to observe causal connections between things if we are able, as we are, to use causal terms (1981, 137). When we observe causal connections, things do not appear to us to be loose and separate.

I suggest, then, that the contrast between Stoutland’s two pictures lines up with a difference between two conceptions of causality. And thinking as I do that Stoutland’s work on action calls attention to the need to introduce a different conception of causality from Davidson’s, I want to see how this different conception belongs in thinking about perception. I start by arguing that certain reason-giving statements that are true by virtue of people’s perceiving things are *causal*-explanatory statements (§2). Then, taking inspiration both from Stoutland’s work (§3) and from Anscombe’s (§4), I argue for another claim about perception. ‘S sees O’ does not record any relation between events, but is to be understood in causal terms nonetheless (§5).

2. When Stoutland says (at the start of the passage) that in Davidson’s picture, we do not know things in the world directly, he relied on Davidson’s having said, in his treatment of perception, ‘Of course there are causal intermediaries’ (Davidson (2001), 144). Davidson thought it simply obvious that, in any case of perception, there is a causal chain having at its start “an object or event in the world” and leading, *via* a sensation, to a belief. “Sensation” was Davidson’s word for a causal intermediary: “sensations are what connect the world and our beliefs”, he said (2001, 142). He was in broad agreement with those whose theories are often taken to face a sceptical problem, a problem that he hoped in his own way to dispel, saying that “we must guard against epistemic intermediaries”.

In order to see that causality’s involvement in perception might be differently understood, one can start from something that Davidson himself wrote: “To perceive

that it is snowing”, he said, “is to be caused (in the right way) by one’s senses to believe that it is snowing by the actual falling snow” (2001, xvi).⁴ The fact that there is no actual mention of sensations here could suggest a causal claim about perception in which no intermediaries feature. Suppose that someone says that it is snowing, and when asked how she knows that it is, or why she believes that it is, she says that she *sees* that it is snowing. About this person, who is aware that it is snowing, one may say that *she believes that it is snowing because it is snowing*. Is not the “because” here *causal*?

Those who think that people’s reasons stand somehow in opposition to any causal notions will answer *No*. They may accept that someone suitably placed, equipped with sight and with certain conceptual capacities has *reason* (indeed all the reason that anyone might need) to think that it is snowing; and that we learn of her reason when told that it is snowing in the bit of the world now visible to her. But they will hold that “She believes that it’s snowing because it is snowing”, gives a *reason*-explanation when said about someone who sees that it’s snowing. And, according to these people, the explanation cannot be causal. Evidently more would need to be said if these people are to be persuaded that there is a causal “because”.

Two points might help. The first is the mundane one that someone’s believing that it’s snowing when she see the falling snow is actually dependent on the contingent fact that it’s then snowing; and it is hard to know how to characterize such dependence except as *causal* dependence of some sort. The other point makes allusion to Davidson’s parenthetical “in the right way”. You might be brought to believe that it is snowing not by seeing the falling snow but by seeing the words “IT IS SNOWING” written by a trustworthy neighbour at a conference, who, unlike you, has a view to the outside from the window. Here one thing leads to another: a path can be traced from the snow—*via* your neighbour’s thought of informing you, her writing as she did, your seeing that she’d written thus—to your believing that it was snowing. In tracing this path, which might be articulated using a series of “because” statements, one says how it came to be that you believed that it was snowing. Why should it be any different when no informer intervenes, so that there are no steps in the path? If one thought that seeing the snow was somehow a different, non-causal sort of affair, then presumably one would think that seeing your neighbour’s words was equally not a causal sort of affair. And then one would need to say, about the example in which your neighbour puts it in writing that it’s snowing, that the causal path from the snow to your believing that it’s snowing reaches a halt following the words coming to be on a page. It would then be as if some sort of magic entered the picture when your eyes participate in what goes on. Causality surely is in play not only when your neighbour informs you that it’s snowing, but also when someone simply sees that it is.

