

Philosophy of Mind/Philosophy of Psychology

Over the last couple of weeks we have looked at themes in philosophy of mind. The main concerns have been to examine a few of the main theories, how they have come about and what objections might be made in relation to how they account for the nature of mind. Generally speaking, this has brought us into contact with questions such as: what is thought? Is the mind identical to the brain? Should we conceive of the mind as, somehow, distinct to the body? What is the relationship between 'mind' and 'thought'? And how should we conceive of thought, as such?

Attempts to answer these questions raised examples and further questions relating to whether or not machines can think. If they can think, is it legitimate to say that such machines have minds? And what are the criteria for saying that something thinks? These questions returned us to theories mind, especially one of the more recent ones – namely, Functionalism. An examination of this theory that is based on the model of input → process → output revealed a number of issues relating to consciousness. It would seem, for instance, that consciousness is required for thought; that, in turn, means that we have to consider whether or not Functionalism provides a sufficient account of the nature of experience. If it does not, then we have to think again about whether it provides an accurate account of the nature of mind. I covered some objections to Functionalism that exploit the argument that it does not provide a sufficient account of the nature of experience.

This class, we will be considering some different objections to Functionalism; objections that seriously undermine the thought that machines can think and take us in the direction of philosophy of psychology.

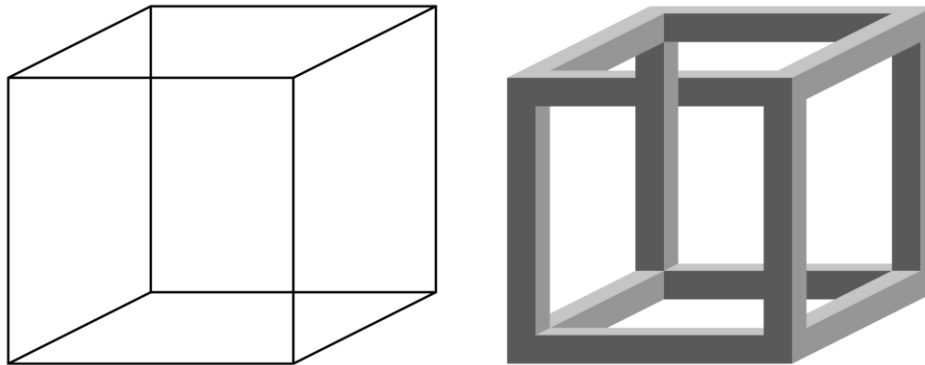
To begin, here are some ambiguous images.



The Duck-Rabbit (above)



Old woman/Young woman



The Necker cube

Aspect Perception

The first distinction to be made is that between continuous aspect perception and aspect dawning. Continuous aspect perception occurs where there is no ambiguity – for example, in an ordinary picture. Indeed, that something is a picture at all is a form of continuous aspect perception. By contrast, aspect-dawning occurs when a different aspect is revealed (as in the ambiguous drawings above). Something similar occurs when we suddenly see a likeness between two faces – a fairly frequent occurrence when we encounter members of the same family (take, for instance, members of the royal family); it also occurs when we suddenly recognise the face of a long-lost friend or when we suddenly change from seeing a smile as friendly to seeing it as malicious. However, in order for such changes of aspect to occur we need to unquestioningly take the objects as faces in the first place (a form of continuous aspect perception). One further point that needs to be made here is that both continuous aspect perception and aspect-dawning are related to the kinds of significance that the objects in question have for us. For example, knives and forks are significant for us insofar as they are objects that we unquestioningly take to be items of cutlery with specific uses. If they held no significance, they would just be physical objects. Thus, our continuous aspect perception of them as knives and forks (the grounds we have for saying they are knives and forks at all) is related to the unambiguous significance they have for us which is expressed in the typicality of our responses. Aspect-dawning (cases in which an aspect change occurs) is also answerable to the significance that an object has but, in this case, the significance changes and, consequently, changes our relationship with the object in question. So, for example, the significance of a picture of a duck will be different if we suddenly recognise the figure of a rabbit in it; the change of aspect being interdependent with the significance that the picture has for us. Similarly, if we suddenly see a smile as friendly instead of malicious (or *vice versa*) then the significance of that person's expression has changed for us and, as such, places us in a different kind of relationship with them.

