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The philosophical implications of the Perky experiments: reply to Hopkins

BENCE NANAY

1. Introduction

In the Perky experiments, subjects were looking at a white wall and they were asked to visualize objects with their eyes open. Unbeknown to them, hardly visible images of the visualized objects were projected on the wall. The surprising finding is that the subjects took themselves to be visualizing – while in fact they were perceiving (Perky 1910; Segal 1972). The standard interpretation of this experiment is that perception and visualization are phenomenally very similar – in fact they are, at least in these circumstances, indistinguishable (see, e.g., Nanay 2010a).

This standard interpretation is criticized by Robert Hopkins. Hopkins argues that when drawing philosophical implications from the Perky experiments, we should not ignore the fact that the images projected on the wall were pictures. Rather than confusing our perceptual experiences with visualizing, we in fact confuse what Hopkins calls our 'non-committal pictorial awareness' of pictures with visualizing. And this phenomenon says nothing about the phenomenal similarity between perception and visualizing.

The aim of this article is to point out that the force of this argument depends on one's views on picture perception. On what I take to be the most mainstream account of picture perception, the argument does not

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work. But even if we accept Hopkins's own account, we have good reasons to believe that the argument does not go through.

2. *Picture perception*

What happens when we see something in a picture – say, in a painting of an apple? We represent two different things – the marks on the surface as well as the depicted entity – the apple. It seems safe to say that we do see the marks on the surface (Hopkins also assumes this). The question is: how do we represent the depicted apple. There seem to be three options:

(i) We perceive it
(ii) We imagine it
(iii) We are aware of it in a way that is neither perceiving nor imagining – I call this, following Hopkins, 'pictorial awareness'.

I leave (ii) aside as Hopkins and I agree that it is not a particularly promising account of picture perception.

According to (i), we perceive the depicted apple. This is what I take to be the most widely accepted view in the philosophical and psychological literature on picture perception (Gombrich 1960; Lopes 2005; Nanay 2010b, 2011; Wollheim 1998). Seeing an apple in a picture is still a way of seeing an apple: we do literally see the apple. And we also see the surface. In fact, much of the philosophical literature on picture perception is about how these two perceptual states are related to each other.

Hopkins seems to use two different strategies concerning (i). On the one hand, he takes (i) to be implausible. As he says, '[pictorial] awareness is not to be equated with that I have when I see, or seem to see, a woman before me' (Hopkins 2012: 434). His reason for this is that 'unlike perceptual consciousness, [pictorial] awareness is non-committal about the reality of its objects' (Hopkins 2012: 434). On the other hand, later in the article, he seems to accept (i) as a plausible option, and claims that even proponents of (i) could accept his argument. He claims that even proponents of (i) would need to accept that Perky's subjects mistake for visualizing a form of awareness that is in important ways similar to it, and unlike ordinary perception (Hopkins 2012: 437).

Both of these strategies depend on the same basic point: that our awareness of the depicted object is, in relevant ways, more similar to visualizing than it is to ordinary, everyday perception. Why? Because pictorial awareness is, like visualizing, but unlike perception, not committal. What Hopkins means by a mental state's being 'committal' is that it 'lays claim to how things really are' (Hopkins 2012: 5; see also Burge 2010: 74–75). Neither pictorial awareness, nor visualizing lays claim to how things really are. As Hopkins says, 'unlike perceptual consciousness, this [non-committal pictorial] awareness is

non-committal about the reality of its objects. In this respect, if no other, pictorial consciousness is like visualizing' (Hopkins 2012: 434).

This is the feature of pictorial experience that does the work for Hopkins when he dismisses (i) as implausible: if it lacks this important feature of perception (being committal), it is wrong to call it perception. And this is why he can say that if we do accept (i) but also accept that pictorial awareness is not committal, we can still accept his conclusion.

