The Invalidity of the Argument from Illusion
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Abstract: The argument from illusion attempts to establish the bold claim that we are never perceptually aware of ordinary material objects. The argument has rightly received a great deal of critical scrutiny. But here we develop a criticism which, to our knowledge, has not hitherto been explored. We consider the canonical form of the argument as it is captured in contemporary expositions. There are two stages to our criticism. First, we show that the argument is invalid. Second, we identify a premise which can fix the argument. But we argue that various strategies which might be employed to support this premise are problematic. If our arguments are successful, we show that the argument from illusion is even more difficult to defend than is commonly acknowledged.

1 Introduction

Many philosophers have held 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 (cf. Smith (2002, p. 22)). The radical challenge to our ordinary ways of thinking posed by this argument from illusion has been subjected to much philosophical scrutiny. But we won’t dwell here on the common critical considerations which have been offered. Instead, we draw attention to an issue which has not, to our knowledge, been examined in the existing literature.

In §2 we outline the argument, and in §3 we show that it is invalid. We then consider a way to repair the argument by adding a further premise (§4). But this further premise is not obviously true. We thus consider three strategies for supporting it and argue that they are all problematic. The arguer from illusion, then, has a more serious argumentative burden than is commonly recognized. The premises of the argument which are usually recognized are highly contentious. What we show is that even if we grant them, there is a further premise which can be targeted in rejecting the argument, and which, as it stands, we have no reason to accept. In §5 we consider the implications of this for our common sense picture of perception.
2 The Argument from Illusion

Expositions of the argument from illusion typically focus on the visual perception of ordinary 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 arguer from illusion wants to be able to generalize the argument 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 (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 perceptual awareness. On one way of running the argument from illusion, its target is just this claim, that in what we ordinarily think of as cases of object perception (e.g., seeing an elm) we are perceptually aware of mind-independent material objects. 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. 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 this version of the argument 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, this too is supposed to be a revisionary conclusion.

It is by no means obvious, however, that there is an innocuous contrast between
direct and indirect perception which can be appealed to in framing our common sense conception of perception. But no matter, since our aims here do not require us to consider the putative direct/indirect distinction. Our primary focus will be on the more straightforward version of the argument from illusion which targets the simple view that we are sometimes aware of mind-independent objects in perceptual experience. What we say applies mutatis mutandis to the other version of the argument.

How do proponents and expositors of the argument conceive of illusions? We find the idea that an illusory experience is one in which it sensibly appears 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 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 critical discussion of this conception of illusion see Kalderon (2011)). Examples abound, but let’s borrow an example from Smith (p. 25) for our discussion: S sees a white wall, but it looks yellow to her. Call this the Wall Case.

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 let’s 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). The claim it terminates in we call the Interim Negative Claim. We can formulate the Base Case Stage (drawing on our other authors) as follows:

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

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

1 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.

2 The focus here is thus not on veridical illusions (see Johnston (2006)).

3 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 §5 below.

4 Note that these authors don’t themselves endorse the argument. Our target is the argument as they formulate it.
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. (Interim Negative Claim)

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 experience that the same analysis of experience must apply to both.

Therefore

v. One is not aware of ordinary objects in cases of veridical experience.

Therefore,

vi. We are never perceptually aware of ordinary objects. (Negative Claim)

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 (vi), namely, that we are never perceptually aware of material objects. The transition from (v) to (vi) relies upon (iii) and the assumption that perceptual awareness of ordinary objects comes, if at all, from just veridical or illusory cases of experience. 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 Spreading Step.  

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

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3 We do discuss the Spreading Step a little further in §5 below. Our formulation of the Spreading Step is based on Broad (1952, p. 9), Price (1932, p. 32ff), Robinson (1994, p. 56ff) and Smith (2002, p. 26ff).
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).\(^6\)

This way of thinking of perceptual experience is enshrined in the principle which constitutes premise (ii) in the above argument – the ‘Phenomenal Principle’ (Robinson (1994, p. 32)).\(^7\)

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 S sees the white wall as yellow in colour, it really does seem to S as if she confronts some instance of yellowness. This 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: something looks F to S because S 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.\(^8\) But we want to set aside the controversy over the Phenomenal Principle. We will just assume, for the sake of argument, that it is true. For our aim is to bring out a further controversial assumption of the Base Case Stage.

