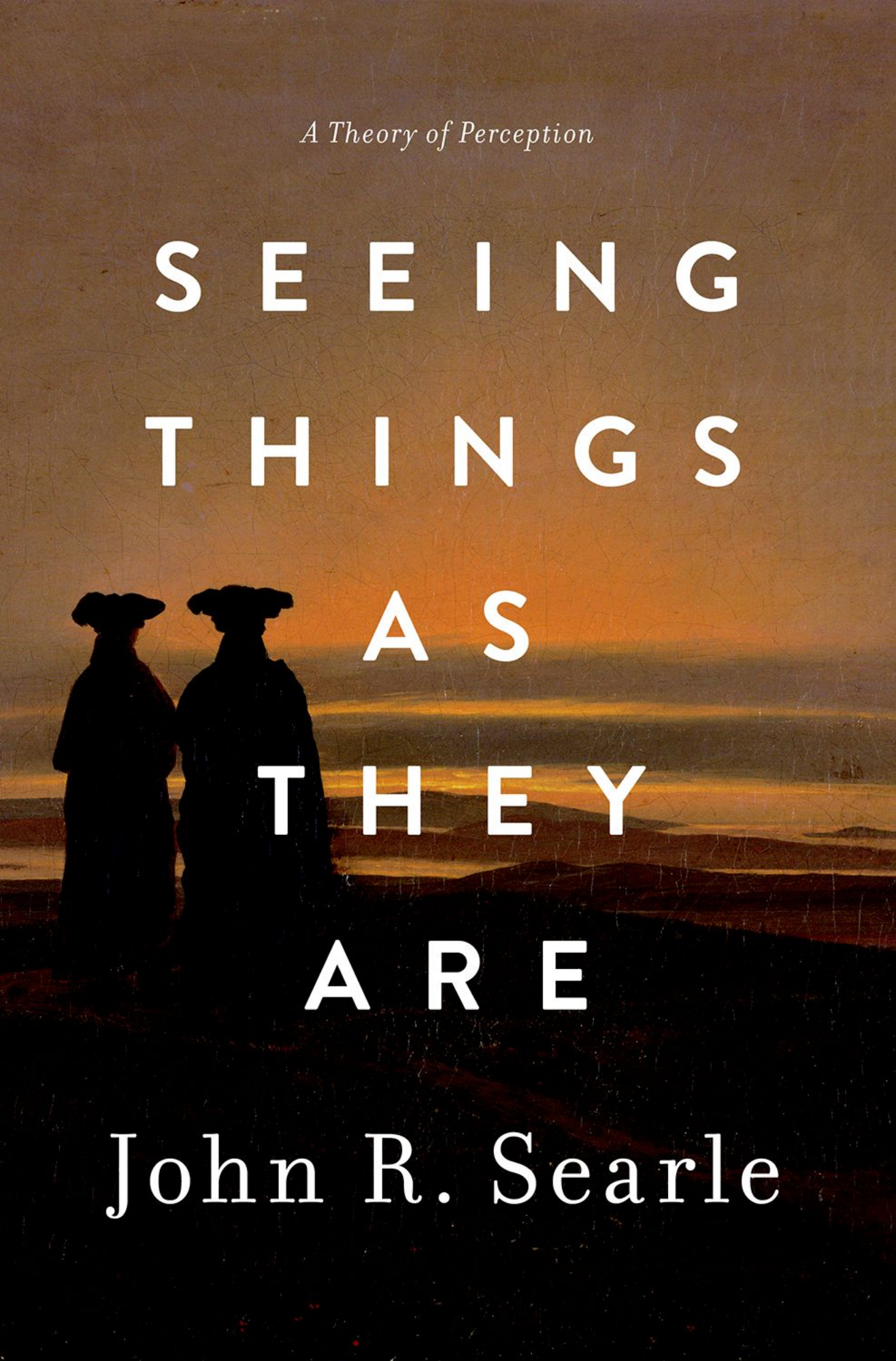
A Theory of Perception

SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE



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For Dagmar

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SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE

Introduction

This book is about perception. Like most authors who write about this subject, I will concentrate on vision. And though I did not intend originally to produce such a book, in a large part it is a celebration of visual experience. Along with sex and great food and drink, visual experience is one of the major forms of pleasure and happiness in life. There are other such things we take for granted that are sources of enormous pleasure if we bother to think about them: free bodily movement and the power of speech, for example. Along with visual experience, we take all of these for granted and so do not appreciate them as much as we do other sources of intense sensory pleasures.

