

# ‘Look’ Sentences and Visual Experience

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This is an extract from the book that I am developing from my doctoral thesis, under negotiation with Oxford University Press. I have included Sections 1.1 – 1.4, 9.1 – 9.2, and 9.4 – 9.5.

In Sections 1.1 and 1.2, I describe the main aim of the book: to clarify what we mean by ‘look’ sentences such as ‘John looks American.’ In Sections 1.3 and 1.4, I explain how doing so can help us work out the nature of visual experience – one of the central questions in the philosophy of perception.

In Sections 9.1 and 9.2, having developed an account of ‘look’ sentences in the previous chapters, I argue that the account gives us a new *adverbial* theory of visual experience (a kind of theory that has fallen into neglect). In Section 9.4, I consider what the theory might say in reply to three objections traditionally brought against adverbial theories. Finally, in Section 9.5, I argue that in at least one respect the theory is better than currently popular representational theories of visual experience.

# 1 The Project

## 1.1 VA sentences

My main aim in this book is to clarify what we mean by a certain class of sentences – sentences whose main verb is ‘look’, and that we use to describe how things visually appear. I shall call them *visual appearance sentences*, or *VA sentences* for short. The following is a fairly representative sample:

- (1) a. Patch looks that way.<sup>1</sup>
- b. He looks the way Mary looks.
- c. John looks American.
- d. Someone looks a character.
- e. Those women look in love.<sup>2</sup>
- f. John looks like a duck.
- g. John’s mum looks how she always looks.
- h. The top line looks longer than the bottom line.
- i. They look to be tired.
- j. It looks as if these tomatoes are ripe.
- k. There looks to be a unicorn approaching.

There are also sentences whose main verb is ‘look’ but that we do not use to describe how things visually appear:

- (2) a. John looked out the window.
- b. She looked after my pot plants.
- c. The boss is looking to hire someone.

Whether or not we use ‘look’ with the same meaning in (2a-c) as we do in (1a-k), we do not use the sentences in (2a-c) to describe how things visually appear, so they are not VA sentences as I am characterising them. So I am not interested in this book in clarifying what we mean by them (although I think that would also be an interesting project). I mention them just to set them aside.

I will assume for simplicity that it is the same word ‘look’ that we use in all VA sentences. My interest is in what we mean by VA sentences, and in particular what we mean by their main verb (or verbs) ‘look’. I am not interested in the number of verbs ‘look’ that we use in these sentences to mean what we do.

## 1.2 What needs clarifying

Since we understand each other when we use VA sentences (at least much of the time), there is a sense in which we already know what we mean by them: by ‘John looks American’, for example, we mean that *John looks American*. We also know what we mean by its constituents ‘John’, ‘look’ and ‘American’: by ‘John’ we mean *John*, by ‘looks’ we mean *looks*, and by ‘American’ we mean

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<sup>1</sup> I shall often use ‘Patch’ as a proper name for a colour patch.

<sup>2</sup> The acceptability of sentences such as (1d) and (1e) varies from community to community – to speakers in Australia they are perfectly acceptable, but to many speakers in the U.S. they are not. I would be happy to omit them from this list.

*American*. But one thing we do not know, at least not explicitly, is what kinds of things these are, and how they are composed to give that which we mean by the sentence. Here is one possible theory: by ‘John’ we mean a certain particular,  $j$ , by ‘looks’ we mean a certain 2-place relation,  $L$ , by ‘American’ we mean a certain particular,  $a$ , and by ‘John looks American’ we mean that  $j$  stands in  $L$  to  $a$ . I don’t think that this is a correct theory, but it is the kind of theory I am looking for. Call such a theory a *semantic theory* of ‘John looks American’. When I say that I want to clarify what we mean by VA sentences, what I mean is that I want a semantic theory of VA sentences.

One way to clarify what we mean by a sentence is to *formalize* the sentence – to translate it into a well-formed formula of an interpreted formal language, such as first order logic. Suppose that by ‘John’ in ‘John looks American’ we mean a particular,  $j$ , by ‘looks American’ we mean a property,  $P$ , and by ‘John looks American’ we mean that  $j$  has  $P$ . Then we can clarify what we mean by ‘John looks American’ by formalizing it as ‘ $Pj$ ’. Suppose, in addition, that by ‘look’ we mean a 2-place relation,  $L$ , by ‘American’ we mean a particular,  $a$ , and that by ‘looks American’ we mean the property of standing in  $L$  to  $a$ . Then we can further clarify what we mean by ‘John looks American’ by formalizing it as ‘ $Lja$ ’. This second formalization is the more informative of the two – it clarifies more fully what we mean by ‘John looks American’ than does the first. Ideally we would like a formalization that clarifies as fully as possible what we mean by ‘John looks American’. If we think of the formalizations ‘ $Pj$ ’ and ‘ $Lja$ ’ as being *logical forms* of ‘John looks American’, and the formalization that fully clarifies what we mean by it as being *the* logical form of ‘John looks American’, then we can say that my aim in this book is to work out the logical form of ‘John looks American’, and every other VA sentence.

By ‘what we mean by VA sentences’ I mean what we *generically* mean by these sentences. Sometimes what an individual speaker means by a VA sentence might be different from what the community as a whole means by that sentence (perhaps because she misunderstands the sentence, or perhaps because she understands it but intends to use it in a different way). But I take it that there are *generic* facts about what we mean by VA sentences, and these are the facts in which I am interested here. I take it that a sentence means whatever we generically use it to mean: if it is generically true that we use  $s$  to mean  $m$ , then it is thereby true that  $s$  itself means  $m$  (I will not argue for that here). So my interest in what we mean by VA sentences is equally an interest in what VA sentences themselves mean. My aim, then, can be stated in either of the following two ways: to clarify what we mean by VA sentences, or to clarify what VA sentences mean. I will use this terminology interchangeably.

Similar comments apply to sub-sentential constituents of VA sentences. As part of clarifying what we mean by VA sentences I will be clarifying what we mean by their constituents. By ‘what we mean by their constituents’ I mean what we generically mean by those constituents. I take it that there are generic facts about what we mean by those constituents, and that a constituent  $c$  of a sentence  $s$  means whatever we generically use  $c$  in  $s$  to mean: if it is generically true that we use  $c$  in  $s$  to mean  $m$ , then it is thereby true that  $c$  itself means  $m$  in  $s$ . So my interest in what we mean by the constituents of VA sentences is equally an interest in what those constituents themselves mean in those sentences.