The problem with the Base Case Stage even given its highly contentious premise is that the Interim Negative Claim does not follow. What actually follows from (i) and (ii) is

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\(^6\) 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).

\(^7\) As in (ii) above, Robinson limits the Phenomenal Principle to sensible qualities. If the Principle is completely unrestricted it has no plausibility at all, since it may seem to me as if I am seeing a tiger without there being a tiger present.

\(^8\) Neither intentionalists, naïve realists or qualia theorists appeal to the Principle in explaining the character of experiences.
not (iii) but a crucially different conclusion, namely:

(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, (vi), the Negative Claim.

To illustrate, let’s return to the Wall Case. Applying the standard exposition of the argument from illusion to this case, (i)-(iii) give the following

(1a) It sensibly appears 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

(4a) 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 (4a). But, crucially, (4a) 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 ordinary 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. The term ‘sense-datum’ here is a functional term. It picks out whatever it is that one is aware of in an experience which bears the qualities which characterize the way things appear to one in that experience. So we shouldn’t be misled 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 of Price (1932, pp. 18-19) 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.\(^9\)

From the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion we know that the sense-data present in such cases must be entities which are objects of awareness, entities which can instantiate sensible qualities, and objects non-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.

Applying 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 in such cases are the ordinary objects we take ourselves to be aware of. Further, in an illusion we know that the sense-datum given by the Phenomenal Principle is not identical to the material object we are purportedly aware of, but that is consistent with it being a distinct material object. Holding that the sense-data present in illusions are material objects but not those we are purportedly perceiving may be bizarre and ultimately untenable, but it is not ruled out by the argument from illusion, nor the conception of sense-data it involves.

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. The invalid version of the argument is rife in the literature. Consider how Robinson (1994) takes the Base Case Stage of the argument to go. First, he states the argument in an informal manner:

*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 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):

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\(^9\) Modern proponents of the claim that sense-data are mental include Jackson (1977), and O’Shaughnessy (2003). 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, but they also held them to be non-physical. Russell takes sense-data to be physical entities in his (1917).
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,\(^{10}\) 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 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, the presumption of uniqueness in (5) – that of which one is aware – is unjustified. As a result, 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 the Wall Case. 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.

This invalid step shows up not just in Robinson, and Smith (and Crane who draws upon their formulations), but in other contemporary formulations of the argument too,

\(^{10}\) 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).
e.g., Coates (2007) and Fish (2010).\textsuperscript{11} And the 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.\textsuperscript{12}

If there is a straightforward and uncontroversial way to render the argument valid, then the observation that as standardly formulated the argument is invalid is a merely superficial criticism. But we now argue that there is no such easy fix.

\section*{4 The Exclusion Assumption}

To render the argument valid the arguer from illusion can add the following \textit{Exclusion Assumption}:

\begin{quote}
\text{(EA) If in an illusion S is aware of a sense-datum, D, and D is non-identical to the ordinary object S is putatively perceiving in an illusory way, O, then S is not aware of O.}
\end{quote}

With (EA) in place we can render the Base Case stage of the argument valid in the following way. Consider again the Wall Case, which we can now plug into a valid Base Case Stage:

- (a) In S’s illusion, it sensibly appears to her as if something is yellow, yet the wall is not yellow
- (b) In the illusion S is perceptually aware of a yellow sense-datum (from (a) and the Phenomenal Principle)
- (c) The yellow sense-datum S is aware of in the illusion is non-identical to the wall.

Therefore,

- (d) S is not aware of the wall (from (b), (c), and (EA))

This time the conclusion – an instance of the Interim Negative Claim – does follow from the premises and assumptions operative.

Note we are being careful here to distinguish what we have in (EA) from a more general claim in the vicinity, the \textit{Uniqueness Assumption}:

\begin{quote}
\text{(UA) If in an illusion S is aware of a sense-datum, D, then for all x not identical to...}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} To keep things manageable, we spare the reader demonstrations of the point in these cases too.