I want to begin by identifying the territory. Close your eyes and put your hand over your forehead, covering your eyes: you will stop seeing anything, but *your visual consciousness does not stop*. Though you do not see anything, nonetheless you have visual experiences which are *something like* seeing darkness with yellow patches. Of course you do not see darkness and yellow patches, because you do not see anything; but you still have visual consciousness. The area of visual consciousness is quite constrained: In my case, it extends, roughly speaking, from the top of my forehead down as low as my chin. I am here speaking about the phenomenology and not about the physiological forehead and chin. I am talking about how it seems to me consciously. But the area of my visual consciousness is limited in that, for example, I have no visual consciousness behind my head or under my feet. But I definitely have visual consciousness in front of

my face even with my eyes closed. That conscious area I just identified I will call the "subjective visual field." Open your eyes and suddenly the subjective visual field is full, and the reason it is full is that you become visually aware of—that is, you literally see—the objective visual field: the objects and states of affairs around you. Much of this book is about the relationship between the subjective visual field and the objective visual field. The most important point I can make right now is: in the objective visual field everything is seen or can be seen, whereas in the subjective field nothing is seen nor can be seen.

Why write a whole book about perception? The relationship between perceptual experiences and the real world—of which vision is the most important type of experience—was a major preoccupation, one may even say *the* major preoccupation, of Western philosophy for the three centuries after Descartes. Up to the twentieth century, epistemology was the center of philosophy and the mistakes that defined the field continue right up to the present time. This book will attempt both to remove the mistakes and to present an alternative account to those I am familiar with, both traditional and contemporary. I hope to provide a more adequate account of the relationship between perceptual experience and the objects of our perceptions.

I want to say a little bit about how this book fits into my earlier work. After I published an intentionalistic account of perception in *Intentionality*,[1] I did not think I had much more to say about the subject. As far as I was concerned, perception seemed to me in pretty good shape. Austin refuted the Argument from Illusion,[2] which was the origin of the classical sense datum theory stretching back at least to the seventeenth century. Grice established a causal component in perception.[3] And I tried to

1. Searle, John R. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Chapter 2, 37–78.
2. Austin, J. L. *Sense and Sensibilia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
3. Grice, H. P. "The Causal Theory of Perception," in *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. Chapter 15, 224–47.

explain the presentational intentionality of perception in ways that would enable us to see the logical structure of perceptual experiences. Such experiences, without being linguistic, present an entire state of affairs. They are causally self-reflexive. They are above all presentational rather than representational. (Please do not worry if you do not understand the jargon of causally self-reflexive, presentational, and representational. I explain all of these terms in due course.)

There were some unclarities and incompleteness in my account. For example, a persistent misunderstanding was that my account made perception too complicated for animals to grasp. But of course the claim is not that animals *think* all this high-level analysis, but that the analysis simply describes what is going on in their experience. When they perceive something, they actually perceive it only if the object perceived causes the very perception of it. As an analogy of this point: if I say knowledge is justified true belief that avoids the Gettier counterexamples and I say, "my dog knows that someone is at the door," I am not thereby committed to the view that the dog is *thinking*, "I have justified true belief that avoids the Gettier counterexamples." It is an old mistake to suppose that if animals can think, then they must be able to think that they are thinking. And it is an extension of that mistake to suppose that if animals have complex intentional structures in perception and action, then they must be able to think about the content of these complex intentional structures.