I shall be talking about what a speaker  $S$  means by a sentence  $s$  on an occasion of use. Many people working in the philosophy of language would prefer to talk about ‘the proposition that the speaker semantically expresses on that occasion’, or ‘the content of  $s$  relative to that context’, or ‘what  $S$  asserts by uttering  $s$  on that occasion’, or ‘the truth-conditions intuitively conveyed by the utterance’, or one of various other alternatives. I find these ways of talking much less clear, so much so that I can only understand this way of talking by translating it into talk about what  $S$  means by  $s$ . The motivation for introducing this technical language seems to be this: sometimes there are two

things that count as what a speaker means when she assertively utters a sentence, one of which is something that she merely implicates (in the Gricean sense). What we need is a way of referring to the *other* thing that she means – the thing that she does not merely implicate. I don't see any such need. I agree that there might in this way be two things that the speaker means when she assertively utters a sentence, but only one of these counts as what she means *by the sentence*. What she implicates is not something that she means by the sentence – rather, it is something that she means *by uttering the sentence* (or by saying what she did), and the sentence and her uttering of the sentence are distinct things (one is a sentence, one is an act). If I utter 'Mary has nice handwriting' and thereby implicate that Mary is not a good philosopher, then it is not by 'Mary has nice handwriting' that I mean that Mary is not a good philosopher – it is by *saying* that Mary has nice handwriting that I mean that she is not a good philosopher. If in response to my uttering 'Mary has nice handwriting' you ask me what I mean by that, seeking to clarify what I am implicating, then you are not using 'that' to refer to the sentence that I have uttered, but to my act of uttering it. I think it is bad methodology to introduce technical terms for phenomena that we already have perfectly good ways of talking about in natural language.

Again, similar comments apply to sub-sentential constituents of VA sentences. I shall be talking about what a speaker *S* means by a constituent *c* of a sentence *s* on an occasion of use. In more popular terminology, I mean the content of *c* relative to that context: when *S* assertively utters the sentence *s* she expresses a proposition, and by uttering *c* she expresses a constituent of that proposition – this is the content of *c* relative to the context. Again, I find it clearer to talk about what the speaker means by *c* on this occasion, and this is the terminology that I shall use throughout. If need be, everything that I say can be translated into the more popular (but, in my opinion, often more confusing) technical language.

### 1.3 One motivation: the nature of visual experience

Why do I want to clarify what we mean by VA sentences? One motivation is that doing so can help us work out the nature of visual experience. In this section I will discuss visual experience; in the next section I will discuss how clarifying what we mean by VA sentences can help us work out the nature of visual experience.

We have visual experiences. I look at a white patch in red light and it looks a certain way to me – I have a visual experience. This visual experience has a certain *character* – often described as what it is like to have the experience, or how things look to me in having the experience. I look at the same white patch in green light and have an experience with a different character – there is something that it is like to have this second experience, and it is different from what it is like to have the first.

One of the central questions in the philosophy of perception is: what is the *nature* of visual experience? Since it is perhaps not clear what this question is asking, I suggest that we consider the following two questions instead:

- (3) a. What is it to have a visual experience?
- b. For any given character *c*, what is it to have a visual experience with character *c*?

I suggest in turn that we focus on a particular character and consider the question of what it is to have a visual experience with that character – answering this question should be a good start to answer the two more general questions in (3).

So suppose that John is having a visual experience with a certain character, such that we might truly describe the situation in one of the following ways:

- (4) a. John has a visual experience as of a red square  
b. John is visually experiencing a red square  
c. It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square  
d. It looks to John as if there is a red square before him

Then let's take our question to be this: what is it for John to have a visual experience with this character? If we fix on the first description of the experience, then the question is this:

- (5) What is it for John to have a visual experience as of a red square?

Note that the question is about visual *experience* rather than visual *perception*. There are reasons to think that although the two typically co-occur, visually perceiving (i.e. seeing) is distinct from visually experiencing. One reason is the possibility of blind sight: there seem to be cases in which a person sees but does not have any visual experience.<sup>3</sup> Another reason is the possibility of hallucination: there seem to be cases in which a person has a visual experience but does not see. If there are cases of blind sight or hallucination, or could be such cases, then seeing is distinct from having a visual experience. Perhaps there can't be such cases, and seeing is identical to having a visual experience. But we should not without argument assume that the two are identical, and that working out the nature of visual experience is the same as working out the nature of visual perception. I will be careful to keep the two apart.

So what is it for John to have a visual experience as of a red square? Perhaps in some cases when John has a visual experience as of a red square he stands in a certain relation to an external object that is red and square: perhaps he is looking at something that is red and square, and it looks red and square to him – he is having a *veridical* experience. But standing in this relation to an external object that is red and square cannot be what it *is* for John to have a visual experience as of a red square, because John might have a visual experience as of a red square even when there is no external object that is red and square to which he is so related. He might have a visual experience as of a red square while looking at a white rectangle, which, due to lighting and other conditions, looks red and square to him – that would be to have an *illusory* experience. Or he might have a visual experience as of a red square while not looking at anything – that would be to have an *hallucinatory* experience. These are the well-known problems of illusion and hallucination that show that some other account is needed.<sup>4,5</sup>

Alternative accounts of the nature of visual experience are typically grouped into four kinds: *sense-datum* accounts, *adverbial* accounts, *representational* accounts, and *disjunctive* accounts. Within each kind of account there are different versions that would give different answers to the question in (5), but I think that in each case we can single out a general claim to which they would agree, one that shows what is distinctive about accounts of that kind.

According to sense-datum accounts:

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<sup>3</sup> Weiskrantz (1986).

<sup>4</sup> Note that here I have used the phenomena of illusion and hallucination to argue *against* one kind of account. I have not used them to argue *for* any other kind of account, as is sometimes done. Sometimes they are used to argue for a sense-datum account. This typically involves claiming that if John is having a visual experience as of a red square then he is experiencing something which *is* red and square (Robinson (1994, p. 32) calls this the *phenomenal principle*) – this is much more contentious than what I have done here.

<sup>5</sup> There are other phenomena that are similarly problematic for the view under consideration here: perspectival variation, double vision, and time-gaps, to name three.

- (6) For John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to stand in a certain relation to an internal object which is red and square.<sup>6</sup>

It is traditional to call this internal object a *sense-datum* (hence the name of this kind of account). Different sense-datum accounts might make different claims about which relation it is – perhaps *direct awareness of*, perhaps *perception of*, perhaps *acquaintance with*. To solve the problem of illusion and hallucination, sense-datum accounts allow that John can stand in this relation to a sense-datum which is red and square, even if he is not related to any external object which is red and square. Different sense-datum accounts might say different things about the nature of sense-data and their connection (if any) with external objects (if any). They might claim (as is typically done) that sense-data are mind-dependent, or they might claim that they are mind-independent; they might claim that there are external objects, that we either experience by being related to sense data (a position sometimes called *indirect realism*), or that we do not experience at all; or they might claim that there are no external objects at all – what seem to be external objects are merely complexes of sense-data (a position sometimes called *phenomenalism*). None of these differences matters here.

According to adverbial accounts:

- (7) For John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be a certain kind of participant in a certain kind of event which is occurring in a ‘red square’ manner.<sup>7</sup>

The key idea is that in ‘John has an experience as of a red square’ we use ‘red square’ not to characterize some internal object to which John is related, as on sense-datum accounts, but to specify a manner in which a certain event involving John is occurring. Since we normally specify manners using adverbs such as ‘clumsily’ and ‘proudly’, we can think of this as the claim that we use ‘red square’ as an *adverb* (hence the name of this kind of account). Proponents sometimes draw an analogy with sentences like ‘Mary wore a seductive smile’: it is plausible that in this case we use ‘seductive’ not as an adjective to say of something that it is seductive, but as an adverb to say of something that it occurs in a ‘seductive’ manner. And just as we might make this more clear by paraphrasing ‘Mary wore a seductive smile’ as ‘Mary smiled seductively’, we might make it more clear that we use ‘red square’ as an adverb by paraphrasing ‘John has an experience as of a red square’ as ‘John experiences (red square)-ly’ (but they need not claim that it is an acceptable or even grammatical paraphrase, so it is no objection to adverbial theories that this is an unacceptable way of speaking.)<sup>8</sup> It remains for adverbial accounts to say what it is to occur in a ‘red square’ manner (more about this in Chapter 9). To solve the problem of illusion and hallucination, they must allow that events of the relevant kind can occur in this manner even if there is no external object which is red and square to which John is related. They typically also allow that they can occur in this manner even if there is no *internal* object which is red and square to which John is

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<sup>6</sup> See Moore (1903), Russell (1912), Broad (1923), Price (1932), Ayer (1956), Jackson (1977), O’Shaughnessy (1980), Casullo (1987), Robinson (1994), Foster (2000), and Garcia-Carpintero (2001).