\textsuperscript{12} See the appendix for evidence. We include this for the information of reviewers.
To see what’s wrong with (UA) suppose that in the Wall Case a black horse is standing next to the wall. Given the Phenomenal Principle, our subject is therefore aware of a yellow sense-datum (which, given Leibniz’s Law, is neither the wall nor the horse). According to (UA), this means that our subject is not aware of the horse. 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 (and, let us grant temporarily, not the wall) 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 full argument from illusion (that is, the Negative Claim), why one could not be aware of sense-data in one area of a visual scene and material objects in another.

What the arguer 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 the ordinary objects we are purportedly perceiving in an illusory way; in our example, the wall. So (EA) is closer to the spirit of the Base Case Stage, and is also not obviously objectionable in the way in which (UA) is.

But is (EA) true? In the Wall Case, S is aware of a yellow sense-datum, but why should that mean that she is not also aware of the white wall? (EA) is not obviously true. It is not incoherent or absurd to suppose that S is aware of both a yellow sense-datum, and the wall. The arguer from illusion owes us an explanation of why the sense-data posited in illusions exclude awareness of the putative objects of awareness in those cases.

Below we consider three strategies. The first two come from considering uncontroversial examples of perceptual exclusion: a Spatial Exclusion Strategy, and an

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13 Although Snowdon (1992) doesn’t discuss the reasoning involved in the Base Case Stage in the way we have here, he does identify a similar sort of assumption that might rescue the reasoning we have been critical of:

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) (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.)
Occlusion Strategy. The third, the Error Strategy, starts from the idea that unless we hold to (EA), intuitive judgements about experience will be in error. We will argue that each strategy for supporting (EA) is problematic.

4.1 The Spatial Exclusion Strategy

Consider first a straightforward case of perceptual exclusion which is grounded in spatial exclusion:

**Apple and Orange Case**

S sees an apple in region of space R. Because S sees the apple in R, S doesn’t also see an orange in R. What grounds this perceptual exclusion fact? The fact that the apple spatially excludes the orange from R. That is, S doesn’t see the orange in R because the apple being in R prevents the orange from being there, and thus from being seen there.\(^{14}\)

This works if R is suitably delimited. Suppose, then, that all of R is occupied by the apple. The apple excludes the orange from R because the apple and orange cannot spatially overlap. Can the arguer from illusion apply this model of perceptual exclusion to the Wall Case? An application of the model might look like this:

**The Spatial Exclusion Strategy**

S sees a non-ordinary yellow sense-datum in R.\(^{15}\) Because S sees the sense-datum in R, S doesn’t also see the wall in R. What grounds this perceptual exclusion fact? The fact that the sense-datum spatially excludes the wall from R. That is, S doesn’t also see the wall in R because the sense-datum being in R prevents the wall from being there, and thus from being seen there.

Let’s spell out what’s going on here as follows. Suppose that V is S’s field of view. By this we mean the three-dimensional expanse which constitutes the space that S is (putatively) aware of in which she (putatively) sees the wall. And suppose R is a region within V which is the region where the wall *seems* to be. That is, it is that region which the wall seems to occupy, and which is defined in terms of the *apparent* shape, extent and boundaries of the wall. With this background, the arguer from illusion can offer the following Spatial Exclusion Argument for the Wall Case:

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\(^{14}\) We are understanding S sees x in R as being factive so that if x is not in R, it cannot be seen in R.

\(^{15}\) By “non-ordinary sense-datum” we mean: the sense-datum introduced in an illusion which is non-identical to the ordinary object putatively being perceived.
(SEP1) If S is aware of the wall, then S is aware of the wall in R.
(SEP2) S is aware of the non-ordinary yellow sense-datum \(D\) in R.
(SEP3) \(D\) spatially excludes the wall from R.

Therefore,

(d) S is not aware of the wall (since the wall is not in R by SEP3, and so not seen there, and so by SEP1 is not seen at all).