The two points are intended for those who are inclined to deny that the “because” at issue is causal. They may be inclined to deny this even though they allow that we wouldn’t see what we do unless the things we see had effects on our open eyes. What they are opposed to are certain *theories* of perception, according to which our ordinary understanding of perception may be conveyed when sensory experiences are taken to be events at the ends of certain causal chains. I shall come to such theories (§5). But one does not advance any theory if one rehearses the simplistic considerations that I have.

Let me make a final point relating to the explanations I have considered here. They have a bearing now on how Stoutland reported Davidson’s view. When the passage I’ve quoted from Stoutland was posted on a website, commentators found fault with Stoutland for a disparity there seemed to them to be between Stoutland’s opinion and Davidson’s own opinion of Davidson’s view of perception.⁵ For Davidson wrote “we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world” (2001, 144), and this can seem to conflict with Stoutland’s report of Davidson as thinking that we do not know the objects and events in the world *directly*. Well, consider now that one’s grounds for saying “She can see that *p* because *p*” might very well be (a) She knows that *p* in that she can see that *p*, and (b) She wouldn’t believe that *p* if she didn’t know that *p*. The conjunction of (a) and (b) provides for the acquisition of *knowledge* in perception without the mediation of belief. *Pace* the commentators, then, Stoutland’s “We know objects .. through their causing beliefs” may attribute to Davidson the contention that beliefs intervene between the world and our knowledge of it. (Compare the contention [not Davidson’s, of course] that sense data intervene between the world and our beliefs about it.) In that case, Stoutland’s point—that, in Davidson’s view, perceptual *knowledge* is, in one good sense, not direct—seems correct. And I think myself that Davidson’s omission of knowledge from a causal story is owed to the conception of causality that Davidson brought to an understanding of perception—the conception which I challenge in §5.

3. I’ve spoken of philosophers who think that people’s *reasons* stand somehow in opposition to any operation of causality. Stoutland was such a philosopher at one time. He didn’t consider what Davidson had to say about perception. But his early opposition to Davidson’s account of action was unreserved.

Davidson once suggested that actions might be caused “through a chain .. that meets standards of rationality” (1980, 232). He made the suggestion in response to the point that someone’s bodily movement might be caused by a belief and desire of hers yet not be her *action*.⁶ Stoutland’s riposte was that “there was nothing for Davidson to mean” by his suggestion (Stoutland 1980, 366). Stoutland failed to see how Davidson’s

understanding of causally related events could allow that a reason a person has to do something might inform any connection between that person's mental states and her bodily movements. And he thought it a mistake in any case to take actions to consist in bodily movements. So Stoutland denied that one could give conditions for an event's being an action in causal terms. But he went further: he denied that statements which say that someone did so and so because she had such and such reasons are causal statements. Thanks to papers which he wrote in the late 1970s and the '80s taking Davidson to task, Stoutland was labelled an "anti-causalist".

Stoutland came to think that he could agree much more with Davidson than he had. Calling the anti-causalist view that he had held "intentionalist", he said "There is a difference between the intentionalist view and Davidson's, but I do not think it runs very deep" (1998, 203). More than a decade on, in papers published in 2011 (a. and b.), Stoutland indicated that neither Anscombe nor von Wright, who hold the intentionalist view, needs to be seen as anti-causalist. Stoutland said that there is an understanding of rational explanation that these philosophers can accept along with Davidson, and that such explanation is causal—is a sort of causal explanation. Stoutland was then no longer an unmitigated anti-causalist, thinking that the intentionalists could share the causal view of Davidson.

For my own part, I have always regarded as unassailable the argument in Davidson's paper of 1963 that the reason-explanations of action he treated there are causal explanations.⁷ And the fact that we find reason-explanation where perception is concerned helps in seeing that there is no need to think that we are outside the causal domain if we are in the domain of reasons. So I welcome the turn away from unmitigated anti-causalism in Stoutland. I have a disagreement with Stoutland nonetheless. For I think that Stoutland's earliest criticisms of Davidson, aimed against the kind of causal story of action Davidson told, hit the mark, and that the difference between Davidson and the intentionalists *does* run deep. The difference as I see it between Davidson and an intentionalist such as Anscombe concerns what is required for a phenomenon to be a causal one. Anscombe held a very different view of this from Davidson. Let me say something about this before returning to the topic of perception.