<sup>7</sup> See Ducasse (1942), Chisholm (1957), Aune (1967), Cornman (1971), Sellars (1975) and Tye (1975, 1984a).

<sup>8</sup> Ducasse (1942, pp. 232-3) says: “To sense blue is to sense *bluely*, just as to dance the waltz is to dance ‘waltzily’, and to jump a leap is to jump ‘leapily’.”

related, thus hoping to avoid well-known metaphysical and epistemological objections to positing entities that are to play the role that sense-data are expected to play.<sup>9</sup>

According to representational accounts:

- (8) For John to have an experience as of a red square is for John to be in a certain kind of state that has a ‘red square’ representational content.<sup>10</sup>

On some accounts visual experiences have representational content, but two visual experiences can have the same representational content while differing in character – these are not representational accounts as I am characterizing them here.<sup>11</sup> Different representational accounts might disagree about the nature of the contents that visual experiences have – some might say that they are propositional, others that they are non-propositional; some might say that propositional contents are singular (object dependent), others that they are general (object-independent);<sup>12</sup> some might say the content of an experience is constrained by the concepts possessed by the subject of the experience, others that it is not. Representational accounts explain cases of illusion and hallucination as being cases of *mis*representation: if an experience has a certain propositional content, say, then the experience is non-veridical just in case the content of the experience is false. Interestingly, it is possible for adverbial accounts to also be representational accounts, as I have characterized them here. Suppose we have an adverbial account which says the following: for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be a participant of kind P in an event of kind E which occurs in a ‘red square’ manner, where events of kind E are mental events, to be a participant of kind P in a mental event is to be the subject of that event, and for a mental event to occur in a ‘red square’ manner is for it to represent the presence of a red square. Then according to this adverbial account, for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be the subject of a certain kind of mental event which has a certain ‘red square’ representational content. If we think of this as John being in a certain kind of state that has a ‘red square’ representational content, then this adverbial account is also a representational account. The relation between adverbial and representational accounts is an issue to which I will return in Chapter 9.

Finally, according to disjunctive accounts:

- (9) For John to have an experience as of a red square is for either of the conditions  $C_1$  or  $C_2$  to obtain, where  $C_1$  is the condition that John stands in a certain relation to an external object which is red and square.<sup>13</sup>

To clarify: for John to have an experience as of a red square is for a *single* condition to obtain, but that condition is a disjunctive one – it is the condition that either  $C_1$  obtains or  $C_2$  obtains. The fact that disjunctive accounts make reference to condition  $C_1$  might make it seem as if their proponents do not accept the problems of illusion and hallucination. But they do – they accept that for John to have an experience as of a red square cannot be for the condition  $C_1$  to obtain; they claim instead

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<sup>9</sup> Some problematic questions are: What are they made of? Do they have mass? Do they have surfaces which are not sensed? Are they located? Can they exist unsensed? Can two people experience numerically identical sense data? Might they be identical with parts of the external things that we perceive? For discussion see Chisholm (1966).

<sup>10</sup> For various kinds of representational account see Anscombe (1965), Armstrong (1968), Dretske (1969), Pitcher (1970), Harman (1990), Tye (1992, 1995), and Lycan (1996). For a recent discussion see Byrne (2001).

<sup>11</sup> See Shoemaker (1993).

<sup>12</sup> See Soteriou (2000).

<sup>13</sup> See Hinton (1973), Snowdon (1979), McDowell (1982, 1987), and Martin (2002, 2003).

that it is for a more complex disjunctive condition to obtain, one of whose disjuncts is the condition  $C_1$ . I have left unspecified the identity of condition  $C_2$ , to allow that different disjunctive accounts might give different accounts of  $C_2$ . To avoid the problem of illusion, each must take  $C_2$  to be a distinct condition from  $C_1$ . A disjunctivist could take  $C_2$  to be a condition given by any of the three kinds of account given above – a sense-datum account, an adverbial account, or a representational account. They could, for example, follow a sense-datum account and take  $C_2$  to be the condition that John stands in a certain relation to an internal object which is red and square. The point of disjunctive accounts is to allow that in veridical cases John has a visual experience as of a red square in virtue of standing in a certain relation to an external object which is red and square, even if in illusory cases it is in virtue of something else; it is thought to be epistemically better if at least sometimes having a visual experience is a matter of being related to external objects (more about this in Section 9.4.3).

#### *1.4 VA sentences and visual experience*

How can clarifying what we mean by VA sentences help us work out the nature of visual experience?

The idea is this. Consider the question of what it is for John to have a visual experience as of a red square. For John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square, and for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square is for whatever it is that we mean by ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ to be the case. So clarifying what we mean by ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ can help us work out what it is for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square, i.e. what it is for John to have a visual experience as of a red square. This, in turn, can help us work out the nature of visual experience.

Suppose that we have a semantic theory of VA sentences which says the following about ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’: by ‘look’ we mean a certain 2-place relation,  $L$ , by ‘John’ we mean a certain particular,  $a$ , by ‘as if he is seeing a red square’ we mean a certain particular,  $b$ , and by the sentence itself we mean that  $a$  stands in  $L$  to  $b$  (this is not the theory at which I will arrive, but it will do for illustration). Then according to this theory, for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square is for  $a$  to stand in  $L$  to  $b$ , because that is what we *mean* by ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square.’ Admittedly this is a limited result – it does not tell us about the natures of  $a$ ,  $L$ , and  $b$ . Perhaps any semantic theory of VA sentences is bound to be limited in this kind of way. But that does not mean it is bound to be uninteresting or unhelpful. On the contrary, the semantic theory of VA sentences that I will develop will tell us enough about visual experience to suggest that an adverbial account is the correct account.

Note that although the theory tells us that for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square is for  $a$  to stand in  $L$  to  $b$ , it does not tell us, of any particular situation, whether or not it is one in which  $a$  actually *does* stand in  $L$  to  $b$ . Even if it is a situation that we *describe* as being one in which it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square, the theory does not tell us that it is one in which  $a$  does stand in  $L$  to  $b$ . It just tells us that *if* our description is true – if it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square – *then*  $a$  stands in  $L$  to  $b$ , so that if  $a$  does not stand in  $L$  to  $b$  then the description is false. Perhaps it is impossible to develop a semantic theory of VA sentences unless our use of those sentences is mostly correct, but it is not part of the theory that they are mostly correct.

