MARK ELI KALDERON

John R. Searle
SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE
A theory of perception
256pp. Oxford University Press USA. £16.99.
978 0 19 938515 7

In delivering his lecture "Elementary Reflections on Sense-Perception" to the Royal Institute of Philosophy in 1951, C. D. Broad began by begging his audience's indulgence for engaging with such a "hackneyed" topic. After the Second World War, the philosophy of perception had become something of a neglected topic in both the analytic and phenomenological traditions. There was thus a period of forgetting, to which the present renaissance in the philosophy of perception, traceable to the early 1990s, perhaps owes its renewed energy. John Searle, whose work has been deservedly influential in the philosophy of mind, has joined the debate about perception in his latest book. One would naturally look forward to seeing what light he may shed on this topic.

However, two remarks early on in the book gave me pause. First, while Searle does not go as far as Broad in describing perception as a hackneyed topic, he does express the need to explain why someone should write "a whole book about perception":

[start quotation:] As far as I was concerned, perception seemed to be in pretty good shape. [J. L.] Austin refuted the Argument from Illusion, which was the origin of the classical sense datum theory stretching back to the seventeenth century. [H. P.] Grice established a causal component in perception. And I tried to explain the presentational intentionality of perception in ways that would enable us to see the logical structure of perceptual experiences. [end quotation]

These are puzzling claims, at least if examined closely. But it is not Searle's take on the state of philosophy of perception in the late twentieth century that is so striking, but rather the complacency of its expression. It is puzzling that Searle should write a whole book about perception when by his lights, the central mysteries have all been resolved.

The second remark that gave me pause is part of the threefold motivation that Searle provides for writing a book about perception. Searle aims first to elaborate and defend his account of perception from chapter two of his 1983 book *Intentionality*; second, to set it in the context of a historical diagnosis of a mistake stemming from the early modern period; and third, to pursue a polemic against the currently popular doctrine known as "disjunctivism". The Oxford philosopher J. M. Hinton is generally credited with first articulating disjunctivism as a distinctive position in the philosophy of perception, though he did not use the term (it was invented by Howard Robinson, one of the doctrine's critics). Hinton regarded himself, not without some justification, as making explicit what was merely implicit in J. L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (somewhat ironically, a favourite work of Searle's, as indicated above). According to Hinton, a hallucination of an ancient chestnut tree, say, can appear from within just like the veridical perception of an ancient chestnut tree. But it is a mistake to assume that this appearance is best explained by these experiences sharing a common nature that is manifest to someone undergoing these experiences. It is this doctrine that is the target of Searle's polemic:

[set as quotation] I was originally provoked, if that is the right word, to undertake more work on perception by conversations with Ned Block and Tyler Burge, who urged me to undertake an investigation of something called "Disjunctivism" that they characterized as "weeds growing in your own garden here in Berkeley". [end quotation]

There is something of *The Sopranos* in all this: reaching out to the West Coast to take a hit on a couple of local troublemakers (John Campbell and M. G. F. Martin, Searle's colleagues at Berkeley, and the local source of the "weeds"). But it was not the spectacle of this encounter that gave me pause so much as Searle's avowed intent of pursuing a polemic. Polemicists typically take straw men as their targets. And, as just noted, Searle regards all the central mysteries about perception as already resolved. This is not a book by a philosopher in the grip of a problem; it is a book by a philosopher with a story to sell.

The story roughly falls into three parts. It begins with a diagnosis of a mistake with its roots in the seventeenth century, which Searle calls "The Bad Argument". Then there is an elaboration and defence of Searle's own theory of perception. The book ends with Searle's discussion of disjunctivism, one of a number of incidental topics left over after the elaboration and defense of his theory.

The Bad Argument is a variant of the traditional philosophical argument from hallucination. Taking a stroll in Greenwich Park, I turn, and look, and see an ancient chestnut tree. It is one of the sweet chestnut trees replanted there when the park was redesigned for Charles II in the 1660s. If it were possible to reproduce in me, in the tree's absence, the same pattern of retinal stimulation that I had when viewing the tree, then I would undergo a conscious visual experience that would be, from within, just like my perceptual experience of the tree in Greenwich Park. (This is a merely hypothetical case of hallucination to which no actual case of hallucination is supposed to correspond.) In this latter hallucinatory case, there is no physical tree of which I am aware, since the tree is absent. And, partly on this basis, the Bad Argument urges that there is nothing physical of which I am aware even in the perceptual case.

Searle concedes that, on one meaning, the verb phrase "is aware of" can take an internal accusative, as many transitive verbs do, but this does not mean that the object of the verb has any reality separate from the state of awareness. When someone dances a dance, for example, this is just another way of saying that they are dancing. The dance has no separate reality. Similarly, there is a sense in which one is always aware 'of something' when one is visually aware, but this is just like the sense in which there is always a dance when one is dancing. Just as there is no real dance independently of the dancing, so there is no real object of awareness when one is hallucinating, even though one is in a state of awareness. (Talk of "awareness" here is merely registering that the hallucinatory experience is conscious, and not that the subject is aware that they are hallucinating.) But that meaning of "aware" doesn't allow us to conclude that there is something of which one is aware when hallucinating. So The Bad Argument is unsound, resting, as it does, on a false premiss that only seems true in light of a conflation between these two meanings of "aware".

