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Seeing Things As They Are: A Theory Of Perception



Synopsis

This book provides a comprehensive account of the intentionality of perceptual experience. With special emphasis on vision Searle explains how the raw phenomenology of perception sets the content and the conditions of satisfaction of experience. The central question concerns the relation between the subjective conscious perceptual field and the objective perceptual field. Everything in the objective field is either perceived or can be perceived. Nothing in the subjective field is perceived nor can be perceived precisely because the events in the subjective field consist of the perceivings, whether veridical or not, of the events in the objective field. Searle begins by criticizing the classical theories of perception and identifies a single fallacy, what he calls the Bad Argument, as the source of nearly all of the confusions in the history of the philosophy of perception. He next justifies the claim that perceptual experiences have presentational intentionality and shows how this justifies the direct realism of his account. In the central theoretical chapters, he shows how it is possible that the raw phenomenology must necessarily determine certain form of intentionality. Searle introduces, in detail, the distinction between different levels of perception from the basic level to the higher levels and shows the internal relation between the features of the experience and the states of affairs presented by the experience. The account applies not just to language possessing human beings but to infants and conscious animals. He also discusses how the account relates to certain traditional puzzles about spectrum inversion, color and size constancy and the brain-in-the-vat thought experiments. In the final chapters he explains and refutes Disjunctivist theories of perception, explains the role of unconscious perception, and concludes by discussing traditional problems of perception such as skepticism.

Book Information

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (February 25, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199385157

ISBN-13: 978-0199385157

Product Dimensions: 8.4 x 0.9 x 5.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #227,521 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #84 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Epistemology](#) #200 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences >](#)

Customer Reviews

"...[O]ffers a straightforward, realistic account of how one perceives objects and states of affairs... Highly recommended." --Choice "Immensely refreshing." --The Weekly Standard"Seeing Things As They Are is full of interesting ideas. It is engagingly written, and deals with big questions about the mind-world relations and the relation between the phenomenology and intentionality of perception. I recommned it to anyone interested in what makes perceptual contact with a mind-independent world possible." -- The Philosophers's Magazine "Searle's book is a wonderful addition to the philosophical discipline of perception, and a useful way for someone who is not well versed in the subject to receive an extensive overview of the historical arguments. The overarching thesis is a strong defense of Direct Realism that will inspire the reader to contemplate the ways they discern meaning through experience." -- Englewood Review of Books

John R. Searle is Willis S. and Marion Slusser Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. His previous publications include *Making the Social World* (2010) and *Mind: A Brief introduction* (2004), both from Oxford University Press.

When it comes to making technical philosophical jargon easily understood, John Searle is one of the best. That is not to say that Searle dumbs things down for the audience, it's just that he is good at getting rid of all the hyperbole that often exists in academic philosophy. Searle opens his book with a critique of what he calls the "Bad Argument" in philosophy. The Bad Argument is that since we may have a perceptual experience of the world that is really a hallucination but is in fact indistinguishable from a veridical (accurate) perception then what both hallucinatory and veridical perception must have in common is the perception of "sense data." Searle contends that this is a huge philosophical mistake that many of the "great" western philosophers have made and has led to problems with what these philosophers can say about the ontologically objective world. Searle contends that what is missing is an understanding of the intentional nature of perception. That is, perception provides us with a direct presentation of the objective world unmediated by sense data because it is the nature of perception to be about the objective events in the world that cause our perceptions. In working out his argument Searle touches on the issue of consciousness, classic thought experiments in philosophy of mind such as the "brain in the vat" and he discusses the

philosophical notion of disjunctivism in perception. Disjunctivism is the argument that veridical and hallucinatory perceptions are different because there is something phenomenally different in our experience of veridical perception versus hallucination. No fan of disjunctivism, Searle argues that there is no difference in the subjective or phenomenal character of veridical perceptions and hallucination - no difference in what he calls their subjective ontology - but there is a difference in their intentional character. Namely, that while veridical percepts are about objects in the world, hallucinations are actually about nothing at all. On reading Searle I find myself partly in agreement with him but only up to a limited point. The biggest problem I have with Searle is his view that the brain "causes" consciousness and that subjective experience are created "in the head." I think this a big problem for his "Direct Realist" position of perception since it means that our perceptions cannot be unmediated as any brain activity relevant to consciousness must be instead mediated by sensory signals from our sensory receptors. Hence those internal brain dynamics relevant to consciousness do not have direct contact with the physical objects that we experience as the subjective contents of perception. Like most contemporary philosophers and scientists who study consciousness and brain, this leads Searle to believe that that subjective experience is a brain event. However, Searle, despite being adamant that consciousness is a natural product of the brain cannot say how the brain causes consciousness. In later chapters of the book Searle is critical of computational theories of mind, so we can rule out that the possibility that he thinks that consciousness is somehow a bi-product of information processing in the brain. This leaves one confused as to how Searle thinks the brain creates the subjective contents of our experience. I should also note that in discussing how relations between the world and subjective perceptions of it occur, he is dismissive of both resemblance theories - the notion that we perceive objects in the world accurately because our perceptions somehow resemble those objects - and causal theories that suggest we perceive objects in the world because our perceptions occur at the end of what Searle calls "a billiard ball" chain of causative events. While I agree with Searle that he is right to dismiss these explanations of how we perceive the world, Searle does not really replace it with anything else since the current neuroscience understanding of how the brain might perceive the world boils right down to "billiard ball" causation, or what Aristotle would have called efficient and material causation between brain and world. My gut feeling is that Searle is really a lot more sceptical about our capacity to scientifically understand the mind/consciousness than he lets on to his audience. I definitely recommend this book to anyone wanting to come to grips with the problems in the philosophy of perception.