There is nothing particularly special about VA sentences. Instead of clarifying what we mean by ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’, and using that to work out what it is for John to have a visual experience as of a red square, we could clarify what we mean by ‘John has a visual experience as of a red square’, and use that instead. Or we could clarify what we mean by either of

the other two sentences in (4). There are, however, a few reasons for focusing on VA sentences. First, they are a part of natural, commonly-used, non-philosophical language, so it is likely that we have a reasonably good intuitive grasp of what we mean by them. Second, they are versatile enough to talk about a very broad class of visual experiences, so that clarifying what we mean by them ought to tell us about that broad class of experiences. Third, many of the constituents of VA sentences are ones that we use with the same meaning as constituents of other sentences to talk about other phenomena, so that clarifying what we mean by VA sentences will take us some of the way to clarifying what we mean by those other sentences, and thus to working out the nature of those other phenomena (more about this in the next section).

Nor is there anything particularly special about visual experience. Suppose that we are trying to work out what it is for it to be the case that blah blah blah. Suppose that 'blah blah blah' contains an expression, *e*. Suppose that we have a semantic theory of 'blah blah blah', T, according to which we use *e* in 'blah blah blah' to mean a certain particular, *a*. Then it is a consequence of T that what it is for it to be the case that blah blah blah has something to do with *a*. Suppose that 'blah blah blah' contains another expression, *e'*, and that according to T we use *e'* in 'blah blah blah' to mean a certain relation, R. Then it is a consequence of T that what it is for it to be the case that blah blah blah has something to do with the relation R. Finally, suppose that according to T we use *e* as a semantic argument of *e'* – that we use *e* to specify one of the relata in the relation that we mean by *e'*. Then it is a consequence of T that what it is for it to be the case that blah blah blah has something to do with *a* standing in the relation R. Here we have used our semantic theory T to work out three things about what it is to be the case that blah blah blah. Again, these results are limited – they tell us that what it is for it to be the case that blah blah blah has something to do with *a*, with R, and with *a*'s standing in R, but they tell us very little, if anything, about the natures of *a* and R themselves. Even so, they might be informative enough to tell us something important about the phenomenon in question.

One might be concerned that this semantic approach is useless in practice – in order to properly develop a semantic theory of VA sentences we *first* have to work out the nature of visual experience, and *then* use that to develop a semantic theory of VA sentences.

But trying to work out a metaphysical theory first and then a semantic theory second is not the best approach. Nor is trying to work out a semantic theory first and then a metaphysical theory second. Each theory has consequences for the other, and each should be used to constrain the development of the other. The best approach is to develop the theories together, checking each against the consequences it has for the other, making appropriate adjustments to one or the other (or both) when those consequences are problematic. I think that to date too little attention has been paid to the semantic constraints that are placed upon our metaphysical theorizing about the nature of visual experience. In this book I make a start towards rectifying that.

There is one fact about VA sentences that makes them a particularly important constraint on the development of metaphysical accounts of visual experience: the VA sentences that we use to talk about visual experience have constituents that we use with the very same meaning in sentences that we use to talk about *other* phenomena. There is evidence, for example, that what we mean by 'as if he is seeing a red square' in 'It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square' is the very same thing that we mean by 'as if he is seeing a red square' in the following sentences:

- (10) a. It {seems, appears, feels, smells, tastes, sounds} to John as if he is seeing a red square
- b. John is {talking, driving, dancing} as if he is seeing a red square

So any claim about what we mean by ‘as if he is seeing a red square’ in ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ is equally a claim about what we mean by ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ in each of the sentences in (10), and so has metaphysical consequences not just for the nature of visual experience, but for the nature of other kinds of experience, and for the nature of talking, driving, dancing, and so on. This places a very stringent and important constraint on what we say about the nature of visual experience – one that we should not ignore when developing our metaphysical accounts.

# 9 The Nature of Visual Experience

I have now developed a theory of what we mean by VA sentences. In Chapter 1, I argued that such a theory can help us work out the nature of visual experience. In this final chapter, I consider what the theory that I have developed has to say.

## 9.1 Some answers

As I discussed in Chapter 1, one of the central questions in the philosophy of perception is: what is the nature of visual experience? I suggested that we consider the following two questions instead:

- (1) a. What is it to have a visual experience?  
b. For any given character  $c$ , what is it to have a visual experience with character  $c$ ?

I suggested in turn that we consider the following question:

- (2) What is it for John to have a visual experience as of a red square?

I also argued in Chapter 1 that for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square, and for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square is for whatever it is that we mean by ‘it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ to be the case. We are now in a position to say what that is. According to the semantic theory of VA sentences developed in this book, what we mean by ‘it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ can be made more explicit by either of the following (the first less formal, the second more formal):

- (3) a. John is an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in the maximally specific way  $w$  such that it is generically true that looking events to John occur in way  $w$  when John is seeing a red square.  
b.  $\exists e(\text{Look}(e) \ \& \ \text{Experiencer}(e, \text{John}) \ \& \ \text{Way}(e, [\text{the maximally specific } w: [\text{Gen } e: e \text{ is a looking event to John in which John is seeing a red square}](e \text{ occurs in way } w)]))$

Since this is what we *mean* by ‘it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’, then this is what it *is* for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square, so this is what it *is* for John to have a visual experience as of a red square. This is the answer to (2) that is given by the semantic theory of VA sentences developed in this book.

It will help to recap some of the main points from previous chapters. I argued that in ‘It looks to John as if he is seeing a red square’ we use ‘as if he is seeing a red square’ to definitely describe a way of looking; in particular, by ‘as if he is seeing a red square’ we mean: the maximally specific way of looking  $w$  such that looking events to John occur in way  $w$  when John is seeing a red square. I am taking ways of looking to be ways in which looking events occur, just as ways of walking are ways in which walking events occur. In turn, I am taking ways of occurring to be properties of events. In particular, I am taking them to be determinates of a determinable. By ‘walk’ we mean a property of events – the property of being a walking event. This property is a determinable, and its determinates are ways of walking. Similarly, by ‘look’ we mean a property of events – the property of being a looking event. This property is a determinable, and its determinates are ways of looking.

It is crucial to the account that what we mean by ‘as if he is seeing a red square’ involves the *generic*: looking events to John occur in way  $w$  when John is seeing a red square. This is how the account allows that things need not look the way they are. Just as it can be generically true that cats are good pets even if some cats are not good pets, so too it can be generically true that looking events occur to John in way  $w$  when John is not seeing a red square, even if sometimes they do *not* occur in that way when John is not seeing a red square. So it allows there to be cases in which John is not seeing a red square and yet it does not *look* to John as if he is not seeing a red square. It does not follow from this, of course, that when John is not seeing a red square it can look to him as if he *is*, but there is nothing in the account that rules it out.

It is also important to the account that ways of occurring in general, and ways of looking in particular, vary in their degree of generality. At a very specific degree of generality, it is unlikely that there is a way  $w$  such that it is generically true that dogs swim in way  $w$ , but at a high enough degree of generality there might well be such a way (and plausibly there is – this is the way that we refer to using ‘the way dogs swim’). Similarly, at a very specific degree of generality, it is unlikely that there is a way  $w$  such that it is generically true that looking events in which John is seeing a red square occur in way  $w$ , but at a high enough degree of generality there might be such a way – I have proposed that there is. If  $w$  is a way such that it is generically true that looking events in which John is seeing a red square occur in way  $w$ , then there are also many more general ways of looking  $w'$  such that it is generically true that looking events in which John is seeing a red square occur in way  $w'$ . The proposal is that we use ‘as if he is seeing a red square’ to definitely describe the *maximally specific* one of these. This is important for explaining why there is no reading on which the following is a valid argument: it looks to John as if he is seeing a colored square, therefore it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square (see Section 5.7).