Now the arguer from illusion is not entitled to (SEP2). For it entails that \(D\) is located in physical space and all the arguer from illusion is entitled to is that \(D\) appears to be located in R (since the Phenomenal Principle is limited to sensible qualities, this does not license the conclusion that \(D\) is in R). And (SEP2) is anyway not consistent with all conceptions of sense-data, e.g., those on which sense-data are mental. But (SEP2) is required by the sort of strategy we are pursuing on the arguer from illusion’s behalf. We are trying to determine whether perceptual exclusion can plausibly be grounded in spatial exclusion, specifically with the idea that \(D\) excludes the wall from a region of space, R. Unless we grant (SEP2), and the consequence that sense-data can be located in physical space, this strategy is simply a non-starter. We could say, perhaps, that \(D\) is in “mental space” \(M\) – whatever that is – and that \(D\) excludes the wall from \(M\). But even if we can make sense of \(D\) excluding the wall from \(M\), this does not license the advertised conclusion. What follows is that S is not aware of the wall in \(M\). But this leaves open that S is aware of the wall in R, and so awareness of \(D\) does not, for all that has been said, exclude awareness of the wall.

So what are we to make of the Spatial Exclusion Strategy and the Spatial Exclusion Argument? (SEP1) seems secure. But even if we grant (SEP2) the argument is still problematic because (SEP3) is not obvious. First, (SEP3) requires a substantive metaphysics of sense-data which the arguer is not entitled to invoke on the basis of the argument from illusion. And second, it leaves the arguer from illusion with an awkward question about where the wall is. And the alternative, which denies the Exclusion Assumption, doesn’t face these issues. Together these points highlight that the Spatial Exclusion Strategy, with (SEP3), is dialectically very weak. Let’s take each point in turn.

The Spatial Exclusion Strategy requires us to conceive of the yellow sense-datum present in the Wall Case as being able to displace an ordinary material object like a wall. This is an obvious consequence of (SEP3), but what exactly does it require the arguer from illusion to commit to? Consider again the Apple and Orange Case. The apple excludes the orange from R because the apple is located in the R, and the apple and the orange are not constitutionally linked to one another. So, whilst the apple excludes the orange from R by being located there, it doesn’t exclude from R entities to which it is constitutionally linked such as its own surface and other spatial parts, the matter from
which it is constituted, or its temporal parts if any. Given this, if the yellow sense-datum is constitutionally linked to the wall, then we have no explanation of why the sense-datum excludes the wall from R along the lines of familiar cases of spatial exclusion such as the one we find in the Apple and Orange Case.

So it looks like the arguer from illusion employing the Spatial Exclusion Strategy will need to hold either that the yellow sense-datum is not constitutionally linked to the wall, or else provide some other reason for thinking that it spatially excludes the wall. More generally, the arguer from illusion must say something similar in all other cases of illusion.

So the Spatial Exclusion Strategy involves appeal to substantive metaphysical claims about non-ordinary sense-data, and thus constitutes a radical departure from the thin conception of sense-data operative so far. Yet it is only the thin conception which is licensed by the Phenomenal Principle. So a crucial question arises: what warrants this departure? Why should we allow that non-ordinary sense-data are both spatially located and not constitutionally linked to the ordinary objects supposedly being perceived in illusions? We have been given no reasons for thinking of sense-data in this thicker way.

Second, even if we grant (SEP3), and this thicker conception of sense-data, the arguer from illusion will be left with a rather awkward question about the wall: where is it? Where is it located, if not in R? And if the wall is not in R, but in R* (another region of V), what prevents us from being aware of it in R*? That is to say, if the wall is not in R but R*, why should we accept (SEP1)?

Now compare how things stand with the alternative which rejects (EA). The alternative says that in illusions we are aware of sense-data and the ordinary things, the presence of which together constitutes the way things appear to S. On this alternative we don’t have to claim that the non-ordinary sense-datum present in the Wall Case excludes the wall from R, and we don’t face the awkward question of where the wall is. We may think of the case as analogous to seeing a white wall through a piece of transparent yellow film – where the qualities of the wall (e.g., location, size, shape), and the film together constitute the way things appear to one.

We haven’t tried to refute (SEP3) and the Spatial Exclusion Strategy. We’ve just tried to highlight the substantive conception of non-ordinary sense-data it requires, and how in contrast rejecting (EA) compares favourably.

### 4.2 The Occlusion Strategy

The difficulties above are traceable to the idea that non-ordinary sense-data spatially exclude ordinary objects. But there are cases of perceptual exclusion which are not grounded in facts about spatial exclusion. Suppose S is looking at an apple. But then in between S’s line of sight and the apple someone places an opaque pane of glass so that
S can no longer see the apple. Here awareness of the glass excludes awareness of the apple. But this is not traceable to a fact about spatial exclusion. Rather, the glass blocks the apple from view, it occludes it. So in being aware of the glass, S is not also aware of the apple. So we have the following case:

**The Glass/Apple Case**

S sees a pane of opaque glass in V (the field of view). Because S sees the glass in V, S doesn’t also see the apple in V. What grounds this perceptual exclusion fact? The fact that the glass occludes the apple.

