The Invalidity of the Argument from Illusion
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Abstract
The argument from illusion attempts to establish a bold claim: that we are never aware of ordinary material objects in perceptual experience. The argument has rightly received a great deal of critical scrutiny. But here we develop a criticism which, to our knowledge, has so far not been explored. We consider the canonical form of the argument as it is captured in contemporary expositions (Robinson, Smith, and Crane), and as it occurs in early 20th century writings on perception (Moore, Broad, and Ayer). There are two stages to our criticism. First, we show that the argument is logically invalid. Second, we identify what extra premise is needed to make the argument valid, but argue that various versions of this extra premise are all problematic in one way or another. If our arguments are successful, we show that there is even more reason to reject the argument from illusion than is currently acknowledged.

1 Introduction
Many philosophers have held that our common sense picture of perception is threatened by the possibility of illusions. They argue that if illusions are possible, then perception as we intuitively think of it is not possible. But since a commitment to the possibility of illusions is a part of our ordinary thought about perception, the situation we find ourselves in, if the argument is sound, is that our ordinary thought is not just mistaken, but incoherent (for this way of framing things, see Smith (2002, p. 22)). The radical challenge to our ordinary ways of thinking posed by this argument from illusion is deserving of philosophical scrutiny. Versions of the argument are employed in various writings in the philosophy of perception. We won’t dwell here on the common critical considerations which have been offered. Instead, we want to draw attention to an issue which has not, to our knowledge, been examined in the existing literature.

In Section 2 we outline the argument from illusion as formulated in key contemporary expositions and in Section 3 we show that the argument is invalid. We show also that the invalid version appears in some key work on perception from the early 20th century. The arguer from illusion wants to establish that we are never aware of ordinary material objects in perceptual experience. We’ll call this the Negative Claim of the argument from illusion. In order to get to this, the arguer from illusion attempts to establish that in cases of illusion we are not aware of ordinary material objects. We’ll call this the Interim Negative Claim of the argument from illusion. But the premises of the
argument do not entail the Interim Negative Claim. Rather, the argument delivers only a positive claim, namely that in cases of illusion we are aware of something which is distinct from the material object we are purportedly perceiving. As a result, formulations of the argument from illusion, rife in the literature, which involve the Interim Negative Claim, are invalid.

In Section 4 we consider ways of repairing the argument. We suggest that the arguer from illusion implicitly appeals to a further premise, which we’ll call the Uniqueness Assumption. The idea here is to build into the argument a premise which ensures that in cases of illusion the subject is aware of a just one thing, and since – granting the other premises of the argument – in such cases the subject is aware of something distinct from the material object they are purportedly perceiving, they are therefore not also aware of the material object. And that is just the Interim Negative Claim the argument seeks to establish.

Now although the idea behind the Uniqueness Assumption is relatively clear, we argue that it is not obvious how the arguer from illusion should formulate this premise. Moreover, what seem to be the most natural and plausible ways of formulating the assumption all seem to be problematic in one way or another. In being committed to the Uniqueness Assumption the arguer from illusion has a rather serious argumentative burden, which has heretofore not been adequately addressed.

Critical scrutiny of the argument for the Interim Negative Claim is usually focused just on one of its controversial parts – the Phenomenal Principle (see below). What we highlight is that even if we grant this principle the argument is still problematic owing to its implicit reliance on the Uniqueness Assumption. We don’t offer decisive reasons to suppose that the Uniqueness Assumption in any form is false. Perhaps there are formulations of it that we don’t consider which are not as problematic as the ones we do consider, and perhaps there are ways of dealing with the objections we raise for the formulations of the Uniqueness Assumption that we do consider. Nor do we show that there are not ways of repairing the argument which do not rely on the Uniqueness Assumption. But at the very least we do present a challenge to the argument from illusion, and in the course of doing so we hope to achieve a greater understanding of the argument – of how it should be formulated, and what needs to be done to support it.

2 The Argument from Illusion

Expositions of the argument from illusion typically focus on the visual perception of material objects. And the usual target of the argument is thus a common sense view about seeing such objects. We’ll keep this restriction in place here, but note that the argument can be generalized to the perception of other sorts of thing, and to perception in other
modalities. So what, then, does the argument aim to achieve? Consider, first, the following remark from Strawson (1979):

Suppose a non-philosophical observer gazing idly through a window. To him we address the question, “Give us a description of your current visual experience,” or “How is it with you, visually, at the moment?” Uncautioned as to exactly what we want, he might reply in some such terms as these: “I see the red light of the setting sun filtering through the black and thickly clustered branches of the elms; I see the dappled deer grazing in groups on the vivid green grass...” and so on (1979, p. 93).

Here, Strawson’s non-philosophical observer manifests our pre-theoretic commitment to ordinary mind-independent material objects (elms, deer, etc) sometimes being among the objects of our perceptual awareness. On one way of running the argument from illusion, its target is just this claim, that in what we would ordinarily think of as cases of object perception (e.g., seeing an elm) we are perceptually aware of mind-independent material objects.¹ For instance, in the exposition we find in Robinson (1994), the conclusion of the argument from illusion is represented as follows:

In all cases of perception that of which the subject is aware is other than the physical object the subject is purportedly perceiving (p. 58).

This is a revisionary conclusion in the sense that it amounts to a rejection of an aspect of our common sense understanding of perceptual situations. As noted in the introduction, we call this the Negative Claim of the argument from illusion.

In some presentations of the argument, however, we find a distinction between direct and indirect perceptual awareness. The common sense target in such presentations is then direct realism, the claim that we are sometimes directly aware of the mind-independent objects which we take ourselves to be aware of. The conclusion of the argument construed as such is that in perceptual experiences we are at best indirectly aware of these material objects, and so never directly aware of them (Smith 2002, p. 26). Now, since our common sense conception of perception, on such presentations, is supposed to involve a commitment to direct realism – as Strawson later goes on to say ‘mature sensible experience (in general) presents itself as, in Kantian phrase, an immediate consciousness of the existence of things outside us’ (p. 97) – this too is supposed to be a revisionary conclusion.

We can distinguish two versions of the argument from illusion, then, according to which common sense claim is targeted. In one version the common sense claim is simply

¹ Specifically, the argument targets the claim that we are aware of the material objects we are purportedly perceiving. This is consistent with us being aware of other material objects, but this view has little to recommend it.
that we are sometimes perceptually aware of the material objects, and in the other version the common sense claim is that we are sometimes *directly* aware of material objects in perception. Which version of the argument should we work with here?

It is by no means obvious that there is an innocuous contrast between direct and indirect perception which should be appealed to in framing our common sense conception of perception. Yet it is obvious that we are, as part of our ordinary thought, committed to the idea that we are sometimes perceptually aware of material objects. So it is perhaps best to discuss just the first version of the argument. But in any case, given our aims here, there is no need for us to get into a discussion of directness and indirectness. For the main points we want to make apply whether we run the argument in terms simply of the awareness of material objects, or in terms of the direct awareness of such things. So, our primary focus will be on the more straightforward version of the argument from illusion which targets the view that we are sometimes aware of mind-independent objects in perceptual experience.

Before continuing, it is worth noting that one might try to deny the common sense picture of perception by denying that there are mind-independent objects. One might suppose that the realist element of the common sense picture is false, and that material objects are mind-dependent in some sense. But this is not the sort of challenge that we are interested in here. The challenge coming from the argument from illusion, as we’ll be understanding it, is rather to the claim that we are sometimes *perceptually aware of* mind-independent material objects, *granting* that there are such things. Of course, the argument from illusion can be used as a stepping-stone to idealism. First establish, via the argument from illusion, that the objects we are aware of are never mind-independent material objects. Second, argue that positing such mind-independent objects is superfluous, and so we should endorse idealism. Insofar as this argument for idealism relies on the argument from illusion, it too is undermined if our conclusions are correct.