The account of VA sentences developed in this book also suggests how we should answer the questions in (1a) and (1b).

What is it to have a visual experience? I take it that for someone to have a visual experience is for things to look some way to him. By ‘things’ here I mean things in general, rather than things in particular. If a drink looks cold to John, then there is something in particular that looks cold to John, but if it looks cold outside to John then there may not be anything in particular that looks cold to John. Either way, things (in general) look some way to John, and he is having a visual experience.<sup>1</sup> According to the account of visual experience yielded in this book, for things to look some way to someone is for him to be an experiencer of a looking event which occurs in some way. Thus, for someone to have a visual experience is for him to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in some way. If looking events necessarily occur in some way (as I suggested in Chapter 3) then we can simplify this: for someone to have a visual experience is for him to be the experiencer of a looking event. This is the answer to (1a) that is yielded by the semantic theory of VA sentences developed in this book.

What is it to have a visual experience with a certain character,  $c$ ? Suppose that John is having a visual experience with character  $c$ . Suppose that there is some proposition  $p$  such that for John to have a visual experience with character  $c$  is for it to look to John as if  $p$  is true (this is not obviously so, but grant it for now). According to the account developed in this book, for it to look to John as if  $p$  is true is for John to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in the maximally specific

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<sup>1</sup> Some will be concerned that we need to be careful here, because there is a sense of ‘look’ in which things can look some way to John even though he is not having a visual experience (or no relevant one): it might look to John as if the democrats are going to win, on the basis of what he hears on the radio. This is an idea that I argued against in Chapter 2, but if there is such a sense of ‘look’ then let me just say: I am not using ‘look’ in that sense.

way in which looking events occur when  $p$  is true. Thus, according to the account developed in this book, for John to have a visual experience with character  $c$  is for John to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in the maximally specific way in which looking events occur when  $p$  is true. This is the answer to (1b) that is yielded by the semantic theory of VA sentences developed in this book.

## 9.2 *An adverbial account*

In Chapter 1, I characterised four kinds of account of the nature of visual experience – sense datum accounts, adverbial accounts, representational accounts, and disjunctive accounts – according to how accounts of that kind would answer the question in (2). Here are the answers that they would give:

- (4)
- a. It is for John to stand in a certain relation to an internal object which is red and square. (Sense-datum accounts)
  - b. It is for John to be a certain kind of participant in a certain kind of event which is occurring in a ‘red square’ manner. (Adverbial accounts)
  - c. It is for John to be in a certain kind of state that has a ‘red square’ representational content. (Representational accounts)
  - d. It is for either of the conditions  $C_1$  or  $C_2$  to obtain, where  $C_1$  is the condition that John stands in a certain relation to an external object which is red and square. (Disjunctive accounts)

According to these characterizations, the present account of what it is for John to have an experience as of a red square is an *adverbial* account. For according to the present account, for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square is for John to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in the maximally specific way looking events occur to John when John is seeing a red square. That is, it is for John to be a certain kind of participant (an experiencer) in a certain kind of event (a looking event) which is occurring in a certain way (the maximally specific way that looking events occur to John when John is seeing a red square). The present account fills in the details of the general adverbial account in three ways: it specifies the kind of event in which John is involved (it is a looking event), it specifies the kind of participant in that event that he is (he is an experiencer of the event), and it specifies which way it is in which the event is occurring (the maximally specific way that looking events occur to John when John is seeing a red square).

In Section 1.3, I pointed out that adverbial accounts, as I have characterized them, might also be representational accounts. Is the present adverbial account a representational account? According to the present account, for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in a certain way (i.e. has a certain way of looking property). If we take it that looking events are mental events of their experiencers, that being the subject of a looking event amounts to being in a certain kind of state, and that for a looking event to have a certain property is for this state to have that property, then the present account says that for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be in a certain kind of state that has a certain way of looking property. Whether or not the account is a representational account thus amounts to whether or not this way of looking property is a representational property: the property of having a certain representational content. This is a question to which I will return in Section 9.4 (where I will argue that it is *not* a representational account).

## 9.4 *Replies to standard objections*

In this section I consider three objections that are standardly raised against adverbial accounts, and consider what the adverbial account developed here might say in reply to them.

#### 9.4.1 Jackson's many-property problem

Frank Jackson has argued that adverbial accounts cannot (correctly) validate the inference from (19a) below to (19b), without also (incorrectly) validating the inference from (19c) to (19d):

- (19) a. John has an experience as of a red square
- b. John has an experience as of a red thing
- c. John has an experience as of a red square and a green circle
- d. John has an experience as of a red circle and a green square

He calls this the *many property problem* (his original example involved a many-propertied after-image).<sup>2</sup> It is thought by some that adverbial theories are unable to meet this challenge, and that this is a decisive strike against them. Robinson (1994, p. 180) says: "The programme of construing experience adverbially is ... demonstrably impossible. Frank Jackson seems to me to have proved this."

Sense-datum accounts can straightforwardly do what Jackson challenges adverbial accounts to do. If John has an experience as of a red square, then, according to sense-datum accounts, John stands in a certain relation, call it R, to a sense-datum that is red and square, from which it follows that John stands in R to a sense-datum that is red, which is what, according to sense-datum accounts, it is for John to have a visual experience as of a red thing. So sense-datum accounts validate the inference from (19a) to (19b). If John has a visual experience as of a red square and a green circle, then, according to sense-datum accounts, John stands in R to two distinct sense-data, one of which is red and square, the other of which is green and circular, from which it does *not* follow that John stands in R to two distinct sense-data, one of which is red and circular, the other of which is green and square, which is what, according to sense-datum accounts, it is for John to have a visual experience as of a red circle and a green square. So sense-datum accounts do not validate the inference from (19c) to (19d).

Unlike sense-datum accounts, adverbial accounts cannot appeal to sense-data and their properties, and must make do instead with experiences and manners in which those experiences occur (this is what Jackson thinks they cannot do). Here is one approach that an adverbial account might try (which turns out to be inadequate). First, say that for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be a participant of a certain kind, P, in an event of a certain kind, E, which occurs in two manners: redly and squarely (set aside the question of which manners they are). Then if John has a visual experience as of a red square, John is a participant of kind P in an event of kind E that occurs both redly and roundly, from which it follows that John is a participant of kind P in an event of kind E that occurs redly, which is what it is, on this approach, for John to have a visual experience as of a red thing. So this approach validates the inference from (19a) to (19b). Now extend the approach to more complex experiences: say that for John to have a visual experience as of a red square and a green circle is for John to be a participant of kind P in an event of kind E that is occurring redly and squarely and greenly and roundly. But this approach validates the inference from (19c) to (19d): if John has a visual experience as of a red square and a green circle, then, on this approach, John is a participant of kind P in an event of kind E which is occurring redly and squarely and greenly and circularly, from which it follows (rearranging the conjuncts) that John is a participant of kind P in an event of kind E which is occurring redly and circularly and greenly and

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson develops the problem progressively in (1975), (1976), and (1977, pp. 63-72).

squarely, which is what, on this approach, it is for John to have a visual experience as of a red circle and a green square. So this approach will not do.