Applying this model of perceptual exclusion to the Wall Case yields the following:

**The Occlusion Strategy**

S sees a yellow sense-datum in V. Because S sees the sense-datum in V, S doesn’t also see the wall in V. What grounds this perceptual exclusion fact? It is the fact that the sense-datum occludes the wall.

This won’t quite be enough to ground the application of (EA) in the Wall Case. To get that, we need to add that if S sees the wall at all, she sees it in V. But we can grant that.

Before we continue let’s note the following limitation of this strategy. If it is going to work at all it seems it will work for vision. But the arguer from illusion hopes to run the argument in any sensory modality. It is unclear to us how, if at all, this strategy could be applied to ground (EA) for all non-visual cases. But the strategy is interesting in its own right, and it would be some progress if the arguer from illusion could employ it to support the argument from illusion in visual cases.

How should we cash out the Occlusion Strategy? In the Glass/Apple Case there are two important features which mean that the glass occludes the apple: first, the *opacity* of the glass, and second, the *position* of the glass. If the glass were transparent or behind the apple we wouldn’t have a case of occlusion.

The Occlusion Strategy might then run from the idea that the yellow sense-datum of which S is aware is opaque and in *front of the wall*, and it therefore blocks the wall from view. But we can be more cautious. Although some cases of occlusion will involve the occluding entity being *in front of* the occluded entity, it is not obvious that this is a necessary condition for occlusion. Take the following case of Mark Johnston’s (1992),

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16 We can thus see this cashing out of the Occlusion Strategy as addressing the difficulties with the Spatial Exclusion Strategy. The latter was left with the questions, where is the wall, if not in R? And why can’t we see it in its location? The Occlusion Strategy, in effect, answers that the wall is behind *D* and we can’t see the wall because *D* occludes it.
offered in a different context, but relevant to our discussion here:

Consider a transparent object whose surface is green but never looks and almost never would look surface green because the object’s interior radiates orange light in such an intensity that the greenness is masked or obscured (pp. 231-232).

We can understand the case in such a way that the intense orange light not only occludes the greenness, but occludes the object itself. But where is the light? It is, in a sense, inside the object, and it spreads out from the inside of the object. The light emanates from the object, but it is not at all clear that it is or spreads in front of the object. We can imagine the case as one in which the orange light is co-located with the object. Yet it still occludes the object.

Fortunately, we don’t need to say anything too specific about the spatial or positional dimension of occluding. Let’s just note what seems to be true from reflection upon paradigm cases of occlusion: that it is a requirement of occlusion that there is a positional dimension to cases of occlusion. That is, let’s note the following requirement on occlusion which is satisfied in both the Glass/Apple case and on our construal of Johnston’s case:

**Positional Requirement**

y will occlude x for a viewer S who is aware of y, only if y and x are both in S’s field of view V, and y is appropriately situated relative to x and S. When y is appropriately situated we say it occupies an occluding position relative to x and S.

We can formulate the Occlusion Strategy in terms of the following Occlusion Argument which we can run for the Wall Case

(SOP1) The non-ordinary yellow sense-datum of which S is aware, D, is opaque.
(SOP2) S is aware of D in V at occluding position p (relative to the wall and S).

Therefore,

(SOP3) D occludes the wall from S’s view.
(SOP4) If S sees the wall at all, she sees it in V

Therefore,

(d) S is not aware of the wall.

This certainly seems like a legitimate argument. Compare: the pane of glass is opaque. Because of this and the fact that it is in an occluding position relative to the apple and S, it occludes the apple from S’s view. And so awareness of the pane of glass
excludes awareness of the apple (given that S doesn’t see the apple anywhere else).

And this is a huge improvement on the Spatial Exclusion Argument. We are allowing the arguer from illusion the idea that the yellow sense-datum is in physical space (though see below). For we are supposing that to occlude the wall it must be appropriately situated in S’s field of view. Yet this involves no commitment at all to the idea that non-ordinary sense-data can spatially exclude ordinary material objects such as walls. And so it doesn’t face the awkward question of where the wall is.