A second misunderstanding was that when I said that perception is causally self-referential, I might be saying that the perceptual experience performs some kind of a speech act of referring to itself. I intended nothing of the sort. The idea is that the conditions of satisfaction of perceptual experience require that the state of affairs perceived functions causally in producing the perceptual experience. So the conditions of satisfaction require reference to the experience itself. And in that sense the experience is causally self-referential. To avoid this misunderstanding I now use the expression "causally

self-reflexive" instead of "causally self-referential," but I intend the two expressions to mean exactly the same thing.

There is another notational change in this work. In *Intentionality*,[4] I used the notation S(p) as the general form of intentional states where the "S" marks the type of state and the "p" the propositional content. So the belief that it is raining would be represented as

Bel (it is raining)

One beauty of this is that it matches perfectly the structure of the speech act. So the assertion that it is raining has a structure F(p) where the "F" marks the type of speech act, the illocutionary force, and the "p" the propositional content. The assertion is of the form:

Assert (it is raining)

The general principle I followed was to put the entire conditions of satisfaction inside the parenthesis. The causally self-referential case would include the causal component inside the parenthesis. The logical form can also be applied to a visual experience. Thus if I see that it is raining, this visual experience will have the form:

Vis Exp (it is raining, and the fact that it is raining causes this Vis Exp)

This way we get the causal self-referentiality inside the propositional content. If we follow the principle that all the conditions of satisfaction must be part of the propositional content, then this is the right way to do it. But it misled a lot of people into thinking that I am claiming that you see the causal relation. And of course you do not

4. Searle, John R. *Intentionality*.

see the causal relation, the causal relation is just an experienced condition on veridicality. I now prefer the notation:

Vis Exp (it is raining)
CSR

where the "CSR" captures the Causally Self-Reflexive character of the intentionality. Various people suggested this notation to me; I think the first was Kent Bach. The new notation is intended to mean exactly the same as the old notation, but I hope it avoids misunderstandings.

So, except for clearing up the misunderstandings, it seemed to me that once the specific forms of the intentionality of perception were understood, and once the presentational character was adequately grasped, my original objectives in presenting a theory of perception would have been achieved.

Other problems in gaining acceptance for an intentional account of perception derive not so much from defects in my presentation as from persistent mistakes that philosophers tend to make about the nature of intentionality itself. There are still confusions between the *content* of the intentional state and the *object* of the intentional state. If I believe that Obama is president, the *content* of my state is the proposition that Obama is president; but the *object* is Obama himself. Philosophers persistently suppose that "a propositional attitude" (a dreadfully muddled terminology) must be an attitude to a proposition. This is a systematic confusion between content and object. This confusion carries over to the intentionalistic analysis of perception. Some people suppose that when I say perception is intentional and has a propositional content, I am saying perception is an attitude to a proposition. Worse yet, they think a proposition must be an abstract entity like a number. This conception would have the result that on an intentionalistic account, we would really have no access to the real world. We would just be related to abstract entities. This conception runs exactly opposite to the whole account I am

presenting, and I have to clear up some of these general mistakes about intentionality in the course of the discussion that follows.

This book is essentially a continuation of the line of analysis that I began in Chapter 2 of *Intentionality*, where I offered an intentionalistic analysis of perception. I think now I see a great many things I did not see when I wrote that book. Not just solutions to pre-existing problems, but problems that I was not then aware of. I think the account in *Intentionality* is completely correct as far as it goes, but it does not go as far as I want to go in this book.

I was originally provoked, if that is the right word, to undertake more work on perception by conversations with Ned Block and Tyler Burge, who urged me to undertake an investigation of something called "Disjunctivism" that they characterized as "weeds growing in your own garden here in Berkeley." I did become interested in this, and I benefitted from conversations with my Berkeley colleagues, especially with John Campbell and Michael Martin, in trying to understand Disjunctivism. It seemed to me that Disjunctivism was, in a sense, accepting the worst feature of the classical argument against Naïve Realism, even though Disjunctivism was designed to defend Naïve Realism.