4. Anscombe's point about the observability of causality, which she made against Humeans, goes hand in hand with her thinking of many verbs as "representative of causal concepts". Her own selection of "transitive verbs of action used in reporting what is observed" contained, among others, "scrape", "push", "wet", "carry", "eat", "burn", "knock over", "squash", "make (e.g. noises, paper boats)" (1981, 137).

Some linguists call verbs such as these *causatives*. One might get to see why they should be so-called, and why Anscombe should call them special causal verbs, by

introducing a word signalling causality into rough paraphrases of sentences containing some of the verbs. Let “CAUSE” be such a word. Then: “A wetted X” might be taken to say that A CAUSED X-to-be-wet (/wetter than it was); “A carried X to his house” to say that A CAUSED X-to-be-at-his-house-by-carrying-it-there. “A squashed X” to say that A CAUSED X-to-be-squashed”. The “CAUSE” which recurs here is not the English word “cause” as that is used with the name of a person as its subject.⁸ Unlike that word, “CAUSE” is not a self-standing notion: it is not intelligible independently of words that it might be used to gloss, which import conceptions of their own of sorts of things that can happen: they are “*special* causal verbs”. The point of introducing “CAUSE” here is simply to bring to the surface that we have an understanding of causality which can be independent of our understanding of any word “cause”, such as that which expresses a relation between events.

There is an important feature of the verbs which “CAUSE” might be used to gloss which shows that they could not introduce event causality. The verbs occur in the progressive—in sentences whose aspect is imperfective. “Mary is wetting the burritos”, “John is carrying the suitcase”, “Fred was scraping the paint off the wall”. If such sentences are true, then a process *is*—or if the tense is past, *was*—going on: there is activity on the part of Mary, John or Fred. Such activity is CAUSING of one or another sort on the part of an agent. And so long as such a process is going on, no pair of events can be discerned which might be supposed to stand in a relation of “cause”.

5. Causal theorists of *perception* of the ’70s and ’80s said “In any case of perception events involving the object which intuitively is perceived are causal antecedents of an experience event involving the perceiver”.⁹ And they attempted to spell out the way in which a chain of events that begins with “events involving O” must proceed if the “experience event” at the chain’s end is to be a perception of O.¹⁰ Evidently these theorists didn’t mean simply to reiterate the empirical facts about the vast numbers of events whose occurrence we take to underpin any case of perception. They were concerned with what it is for a person to see an object. And they took it that a notion of *cause* belonged in a theory about that, not only in such theories as scientists work towards giving.

Various things have been said in providing support for thinking that an understanding of “S sees O” should be given in a *causal* theory. Some have said that if O is seen by S, it “is causally affecting S”, others that it “causes an experience in S”, and others that it is “causally responsible” for something or other—whether for “S’s visual experience”, for “its seeming to S as if he sees O”, or for “the state of affairs of S’s seeing O”.¹¹ Evidently the thought, expressed in these various, ways, is that an object plays some causal role when it is seen. This is not itself a thought about events. And it is

surely questionable whether it can be cast, as the theorists proceeded to cast it, in the language of events. Do we really know what needs to be meant in this context by “an event involving the object”? And do we know how a subject of experience is supposed to be related to “an experience event”?¹²

Still, the thought that O, *qua* object seen, plays some sort of causal role is surely right. And the thought may take one, not to any story about events, but to the idea that “is seen by S” is representative of a causal concept. Certainly “is seen by” behaves differently from any of the causal transitive verbs of action on Anscombe’s list. But perhaps its causal character can still be elicited with a paraphrase. And then one can hardly do better than suggest that “O is seen by S” says that O *CAUSES* S-to-be-as-she-is-if-and-only-if-she-sees-O. Just as before, “*CAUSE*” is not an ingredient of which there is any independent understanding: it is introduced here to try to capture the thought that led to causal theories, put now by taking “see” to be a special causal verb.