Still, the Occlusion Strategy is problematic. We will grant (SOP2) and (SOP4). And, as we’ll show, (SOP1) is well motivated in the arguer from illusion’s framework. But what about the transition from (SOP1) and (SOP2) to (SOP3)? Call this the occlusion move. We will show that the occlusion move is invalid.

Why think that the non-ordinary yellow sense-datum involved in the Wall Case is opaque? Here the arguer from illusion can appeal to the Phenomenal Principle and reflections on experience. For in the Wall Case, 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 there is a thing of which S is aware, which is both yellow and opaque. Since the wall is not yellow, it is not yellow and opaque, and so, by the Phenomenal Principle and Leibniz’s Law, in the Wall Case S is aware of a yellow and opaque sense-datum which is not the wall.

Having thus established that in the Wall Case S is aware of a yellow and opaque sense-datum non-identical to the wall, the arguer from illusion will make the occlusion move. For given the meaning of ‘opaque’, if S is aware of something opaque that is not the wall, then, given that this entity is in an occluding position, S is not also aware of the wall. The opaque sense-datum blocks the wall from S’s view. As we will now show, compelling as this thought is, it is invalid.

Let’s call objects which account for the illusory aspects of experience ‘elementary sense-data’. For all the argument from illusion says, in the Wall Case, the yellow and opaque sense-datum, D, of which S is aware, is a composite object comprised of the wall and some yellow elementary sense-datum. That is, we know that D is yellow and opaque, and non-identical to the wall. But for all that, D may fail to be wholly distinct from the wall, for D may in part be constituted by the wall, and in part constituted by an elementary sense-datum. For all that has been said, D could be opaque in virtue of having an opaque part (the wall), and yellow in virtue of having a yellow elementary sense-datum part, just as a white wall covered with yellow film is yellow and opaque in virtue of its yellow and opaque parts. If so, it could be that the elementary sense-datum part is responsible for our experience of yellow and the wall part is responsible for our
experience of opacity.\textsuperscript{17}

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 an elementary sense-datum and an ordinary object, this does not preclude us from being aware of the ordinary object, just as when we see a wall covered with yellow film this does not preclude us from seeing the wall.

Let’s be clear about the dialectical situation. We are not claiming that in the Wall Case S is aware of some composite sense-datum D. Rather, the point is this. We are supposed to be moved to think that S is not aware of the wall because the yellow sense-datum of which she is aware is opaque and appropriately situated, and thus occludes the wall. What we’ve shown is that the yellow sense-datum of which S is aware may well be opaque and appropriately situated, yet still not such as to occlude the wall. This will be the case if the yellow sense-datum is a composite composed of an elementary sense-datum and an opaque wall. Thus we have shown the occlusion move to be invalid. The Occlusion Argument is thus invalid, and so cannot be used to establish (EA), and thus cannot be used to fix the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion.

Now given the above Positional Requirement, if the yellow sense-datum is to occlude the wall, the sense-datum must be in S’s field of view. The arguer from illusion may be keen to reject this (if, for example, they think of sense-data as mental). They may suggest that what is relevant for occlusion is not position in the field of view, but position in the structure of experience. Take again the Wall Case. In purportedly seeing the wall, there is a position $p$ in the structure of S’s experience, where yellowness shows up. We can remain non-committal on how to spell out this idea about the structure of experience and positions in it. But the idea is that since an opaque yellow sense-datum shows up at position $p$ in the structure of experience, the wall cannot also be perceived, or cannot also show up in that position. We have now relaxed the Positional Requirement so that the yellow sense-datum may still occlude even if we refuse to build into this a commitment to it being in the field of view.

But all it does is bring out how nothing in our discussion hangs on the way we have understood the Positional Requirement. Since even with the non-committal Positional Requirement, we still need the occlusion move, and that is what we have targeted.