In the previous section I described the two existing adverbial accounts that have been developed in most detail – those of Wilfred Sellars and Michael Tye. Each hopes to have the resources to meet Jackson’s challenge. Sellars’ response to the challenge is to allow that a subject’s (overall) visual experience is sometimes a complex entity that has other visual experiences as constituents, and that the manners in which experiences occur can be complex entities that have other manners of occurring as constituents (see Section 9.3.1 above). When John has a visual experience as of a red square and a green circle, for example, John’s overall experience has (at least) two constituent experiences, each of which occurs in a manner which has (at least) two constituent manners. Here is how we might formalize the sentences in (19) on Sellars’ approach:

- (20) a.  $\exists x(\text{Experience}(x) \ \& \ \text{Subject}(x, \text{John}) \ \& \ (\text{A red and square object})^*(x))$   
 b.  $\exists x(\text{Experience}(x) \ \& \ \text{Subject}(x, \text{John}) \ \& \ \text{Red}^*(x))$   
 c.  $\exists x(\text{Experience}(x) \ \& \ \text{Subject}(x, \text{John}) \ \& \ (\text{A red and square object and a green and circular object})^*(x))$   
 d.  $\exists x(\text{Experience}(x) \ \& \ \text{Subject}(x, \text{John}) \ \& \ (\text{A red and circular object and a green and square object})^*(x))$

The inference from (20a) to (20b) (and thus from (19a) to (19b)) is validated by standard inference rules of first order logic together with special inference rules to move from (a red and square object)\* to red\*. The inference from (20c) to (20d) (and thus from (19a) to (19b)) is not validated, because there is no way to derive the latter from the former within this system.

Tye’s response to Jackson’s challenge is to allow that the (overall) manner in which a subject’s visual experience occurs is sometimes a complex entity that has other manners as constituents (see Section 9.3.2 above). When John has a visual experience as of a red square and a green circle, for example, the overall manner in which John’s experience is occurring has (at least) two constituent manners. Here is how we might formalize the sentences in (19) on Tye’s approach:

- (21) a.  $((\text{Redly Coin Squarely})(\text{Experiences}))(\text{John})$   
 b.  $(\text{Redly})(\text{Experiences})(\text{John})$   
 c.  $((\text{Redly Coin Squarely}) \ \& \ (\text{Greenly Coin Circularly}))(\text{Experiences})(\text{John})$   
 d.  $((\text{Redly Coin Circularly}) \ \& \ (\text{Greenly Coin Squarely}))(\text{Experiences})(\text{John})$

The inference from (21a) to (21b) (and thus from (19a) to (19b)) is validated by the inference rules of first order logic (with predicate operators), and an additional predicate operator simplification rule: from ‘ $((\Omega \text{ Coin } \Omega')(\Pi))(\alpha)$ ’ deduce ‘ $(\Omega(\Pi))(\alpha)$ ’ and ‘ $(\Omega'(\Pi))(\alpha)$ ’. The inference from (21c) to (21d) (and thus from (19c) to (19d)) is not validated, because there is no way to derive the latter from the former within this system.

Here is how I would formalize the sentences in (19):

- (22) a.  $\exists e(\text{Look}(e) \ \& \ \text{Experiencer}(e, \text{John}) \ \& \ \text{Way}(e, [\text{the ms } w: [\text{gen } e: e \text{ is a looking event to John in which John is seeing a red square}](e \text{ occurs in way } w)]))$   
 b.  $\exists e(\text{Look}(e) \ \& \ \text{Experiencer}(e, \text{John}) \ \& \ \text{Way}(e, [\text{the ms } w: [\text{gen } e: e \text{ is a looking event to John in which John is seeing a red thing}](e \text{ occurs in way } w)]))$   
 c.  $\exists e(\text{Look}(e) \ \& \ \text{Experiencer}(e, \text{John}) \ \& \ \text{Way}(e, [\text{the ms } w: [\text{gen } e: e \text{ is a looking event to John in which John is seeing a red square and a green circle}](e \text{ occurs in way } w)]))$

- d.  $\exists e(\text{Look}(e) \ \& \ \text{Experiencer}(e, \text{John}) \ \& \ \text{Way}(e, [\text{gen } e: e \text{ is a looking event to John in which John is seeing a red circle and a green square}](e \text{ occurs in way } w)))$

How do I validate the inference from (19a) to (19b)? One way would be to add extra rules of inference. We would probably need to add elimination and introduction rules for ‘Way’, ‘the’, and ‘gen’, and possibly other rules as well, and no doubt the details would be tricky.

I propose, however, that any adequate account of visual experience should *not* validate the inference from (19a) to (19b). I agree that (19a) entails (19b) – that there is no possible situation in which John is having an experience as of a red square but not having an experience as of a red thing. But I deny that this should be guaranteed by our account of visual experience. Let  $w$  be the way that red square things look, and let  $w'$  be the way that red things look. These two ways are such that necessarily, any looking event that occurs in way  $w$  also occurs in way  $w'$  – this is why an experience as of a red square is necessarily an experience as of a red thing, so that if John is having an experience as of a red square then it follows that John is having an experience as of a red thing. But it is a contingent fact that red square things look  $w$  and that red things look  $w'$ . It could have turned out that red square things look some way,  $W$ , and that red things look some way,  $W'$ , where it is possible for a looking event to occur in way  $W$  without occurring in way  $W'$ . Then it would not have been the case that having an experience as of a red square entailed having an experience as of a red thing. Moreover, it might have turned out that way even without any change in the nature of visual experience. So it should be no part of any account of visual experience that (19a) entails (19b) – no account of visual experience should validate the inference from (19a) to (19b). To make this possibility more plausible, note that there are actually pairs of properties  $p$  and  $q$  such that a visual experience as of a  $p$  and  $q$  thing need not be a visual experience as of a  $p$  thing. The Ainu people of Japan, for example, do not look Japanese. That is, visual experiences as of an Ainu Japanese person need not be (and typically are not) visual experiences as of a Japanese person. So let  $p$  be the property of being a Japanese person, and  $q$  be the property of being Ainu, and we have a pair of properties  $p$  and  $q$  such that visual experiences as of a  $p$  and  $q$  thing need not be visual experiences as of a  $p$  thing. What I am claiming is that the same might have been true of the properties of being red and being square, consistent with the nature of visual experience.

Here is another way to make the point. If our account of visual experience were to validate the inference from ‘John has a visual experience as of a red square’ to ‘John has a visual experience as of a red thing’, then it ought to also validate the inference from ‘John has a visual experience as of a Ainu Japanese person’ to ‘John has a visual experience as of a Japanese person’. Since it should not do the latter, it should not do the former.

So I think we should reject Jackson’s challenge to validate the inference from (19a) to (19b) without also licensing the inference from (19c) to (19d), because we should reject his challenge to validate the inference from (19a) to (19b). That means that we should also reject any account which *does* validate the inference of (19a) to (19b); if Sellars’s and Tye’s accounts do, then we should reject them, or at whichever feature of them validates the inference (whether or not this can be done successfully is not an issue that I will consider here).