The argument from illusion runs from the common sense claim that illusions are possible to a denial of the common sense claim that we are sometimes aware of material objects in perceptual experience. But how do proponents and expositors of the argument conceive of illusions? We find the idea that an illusory experience is one in which it seems to one that something has a quality which the material object supposedly being perceived does not actually have. And a common sense understanding of what is going on in such

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2 For scepticism about philosophers’ employment of the distinction between direct and indirect perception see Austin (1962), and for helpful discussion of attempts to draw the distinction see Dretske (1969), pp. 62–75, Jackson (1977), Chapter 1, Snowdon (1992), and Martin (2005), pp. 702–709.

3 The focus here is thus not on *veridical* illusions, a category of illusion discussed in Johnston (2006), construed as ‘cases in which the subject is suffering an illusion even though there is no falsity in the
cases is that in them a subject is aware of some particular material object, but it appears to them differently to how it actually is (see Robinson (1994, p. 31), and Smith (2002, p, 23), and for detailed critical discussion of the traditional conception of illusion see Kalderon (2011)). Examples abound, but let’s borrow an example from Smith (p. 25) for our discussion: one sees a white wall, but it looks yellow to one.

With these preliminary remarks in place, we can turn to how the argument is formulated by contemporary expositors of it. The formulation of the premises below is based on the discussions in Robinson (1994), Smith (2002), and Crane (2011). But first we need to note a useful structural point highlighted by Snowdon (1992). Snowdon suggests we think of the argument as involving two stages. In this first stage we take a central sort of case and argue that in that type of case the common sense view of perception is not sustainable. Snowdon calls that part of the argument its ‘Base Case’ (p. 68). We can formulate the Base Case Stage (drawing on our other authors) as follows:

i. When one is subject to an illusion, it seems to one that something has a quality, F, which the ordinary object supposedly being perceived does not actually have.

ii. When it seems to one that something has a quality, F, then there is something of which one is aware which does have this quality.

iii. Since the ordinary object in question is, by hypothesis, not-F, then it follows that in cases of illusion, one is not aware of the ordinary object after all.

So much for the Base Case Stage. But, Snowdon adds

since the arguments [from, e.g., illusion, hallucination] are designed to support a completely general conclusion, they incorporate a spreading step, which amounts, supposedly, to a justification for thinking that the negative conclusion about the Base Case holds generally of what we, prior to these arguments, take to be perceptual experiences (p. 68).

We can formulate the Spreading Step as follows:

iv. There is such continuity between cases of illusion and cases of veridical perception that the same analysis of perception must apply to both.

propositions which would capture the content of his visual experience’ (p. 271). Here our focus is on illusions where, to put it in Johnston’s way, the proposition which would capture the content of the relevant visual experience is false.

Note that the common sense understanding of illusions isn’t that in illusions we are aware just of the relevant material object, but that we are at least aware of the material object. We discuss the common sense perspective on illusions further in Section 5 below.

Note that these authors don’t themselves endorse the argument from illusion. Our target is the argument as they formulate it. We discuss some authors who do endorse some version of it – namely Moore and Broad – below.
Therefore

v. One is not aware of ordinary objects in cases of veridical perception, and so perception is not what we ordinarily think it is.

The Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion, (i)-(iii) above, seeks to establish the Interim Negative Claim: that in illusory cases we are not aware of mind-independent objects. The Spreading Step Stage (iv)-(v) then attempts to generalize from that negative finding to the Negative Claim of the argument from illusion (v), namely, that we are never aware of material objects. We mention the Spreading Step to give a sense of how proponents of the argument try to generalize the result of the Base Case Stage, but our main focus here is on the Base Case Stage of the argument, so we set aside critical consideration of the obviously contentious premise involved in the Spreading Step.6

3 The Base Case Stage

This stage of the argument pivots on premise (ii), which is a principle central to a particular way of thinking about perceptual experience. On this way of thinking about experience we are to understand cases in which some object appears some way to one at least in part in terms of one’s bearing a special sort of relation to a thing which is that way. As Martin (2003) notes

Moore, Russell, Broad, and Price all assume that whenever one has a sensory experience – when one perceives an object or when at least it appears to one as if something is there – then there must actually be something which one stands in the relation of sensing to; indeed they assume there must be something which actually has the qualities which it seems to one the object sensed has. So if it now looks to me as if there is a brown expanse before me as I stare at the table, then an actual brown expanse must exist and be sensed by me. This is so even if we consider a case in which I am misperceiving a white object as brown, or even suffering an hallucination or delusion of the presence of brown tables when none are in the vicinity (p. 521).7

This way of thinking of perceptual experience is enshrined in the principle which

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6 We do discuss the Spreading Step a little further in sections 5 and 6 below. The formulation of the Spreading Step we have in (iv) is based on Robinson (1994, p. 56ff). Robinson draws on Broad (1952, p. 9). Smith (2002, p. 26ff) also formulates the Spreading Step in terms of continuity, and draws on Price (1932, p. 32ff).

7 See e.g., Moore (1913-1914, 1953, 1957), Russell (1912, 1913, 1917), Broad (1923, 1925), and Price (1932). Not all theorists of perception of this era held to the view under discussion here, notably Prichard (1906, 1909: Chapter 4), and Dawes Hicks (1912, 1938: Chapter II). Other notable early critics are Paul (1936), Barnes (1945), and Austin (1962).
constitutes premise (ii) in the above argument. The principle has come to be known as the ‘Phenomenal Principle’ (Robinson (1994), p. 32; it is also known as the ‘Sense-Datum Inference’, Chisholm (1950)):

The Phenomenal Principle: When it seems to one that something has a quality, F, then there is something of which one is aware which does have this quality.

This principle is not always explicitly formulated, or argued for, but it is certainly an essential aspect of the discussions of perception in the works mentioned above.

The advocate of the Phenomenal Principle appeals to the instantiation of F in illusory experiences as of objects being F. They thus at least have an account (or perhaps the beginnings of an account) which is, in Smith’s terms, phenomenologically adequate (2002, p. 40). That is, when one sees the white wall as yellow in colour, it really does seem to one as if one confronts some instance of yellowness. This experiential or phenomenological fact is, one might argue, adequately explained by appeal to awareness of a genuine instance of yellowness. And this explanation is continuous with how we pre-theoretically think of cases of veridical perception: it looks F to one because one confronts something which is F.

Whether appeal to the Phenomenal Principle is the best way to explain the phenomenological facts is a further matter. The Principle is very much out of favour in contemporary discussions of perceptual experience, and we ourselves are sceptical of its merits. As noted in the introduction, the Phenomenal Principle has been the main point of dispute regarding the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion. But we want to set aside the controversy over the Phenomenal Principle. We will just assume, for the sake of argument, that the Principle is in good order. For our aim is to bring out a further controversial assumption lurking in the Base Case Stage of the argument.

The problem with the Base Case Stage of the argument is that even given its highly contentious premise The Interim Negative Claim does not follow. What actually follows from (i) and (ii) is not (iii) but a crucially different conclusion, namely:

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Authors in the intentionalist tradition reject the idea that for one’s perceptual experience to be structured in a certain way – e.g., where a thing appears F to one – one must be aware of something which actually instantiates the qualities which characterize the way in which one’s experience is structured. Instead, appeal is made to perceptual representation of such qualities (see, e.g., Harman (1990), Tye (1992), Crane (2001)). Things are different with naïve realism. A naïve realist thinks that in cases where one perceives something for the F thing it is – e.g., where one sees a white picket fence for what it is – one’s experience constitutively involves, and thus has its nature partially determined by, the F object (e.g., white fence) one sees (see Martin, 2006). An experience of the same fundamental kind thus requires the presence to one of an F object. This is not, though, to endorse the Phenomenal Principle – at least not unrestrictedly. For there is no commitment in this naïve realist idea to treating cases of illusion and hallucination in the same way: naïve realists are typically disjunctivists.
(iii*) Since the material object in question is, by hypothesis, not-F, then in cases of illusion, one is aware of something else which is F.

But (iii*) doesn’t entail that in illusions we are not aware of material things. It leaves the common sense view intact. Since although the F-thing of which one is aware is not the material object one takes oneself to be aware of, this is consistent with one also being aware of this material object. In short, the Interim Negative Claim doesn’t follow from the premises of the argument from illusion. And without the Interim Negative Claim, (iv) doesn’t yield the conclusion of the argument from illusion, (v), the Negative Claim.