What we have argued also gives us the resources to reply to something which comes up in Smith’s discussion of illusion. Smith writes:

suppose that we see a red tomato that looks black as a result of unusual lighting. We

\textsuperscript{17} One need not decompose the experience like this. It could be that it is through the interaction of the parts of the non-ordinary sense-datum that it is yellow, rather than by having a part which is itself yellow.
conclude, by the second and third steps of the Argument [(ii) and (iii) in section (2) 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)

Call the case here the *Tomato Case*. S looks at a red tomato and sees it as black. This illusory aspect, Smith thinks, is all that is needed for a sense-datum to replace the tomato as the object of awareness (the sense-datum infection): what S sees is something black and tomato-shaped, and by hypothesis the tomato is not black and tomato-shaped (although it is tomato-shaped), so what S sees is not the tomato.

Now what follows from the case above and the Phenomenal Principle is that S is aware of something black and tomato-shaped which is not the tomato. But as should be familiar by now, this does not entail that S is not also aware of the tomato. The claim that there is a sense-datum infection is not warranted. For all we have in play is the claim that the shape S sees is the shape of something which is *not* the tomato – a black sense-datum. And for all that it might also be the shape of the tomato. For note that for all that has been offered, the black and tomato-shaped sense-datum, \( D \), of which S is aware in the Tomato Case, may well be a composite, composed of an elementary sense-datum, and a tomato (or the shape of the tomato). So \( D \) is not the tomato, for it is black, and \( D \) is tomato-shaped, but the shape of \( D \) just is the globularity of the tomato.

So even if \( D \) is an object of awareness in the Tomato Case we have no reason to suppose that this means that it replaces the tomato or the tomato’s shape as an object of awareness, *even if the shape one sees is the shape of something which is not the tomato*. Moreover, it does not follow that one is not aware of other parts of the surface of the tomato, for \( D \) may be black in virtue of the elementary sense-datum and the tomato’s surface.

Thus we think that the Occlusion Strategy, and Smith’s sense-datum infection are problematic. In order to circumvent these latest difficulties, the arguer from illusion must establish either that there are no composite sense-data comprised of non-ordinary elementary sense-data and ordinary 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 these claims are not warranted by anything in the argument from illusion, and it is hard to see what *reflections on experience* could justify them. 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.
4.3 The Error Strategy

A final strategy for supporting (EA) says that unless we endorse (EA), intuitive verdicts obtained on the basis of reflection on experience will be in error. Suppose we follow through with the idea that what S is aware of is a composite, $D$, composed of an elementary yellow sense-datum, and the wall. Intuitively, if asked to say how many wall looking things she sees in the Wall Case, S would say one. But $D$ is surely a wall looking thing, the wall is another wall looking thing, and S sees, we are supposing, both of them, and so S is in error. We can avoid S’s error by endorsing (EA).

But that we can avoid the error by embracing (EA), does not mean that we cannot avoid the error without embracing (EA). More specifically, the objection assumes that S is in error because she is counting by identity: she counts one where there are in fact two. But as we don’t always count by identity, especially when dealing with constitutionally linked objects, this assumption need not be granted.¹⁸ For example, many accept that a statue is not identical to the lump of clay from which it is made. Still, when faced with such a statue and asked how many two-metre tall objects are in front you? many would answer ‘one’, even though there are two. But even if we eschew such a metaphysics, it still seems that we do not always count by identity. As Lewis notes (1976, pp. 63-64), if S asks how many roads they have to cross to reach their destination, we will count not by identity but by ‘identity-along-her-path’ when two roads overlap, and answer ‘one’ rather than ‘two’. So the fact that we do not count by identity in the present case is no objection to claim that in illusions we are aware of the putative ordinary object of experience as well as the sense-datum.

We have argued that the Base Case Stage of the argument from illusion is invalid. A natural way to render the argument valid is with the addition of the Exclusion Assumption. We haven’t refuted that assumption. But we’ve tried to show that it is highly questionable, and something we have no obvious reason to accept.¹⁹ We have explored three strategies for supporting it, all of which look to be problematic: the third makes the unwarranted assumption that we count by identity in case of illusion, whereas the first two make substantive, yet unsubstantiated metaphysical assumptions, most notably that ordinary objects are not constitutionally linked to the non-ordinary sense data licensed by the Phenomenal Principle This is not the last word on the Exclusion Assumption, but we

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¹⁸ In fact, Liebesman (forthcoming) argues that we never count by identity.