The adverbial account developed here needs to allow that a visual experience as of a red square and a green circle has a different character from a visual experience as of a red circle and a green square – that is, that the maximally specific way that things look to John when he is seeing a red square and a green circle is distinct from the maximally specific way things look to John when he is seeing a red circle and a green square. But it can allow that, without having to take some visual experiences to be complex entities that have other experiences as constituents, and without having to take some manners of occurring to complex entities that have other manners of occurring as

constituents, and even if the descriptive materials that I just used to refer to these two ways have many common constituents. To draw an analogy, it might be that the ‘the electron closest to the left front door of my car’ and ‘the electron closest to the right back door of my car’ refer to distinct simples; so too, it might be that ‘the maximally specific way that things look to John when he is seeing a red square and a green circle’ and ‘the maximally specific way that things look to John when he is seeing a red circle and a green square’ refer to distinct simples. I am not denying that looking events are complex events, nor that ways of looking are complex manners. I am just pointing out that we can respond to Jackson’s challenge without being committed to their being so.

#### 9.4.2 Accounting for how things seem

The adverbial account developed here allows that it can look to John as if he is seeing a red square even when he is not seeing a red square. Nevertheless, in such cases it still *seems* to John as if he is seeing a red square. How can the account explain this?

Moreover, according to the account, what is going on in these cases is that John is the experiencer of a looking event that is occurring in a certain way (the maximally specific way  $w$  such that looking events occur to John in way  $w$  when he is seeing a red square). But it does not *seem* to John as if this is what is going on – it seems to him as if he is seeing a red square. Indeed, were he to try to attend to the character of his experience he would end up attending to the world. Changing the example should help to make the point. My cup looks a certain way to me now – my experience of the cup has a certain character; when I try to attend more closely to that character, I do so by attending more closely to features of the cup. According to the adverbial account developed here, the character of my visual experience is a manner in which my experience of the cup is occurring. Why then, when I try to attend more closely to the character, do I attend more closely to features of the cup, rather than attend more closely to my experience and the manner in which it is occurring?<sup>3</sup>

There are two challenges here, and I will respond to each in turn. The first challenge is to explain why it seems to John as if he is seeing a red square even though he is not. I respond as follows. The semantic theory of VA sentences developed in this book can be extended to a semantic theory of ‘seem’ sentences, such as:

(23) It seems to John as if he is seeing a red square

(I will not try to show that here). According to the corresponding account of ‘seem’ sentences, what we mean by (23) is that John is an experiencer of a seeming event that occurs in the maximally specific way  $w$  such that it is generically true that seeming events occur to John in way  $w$  when he is seeing a red square. This account allows that if John is not seeing a red square then it need not seem to John as if he is not seeing a red square, and in fact it can seem to him as if he *is* seeing a red square. So this is why, in cases in which John is not seeing a red square but it still looks to John as if he is, it seems to John as if he is seeing a red square – it seems to him that way because he is an experiencer of a seeming event that is occurring in the maximally specific way seeming events occur to him when he is seeing a red square. This is the response that I offer to the first challenge.

There are two parts to the second challenge. The first part is to explain why, if John is the experiencer of a looking event that is occurring in the maximally specific way that looking events occur to him when he is seeing a red square, it does not *seem* to him as if that is what is going on. My response is to say that it typically *does*. Situations in which it looks to John as if he is seeing a

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<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon being described here is sometimes called the *transparency* of experience. See Harman (1990), Tye (1992, 1995, 2000), Thau (2002). For critical discussion see Martin (2002) and Stoljar (forthcoming).

red square are situations in which things seem a certain way to John. Plausibly, there is such a thing as the maximally specific way that things seem to John when it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square. If so, it is generically true that when it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square things seem that way to John. That is, it is generically true that when it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square, it seems to John the maximally specific way it seems to John when it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square. That is, it is generically true that when it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square, it seems to John as if it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square. That is, it is generically true that when it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square, it seems to John as if he is the experiencer of a looking event that is occurring in the maximally specific way that looking events occur to him when he is seeing a red square. This is my response to the first part of the challenge. Note that it can seem to John as if he is the experiencer of a looking event that is occurring in a certain way even if John does not believe that he is. In Chapter 7, I argued that there is a structural ambiguity in ‘It looks to John as if  $p$ ’, according to whether ‘to John’ is used to specify that John is the experiencer of a certain *looking as if  $p$*  event, or to specify that John believes that it looks as if  $p$ . So too I would argue that there is a structural ambiguity in ‘It seems to John as if  $p$ ’. Perhaps on the second reading it might *not* seem to John as if he is the experiencer of a looking event that is occurring in the maximally specific way that looking events occur to him when he is seeing a red square. But I take it that the relevant reading here is the first one.

The second part of the second challenge to explain why, when we try to attend to the character of our experiences, we end up attending to the world – why, for example, when I try attend to the character of my experience of my cup do I end up attending to the cup itself and its various parts? I propose the following explanation. For my cup to look any way to me, I need to be looking at the cup (even if only indirectly), for otherwise there would be no looking event which has the cup as a stimulus and me as an experiencer. So, in order to attend to the character of my visual experience of the cup, I must look at the cup. To attend to any detail of the character of my overall experience – say, to how its handle looks – I need to look at the handle, for otherwise there would be no looking event which has the handle as a stimulus and me as an experiencer. The more closely I want to attend to features of my experience, the more closely I have to attend to the features of the cup that they are experiences of. This is my response to the second part of the challenge.

I posed these two challenges in terms of how things *seem* to someone in having a visual experience, but I could just as well have posed them in terms of how things *appear*. My responses would be much the same, appealing to the semantics of ‘appear’ instead of the semantics of ‘seem’.

#### 9.4.3 *A veil of perception*

One concern about sense-datum accounts of visual experience is that they place a ‘veil of perception’ over the world (at least those accounts which allow that there is a world beyond our sense data). The concern is that, according to such accounts, when we have visual experiences we are not in direct contact with external objects and the properties and relations that they instantiate, but rather we are in direct contact with sense data and the properties and relations that they instantiate. The concern is that without such direct contact with the external world we may not be able to get the knowledge of the external world that we would like to have.

It might be thought that there is a similar concern about the adverbial account yielded here: according to the present account, when we have visual experiences we are not in direct contact with external objects and the properties and relations that they instantiate, but rather we are in direct contact with certain mental events and the manners in which they are occurring. Without such direct contact with the external world we may not be able to get the knowledge of the external world that we would like to have – the account places a *veil of manners* over the world.

But I think there need be no such a concern. The present account says that for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in a certain way. It is compatible with the account that when John has such an experience he is *also* in direct contact with objects in the external world and the properties and relations that they instantiate. Suppose that not only does it look to John as if he is seeing a red square, but it does so because a certain object looks red and square to him. According to the semantic theory of VA sentences developed in this book, by ‘the object looks red and square to John’ we mean that John is an experiencer of a looking event which is occurring in a certain way *and whose stimulus is the object* (this last part is important). Since this is what we mean by ‘the object looks red and square to John’, this is what it is for the object to look red and square to John. So if an object looks red and square to John, the object is a stimulus of the looking event of which John is an experiencer – it is a stimulus of his experience. It remains for further investigation to say what it is for something to be a stimulus of a looking event, but it might turn out that the experiencer of a looking event can be in direct contact with the stimulus of the event. It is not implausible that being a stimulus of a looking event requires standing in some kind of causal relation to the event, and thereby in some kind of causal relation to the experiencer of the event – perhaps this counts as direct contact between John and the object. If that is right, then John can have a visual experience as of a red square while being in direct contact with an external object. That might be enough to alleviate concerns about the account placing a veil of manners over the world.