To illustrate, let’s return to our example of the white wall seen as yellow. Applying the standard exposition of the argument from illusion to this case, (i)–(iii) give the following

1a. It seems to S that something has the quality of yellowness, yet the wall is not yellow.

2a. S is perceptually aware of something which is yellow.

Therefore,

3a. S is not aware of the wall.

The problem is that (3a) doesn’t follow from (1a)–(2a), what actually follows is

3b. S is aware of something yellow which is not the wall.

By the Phenomenal Principle S is aware of something yellow. Let’s call this yellow thing a ‘sense-datum’. Now given that the wall isn’t yellow, it follows from Leibniz’s Law that the yellow sense-datum is not identical to the wall. Putting all this together yields (3b). But, crucially, (3b) is consistent with S being aware of the wall in the illusory experience in addition to the yellow sense-datum. More generally, this form of argument (from (i) and (ii)) isn’t powerful enough to falsify the common sense view that in illusions we are aware of material objects.

Before we continue, a point of terminology. As others do in this context, we have introduced ‘sense-data’ into the discussion. As we are using the terms ‘sense-data’ and its cognates, sense-data are the objects of awareness licensed by the Phenomenal Principle and the relevant phenomenological facts. But we shouldn’t be mislead into thinking that we are entitled to say much of substance about the nature of sense-data. We are in a position similar to that Price (1932, pp. 18–19) was in when he first introduced sense-data into his discussion:

We are not committed to any view about what is called ‘the status’ of sense-data in the Universe, either as regards the category they fall under, or as regards their relations with other types of existent entities. They may be physical; i.e. they may be parts of, or events in
material objects such as chairs and tables or (in another theory) brains. They may be mental, as Berkeley and others have held. They may be neither mental nor physical.9

And likewise we are not in a position to claim that sense-data are private entities, nor to make claims about the epistemological status of sense-data, such as that they are infallibly known and somehow foundational to other knowledge.10

From the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion we know that the sense-data present in such cases must be (a) entities which are potential objects of perception, (b) entities which can instantiate perceptible qualities (such as yellowness), and (c) not identical to the material objects which we are purportedly perceiving in such cases. But these conditions don’t individuate a specific and unified ontological category or kind (Austin, 1962). Entities of many different kinds might satisfy these conditions.

Further, in cases of illusion we know that the sense-data given by the Phenomenal Principle are not identical to the material object we are purportedly aware of, but that is consistent with such sense-data being distinct material objects. The claim that sense-data in cases of illusion are distinct material objects may be implausible, but it is not ruled out by the argument from illusion. Moreover, application of the Phenomenal Principle and Leibniz’s Law in cases of veridical perception does not rule out that the sense-data of which we are aware are the ordinary objects that we take ourselves to be aware of. So let’s be clear that insofar as the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion commits us to sense-data, it is to a thin, as opposed to a thick, metaphysically substantive, conception of sense-data.

Back, then, to the invalid step we have discerned in the formulation of the argument from illusion we began with. The invalid version of the argument is rife in the literature. How does Robinson (1994) take the Base Case Stage of the argument to go? First, he states the argument in an informal manner:

\textit{In some/many/most/all cases of perception, we are aware of something that possesses different sensible properties from those possessed by the physical object we take ourselves to be perceiving. That of which we are aware is, therefore, something other than the object purportedly perceived (p. 31).}

He then notes what he thinks is needed to make this argument formally valid:

The argument can easily be made formal, for the premise and the conclusion are linked by

9 Modern proponents of the claim that sense-data are mental include Jackson (1977), and O’Shaughnessy (2003). See also the helpful discussion in Moore (1953 pp. 42-44) of how the ‘accepted view’ of sense-data has it that they are mind-dependent entities. Some early 20th century sense-datum theorists like Moore (1913-14, 1918-19), Broad, and Price held that sense-data existed independently of our awareness of them, so they were not mental, but they also held them to be non-physical. Russell takes sense-data to be physical entities in his (1917).

10 See e.g., Russell (1912, 1917).
an application of Leibniz’s Law: if things possess different properties then they cannot be
the same thing (p. 32).

And thus later (pp. 57–58) we get the following (which we quote in full):

1. In some cases of perception, physical objects appear other than they actually are – that is,
   they appear to possess sensible qualities that they do not actually possess.
2. Whenever something appears to a subject to possess a sensible quality, there is something of
   which the subject is aware which does possess that quality.

Therefore
3. In some cases of perception there is something of which the subject is aware which
   possesses sensible qualities which the physical object the subject is purportedly perceiving
   does not possess.
4. If \(a\) possesses a sensible quality that \(b\) lacks, then \(a\) is not identical to \(b\).

Therefore
5. In some cases of perception that of which the subject is aware is something other than the
   physical object the subject is purportedly perceiving.

The Base Case Stage here terminates with an instance of the Interim Negative Claim, 5.

To be absolutely clear, for this to be in line with the ultimate conclusion Robinson
advertises,\(^{11}\) 5 had better be understood in this way:

5*. In some cases of perception that of which the subject is aware is not the physical object the
subject is purportedly perceiving but something else.

But then, the argument is invalid, as 5* doesn’t follow from 1–4. Rather, what actually
follows is:

5**. In some cases of perception the subject is aware of something other than the physical object
the subject is purportedly perceiving.

That is, it doesn’t follow from 1–4 that what the subject is aware of is just the sense-
datum. It follows only that she is at least aware of the sense-datum.

What, then, of Smith’s (2002) presentation? First, Smith has us consider that one is
subject to the illusion we have been considering – the white wall seen as yellow. Next, by
the Phenomenal Principle, one is aware of something which is yellow. And finally (for
the Base Case stage),

since the wall is white, not yellow, but what we are immediately aware of is yellow, not white,
what we are immediately aware of cannot be the wall. This third step is but an application of
Leibniz’s Law to illusory situations (Smith 2002, p. 25).

But, again, what follows from Leibniz’s Law is that the yellow thing of which we are
aware is not the wall. This is quite different from saying that we are not aware of the wall.

\(^{11}\) Which we mentioned above, namely: ‘In all cases of perception that of which the subject is aware
is other than the physical object the subject is purportedly perceiving’ (p. 58).
This invalid step shows up not just in Crane, Robinson, and Smith, but in other contemporary formulations of the argument, e.g., Coates (2007) and Fish (2010). And this invalid step isn’t an artefact of the contemporary interpretations of those early 20th century instances where the argument is employed or discussed. The formulations in at least Moore (1913-1914), Broad (1923), and Ayer (1940) all seem to involve this invalid step. Let’s look at each author in turn. First, Moore. He begins with the following:

I am looking at two [circular] coins [of the same size], one of which is a half-crown, the other a florin. Both are lying on the ground; and they are situated obliquely to my line of sight, so that the visual sensibles [sense-data] which I directly apprehend in looking at them are visibly elliptical, and not even approximately circular. Moreover, the half-crown is so much farther from me than the florin, that its visual sensible is visibly smaller than that of the florin (p. 371).

Clearly the Phenomenal Principle is at work here. For Moore says that in seeing the circular coins he visually apprehends elliptical things – sensibles, or sense-data. What conclusions does Moore draw from this? First we have:

The upper side of the coin, which I am said to see is not simply identical with the visual sensible [sense-datum] which I directly apprehend in seeing it (p. 372).