A very good book. Searle's focus is on perception, particularly vision, but he brings the other senses in as well. He begins by reviewing what he calls the "bad argument" which he claims has misled philosophy for the past few hundred years. His review of the "bad argument" is straight forward but its badness springs directly from its opposition to his own view which he calls "direct realism", a term he prefers to "naive realism" which nevertheless also fits his position. Searle's view is like a glass of cool water on a hot day. I would call it "common sense realism", but M. Ferraris has already adopted that phrase for his "new realism". The two views have much in common, but Ferraris' focus is not perception as such. I have reviewed a few of Ferraris' books elsewhere on .In an early chapter on consciousness in general Searle burnishes his materialist credentials by declaring (at least as concerns life on Earth) that consciousness is necessarily associated with brains (which is uncontroversial), but he also declares that brains alone are sufficient to produce consciousness, something that no one (on Earth) knows for sure. This precisely why there is a "hard problem of consciousness". He repeats this claim a few times but his theory of perception does not hang on it. Another quibble is that he is a little sloppy as concerns statements of cosmological fact. In one of his examples he says "I look at the star and know it ceased to exist millions of years ago". He could only mean "I look at the stellar explosion" (a nova or supernova) and know it ceased to exist millions of years ago." If he "sees the star" then the light of its demise has not reached us yet and he could not know that it has already ceased to exist.Searle begins by recognizing that when we experience something visually, what we have is a "subjective ontology", a phenomenal experience that philosophers for centuries have called a "sense datum". The "bad argument" comes down to the belief that this sense datum is really all we KNOW and that for all we know there is nothing about "objective ontology", the structure of the mind-independent world, to which we have access unless the sense datum represents the objective to the subjective. What has confused philosophy for centuries is the matter of how (or if) this representation actually works. Searle's argument here is very simple. Our senses, particularly vision and touch, do not merely represent the world, but PRESENT it, presentation being a special case of representation. What constitutes presentation specifically is that there are "conditions of satisfaction" for the presentation. If I see a tree, the sense datum is satisfied (and so presented and not merely represented) by there being an actual tree where I see it. This accounts for hallucinations. If the identical sense datum is hallucinated then the satisfaction criteria are not met, no tree is present where I appear to see it.Presentation is causal with the direction of cause going from world to mind, objective to subjective. Response (what Searle calls "direction of fit"), on the other hand goes from mind to world. Searle also gets a bit into "action" because it happens that its connection between mind and world is the inverse of perception. Cause

goes from mind to world and the "direction of fit" from world to mind. This ties in beautifully with Ferraris' concepts "unamendability" (perception) and affordance (action). Searle recognizes the matter of will, free will, comes up here but he demurs. I would like to see him talk about it somewhere. Searle goes on to flesh out perception with a distinction between basic presentational properties like shape, color, motion, and so on, and those properties that require background knowledge on the part of the receiver. Perception is hierarchical. This accounts for the distinction between seeing a shape and color (basic perception) and seeing "an automobile", and further up the hierarchy (additional background), recognizing "my car". Importantly, "conditions of satisfaction" lie all the way up the hierarchy and they really apply TO THE OBJECT. The base phenomenology is not only a black object of such and such a size, but a car, and furthermore, it really is my car! All of this makes perfect sense to me, but then I am also a realist. It is hard to imagine not living one's life in a realist mental environment. If you are about to step off a curb into a lane of traffic but have a visual experience of a black object about the size of a car hurtling down the same lane towards you, you likely ASSUME that the object IS a car and that it makes sense not to step into the lane. You take for granted that the object is being presented and not merely represented to you. Philosophically though, Searle's perception requires two assumptions. First that your brain and sensory system are operating within normal parameters, and second that the mind-independent world is genuinely structured AS PRESENTED. It is this mind-independent structure (including I believe its causal relations) that constitutes the "conditions of satisfaction" of the presentation which rests also on the causal relations between perception and the perceived object. For Searle to get his theory of perception out, he has to presuppose that the world is real and already structured having causal properties. The apropos structure must be present to be presented. This is the very assumption that anti-realists want desperately to avoid and it makes Searle's argument circular. Because of the causal properties, the demand that we live AS IF the world is presented breaks the tie in favor of Searle's position (and against anti-realism), but I do not recall him acknowledging this circularity. Apart from this omission, the book is a very refreshing departure from all the anti-realism I've been reading lately. It is not a long or very technical read. I highly recommend it.

This is the best defence of direct realism that I've ever seen. The fallacy that Searle identifies in the literature on the problem of perception is fundamental, and he is right in saying that it was in a certain sense tragic, originating the whole traditions of representationalism and idealism. This deceptively easy to read book is a philosophical achievement. He knows how to cut the Gordian knot.

I enjoyed this book and may read it again because some of the concepts explored were new to me, certainly some of the terminology used. I tend to read more science than philosophy. This book also confirmed for me, core concepts that I feel I had already intuitively realized, and had argued-for in discussions with friends. However, I was really not properly prepared to fully argue my case...I now feel emboldened to re-argue some of these concepts with friends who are way too skeptical about human's (& animals) ability to accurately read the external world we live in.

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