The Paradox of Perception

But how can I see something different if the object has not changed? Clearly I understand that the object itself has not changed but I still report that I see something different. This is known as the paradox of perception. In answer to it, psychologists and scientists alike have generally formulated some kind of distinction between what we see and what we *really* see.

Interpretation?

Many psychologists have suggested that we grasp the external world through our senses which send signals to our brains to interpret. The interpretations provide us with our visual experience to which we then react yielding a behavioural output. This is largely a functionalist model.

So how does this model deal with changes in aspect-perception? What happens when we suddenly see malice in a smile where previously we had only seen friendliness? What happens when we suddenly see the old lady as opposed to the young one?

The gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Kohler suggested that, when an aspect changes, we experience a change of organisation of the object in our subjective visual experience. In essence, this means that the object in our visual experience changes even though the object itself does not – the subjective change in organisation is due to the way our brains process the information received by the senses.

The problem with this still largely accepted view is that there seems to be no way we can represent such a change in organisation. For example, were two different people to see different things in the duck-rabbit they would still draw the same object and see what they had drawn as the object which they believed it to be. Similarly, two people could draw the same smiling face but claim it to be friendly and malicious respectively – if they suddenly saw the opposite to what they had previously seen, a subsequent drawing would not reveal the difference. Consequently, no public representation of the supposed subjective reorganisation is possible. If there is no way of representing the supposed subjective reorganisation of the object in our visual experience, then the reorganisation hypothesis is redundant because there is no way, in principle, of proving it true or false.

But, can we say that our aspect changes are still a matter of interpretation – that we only *really* see configurations of shapes and colours and that anything else is an interpretation of them?

Let us take the example of a smiling face that one person sees as malicious and another as friendly. Do they see the same thing or something different? If you are asked what you see, you may answer that you see a malicious smile; someone else may say they see a friendly smile. These are, essentially, reports of what a person sees and they are different accounts. The arrangement of facial muscles on the face of the (same) person smiling is the same in each case. What, exactly, occurs when we recognise a smile and understand it as friendly or malicious?

Firstly, when I see a smile as friendly or malicious, my recognition of it as such is interdependent with my qualitative experience of it – in other words, I cannot separate out the way I experience the smile as malicious from my recognition of it as such. If that were not so then it becomes impossible to distinguish between someone who sees the smile as malicious from someone who sees it as friendly because there is nothing that counts as seeing either.

Furthermore, recognition is not interpretation – the latter has criteria for application that are quite different from those associated with recognition. An interpretation is a reflective cognitive act; recognition is not – it is a change of aspect that is interdependent with a revised significance of what has been recognised.

Functionalism seems unable to cope with this argument. There is nothing in a malicious smile that is answerable to specific external (physical) inputs. No physical configuration corresponds to malice and friendliness and, as such, no (physical) difference is required for two people to experience (and report) a smile differently; an interpretation requires deliberate reflection that is absent from such experience. Functionalism argues that certain inputs result in certain processes that are necessarily tied to specific mental concepts made apparent in behavioural output. In a computer, if it malfunctions, there are specific physical processes that can be corrected. Put another way: the

processes that take place in a computer hard drive determine the outcome causally, not normatively (which is why we can correct them when they go wrong by altering something physical). But what determines the rules at all for the deployment of human concepts (including thought) is not causal determination but, rather, the significance that particular things have for us. The ways the steps in a calculation are determined are not via a physical process but by what counts as the rules which govern how we distinguish a correct from incorrect calculation. These are given in behaviour and relate to the various things that are significant in human life.

Secondly, if we do not really see a smile but only see certain alignments of facial muscles, then it must be more accurate to describe what we see in neutral terms. This is actually very difficult, if not impossible – it would certainly take a great deal of practice and skill to achieve. If such a report were made, would this be any more a case of seeing than just reporting that one sees malice in a smile?

In relation to Functionalism and the belief that computers may be able to think and be conscious, one can say this: It is possible to programme a machine to function in a certain way in relation to inputs. If its parts do not break down then the causal connection that take place between the various parts (the processes) will mean the output is correct. However, what makes the output correct at all is not the causal determination that produces it; rather, it is the fact that it functions according to the rules of living that are answerable to human forms of interaction. There is no physical process that can account for meaning of this kind.