So far this is a legitimate conclusion to draw, given that the upper side of the coin is circular and not elliptical, whereas the sensible apprehended is elliptical and not circular. But note that the conclusion so far is not that Moore doesn’t directly apprehend the coins, or their upper sides. It is not, then, the Interim Negative Claim. But Moore continues:

From this it follows that we must distinguish that sense of the word “see” in which we can be said to “see” a physical object, from that sense of the word in which “see” means merely

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12 To keep things manageable, we spare the reader demonstrations of the point in these cases too.
13 Chapter 2 of Price (1932) is an exception. In the way his argument is structured, we don’t find the Interim Negative Claim as a part. (This is not to say that Price’s argument is any good. For he tries to show that in illusions we are aware of non-material sense-data, and then he attempts to generalize just from the claim that some sense-data are non-material to the claim that all sense-data are non-material (pp. 31-33). This is criticized forcefully by Austin (1962)).
14 Another exception is Kiteley (1972). He presents a version of the argument from illusion which corresponds to our valid version of the Base Case Stage. Kiteley’s main concern, however, is with the status of the Phenomenal Principle. He does not note that the Base Case as it is usually presented is invalid. Also, he doesn’t note that the conclusion of the valid Base Case Stage is compatible with being aware of the material object, and nor does he say what the argument would need in order to exclude awareness of the material object. Finally, he does not note that the Base Case as he formulates it is unsuitable for the achieving the traditional target of the argument from illusion, the Negative Claim.
15 Consonant with our presentation of the argument so far we might see this as warranted by an application of Leibniz’s Law. Moore himself, however, is not so quick here, for he entertains the idea that the sense-datum in question is elliptical only in the subject’s ‘private space’, yet circular in ‘physical space’ (p. 372). Moore finds another route to the conclusion. But we don’t need to go into that here, for our interest is in what Moore takes to follow from all of this.
to directly apprehend a visual sensible. In a proposition of the form “I see A,” where A is a
name or description of some physical object, though, if this proposition is to be true there
must be some visual sensible, B, which I am directly apprehending, yet the proposition “I
see A” is certainly not always, and probably never, identical in meaning with the proposition
“I directly apprehend B”. In asserting “I see A” we are asserting not only that we directly
apprehend some sensible but also something else about this sensible – it may be only some
proposition of the form “and this sensible has certain other properties,” or it may be some
proposition of the form “and I know this sensible to have certain other properties” (pp. 372-
373).

We don’t mean to suggest that any of this has a straightforward interpretation, but
here is what we think is going on. In cases of the sort Moore discusses, Moore wants to
preserve the claim that he sees the relevant material object(s), or parts of the relevant
material object(s). So, in the case in question he wants to preserve the claim that he sees
the coin, or its upper side. But he thinks there is some difficulty in preserving such
claims. And this is solved by the introduction of a distinct sense of “see” (or, by getting
clear on the correct interpretation of “sees x” as it applies to material things). The issue is
why he thinks there is this difficulty? Here is one explanation. Suppose we take “sees x”
to just mean directly apprehends x (and this is Moore’s starting point, for earlier in the
paper he introduced direct apprehension with reference to seeing). Then the claim that
he sees the coin or its upper side, is just the claim that he directly apprehends the coin or
its upper side. But now, Moore seems to think, this needs to be revised in light of the
argument from illusion. That is, “see”, as it applies to objects like coins and their parts
can’t just mean directly apprehends. Why not? Because in a case where one sees a round
coin as elliptical, one directly apprehends something which is elliptical, and that can’t be
the round coin (or its upper side). So, it might be thought to follow that one doesn’t in
such a case directly apprehend the coin, or its upper side. Now since one can still be said to
“see” the coin, or its upper side, we have to interpret “see” in another way (where to see
some material thing x ends up being analyzed as directly apprehending a distinct thing y
in conjunction with the claim that y has certain properties).

This may well make sense of why Moore feels the need to recommend a distinct
sense of “see” for cases of material object perception, but unfortunately it involves the
invalid step we have been discussing. For, given what he offers us, at no point is Moore
entitled to conclude that he doesn’t directly apprehend the coin or its upper sides. And if,
contra this interpretation, Moore isn’t guilty of the invalid move, then it is not at all clear

\[15\] We’ve switched to a case of a single coin for ease of exposition.

\[16\] This latter claim might be that y in some respects resembles x, so as we end up with a form of
indirect realism, such as the Lockean indirect realist thesis which Moore seems to end up with towards the
end of his paper.
why he feels the need to distinguish senses of “see”.

Next, Broad, whose discussion is very similar to Moore’s, but more explicit in certain respects. First, then, consider the following:

Assuming that when I look at a [round] penny from the side I am directly aware of something which is in fact elliptical, it is clear that this something cannot be identified with the penny, if the latter really has the characteristics that it is commonly supposed to have. The penny is supposed to be round, whilst the sensum is elliptical… Now one thing cannot, at the same time and in the same sense, be round and elliptical… Thus it is certain that, if there be sensa [sense-data], they cannot in general be identified with the physical objects of which they are appearances, if these literally have the properties commonly assigned to them (p. 240).

The background assumption here is some version of the Phenomenal Principle (which Broad gives us on p. 239). And Broad’s conclusion can be read as just the negation of a general claim. Namely, that whenever we are aware of a sensum in an experience, that sensum is the physical object we take ourselves to be aware of. And the idea is that this general claim is falsified by cases of illusion, given the Phenomenal Principle and Leibniz’s Law. For the premises Broad gives us entail:

(A) In an illusory perception of the round penny as elliptical, there is an elliptical sensum of which one is aware which is not the penny one takes oneself to be aware of.

And this falsifies the general claim. If this is all Broad is up to in wielding this argument, then it doesn’t involve the invalid step we have deciphered. Just so long as (A) and not (A*) is in the picture:

(A*) In an the illusory perception of the round penny as elliptical, one is aware of just an elliptical sensum and not the penny one takes oneself to be aware of.

But unfortunately, as Broad’s discussion proceeds, it becomes clear that he is helping himself not just to claims such as (A) but claims in the vicinity such as (A*). And Broad presents these further claims as if they flow just from the considerations of illusion he gives us to begin with. So later, we get:

words like “seeing” and “hearing” are ambiguous. They stand sometimes for acts of sensing, whose objects are of course sensa, and sometimes for acts of perceiving, whose objects are supposed to be bits of matter and their sensible qualities… In one sense we see a penny; in a somewhat stricter sense we see only one side of the penny; in another sense we see only a brown elliptical sensum. The first two uses refer to acts of perceiving, the last to an act of sensing. (p. 248, emphasis added).

17 The point is exemplified again with the straight stick looking bent on p. 241, and with illusions of redness and hotness on p. 242.
In the case where one is viewing the penny from an angle so that it looks elliptical to one, Broad claims that what is sensed, or in our terms, what one is aware of, is *just* the brown elliptical sensum. So in cases of illusory perception, we are *not* after all aware of the physical objects we take ourselves to be aware of. (We might still be said to “see” them, but this is now not a matter of being aware of them, or if one prefers, being *directly* aware of them). But it is the argument from illusion which is supposed to deliver this result. As we’ve shown, it doesn’t. So although Broad doesn’t make the invalid step to begin with, he does ultimately take (A∗) to follow from the premises of the argument from illusion, and so he too is thus guilty of the invalid step.

Finally, let’s look at how Ayer represents the early 20th century tradition we have sampled. First, Ayer asks ‘Why may we not say that we are directly aware of material things?’ And ‘The answer is provided by what is known as the argument from illusion’ (1940, p. 3). How does he think the argument goes? He begins, familiarly enough, by observing that there are a range of sorts of non-veridical experience. He gives a flurry of examples, one of which is the straight stick in water which looks crooked. Of that case, he makes the following remark:

> For the present it must be assumed that the stick does not really change its shape when placed in water... Then it follows that at least one of the visual appearances must be delusive; for it cannot both be crooked and straight. Nevertheless, even in the case where what we see is not the real quality of a material thing, it is supposed that we are still seeing something... (p. 4).