An obvious difference between “see” and the transitive verbs of action on Anscombe’s list shows in the need to treat sentences that are grammatically speaking passive (containing “is seen by”) in order to bring “*CAUSE*” into play. This brings another difference to the fore. Whereas if X wets Y or carries Y or scrapes Y, Y has a passive part and simply suffers change, S evidently plays a role of her own when she sees O. It is true that S is not *active* in the manner of an animal subject of one of the verbs of action. Still, S’s power of sight is exercised so long as she sees O.¹³

I said that Anscombe’s transitive verbs of action can occur in sentences with imperfective aspect, so that they may be used to speak of a *process*. One might then wonder whether there is a process of S seeing O (albeit not an activity). But it must be wrong to speak of a process here. “See O” cannot occur in the progressive.¹⁴ It is not surprising that *seeing* is standardly treated as a *state* of mind. Nevertheless S’s seeing O does not belong straightforwardly in the category of states as states are usually conceived. For states, as usually conceived, are *static*: and so long as S sees O, S is a subject of experience, and S’s stream of experience to which her seeing O belongs, can hardly be a simply static phenomenon. One way to appreciate that S’s seeing O is not simply static is to consider that S’s experience of O changes if O perceptibly changes.

Matthew Soteriou captures the fact that S’s seeing O both partakes of the nature of a state and yet is not static by calling it an *occurrent state*. Soteriou argues that:

[C]onscious sensory experience involves the occurrence of phenomenally conscious [processes] and the obtaining of phenomenally conscious “occurrent” states. When such a phenomenally conscious [process] occurs, a phenomenally conscious “occurrent” state obtains [whose] obtaining .. is constitutively dependent on the occurrence of the phenomenally conscious [process].¹⁵

Soteriou's arguments rest upon phenomenological considerations, and he draws conclusions going well beyond anything I have said. My own suggestion now is simply that the phenomenally conscious process involved, on which S's seeing O depends, can be treated as a sort of *CAUSAL* process, and that this is conveyed when "see" is treated as a special causal verb. (Notice that its being a *special* causal verb rules it out that we should say what it is for there to be such a process without helping ourselves to the concept of *seeing*.)

There are other ways to make it out that perception involves causality than by introducing "*CAUSE*". In §2 I appealed to the causal dependency of someone's believing that *p* on the fact that *p* when she sees that *p*. But there will be causal theorists who say that it is only thanks to the actual workings of causality that there are such dependencies, and that for the actual workings of causality, one must turn to an account in which events cause events. Well, my idea has been that the truth there is in the claim that perception is a causal concept is uncovered when the relation between a person and something she sees is taken to depend upon a conscious process which is causal, and this relation cannot be understood by thinking of seen objects as involved in events at the start of chains with perceptual experiences at their ends.

6. I suggested that the passage from Stoutland I quoted at the start might make it seem that he thought causality proper was confined to the Davidsonian picture. It is possible then to think that Stoutland's outright opposition to Davidson on the subject of action, which led to his unmitigated anti-causalism, resided in a conception of causality that lingered on in his thought. When Stoutland abandoned his anti-causalism, he reached a view which he took Davidson and Anscombe alike to share in (see §3 above). It can seem as if Stoutland always thought that the choices were an unmitigated anti-causalism or a measured view which put Davidson and Anscombe on the same side. If that is so, then Stoutland never envisaged an anti-anti-causalist story which cannot be contained in the Davidsonian picture. I hope that thinking about the case of perception shows that there must be such a story. It is impossible to think of connections between human beings and the world as causal and direct if one treats such connections as a matter of events standing one to another in a relation of cause.

