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## Reviews

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**Possibilities of perception** by J Church; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, £35.00 cloth (US \$55.00) ISBN 9780199678440

The analysis of perception has a venerable history in the annals of philosophy. Jennifer Church has taken on the task of explicating the epistemology of perception, which should be a topic dear to the hearts of readers of this journal. I began reading with the hope of gaining a fuller insight into the structure of the domain that might be considered ‘perception’, and was particularly stimulated by the cover picture by Arshile Gorky, which did indeed seem to capture the mutable possibilities of perception, as each element of the scene spoke almost aurally of a variety of organic forms and figures, mouths, bodies, flowers, rainshowers—evoking among many other things the evanescent T S Eliot lines “In the room the women come and go. Speaking of Michelangelo”: in other words, the wealth of perception from form and depth structure to high sociocultural inferences.

Unfortunately, I was soon plunged into a blizzard of terminological distinctions that could be appreciated only by the seasoned philosophical specialist, I fear (if at all). From the viewpoint of a perceptual scientist, it seems that one is expected to have an intuitive grasp of terms that are not clearly defined, and only through progressive adumbration rather than any direct specification. I might add that Church is not alone in this regard, and that this is a fairly common experience in my attempts to tackle the philosophical literature.

An example is the distinction between the “justificatory immediacy of perception and the experiential immediacy of perception” (page 25). I am comfortable with the second, but am unenlightened by Church’s attempt to explain the first: “Perceptual knowledge or experience, I suggest, has justificatory immediacy not because it is incapable of or unneedful of further justification but, rather, because it is *self-justifying*” (page 25). Her emphasis here seems to be a tautological attempt to convey some meaning that is unexpressed. The situation is not helped by the following sentence, which develops this supposed ‘self-justification’ in terms of ‘veridicality’, which as far as I am aware means the relationship of the internal state to the external reality—that is, the opposite of self-justification: “The veridicality of perceptual experiences is signaled from within the experience itself” (page 25). Even if this statement meant anything, it is immediately contradicted by the following one: “Self-justifying experiences can still be doubted, and further justification is sometimes needed; but the self-justifying character of perceptual knowledge is what distinguishes it from non-perceptual knowledge” (page 25).

If this sequence of terminological contradictions can be construed to mean anything substantive, it would need illustrative examples to carry the sense. It seems that ‘justification’ is related to veridicality, so perhaps it refers to the fact that we typically perceive objects, so that perception is justified if we find (through manipulation, etc) that there are actual objects corresponding to these percepts. Perhaps ‘self-justification’, then, refers to mutual verification within multiple aspects of perception, such as that the various depth cues are consistent with the inference of the same object, before any attempt at external verification is made. We are left to guess whether such interpretations are reasonable or not. However, the main point, that perceptual knowledge is self-justifying whereas nonperceptual knowledge is not, seems to be readily falsified by typical examples. I presume that my knowledge of my bank account, for example, is deemed nonperceptual. In some sense, my bank account has no external reality—it is a set of codified transactions that are recorded in various ways, and I can cross-validate them from my memory, my cheque-book, the bank statement, the teller’s readout, my Internet portal, and so on. Would these be described as self-justifying operations? Or does self-justification apply only to mental operations? Even if it does, many nonperceptual memories are extensively cross-validated mentally, such as my name or my family structure. This justificatory distinction between perceptual and nonperceptual knowledge does not, it seems to me, stand up to meaningful scrutiny.

Church seems to have been drawn into these abstractions by a confusion between perceptual inference, logical inference, and perceptual immediacy. Anything immediately accessible to awareness is termed ‘perception’, even if it is derived from logical inference across the memory of perceptual

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examples (such as the generic properties of triangles), rather than their perceptual elaboration from sensory input. She fails to realize that nothing deriving from memory or from symbolic input such as the words on a page can be meaningfully considered to be ‘perception’, even if its evocation to consciousness is immediate. Indeed, it is not until page 234 that she swings in the other direction to aver that “perception, properly so-called, requires not only the experience of objectivity but the accuracy of such experience”, effectively excluding any abstract entities.

A further contradiction with her treatment in this regard is that she unapologetically incorporates into ‘perception’ aspects that seem to me by any standard to be nonperceptual knowledge. Large sections of the book are devoted to the “perception of reasons” and “moral perception”. Admittedly, such concepts are implied in common usage, such as “the judge perceived the force of his argument”, or “she was perceived by the community as a morally disreputable character”, but I doubt if readers of this journal would regard these as more than metaphorical statements, and the usage sounds distinctly 19th century. To call these ‘perception’ is like considering it a visual process when someone says “I see what you mean”.

The author is on firmer ground in her final section on aesthetic perception. Here, she draws meaningful and nuanced distinctions between the perceptual of ordinary objects and of works of art, deriving from a dual understanding of them as physical objects and as carrying some social/aesthetic overlay, and also allowing for this duality to be either inherent in the object or, in more recent manifestations, purely within the subjective assessments of the viewer. This duality can explain how an everyday object such as a urinal can be deemed an art object and take on layers of effective meaning merely by the pronouncement by the artist that it is so. I felt illuminated by the view of perception as stretching the layers of meaning some sensory input to such forms of duality, not least because the section is liberally illustrated with explanatory examples. The extended discussion of aesthetic perception through this analysis thus redeemed what I assessed as both expository and philosophical defects of the earlier parts of the book.

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