Despite the tremendous amount of philosophical work that has been produced in recent years on the argument from hallucination, Searle discusses no other alternative responses to the argument, save what he takes to be the disjunctivist response. Moreover, Searle considers no variants of The Bad Argument. If he had, he might have noticed that his presentation of the argument is in one way idiosyncratic. The first premiss of his official reconstruction of The Bad Argument reads: "In both the veridical (good) case and in the hallucination (bad) case, there is a common element – a qualitative subjective experience going on in the visual system".

This is the premiss that Searle represents the disjunctivists as denying, but in fact no disjunctivist denies that there is anything in common between perception and the corresponding hallucination. Disjunctivists claim only that perception enjoys a kind of unity that prevents its reduction to an experiential state, manifest in common with the corresponding hallucination, that meets further external conditions. But my point is that, whatever its proper formulation, some such claim about there being a common factor between perception and the corresponding hallucination typically emerges as an interim conclusion of the argument and not as the initial premiss. So the fact that, in Searle's hands, disjunctivism emerges as a not terribly coherent response to The Bad Argument should be no surprise, since disjunctivists are typically responding to a differently formulated argument.

Searle claims that the mistake he diagnoses in The Bad Argument has been pervasive since the seventeenth century. Moreover, he claims that the mistake, involving the conflation of two meanings of "awareness", explains why Direct Realism, the view that we directly perceive ordinary physical objects, has fallen out of favour for four centuries. I doubt that these historical claims can survive close scrutiny. Consider just one example: Nicolas Malebranche's doctrine of the vision of all things in God. (To be sure, Malebranche is not on Searle's conveniently provided list of Great Philosophers. But Hume is, and Hume recommended for a proper understanding of his *Treatise* that we first read Malebranche's *The Search after Truth*.) Malebranche writes:

[set as quotation] I think everyone agrees that we do not perceive objects external to us by themselves. We see the sun, the stars, and an infinity of objects external to us; and it is not likely that the soul should leave the body to stroll about the heavens, as it were, in order to behold all these objects. Thus, it does not see them by themselves, and our mind's immediate object when it sees the sun, for example, is not the sun, but something that is intimately joined to our soul, and this is what I call an *idea*. [end quotation]

Notice how Malebranche's case against Direct Realism makes no appeal to hallucination, and so Searle's diagnosis gets no grip. This is not a fussy point about history, but evidence that Searle is blind to the alternatives.

Perhaps the main interest of the book lies with chapters four and five, where Searle lays out and defends his own theory. Billed as a theory of perception, what we get is an account of vision. This is disappointing, since one of the salutary aspects of the contemporary renaissance in the philosophy of perception is a renewed interest in non-visual modes of perception, and a keen interest in the ways in which our sensory experience may be multimodal.

"Close your eyes and put your hand over your forehead, covering your eyes" Searle writes; "you will stop seeing anything, but *your visual consciousness does not stop*." On this basis, Searle concludes that all experience must be "ontologically subjective", even perceptual experiences whose objects are "ontologically objective". Not only are all experiences "in the head" in the sense that they at least have an ontologically subjective component, but they are also "in the head" in an intracranial sense. Ontologically subjective experiences are the effects of neurobiological processes. The object of perception, on the other hand, is what is perceived. Searle takes care to distinguish the object of perception from its "content", understood as the conditions that must be satisfied if the perception is to count as veridical. As should be familiar to readers of Searle's book *Intentionality* (1983), one of these conditions is that the object of perception should be the cause of the perceptual experience. This is what Searle calls the "causal self-reflexive element" of perception. The central task Searle sets himself is to understand how the intrinsic phenomenological character of ontologically subjective experiences can determine the conditions of satisfaction associated with them. While there is a lot that is of interest in Searle's discussion (such as his attempt to characterize what he calls the presentational character of perception), it is difficult to assess Searle's answer, let alone the validity of the question, since we are led to this point on the back of a variety of substantial assumptions from which many will reasonably demur. Searle's intellectual assurance is a disservice here, since it leads him to move far too quickly. (As Wittgenstein once remarked, philosophers should hail one another by exhorting themselves to take their time.) Specifically, Searle moves very quickly between four distinct things: seeing a chestnut tree; seeing that there is a chestnut tree; having an experience whose content represents that there is a chestnut tree; and having an experience in which there seems to be a chestnut tree. And this despite the recent literature providing a wealth of grounds for distinguishing these things. Not taking the alternatives seriously has its costs; one wonders whether what we are left with is merely a self-portrait of Searle's philosophical concerns.