Perhaps one can understand why Stoutland should at one time have thought that there was no deep difference between the views of Davidson and the views of Anscombe and von Wright on action. It may be that Davidson's lesser emphasis in his later work on his monism of events and his greater emphasis there on his anti-reductionism made Stoutland suppose that Davidson might somehow be distanced from his claims about the nomological character of causality. And it may be that Stoutland was apt to find it unconscionable that Davidson should have failed to provide

an account of how we are related to the world. But Davidson did so fail, I believe—by failing to make any use of those of our conceptual resources that are essential to an account whether of action or perception. Stoutland surely showed a tacit appreciation of this both in his earliest and in his latest writings. And perhaps at the end of his life Stoutland contemplated a wholesale rejection of Davidson’s view of causality. In the paper which contains the passage, Stoutland reported a change of mind consequent on writing the paper (2011c), 12, n.21), and this was a change away from his (2011a) where he had been as at his most supportive of Davidson on the subject of action.¹⁶

NOTES

1. In the first draft of this paper “Stoutland” was “Fred” throughout, he and I having become friends over email in the last years of his life. I’m delighted to have the opportunity now to pay him tribute, and to remember the Symposium in his honour held at Uppsala University, 16-17 November, 2012.
2. I’ve made this passage by omitting some, and reordering some, of the sentences in a passage at 19–20 of Stoutland (2011c).
3. Hume said this before providing his account of “the source of our idea of necessary connection among events”. (1748), §7, II.
4. Davidson’s parenthetical “in the right way” signals his acknowledgment that it is not sufficient for there to be a chain of events from what is perceived to one who perceives it for there to be a case of perception: a chain might be “deviant”. Cp. nn.7 and 11 below.
5. A version of the passage was posted on “Leiter reports: a Philosophy Blog” in June 2011, and linked to “In Memoriam: Frederick Stoutland” in November 2011. For Stoutland’s contribution to the blog: see comment 24 at <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2011/06/two-different-pictures-of-how-we-are-related-to-the-world-davidson-vs-anscombe.html#comments>.
6. The point is often put by saying that there can be “deviant causal chains”. The famous example from Davidson is the climber, who “wanted to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and knew that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want so unnerved him as to cause him to loosen his hold, but he did not loosen his hold intentionally” (1980, 79).
7. The aim of Hornsby (1994) was to disentangle the claim that “reasons are causes” as Davidson understood it from the claim that reason-explanation is causal explanation.
8. A first thought might be that (e.g.) “X squashed Y” means “X caused Y to be squashed”, where “cause” is a familiar English word. And so for other verbs, of which perhaps the one most discussed has been “killed” whose candidate meaning then is “caused the death of”.

But to cause something to be squashed (/its death), it is not necessary to squash it (/kill it).

9. The quotation is taken from Martin Davies (1983, 409), whose focus on *events* is explicit. Other self-styled causal theorists did not speak of events. But as I am using “causal theory”, a causal theorist assumes that it’s possible to give some non-circular explication of “see O” which introduces “cause”.
10. These theorists encountered the problem of “deviant causal chains”: see nn.4 and 6 above. Rowland Stout has argued: “the intractable problem of deviant causal chains afflicts the attempt to construct a causal theory for any notion” (2011, 161).
11. The various ways of putting it are found in D.F. Pears, P.F. Strawson, H.P. Grice, and (much more recently) in William Child.
12. What could possibly determine which events in the chain might be supposed to be the object’s looking to the person as it looks to be? Cp. Steward 2012. Steward argues that “causation, properly understood, .. subsumes a large number of ontologically various relations and relationships”. (Note a terminological difference between Steward and me: my use of “causal theory” is more restrictive than hers.)
13. The difference between the “CAUSE” I introduced earlier and the “*CAUSE*” here (now in italics!) corresponds, I think, to a distinction Aristotle makes when he distinguishes “two senses of alteration”, saying that “being acted on is not used in a single sense”. (*De Anima* 417b 15-16).
14. Cp. 154–8 in Vendler (1957).
15. Soteriou (2013) 164. Where Soteriou had “event/process”, I have changed to “process”. The reason is that I have throughout used “event” in the Davidsonian way in which states, or at least their onsets, come into the category of events.
16. This work was partly supported by the Research Council of Norway through its Centres of Excellence funding scheme, project number 179566/V20. A discussion with Will Small and Sebastian Watzl of C.S.M.N. helped me in its preparation. Will subsequently gave me invaluable comments on a draft (from which the present paper is by now rather remote).

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