

Philosophy 136  
The Philosophy of Perception  
Handout 7  
Thursday 22 September 2005

1. *The Argument from Illusion*

What we have above all to do is, negatively, to rid ourselves of such illusions as ‘the argument from illusion’—an ‘argument’ which those (e.g. Berkeley, Hume, Russell, Ayer) who have been most adept at working it, most fully masters of a certain special, happy style of blinkering philosophical English, have all themselves felt somehow to be spurious. (J.L. Austin, *Sense & Sensibilia*, p. 4.)

What emerges... is a typical philosophical problem. I do not mean the problem of deciding what does follow from the premiss that appearances conflict. For the answer to that question, I believe, is that nothing follows: nothing of any epistemological significance at all. The problem rather is to discover why so many conflicting conclusions have been thought to follow. Why have some philosophers been so impressed, while others like Austin, remain unimpressed, by the familiar fact that appearances conflict? What assumptions, spoken or unspoken, are at work to make the familiar fact seem problematic? (Myles Burnyeat, ‘Conflicting Appearances’. p.73.)

We commonly employ a distinction between how things appear and how they really are; and it is therefore natural to push this distinction to its limit. This seems to me the best way in which to view the so-called “argument from illusion”. If this is regarded as an argument, properly so called, with premisses and a conclusion, it is difficult to make out what are the premisses and what the conclusion. Rather it is a starting point. (Michael Dummett, ‘Common Sense & Physics’, in *Perception & Identity*, ed. McDonald, 1979)

Dummett’s denial that there is any argument goes too far. There are examples of the argument presented, however briefly, as an argument. Consider first Hume in the *First Enquiry*:

...when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other. This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist, independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. Our presence bestows not being on it: our absence does not annihilate it. It preserves its existence uniform and entire, independent of the situation of intelligent beings, who perceive or contemplate it.

But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object. The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: but the real table suffers no alteration: but the real table, was, therefore, nothing, but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. (D Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, pp.151-2)

In this passage there is an argument offered with seeming premisses and a conclusion:

*The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: but the real table suffers no alteration: but the real table, was, therefore, nothing, but its image, which was present to the mind.*

We can represent Hume’s argument as moving from two premisses to *two* conclusions:

- (1) The table appears to shrink in size
- (2) The table does not alter in size

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(C+) DH perceives an image of the table

(C-) DH does not perceive the table

This raises a number of questions both about Hume's premisses and about how he can draw his conclusion.

Why does Hume suppose that the table appears to shrink?  
(A point that Thomas Reid pointed out shortly after Hume.)

In general visual perception involves shape and size constancy – as you alter your position relative to the table it does not appear to alter in size or shape, although there is a difference in how things appear. Psychologists often talk of apparent size and apparent shape to capture this aspect of visual perception.

There are, however, some visual size illusions:

The Ames room involves slanting walls and misleading cues in the chequerboard pattern on the floor. When viewed either monocularly or by photograph, one gets startling results:



Is there any other purpose to Hume's example?  
(If this were a case of visual illusion, or conflicting appearances, then visual illusion would be widespread.)

Is the argument *valid*?

How does Hume arrive at his positive conclusion?  
He seems to reason in the following way:

- (S1) It appears to DH as if there is a small rhomboid there
- (S2) There is a small rhomboid which appears to DH there

But this seems to parallel the following kinds of reasoning:

- (B1) Mary believes that there are *Smarties* in the tube
- (B2) There are some *Smarties* which Mary believes are in the tube

- (EA) There is someone who is loved by everyone in the room
- (AE) Everyone in the room loves someone

Are either of these forms of argument acceptable?

[mgfmartin@berkeley.edu](mailto:mgfmartin@berkeley.edu)