In the “delusive” case, where the straight stick appears bent to one, still one sees something. This something is crooked, and so not the straight stick. And as Ayer notes ‘it is for this purpose that philosophers have recourse to the term “sense-datum”’ (p. 4). Ayer is here representing the appeal to the Phenomenal Principle. Unfortunately, Ayer then goes on to take the invalid step we’ve highlighted:

> If anything is established by this, it can be only that there are some cases in which the character of our perceptions makes it necessary for us to say that what we are directly experiencing is not a material thing but a sense-datum (p. 5).18

We’ve seen that contemporary expositors and some authors from the early 20th century represent the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion as establishing the Interim Negative Claim – that in illusory experiences we are not aware of (or we don’t sense, or directly apprehend) the material objects we take ourselves to be aware of. (And this is what is needed if the Negative Claim of the argument – that we are never

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18 Ayer’s formulation in his (1973) also contains this invalid step (p. 75).
perceptually aware of material objects – is to follow via the Spreading Step). But these formulations of the argument from illusion are invalid. All that follows from the premises we are given is the positive claim that in an illusory situation one is aware of a sense-datum distinct from the material object one takes oneself to be aware of. Without a further premise the Interim Negative Claim does not follow from this positive conclusion, and so even if we accept the Spreading Step, the Negative Claim won’t follow either.

4 The Uniqueness Assumption

As we have seen, the proper conclusion to draw from the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion, if we grant the premises, is that in cases of illusion we are aware of sense-data distinct from the material object which we are purportedly perceiving. But this is consistent with our also being aware of the purported objects of experience in such cases. So in order to establish the Interim Negative Claim – that in illusions we are not aware of these ordinary material things – the arguer from illusion needs to find some bridge premise which gets us from awareness of sense-data to the absence of awareness of such ordinary objects.

What might this extra premise be? Although Snowdon doesn’t discuss the reasoning involved in the Base Case Stage in quite the way we have here, he does identify what seems to be precisely the sort of assumption that might rescue the reasoning we have been critical of. Consider the following passage:

There is a very important assumption which has been made so far, and which is usually made, but which needs spelling out. If the Base Case argument is sound it shows, as we might put it, that that (a [perceivable] item, whatever it is) is not an external object [better: not the material object we are purportedly perceiving]. But this conclusion only implies that the external object is not [perceivable] ... on the assumption that it, the external item, would have to be identical to that in order to be [perceivable]. We can label this the Uniqueness Assumption, because it amounts, in effect, to the claim that there is, in a particular direction of attention, as it were, a unique, single, [perceivable] thing... (p. 74).

How are we to formulate the Uniqueness Assumption in general terms so that it can be used as the desired bridge premise in the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion? A simple first attempt might take the following form:

(I) In a single act of awareness (or in a single experiential episode) there is at most a single thing of which one is aware.

19 For continuity with our own way of presenting things we have removed Snowdon’s references to directness, but everything we say could be reformulated in Snowdon’s preferred terms.
The Uniqueness Assumption formulated in terms of (I) seems to be plainly false. For intuitively one can look out of the window into the garden and see multiple things in one go, that is, in a single act of awareness or experience. For instance, we can have experiences in which we see scenes, and their constituents (e.g., a garden scene, involving birds, trees, people, etc). If (I) is true, then there can’t be such cases. There do seem to be such cases, so in the absence of a strong argument for (I), we ought to reject it. Now the arguer from illusion is committed to there being no such cases, for she thinks that we are never aware of material objects, and so never aware of multiple material objects in a single experience of a scene. But since we are considering whether (I) can provide a fix to the argument from illusion, at this stage the arguer from illusion is not entitled to the conclusion of their argument in rebutting the intuitive objection we have raised to (I). In any case, it is not clear that accepting the conclusion of the argument from illusion commits us to (I) – why could one not be aware of multiple non-material sense-data in a single experiential episode?

Instead we might try the following:

(II) If one is aware of a sense-datum, one is not aware of a material object.

Again, the arguer from illusion is committed to such a claim, but it is hard to see why we should be, at the point where we are trying to fix the argument from illusion. First, it is consistent with the thin notion of sense-data that sense-data are material objects. Indeed our ordinary understanding of veridical cases equates the two. So (II) is too strong in general terms. But even if we restrict its application to illusory cases, it is still uncompelling. Consider again the case of the white wall. Suppose that next to the wall stands a horse. Now suppose that our subject has an illusory experience in which the wall looks yellow to them. Given the Phenomenal Principle, our subject is therefore aware of a yellow sense-datum (which is not the wall). According to (II), with restricted application to illusory experiences, this means that our subject is not also aware of the horse standing next to the wall. But why shouldn’t our subject be aware of the horse as well as the yellow sense-datum? We can stipulate that the horse appears as it is to the subject. So why should the fact that our subject is aware of a yellow sense-datum mean that our subject is not also aware, in a perfectly veridical way, of the horse? There seems to be no reason, independent of the conclusion of the argument from illusion, why one could not be aware of sense-data in one area of a visual scene and material objects in another. This fix to the argument from illusion, then, is too strong to be dialectically effective.

Of course, what the argument from illusion seeks to establish in the Base Case Stage is not that we are not aware of any material objects but that we are not aware of certain material objects. To take our example, the Base Case Stage seeks to establish that one is not aware of the wall. It is in this sense that (II) is unnecessarily strong. Presumably this is
why Snowdon puts the Uniqueness Assumption in a more restricted way (our emphasis): 

*within a particular direction of attention* there is a unique single thing of which one can be aware. So, in a single act of awareness one might be aware of many objects (contra (I)), and even material objects in addition to sense-data (contra (II)), but *within a particular direction of attention* – so the thought goes – one can be aware of only a single entity. This suggests something like:

(III) Within a particular direction of attention there is at most a single thing of which one is aware.

Suppose that our subject looks towards the white wall. Common sense would have it that, in that particular direction of attention, our subject sees the wall. (Even though it illusorily appears to her as yellow). Granting the Phenomenal Principle we have to say that in that particular direction of attention, the subject is aware of a yellow sense-data (which is not identical to the wall). But if (III) is right, then in that particular direction of attention, our subject is not also aware of the wall. This isn’t yet the conclusion that the arguer from illusion wants from the Base Case Stage – namely, that our subject is not aware of the wall. But it is progress. For we only need to add something like: if she is aware of the wall at all it is in *that* particular direction of attention.

The crucial issue now is how exactly we are to understand the notion of a “particular direction of attention”. Unfortunately, the most intuitive ways of understanding it, yield versions of the Uniqueness Assumption which, like (I) and (II), are questionable. On one natural way of understanding “a particular direction of attention” we get the following rendering of (III):

(IV) *Within a particular region of space to which a subject directs their attention* there is at most a single thing of which they are aware.

Now the idea of a particular region of space where a subject directs her attention is most obviously applicable in the case of visual perception (not obviously so for some other sensory modalities). This is presumably at least partly because visual perception is directional. Seeing involves looking in a certain direction. One issue which might be raised then, is how the arguer from illusion can extend this cashing-out of the Uniqueness Assumption to other sense-modalities? We won’t pursue this issue here, however. As noted above we are happy to restrict attention to just visual perception. In what follows, we will question (IV) and its application even for the visual case.

If (IV) is not to be subject to the counterexamples that made (I) unacceptable, that is, the possibility of perceiving multiple objects within a single visual scene, the region of space will have to be delimited in some way. One option here is to appeal to the material object which one is purportedly aware of as that which determines a precisely defined
region of space. We might thus understand (IV) in this way: in the region of space defined precisely and exclusively in terms of the putative object of awareness $x$ – that is, defined in terms of the shape, extension and boundaries of $x$ – there is at most a single thing of which one is aware:

(V) Where $x$ is the material object of which one is putatively aware, within an $x$-defined region of physical space to which a subject, S, directs their attention there is at most a single thing of which they are aware.

So to return to the case of the wall, what (V) says is that within the wall-defined region of space where S directs their attention, S is aware of at most one thing.

In order to move from (V) to the Interim Negative Claim, the arguer from illusion needs two further premises. First, that if S is aware of x, then S is aware of x in the x-defined region of physical space. This premise seems secure: presumably if S is aware of the wall she is aware of it in the region of space where the wall is located. But in addition, the argument requires the further claim that the sense datum is located within the x-defined region of physical space. For if the sense datum is not located within this region, (V) does not rule out that x is the only thing within the x-defined region of space, and so does not rule out that x is the only thing in that location of which S is aware. So it is a commitment of this way of repairing the argument that the arguer from illusion takes sense data, or at least those we are aware of, to be located in physical space. Let us grant this claim and see where it takes us.