3. *Committal versus non-committal*

The problem with both of the strategies Hopkins uses in order to argue against (i) is that although 'laying claim to how things really are' may be an important feature of perceptual experience (although one could deny that it is a necessary feature), it is unclear why it should matter in the present context, for two independent reasons:

(a) Suppose that Hopkins is right and (iii) is the right way of thinking about pictorial awareness. It is not perception, but something else: something non-committal. In this case, the experimental subjects' non-committal pictorial experience is still phenomenally similar to the committal experience of genuinely perceiving the depicted object. This is not to say that pictorial experience is always phenomenally similar to the face-to-face experience of the depicted object. As Hopkins himself observes,

> In the case of many pictures, my awareness of the depicted object is not very similar in phenomenology to perceptual experience of such objects. (Consider, for instance, my awareness of a dog when looking at a line drawing of one, or of a man when looking at a mosaic depicting him.) (Hopkins 2012: 434)

This would be difficult to deny: in the case of many pictures, like the line drawing of a dog, there is no such phenomenal similarity. But in the case of many others, like the ones Perky and her followers used, there is such phenomenal similarity: they used naturalisitic depiction of bananas, books, etc (just what kind of depictions they were will be addressed shortly).

As these subjects confuse the non-committal pictorial experience with visualizing, this indicates that this non-committal pictorial experience is phenomenally similar to visualizing. Perception is phenomenally similar to the non-committal pictorial experience and the non-committal pictorial experience is perceptually similar to visualizing. Now, there is disagreement about whether phenomenal similarity is transitive, but even if we assume that it isn't always transitive, it is difficult to see what systematic reason would prevent the move from the phenomenal similarity between perception and non-committal pictorial experience and the phenomenal similarity between non-committal pictorial experience and visualization to the phenomenal

similarity between perception and visualization. In other words, even if we accept (iii), that is, Hopkins's preferred view on picture perception, we can still resist his argument and conclude that the Perky experiments demonstrate the phenomenal similarity between perception and visualization.

(b) The second, even more salient problem for Hopkins's use of the committal/non-committal distinction in his argument about the Perky experiments is the following. Hopkins points out, rightly, that in the Perky experiments, both the original 1910 experiments by Perky and their more controlled versions by Sydney Segal in the 1960s and 1970s, pictures were presented to the subjects, and the subjects confused their perception of these pictures with visualizing. But Hopkins does not spend much time discussing what kinds of pictures were used in these experiments. Presumably, Perky herself used drawings or paintings and Segal is not always clear about what pictures she used, but at least in one crucial experiment (not cited by Hopkins), where the original Perky experiments were replicated, she explicitly states that she used photographs (Segal and Glicksman 1967: 259). It is not clear whether she also used photographs in her other experiments, but she definitely used photographs in this replication of the Perky experiment.

Hence, Hopkins has a serious problem. He himself argued recently and at great length that the experience of seeing objects in photographs is a factive experience (Hopkins forthcoming). By factivity, Hopkins means the following: 'a kind of mental state is factive if the following is true: for any token state of that kind, if that token state represents it as the case that *p*, then it is indeed the case that *p*' (Hopkins forthcoming, § 2). Hence, 'What we see in traditional photographs is, of necessity, true to how things were when the photograph was taken' (Hopkins forthcoming, § 1). Now being factive does not entail being committal.[1] True supposition, for example, is factive but not committal. But those mental state types that are factive but not committal are factive by accident – their factivity seems to have little to do with what they are. In this case of the experience of seeing objects in photographs, this is not so: as Hopkins himself acknowledges, 'traditional photography is *designed* to produce factive seeing-in. Moreover, that is precisely what it does produce, when everything works as it should' (Hopkins forthcoming, § 4). But it is difficult to see how Hopkins could deny that the experience of seeing objects in photographs is not only a factive, but also a committal experience: how he could deny that the experience of seeing objects in photographs 'lays claim to how things really are'.

But then, given that the Perky experiment works with photographs, it seems that the 'pictorial awareness' Hopkins is keen to distinguish from perception can be committal. But Hopkins's reason for claiming that it is

1 I am grateful to Rob Hopkins for discussion on this.

different from perception is exactly that this pictorial awareness is non-committal (see Hopkins forthcoming: 5 and 8). As the Perky experiment works with photographs, the pictorial awareness that the subject confuses with visualization can be committal. But then Hopkins has no reason to treat it as different from perception. Hence, he has no reason to deny that the Perky experiment shows that we can confuse perception with visualization – just as the contemporary philosophical consensus holds.[2]

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