

William Fish

Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction.

New York: Routledge 2010.

192 pages

\$142.00 (cloth ISBN: 978-0-41599-911-3);

\$39.95 (paper ISBN: 978-0-41599-912-0)

The philosophy of perception has emerged in the past decade as a subfield in its own right and no longer merely as an episode in epistemology and philosophy of mind. In this book, William Fish provides us with a clearly written, informed, and accessible contemporary introduction to the philosophy of perception as well as an update on current debates within this field. The selection of topics is excellent and the attention devoted to each topic is always just about right. In addition to serving well in various capacities as an assigned text in philosophy courses, this book would be a nice entry point for philosophers unfamiliar with current debates in the philosophy of perception.

The book divides naturally into three sections. Chapters 2-4 survey the theories occupying the attention of the early- and mid-twentieth century analytic period: the sense datum theory, the adverbial theory, and the belief acquisition theory. Chapters 5 and 6 consider presently what are the two most prominent theories: intentionalism and disjunctivism. Chapters 6-9 address the place of causation in theories of perception, discuss the relevance of various empirical findings to philosophical reflection on perception, and explore other senses in addition to vision and the problem of how to individuate the senses.

The survey and assessment of theories in chapters 2-6 are organized around three principles and two desiderata, which are set forth in the preliminary first chapter. The three principles are (a) the *common factor* principle, according to which phenomenologically indiscriminable experiences have the same underlying mental state; (b) the *phenomenal* principle, according to which there is something of which *S* is aware that is *F* if something sensibly appears *F* to *S*; and (c) the *representational* principle, according to which visual experience is representational. These can be thought of as *prima facie* considerations to be set aside if doing so resolves problems. Each theory is discussed in terms of its agreement or disagreement with each principle. In some cases, there are some complications that prevent a straightforward judgment one way or the other. Additionally, each theory must address the phenomenological and epistemological aspects of perception. A plausible theory of perception must successfully account both for *what it is like* to have a sensory experience and for the idea that sensory experience is a primary source of empirical *knowledge*.

Fish helpfully often considers two or three versions of each theory rather than offering one overly simplistic rendition of each. In discussing the adverbial theory, Fish distinguishes *event* analyses from *subject-predicate* analyses of statements about experience. The chapter on intentional theories features three different theories, which concern primarily differences in the relationship between representational content and the phenomenology of perceptual experience. Additionally, further variations are noted in the context of discussions of competing views about the nature of content (possible worlds or Russellian or Fregean) and the internal-external and

conceptual-nonconceptual content debates. Within disjunctivism, Fish discusses the more recent division between negative and positive disjunctivists. All of this is done with just enough space devoted to the debates to indicate how those divisions may affect how its proponents respond to objections to their views without lingering on too long.

There are but a few occasions in which one might wish that a line of discussion had been pursued just a bit further. For example, when discussing the ‘veil of perception’ objection to the sense datum theory (the objection that positing sense data of the object of awareness of perception threatens the very intelligibility of saying that we perceive physical objects) Fish mentions one sense datum reply. The reply is that once we understand the relationship between sense data and physical objects as being analogous to the relationship between surfaces of physical objects and the physical objects themselves, the objection loses much of its force. This is because surfaces can be said to mediate our perception of physical objects in a way that is analogous to the way that sense data mediate our perception of physical objects. But since the mediation occurring via perception of surfaces is relatively inoffensive, it does not generate a veil between us and physical objects. Consequently, neither do sense data. Fish ends the discussion on this point to move on to what he considers to be larger problem looming in the background, however successful this reply may be. What remains unsaid is that there is a fundamental disanalogy between sense data and surfaces of physical objects. Surfaces are at least *constituents* or *dependent parts* of physical objects whereas sense data are usually conceived of as being *wholly distinct* from physical objects. The radically different nature of the relation that sense data have to physical objects when compared with that of surfaces to their objects robs the analogy between them of any force in replying to this objection. These and other such moments may lead the reader to wish that the dialectic had been pursued just one more step. Such moments are, of course, the result of inevitable and justified decisions to keep the discussion moving, and in this, the author is definitely successful.

Fish’s book is a worthy successor to Howard Robinson’s *Perception* (Routledge, 1994). While Robinson’s book is not straightforwardly an introduction in that Robinson is arguing for a definite position, it is probably the closest the field has had to one until now. Robinson devotes a chapter to historical developments in the philosophy of perception, and discusses in some depth physical world realism and idealism as these relate to perception. In contrast, Fish includes significantly less attention to historical developments, does not argue in favor of particular theory, and does not give much attention to the metaphysical theories of realism and idealism. While I think Robinson’s book has aged well despite the recent flurry of scholarly output in the philosophy of perception, there is a need for an up-to-date introduction. Fish’s more neutral, entry-level introduction to the field fills this need.

The book is augmented with various user-friendly features, ostensibly to serve as pedagogical aids for use in a course. Each chapter begins with an overview, ends with several discussion questions and a modest number of suggestions for further readings. Given the importance of perception to epistemology and philosophy of mind, this would be a fine book to use to supplement survey courses on those topics. The book would also serve well as a primer for advanced undergraduate seminars focusing on philosophy of perception or epistemological issues in perceptual knowledge, supplementing classic texts or any one of several recently published

volumes in perception and perceptual knowledge. The suggestions for further readings provided at the end of each chapter would be an excellent place to start compiling a reading list of older as well as more recent classics.

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