On the face of it, (V) might seem like a plausible enough principle. Suppose there is a tomato before S, and there is thus a tomato-defined region of space R. Now suppose that S directs their attention to region of space R. Let us grant that S is aware of the tomato in that particular region of space. Can S also be aware of other entities in that very region of space at the same time? For instance, can S also be aware of an orange in that region of space? It seems obvious that S cannot be. For the orange would have to be in R for S to be aware of it in R. And as tomatoes and oranges spatially exclude one another, the orange can’t be in R at the same time as the tomato is in R.

But unfortunately for the arguer from illusion, this way of making (V) seem plausible doesn’t generalize. First, as well as being aware of a material object within its defined region of space, we can also be aware of its surface and its parts within that region. One might think that this does not represent a significant problem for (V) since we can understand it as saying that we are only aware of a single object that occupies the whole of the object-defined region of space.

But more fundamentally, the reason we gave for thinking that (V) is true, that objects spatially exclude one another, is not a general truth. That is, although material objects like tomatoes exclude other material objects such as oranges from regions of

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space, they do not exclude all entities from the regions they occupy. For instance, material objects do not exclude other material objects to which they are constitutionally linked. For example, the tomato does not exclude the matter from which it is made, or its temporal parts, if any. Moreover, if it is legitimate to think of properties as being located where their instances are, then the tomato and its redness don’t exclude each other from space. So when S looks at the tomato of which she is aware and directs her attention to the tomato-defined region of space, it is not at all obvious why we should suppose that S cannot also be aware of the matter of which the tomato is made, for example. Why, then, should we suppose that there is at most a single thing of which S is aware even within an x-defined region?

Again, the arguer from illusion is ultimately going to be unhappy with the idea of being aware of material objects, their parts, and the like, but that doesn’t mean our invoking such awareness in the discussion here is dialectically inappropriate. Rather, as we found that the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion is invalid, we have been trying to find a suitable further premise which makes it valid. In trying to discern whether any such premise is plausible, we have to appeal to ordinary cases. For if it doesn’t apply in those cases, or is somehow questionable in the verdicts it delivers when applied to those cases, then absent some compelling philosophical argument for it, we are entitled to reject it. And in any case, at this stage of the discussion the arguer from illusion is not entitled to their conclusion that we are never aware of material objects – for we are still at the point of trying to fix the argument from illusion.

The arguer from illusion might suggest that sense-data are not constitutionally linked to material objects. But this is not enough to make (V) unassailable. As we noted above, the reason we cannot see an orange in a tomato-defined region is because the tomato excludes the orange from that region. But the arguer from illusion cannot legitimately claim that the cases they are interested in – that is, where one is aware of a sense-datum in a particular region of space – should be treated like the case of the tomato and the orange, for nothing can exclude an object x from an x-defined region of space, since an x-defined region of space is simply the region of space where x is located. So the arguer must claim that although the sense-datum does not exclude x from the x-defined region of space, it nonetheless excludes awareness of x.

But note that the arguer from illusion’s commitments are beginning to mount-up. First, sense-data can be located in physical space; second, sense-data can be co-located with ordinary material objects; third, sense-data are not constitutionally-linked to the putative objects of awareness; and finally, sense-data exclude ordinary material objects from awareness in a region, even though they do not physically exclude them from that region. So what we have here is an appeal to a range of substantive metaphysical claims
about sense-data, and thus a departure from the thin conception of sense-data operative so far. But remember, it is only the thin conception which is licensed by the Phenomenal Principle. So a crucial question arises: what warrants this departure? We have been given no reasons for thinking of sense-data in this thicker way, and so appealing to (V) does not secure the Interim Negative Claim. Moreover, given the odd metaphysics of sense-data required for the argument to go through, the arguer from illusion needs to supply a compelling argument for thinking of sense-data in this way, if her argument is to succeed.

The above problems were the result of defining a region of physical space in term of the putative object of awareness, x. Perhaps these problems can be avoided if we appeal to the apparent location of the sense-datum instead (which is also the apparent location of the putative object of experience). Let us help ourselves to a notion of apparent space. The thought is that whether or not sense-data have a location in physical space, they do appear to have a location, and so have a location in apparent space.\textsuperscript{20} The suggestion, then, is that we understand (IV) not in terms of physical space, but rather in in terms of apparent space:

\[
\text{(VI): Where } y \text{ is the sense-datum one is aware of, within a } y\text{-defined region of apparent space to which a subject directs their attention, there is at most a single thing of which they are aware.}
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If the notion of apparent space is unclear, so much the worse for (VI) as a repair to the argument from illusion. In what follows, we shall simply assume we have an adequate grasp of this notion.

In order to reach the Interim Negative Claim via (VI), we need the additional premise that if S is aware of the putative ordinary object of experience, x, then S is aware of x in the y-defined region of apparent space. This premise seems secure: presumably if S is aware of the wall she is aware of it in the region of space where there appears to be a yellow wall. So given that x is not identical to y, and S is aware of y, (VI) entails that S is not aware of x, which is the Interim Negative Claim.

But now consider the fact that material objects do not exclude light phenomena, such as shadows and holograms, or other transparent objects, such as pieces of glass, from regions of apparent space. One can, for example, be aware of both a piece of glass and the wall behind it, if the glass is transparent. Similarly, if we place a transparent piece of yellow film across a wall, we can, it seems, be aware of both the film and the wall, in the same region of apparent space. So now if sense-data are akin to light phenomena or transparent objects, then they won’t exclude material objects from apparent space. Thus, if

\textsuperscript{20} This is not to say that apparent space is not physical space. It is just that there is no commitment to apparent space being physical space.
sense-data are like that, then (VI) is to be rejected.21

Note that it does not help to understand apparent space in such a way that the above examples do not threaten (IV), so that, for example, the wall and the glass occupy different regions of apparent space. On such a reading, we need not concede that if S is aware of x she is aware of x in the y-defined region of apparent space: S’s being aware of the yellow film does not prevent S being aware of the wall in a different region of apparent space to the film. Either way, the route from (VI) to the Interim Negative Conclusion is blocked.

Naturally, then, at this stage the arguer from illusion might reply by appealing to the nature of sense-data: whilst glass and transparent film may allow one to see through to further objects, sense-data do not: sense-data are opaque. If sense-data are opaque, or otherwise block or exclude material objects from regions of apparent space, then the arguer from illusion can establish the conclusion of the Base Case Stage.

Now whilst the Phenomenal Principle is consistent with such a metaphysics of sense-data, it does not entail it. The thin conception of a sense-datum, which is all the arguer from illusion is entitled to at this stage, just doesn’t involve the idea that sense-data are opaque. So the arguer from illusion needs to provide reasons for thinking of sense-data as opaque, ones that do not rest upon the desired conclusion of the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion. At this stage, however, the arguer from illusion may claim that, unlike the claims required for (V) to be plausible, she can motivate the opacity of sense-data, given the Phenomenal Principle and reflections on our experience. If so, it looks as though the argument to the Interim Negative Claim can be restored. There are two steps to this attempted restoration, let’s see how it works with our recurring example.

Step One: In our example, not only does S seem to see something yellow, but she also seems to see something yellow and opaque. It follows from the Phenomenal Principle that in such a case there is a thing of which S is aware, which is both yellow and opaque. As Price writes of sense-data

> When I see a tomato there is much that I can doubt. ... One thing I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape ... that something is red and round then and there I cannot doubt ... and that which is thus present is called a datum. (1932, p. 3, our emphasis).

And since, by hypothesis, the wall is not yellow, it is not yellow and opaque, and so, by the Phenomenal Principle, S is aware of a yellow and opaque sense-datum which is not

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21 And presumably the same holds on any reasonable spelling-out of (VI) in terms of ‘direct awareness’: in the cases above, we take it that those who employ the language of ‘directness’ wish to say that we pre-theoretically think of ourselves as being directly aware of the wall.
the wall.