Because this work relies on my earlier work, especially intentionality and consciousness, but also because I want it to be completely self-contained, I have added two short appendices to Chapter 1: one about intentionality and one about consciousness. Many of the confusions in contemporary philosophy of perception derive from the authors' lack of a clear conception of intentionality and a mistaken conception of consciousness. These mistakes are derived, at least in part, from our unfortunate philosophical tradition. These appendices are brief and they repeat material that I have expounded at greater length elsewhere. But I believe they result in a book that is entirely self-contained.

Once you have established the intentionality of perception and given a general characterization of its features, the investigation opens up a whole lot of problems. I criticize Disjunctivism more or less incidentally in Chapter 6. The main intellectual thrust of the book is in Chapters 4 and 5. I try to answer the question of how the raw phenomenology of perceptual experiences determines the intentional content of the experience. In Chapter 7 I consider examples of unconscious perception as well as other forms of unconscious cognition, and I try to answer the claim that consciousness does not really matter very much. The classical philosophical problems of perception—about skepticism and the various traditional theories of perception—are considered only at the end in Chapter 8. To me the most important chapters are 1, 2, 4, and 5.

Chapter 1

The Bad Argument

One of the Biggest Mistakes in Philosophy in the Past Several Centuries

I. A SMALL FALLACY AND A LARGE MISTAKE

Philosophy never completely overcomes its history, and many of the mistakes of the past are still with us. Indeed we lack a single word to name the variety of mistakes, errors, fallacies, confusions, incoherencies, inadequacies, nonsense, and just plain falsehoods that we have inherited. It is imprecise to call all of these "mistakes," but I lack a better word. I believe the worst mistake of all is the cluster of views known as Dualism, Materialism, Monism, Functionalism, Behaviorism, Idealism, the Identity Theory, etc. The idea these theories all have in common is that there is some special problem about the relation of the mind to the body, consciousness to the brain, and in their fixation on the illusion that there is a problem, philosophers have fastened onto different solutions to the problem. This mistake goes back to the Ancients, but it has received its most famous exposition by Descartes in the seventeenth century, and has continued right through to the present mistakes such as the contemporary Computational Theory of Mind, Functionalism, Property Dualism, Behaviorism, etc. The important thing to see is that all these apparently different and inconsistent views are in fact expressions of the

same underlying mistake, which just to have a label I have called Conceptual Dualism.[1]

A mistake of nearly as great a magnitude overwhelmed our tradition in the seventeenth century and after, and it is the mistake of supposing that we never directly perceive objects and states of affairs in the world, but directly perceive only our subjective experiences. The mistake has many different names, among them Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant. After Kant it gets worse. Mill and Hegel, in spite of all their differences, would also have to be included. In this book, I expose this mistake and its disastrous consequences, but my main aim is not historical. I want to give a more accurate account of perception, and much of the interest of the account is in its effort to correct the mistakes that preceded it. I will start by giving a bare-bones account of what I think is a correct theory of perception and of the mistake I am alleging. Later on, in Chapter 3, I will fill in the details. Like most philosophers who write about the subject, I will concentrate on vision. I will say something about the other modalities in passing.

If you have normal vision and are in reasonably good light, and you look around you as you are reading this book, you are likely to see the following sort of things: if you are indoors, you might see the table on which the book rests and the chair in which you are sitting. Under normal circumstance, there will be other furniture as well as walls, windows, a ceiling, and the other elements of an indoor scene. If you are outdoors, the scene is likely to be much richer, as you might see trees, flowers, the sky, and perhaps houses and streets. I will begin by trying to describe obvious facts about this scene and your perceptions that occur in the scene. First, you are *directly* seeing objects and states of affairs, and these have an existence totally *independent* of your perception of them. The perception is *direct* in the sense that you do not perceive something else by way of which you

1. Searle, John R., *The Rediscovery of the Mind.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992, 26ff.