¹⁹ O’Shaughnessy (2003) argues that awareness of sense-data (which he conceives of as mental) doesn’t exclude awareness of other entities (see also his (1984) and (2000)). In contrast to our discussion, O’Shaughnessy’s discussion is not in the context of the argument from illusion and is complicated by the involvement of a mediate/immediate awareness distinction.
hope to have shown that owing to this assumption the argument is even more difficult to support than has previously been acknowledged: we may still reject it even if we grant the other highly contentious premises which are typically targeted for rejection.

5 The Common Sense Picture of Perception

The arguer from illusion might take the above critical remarks on board and react as follows. 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 an elementary sense-datum non-identical to the material object of which we are putatively aware. The arguer from illusion then adds that even this requires a revision to our ordinary understanding of such illusory situations, and veridical perceptual situations if we also allow the Spreading Step.

We have four remarks to make in response to this. First, with such a thin and non-specific conception of elementary 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 elementary sense-data, whether or not their introduction is at odds with our common sense picture of perception is, perhaps, an open question.

Second, we need to distinguish between a claim being inconsistent with common sense, and a claim being additional to the claims of common sense (see the discussion of ‘revisionary metaphysics’ in Snowdon (2008, p. 117)). Each case requires a revision of common sense, but the revision required in each case is different. The invalid version of the argument from illusion discussed above terminates, at the Base Case Stage, in the Interim Negative Claim which is inconsistent with common sense. 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 elementary sense-data (in the thin sense) in cases of illusion is inconsistent with, as opposed to merely additional to 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.

But, third, what would follow from granting that the introduction of elementary 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 elementary sense-data don’t exist and aren’t objects of awareness, this is not a central commitment of our ordinary conception of 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.

Now it may be thought that, by the Spreading Step, if we are aware of elementary sense-data in the illusory case, then we are aware of such 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)

And 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 aware of an ordinary material object in a case of veridical perception to instead being aware of just 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 an illusion one is aware of an elementary sense-datum 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 elementary sense-data only when needed. And given that they are not needed in veridical cases, there is no need to posit them in such cases. Our fourth and final point, then, is that the Spreading Step, does not force a revision of our common sense picture of veridical perception.

It might be replied, however, that our observations are otiose, since in cases of hallucination, one is not aware of an ordinary object. If so, could not a case against the common sense picture of perception be mounted from this uncontroversial premise?

There are three things to note her. First, our focus 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 arguments
which establish the same conclusion. Second, the uncontroversial premise is not inconsistent with our common sense picture of hallucination, and so contrasts with the Interim Negative Claim which is inconsistent with our ordinary understanding of illusion. So conceding the former does not immediately threaten the common sense picture of perception in the way in which accepting the Interim Negative Claim does. Finally, it is not clear that the Spreading Step in the imagined argument from hallucination is as plausible as it is in the argument from illusion. As Smith puts it

> 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 an elementary 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 cases of perception, whether veridical or illusory. The types of considerations which have motivated the arguer from illusion do not carry over, *mutatis mutandis*, to cases of hallucination. This is not to deny that there are other considerations which might support an argument against the common sense picture of perception from the possibility of hallucination. But this would be a different type of argument (e.g., Martin (2004)). As a result, there is no suasive argument from illusion, or from the considerations which drive it, even granting the Phenomenal Principle.\(^\text{20}\)

### Appendix

Here we provide evidence that the invalid argument from illusion can be found in discussions of Moore (1913-1914), Broad (1923), and Ayer (1940).

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

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\(^{20}\) Thanks to an audience in Oxford, especially Anil Gomes, Anandi Hattiangadi, Alex Moran, and Andrew Stephenson, and an audience in Cambridge, especially Arif Ahmed, Adam Bales, Tim Button, Fiona Doherty, Rae Langton, Alex Moran, Huw Price, Shyane Siriwardena. For comments on earlier versions of this material thanks to Clare Mac Cumhaill, Mike Martin, Bence Nanay, Ian Phillips, Louise Richardson, Lea-Cecile Salje and Paul Snowdon.
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 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

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21 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.

22 We’ve switched to a case of a single coin for ease of exposition.
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 discussed. 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 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, 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 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).

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 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).
References


Liebesman, D (Forthcoming). “We Do Not Count By Identity”. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*