**Step Two**: Now given the meaning of ‘opaque’, the arguer from illusion may think that we can obtain the Interim Negative Claim after all. For if S is aware of something opaque that is not the wall, then, given the location of this object in apparent space, S is not aware of the wall. That is, given the meaning of ‘opaque’, it might be thought that awareness of an opaque sense-datum which is not the wall blocks awareness of the wall because the opaque sense-datum occludes the wall. As Smith writes of a similar case, seemingly recognizing the invalidity of the Base Case Stage of the argument as formulated above:

suppose that we see a red tomato that looks black as a result of unusual lighting. We conclude, by the second and third steps of the Argument [(ii) and (iii) above], that we are aware of a black sense-datum distinct from any physical tomato. Now although in this situation the shape of the tomato is not, we may suppose, subject to illusion, we cannot maintain that we are directly aware visually of the tomato’s shape, because, simply in virtue of one of the visible features of the tomato being subject to illusion, a sense-datum has replaced the tomato as the object of visual awareness as such. For the shape you see is the shape of something black, and the tomato is not black. I shall refer to this as the “sense-datum infection”. (2002, p. 26, our emphasis)

Given that the Phenomenal Principle licenses this sense-datum infection, it may seem that the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion is secure after all (again, granting that we are not aware of the wall in some other region of apparent space).

What follows from the Phenomenal Principle is that in our example S is aware of something yellow and opaque, and that in Smith’s case S is aware of something black and tomato-shaped. Nevertheless, the Interim Negative Claim has not been established. Let’s call objects which account for the illusory aspects of experience ‘sense-data’. For all the argument says, the yellow and opaque sense-datum of which we are aware is a *composite object* comprised of the wall and some yellow sense-datum*. If so, it could be that the sense-datum* is responsible for our experience of yellow and that the wall is responsible for our experience of opacity. This is because although being aware of a composite object does not entail being aware of all of its parts, being aware of a composite is consistent with being aware of some of its parts.

Moreover, when we see a whole, we often do see some of its parts. So if we are aware of a composite sense-datum consisting of a sense-datum* and a material object, this does not preclude us from being aware of the material object, just as when we are aware of the wall covered with yellow film this does not preclude us from seeing the wall. So, the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion is still not secure. Similarly, in Smith’s case we might be aware of a composite object comprised of a black sense-datum* and the shape of the tomato. And whilst the black sense-datum* may hide from view the surface
of the tomato, it need not obscure the shape of the tomato. So given that we can be aware of an object by being aware of some of its parts, then it is consistent with Smith’s case that we are aware of the tomato in virtue of being aware of its shape. But in fact we need not even concede that awareness of the sense-datum* precludes awareness of the surface of the tomato. Perhaps what we are aware of is a composite made up of a transparent dark sense-datum* and the tomato, and this composite sense-datum, through the interaction of the transparent sense-datum* and the tomato, is black.

In order to circumvent this latest difficulty, the arguer from illusion must establish either that there are no composite sense-data comprised of sense-data* and material objects, or that we cannot be perceptually aware of them, or that whenever we are aware of such composites, we are not aware of the material object which it has as a part. But it is hard to see what reflections on experience could justify these claims. Moreover, given that we often can see wholes and their parts, the prospects for denying that we see the material object part of these putative composites seem dim, unless it can be established that sense-data* parts of composite sense-data are themselves opaque and so block the perception of the distinct material object. So whether we cash-out (IV) in terms of (V) or (VI), the revised Base Case Stage of the argument is problematic.

A final way of making the argument from illusion valid appeals not to the way that objects exclude one another from perception, but the way in which properties do. The claim that certain classes of ‘incompatible’ properties exclude one another from perception has a certain intuitive plausibility. For example, maybe properties in the same determinate-determinable structure which are not themselves related by the determinate-determinable relation, such as yellow and white, exclude one another when we focus on a given x-defined region of space. This thought gives us the following

(VII) Where x is the putative object of one’s awareness, within an x-defined region of apparent space to which a subject directs their attention, if one is aware of an object which has the property F in the x-defined region of space, one is not aware of an object in the x-defined region with a property incompatible with F.

Despite some initial plausibility, (VII) is also refuted by our case of the white wall covered in yellow film. Here we are aware of something yellow and something white within a given x-defined region of apparent space.

The arguer from illusion need not, of course, subscribe to any of (I)-(VII). Indeed, the minimal claim that they need to restore the validity of the argument is the following:

(VIII) If S is aware of a sense-datum distinct from the putative object of experience, then S is not also aware of the putative object of experience.

(I)-(VII) can be seen as ways of giving us (VIII), but (VIII) does not itself depend on the truth of any of (I)-(VII). So although we have shown that appeals to (I)-(VII) do
not help the arguer from illusion, is it not open to her to appeal directly to (VIII) which has not been shown to be false or otherwise of no help? Well, in a sense, yes. But without something akin to the above strategies, (VIII) is unmotivated. Moreover, once we consider examples such as the wall with the yellow film placed over it, the plausibility of (VIII) is greatly diminished. There is, it seems, no easy way of repairing the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion.

In the previous section, we argued that the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion is invalid. The arguer from illusion wanted to establish the Interim Negative Claim – that in illusions we are not aware of material things. But the premises offered establish only that in cases of illusion we are aware of sense-data* distinct from the putative material object of such cases. This is consistent with our also being aware of the putative material object in such cases. At the start of the current section, we pointed out that in order to establish the Interim Negative Claim the arguer from illusion needs a bridge premise which gets us from awareness of sense-data* to the absence of awareness of ordinary material objects. We then considered various forms that such a bridge premise might take, versions of what we called the Uniqueness Assumption. But all versions of the Uniqueness Assumption we considered are either implausible or else stand in need of serious justification in the face of difficult metaphysical questions. In the absence of a plausible and well justified Uniqueness Assumption, or some other strategy for fixing the invalidity, the argument from illusion establishes nothing like the radical conclusions it has been thought to establish, even granting the highly contentious Phenomenal Principle which it involves.

22 Although we haven’t been able to find discussions of what we are calling the Uniqueness Assumption in the context of the argument from illusion, there is an interesting discussion of how some such Uniqueness Assumption might fail, in a different context, in O’Shaughnessy (1984), developed in his (2000). O’Shaughnessy’s discussion is centered on the visual perception of light and how that doesn’t, in a given instance, exclude the visual perception of other entities. In O’Shaughnessy (2003) a similar point is made with respect to sense-data (for O’Shaughnessy, these are mental entities). O’Shaughnessy also discusses the question of whether to think of sense-data as opaque or not. His view is that they are neither transparent nor opaque, but still, he doesn’t think that awareness of sense-data excludes awareness of material objects.

22 Though note that O’Shaughnessy’s various discussions are complicated by the fact that he has a view on which the perception of material objects is in some sense mediated by the visual perception of other entities such as light, and sense-data. What we are saying here, however, doesn’t require the introduction of a distinction between mediate and immediate perception of entities. Nor does it require the idiosyncratic conception of sense-data that O’Shaughnessy operates with. We’ve argued for ways of resisting Uniqueness Assumptions which are independent of O’Shaughnessy’s framework.
5 The Common Sense Picture of Perception

The arguer from illusion might take the above critical remarks on board and react in the following way. Given that we have not challenged the Phenomenal Principle, we are granting that the Base Case Stage establishes that in cases of illusion we are aware of a sense-datum* non-identical to the material object of which we are putatively aware. Now the arguer from illusion may well give up the Interim Negative Claim but note that awareness of such sense-data* is damaging enough. That is, they might say that the result we do get from the Base Case Stage requires a revision to our ordinary understanding of such illusory situations.

We have four remarks to make in response to this suggestion. First, with such a thin and non-specific conception of sense-data*, why should we think that introducing them in cases of illusion is at odds with anything we are committed to in our ordinary understanding of perception? Unless the arguer from illusion can establish some thicker conception of sense-data*, whether or not the introduction of sense-data* is at odds with our common sense picture of perception has the status of an open question.

