Perception: The Manifest Visible World

PHI 535 Philosophy of Mind, Spring 2024
Instructors: Mark Johnston and Alex Kerr
Wednesdays 1.30 to 4.20 pm, Room 201 Wooten Hall, Princeton University

Overview of Course

Is visual experience reducible to neural processes? The psychophysics and neuroscience of visual experience is very well understood. And the sighted amongst us have access to their own visual phenomenology, i.e., to the way things visually appear to them.

How is visual phenomenology to be situated in a realm of light-induced neural firings?

As the course will reveal, visual experience provides an ideal test case for various theses in the philosophy of mind relating the mental and the physical, including the identity theory, reduction, supervenience, realization, subservience, and functional isomorphism.

When it comes to color experience, evolved nature as we actually find it has provided more surprises about the mind-world relationship than we would be likely to think up in the armchair. (For one thing, the phenomenon known as metamerism.) Ontological reduction of visual experience to neural processing looks hopeless, particularly when we clarify the formal properties of ontological reduction. Intertheoretic reduction upon analysis splinters into a variety of intertheoretic explanatory memes, some of which provide explanatory maneuvers when it comes to visual experience and the neuroscience of vision. But they don’t settle how a state that intrinsically involves (a) the presentation to (b) a subject of (c) an object or content (d) under a mode of presentation stands ontologically to an distributed electrochemical brain process, which on its face has an entirely different intrinsic nature.

A new account of visual phenomenology—Disclosive Realism—will be examined, an account that finds some truth in, but in the end rejects all of the following:

(i) Nihilism about color defended by Daniel Dennett.

(ii) Illusionism about color defended by Galileo, C.L. Harding, Paul Boghossian and David Velleman.
(iii) The various Sense-Datum Theories defended by C.D. Broad, H.H. Price, Frank Jackson (1976), Moreland Perkins, Howard Robinson and Manuel Garcia Carpintero, along with Visual Field Theories such as that defended by Chris Peacocke (1984).

(iv) Direct or “Open Window” Realism of the sort defended by Ian Phillips.

(v) The view defended by David Armstrong, George Pitcher, John Searle, Gilbert Harman, Susanna Seigel and Alex Byrne to the effect that visual experience is first and foremost an entertaining of propositional contents concerning the scene before the eyes.

(vi) The Adverbial or “Inner state” theory of visual experience defended by Michael Tye and Justin D’Ambrosio.

(vii) Color Primitivism or the “Simple View” defended by John Campbell, and the variant offered by Colin McGinn

(viii) The almost universal view that hallucination is a narrowly supervening mental state.

(ix) The view that a concrete thing cannot appear in spacetime without being located in spacetime.

(x) “Disjunctivism” about experience defended by John McDowell and Michael Martin

(xi) “Conjunctivism” of the sort defended by H.P. Grice, and Frank Jackson (1976)

(xii) The view that sensory experience is value neutral.

(xiii) The view that sensible qualities are properties that can only relate to things by being instantiated by them.

(xiv) The view that qualia constitute the major obstacle to the reduction of the mental to the neural.

(xv) The view that green = the property of being green (nothing special about green, here).
Epiphenomenalism concerning sensory qualities.

As well as providing a principled basis for rejecting all that, Disclosive Realism points to a neglected epistemic virtue which attends immediate perceptual judgment. Disclosive Realism further implies that the visible world mostly has the features it appears to have, since the conditions of having those features are largely response-dependent.

Moreover, it turns out our experience of color is close to being “Edenic” in the sense of David Chalmers, and contrary to his own account of color. Indeed, color experience is Edenic if we do not mistakenly insert into visual phenomenology itself the epidermal picture of colors (O.K. Bowsma’s nice phrase) as the thinnest “paints” somehow actually spread across surfaces. The phenomenology of color experience both exhibits and presents just what it is to be colored in this or that way. The non-relative and “simple” character of color-as-we-see-it does not imply that the phenomenon of coloredness is non-relative and simple. That inference depends on the “property mistake.”

Level of the Course

It’s for all comers from the first-year graduate level up. The uninitiated, semi-mavens, aficionados, mavens, experts and even super-mavens are all welcome.

The first half of the seminar will be concerned with getting everyone up to speed on the variety of philosophical views on visual experience. Crucial here is Adam Pautz’s new book designed for precisely that purpose. It is both directed at graduate students, and points to new research possibilities in the area. Adam Pautz (2021) Perception. New York, NY: Routledge.

Visitors to the Course

Adam (Brown) will be visiting the seminar on March 27th to deliver a paper, as will Alex Byrne (MIT), probably on April 17th. There is the possibility of arranging a conference on perception here on or around April 26-28th depending on interest. Alex Moran (U. De Fribourg), another expert on perception, will be attending throughout.

The second half of the course will take up Disclosive Realism in some detail.

There is the possibility of a conference on perception on or around April 26-28. If so, this will replace the May 1st seminar.
Accessibility Policy:

If you require any accommodation for a disability, please contact and register with Disability Services. Note that you can contact them directly by phone at (609) 258-8840 or by email at ods@princeton.edu. And please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns.

Course Mechanism and How to Get Units:

All readings will be posted on Canvas. If you are not officially enrolled in the course but wish to attend, please ask Brittany Masterson in the Philosophy Department Office to sign you up for access to the readings for the course on Canvas.

There will be units available by passing a take home examination at the end of the course. Due May 15th. Depending on which questions you choose to answer, the units will either be in M&E, Phil of Science or in Value Theory.

Sequencing of Topics and Readings (If time is short, give priority to the first reading listed)

Jan 31st, Week I: **Introduction**

Neat illusions. Something about expanses of color. Some problems with color nihilism and color physicalism.

Feb 7th, Week 2: **The Sense Datum View**

1. Chapter 1 of Pautz
2. Russell (1912). Appearance and Reality (Chapter 1 of The Problems of Philosophy)

Feb 14th, Week 3: **Adverbialism and The Internal Physical State View**

1. Pautz, Perception, Chapter 2

Feb 21st, Week 4: **Representationalism**

1. Chapters 3 and 4 of Pautz

Feb 28th, Week 5 **Naïve Realism**

1. Chapter 5 of Pautz.

March 6th, Week 6, **Alex Kerr on Adam Pautz’s view, and Alex’s own view.**
Kerr, “Against Illusionism”

**March 13th, Midterm Break** (The noble ideal of Classlessness is evanescently achieved!)

March 20th, Week 7: **Expanses of Color and Disclosive Realism**
Johnston “A Plea For Expanses”, “Why there are no Visual Fields or Minds, Either”

March 27th, Week 8: **Adam Pautz visits**

April 3rd, Week 9: **Color versus Coloredness—Eden Regained**
Johnston “The Property Mistake”, “How to Speak of the Colors”

April 10th, Week 9: **The Problem with the Content View**
April 17th, Week 10: **Alex Byrne visits**

April 24th, Week 11: **Objections to Disclosive Realism**

How can a difference in expanses make a causal difference, given the causal closure of the physical? Etc.

April 26-28 **Perception Conference**?

OR

May 1st, Week 12: **Prospects for the Physical Reduction of Attentive Sensory Episodes.**

Johnston, Romanell Lecture “What is Ontological Reduction?”