Second, we need to distinguish between a claim being inconsistent with a piece of common sense, and a claim being additional to the claims of common sense. Each sort of scenario requires a revision of common sense, but the sort of revision required in each case is different. The invalid version of the argument from illusion discussed above terminates, at the Base Case Stage, in a claim which is inconsistent with a claim of common sense – the Interim Negative Claim. But once we correct for the invalidity of that argument it is not at all obvious that we get a claim which is inconsistent with common sense. It is not obvious that the claim that we are aware of sense-data* (in the thin sense) in cases of illusion is inconsistent with, as opposed to merely additional to the commitments of our common sense picture of perception: not being committed to there being Fs of which we are aware is not the same as being committed to there not being Fs of which we are aware.

Even if we have a thicker conception of sense-data* in play, it is not obvious that our common sense conception of perception is complete enough to issue a determinate verdict on the question: “do illusory situations involve awareness of such sense-data*”. No doubt common sense is committed on the subtly different question, namely “do illusory situations involve awareness of sense-data* as opposed to the material things we are purportedly aware of in such situations”, but we shouldn’t conflate these two questions as the arguer from illusion does. With respect to the former question it is not clear that common sense has a commitment, however implicit, with respect to it. After all, it is not as if we are obliged to suppose that our common sense picture of perception is akin to a
completed theory which we each carry around with us just in virtue of having an understanding of perception. But, again, assuming that we are not pre-theoretically committed to the existence of such sense-data* in illusory situations, the valid version of the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion forces a revision of common sense only in the sense that it requires an addition to common sense. (C.f. the discussion of ‘revisionary metaphysics’ in Snowdon (2008, p. 117)). As such, the argument does not have the destructive effect its proponents suppose.

But, third, what would follow from granting that the introduction of sense-data* in illusions is inconsistent with common sense? Such a concession does not, for example, sustain the view that we are forever behind a “veil of perception”, and never in (direct) perceptual contact with the mind-independent material world. So even if our common sense picture of illusion is shown to be false, and not just incomplete, it is not clear that this has further unpalatable consequences. Even if we are pre-theoretically committed to the claim that sense-data* don’t exist and aren’t objects of awareness, this is not a central commitment of our ordinary conception of perception. It is not as central as the commitment we have to the idea that we are aware of ordinary material objects in perception. So perhaps if, as the reaction alleges, there has to be a revision of common sense, it still remains to be seen what the philosophical significance of that revision is.

Fourth and finally, granting that we are aware of sense-data* in illusory situations does not entail that we are aware of sense-data* in veridical perceptual episodes, and so any revision of common sense is isolated to the illusory case. But, it may be objected, does not the Spreading Step of the argument from illusion establish that if we are aware of sense-data* in the illusory case, then we are aware of sense-data* in the veridical case. As Broad (1952) puts it:

No doubt it would be possible in theory to admit [that illusions require sense-data], and yet to maintain that in the one case of direct vision through a homogeneous medium one really is (as one appears to oneself to be in all cases) prehending a part of the coloured surface of a remote foreign body. But, in view of the continuity between the most normal and the most abnormal cases of seeing, such a doctrine would be utterly implausible and could be defended only by the most desperate special pleading (p. 9).

Robinson agrees: ‘It is, therefore, very implausible to say that some of these cases involve direct apprehension of an external object and in the others of a sense-datum. So the argument generalises easily.’ (1994, p. 57).

Broad and Robinson are working on the assumption that the Interim Negative Claim has already been established, and so conclude that it would be implausible to go from being being aware of an ordinary material object in a case of veridical perception to instead being aware of a non-material sense-datum in cases of illusion. As Smith (2002, p. 28) puts it ‘it is crucial to our understanding of illusion... that we are aware of the same
object in an illusion that we could perceive veridically. Thus the very nature of illusion demands acceptance of the generalizing step of the argument.’

But as we have shown, the Interim Negative Claim has not been established. Rather what has been established is that in illusions one is aware of a sense-datum* which is non-identical to the material object one is purportedly perceiving. But as we have highlighted above, this is consistent with Smith’s desideratum that we are aware of the same object in illusory cases – the ordinary material object – that we perceive veridically in non-illusory cases. Further, if we consider a case of veridical experience where we seem to be aware of mind-independent material objects, and then introduce an illusory aspect, e.g., by bathing a white wall in yellow light, it seems very odd to say that we go from seeing the wall to not seeing it, even if we endorse the Phenomenal Principle. So if we hold on to the Phenomenal Principle it seems natural to posit sense-data* only when needed. And given that, by hypothesis, they are not needed in the veridical case, there is no need to posit them. The Spreading Step, then, does not force a revision of our common-sense picture of veridical perception.

6 Conclusion

We have argued that the version of the argument from illusion which is rife in the literature is invalid (Section 3). The premises we are offered in the Base Case Stage entail just that in cases of illusion we are aware of objects not identical to the material objects which we ordinarily take ourselves to be aware of. But they do not entail the Interim Negative Claim that in such cases we are not aware of material objects. We argued that there is no obviously plausible way to fix the argument with a Uniqueness Assumption (Section 4). Finally (Section 5), we discussed how the valid version of the argument does not bear significantly on our common sense picture of perception. Of course, one may think, that the metaphysical picture we end up with on the valid version of the argument from illusion is bizarre. If so, then so much the worse for the valid version of the argument, and the Phenomenal Principle it presupposes.

The argument from illusion is, then, much less suasive than its proponents realize. Still one might worry about the significance of the observations above. The thrust of our paper is to show that the arguer from illusion has not done enough to establish the Interim Negative Claim. As a result, the Spreading Step cannot be used to establish the Negative Claim. But it might be replied that in cases of hallucination it is agreed that we are not aware of the putative material objects of awareness, and so an analogue of the Interim Negative Claim is not in dispute in such cases. If so, could not a case against the common sense picture of perception sketched above be mounted from the possibility of hallucinations, rather than from the possibility of illusions. If all we have done is block
the Interim Negative Claim, then we have not got to the heart of the matter, since an
analogue of this claim is uncontroversial in cases of hallucination.

There are three things to note about this concern. First, our focus in this essay has
been on the argument from illusion and how it seeks to establish a revision of common
sense. It is worth getting straight on whether this argument achieves its aims even if there
are other, more compelling arguments which establish the same conclusion. Second, the
objector is correct that in cases of hallucination the analogue of the Interim Negative
Claim is uncontroversial. As such, then, it is not inconsistent with our common sense
picture of hallucination. This contrasts with the Interim Negative Claim which is
inconsistent with our ordinary understanding of illusion. Most importantly, this objection
assumes that the Spreading Step in the imagined argument from hallucination is as
plausible as it is in the argument from illusion. But this claim need not be accepted. As
Smith puts it

the whole point about the concept of illusion, from which the argument [from illusion]
starts, is that in an illusion we really are perceiving a certain physical object, but
misperceiving it. This, after all, is how illusion differs from hallucination. To deny the
generalizing step [that is, the original generalizing step of the invalid form of the argument
from illusion, (iv)], while accepting the rest of the argument, is to regard us as being radically
out of touch with our environment when subject to mere illusion as we are generally agreed
to be when wholly hallucinating. ... In other words, it is crucial to our understanding of
illusion, as opposed to hallucination, that we are aware of the same object in an illusion that
we could perceive veridically. Thus the very nature of illusion demands acceptance of the
generalizing step of the argument. ... To deny this is to treat illusions as hallucinations. (2002,
p. 28).

So one may happily concede that one is not aware of ordinary material objects in
cases of hallucination, and even that one is aware of a sense-datum* in such cases, without
conceding that one is not aware of ordinary material objects and that one is aware of non-
material sense-data in veridical cases of perception, or indeed in illusory cases. The types
of considerations which have motivated the arguer from illusion, then, do not carry over,
mutatis mutandis, to cases of hallucination. As a result, our rejection of the Interim
Negative Claim is not otiose as our imagined objector supposes.

23 This is not to deny that there are other considerations which would establish the Negative Claim
given the possibility of hallucination and granting the Phenomenal Principle (for discussion see Martin
(2004)). So in the ultimate analysis perhaps the Phenomenal Principle has to be denied if the common
sense picture of perception defended above is to be tenable. But whether that is so depends on
considerations which are not part of the argument from illusion as traditionally conceived by its proponents.

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References