I am not suggesting that being in direct contact with objects in the world and the properties and relations that they instantiate is enough to give us the knowledge of the world that we would like to have. I am just pointing out that the present account of visual experience might not rule out that we have such direct contact.

### 9.5 *A representational account?*

In this last section I return to the question of whether or not the adverbial account developed here is a representational account. According to the account developed here, for John to have a visual experience as of a red square is for John to be an experiencer of a looking event that occurs in a certain way (i.e. has a certain way of looking property). In Section 9.2, I argued that we can think of this as saying: it is for John to be in a certain kind of state that has a certain way of looking property. Whether or not the account is a representational account thus amounts to whether or not this way of looking property is a representational property. I will argue that it is not.

Way properties are not in general representational properties. For John to walk clumsily is for John to walk in a certain way – for his walking event to have a certain way of walking property, call it *w*. Is *w* a representational property? It might be that John walks in way *w* in order to represent himself as being clumsy (perhaps to pretend that he is clumsy). But in such cases it would be John and not his walking event that represents that he is clumsy. Moreover, it might be that John walks in way *w* without representing himself as being clumsy – in fact, he might be doing his best to *not* walk clumsily. In these cases it seems implausible to claim that his walking event represents that he is clumsy, or that it represents anything at all. If so, then *w* is not a representational property, for if it were then his walking event would have representational content in virtue of instantiating a representational property. So at least some way properties are not representational properties.

Nevertheless, perhaps way of looking properties (i.e. ways of looking) are a special case, so that even if way properties are not in general representational properties, way of looking properties are.

I am going to argue against this idea. I shall do so by arguing against the more general idea that visual experiences have representational content. If visual experiences do not have representational content then ways of looking are not representational properties. For if ways of looking were representational properties; then visual experiences (i.e. looking events that occur in some way) would be events that instantiate representational properties, and thus would have representational content. Arguing against the idea that visual experiences have representational content is much too big a task to do thoroughly here. Instead, I will just try to undermine one motivation for thinking that they do.

The motivation that I have in mind is this: taking visual experiences to have representational content (in particular, propositional content) allows for the best explanation of the following facts:

- (24) a. Visual experiences are assessable for accuracy  
b. Visual experiences can be inaccurate  
c. Visual experiences can justify beliefs<sup>4</sup>

Suppose that it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square. If he *is* seeing a red square then his experience is accurate; if he is *not* seeing a red square, then his experience is inaccurate. So his experience can be assessed for accuracy – it has accuracy conditions. Moreover, his experience can be *inaccurate* – it is possible for it to look to John as if he is seeing a red square when he is not seeing a red square. And the fact that it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square can justify the belief that he is seeing a red square: Why think that John is seeing a red square? Because it looks to him as if he is seeing a red square. Of course, this is not conclusive justification: it might be that it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square even though he is not seeing a red square. But the fact that it looks to John as if he is seeing a red square provides at least *some* justification for thinking that he is seeing a red square.

Let us grant that there are indeed these three facts about visual experiences. On the assumption that visual experiences have propositional representational content we can explain them as follows. Visual experiences are assessable for accuracy, because for any visual experience there is some proposition *p* such the experience represents *p*, so the experience can be assessed for accuracy according to whether or not *p* is true.<sup>5</sup> Visual experiences can be *inaccurate*, because it is possible for a visual experience to represent *p* even when *p* is not true – this would be an instance of the more general phenomenon of *misrepresentation*. Finally, visual experiences can justify beliefs, because visual experiences are mostly accurate.

If this is the best explanation of these facts, then that is at least some reason to think that visual experiences have representational content. I do not think, however, that this is the best explanation.

First, the adverbial account developed here also offers an explanation. Visual experiences are assessable for accuracy, because for any visual experience there is some proposition *p* such that the experience occurs in the maximally specific way that visual experiences occur when *p* is true; so the experience can be assessed for accuracy according to whether or not *p* is true.<sup>6</sup> Visual experiences can be *inaccurate*, because it possible for a visual experience to occur in the maximally specific way

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<sup>4</sup> See Siegel (ms).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there are some visual experiences for which there is no such *p* – if Molly looks to John the same as Mary feels, then the most plausible candidate for the content of this experience is the proposition that Molly is the same as Mary feels, but it is not clear that this is indeed the content. More about this below. Also see Travis (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Again, perhaps there are some visual experiences for which there is no such *p*, but this is an issue that the representational explanation must deal with as well.

that visual experiences occur when  $p$  is true, even when  $p$  is not true. Finally, visual experiences can justify beliefs, because visual experiences are mostly accurate.

Second, if we accept the facts about visual experiences in (24), then it seems to me that we ought to accept corresponding facts about many other phenomena. We ought to accept, for example, corresponding facts about walkings (i.e. walking events):

- (25) a. Walkings are assessable for accuracy  
b. Walkings can be inaccurate  
c. Walkings can justify beliefs

Suppose that John is walking as if he has a sore foot. If he *does* have a sore foot, then his walking is accurate; if he does *not* have a sore foot, then his walking is inaccurate. So his walking can be assessed for accuracy – it has accuracy conditions. Moreover, his walking can be *inaccurate* – it is possible for John to walk as if he has a sore foot, even when he does not have a sore foot. And the fact that John is walking as if he has a sore foot can justify the belief that John has a sore foot: Why think that John has a sore foot? Because he is walking as if he has a sore foot. Of course, this is not conclusive justification: it might be that John is walking as if he has a sore foot even though he does not have a sore foot. But the fact that John is walking as if he has a sore foot provides at least *some* justification for thinking that he has a sore foot. There are corresponding facts about all kinds of events: dancings, floatings, meltings, burnings, and so on. So there seems to be a general phenomenon here. If so, it would be nice to have a uniform explanation.

Third, it is implausible that the representational explanation can provide a uniform explanation. For it to provide a uniform explanation we would need to assume that walkings, dancings, floatings, meltings, and burnings, all have representational content, which seems implausible (I argued above against the idea that walkings have representational content – the argument generalizes).

Fourth, the adverbial explanation *can* provide a uniform explanation. The account of VA sentences developed in this book can be modified without much trouble into an account of ‘walk’ sentences. According to this account, by ‘John walks as if he has a sore foot’ we mean that John is the agent of a walking that occurs in the maximally specific way that walkings occur when their agent has a sore foot. Since this is what we mean by ‘John walks as if he has a sore foot’, this is what it is for John to walk as if he has a sore foot. This suggests the following explanation of the facts about walkings in (25). Walkings are assessable for accuracy, because for any walking there is some proposition  $p$  such that the walking occurs in the maximally specific way that walkings occur when  $p$  is true, so the walking can be assessed for accuracy according to whether or not  $p$  is true.<sup>7</sup> Walkings can be *inaccurate*, because it possible for a walking to occur in the maximally specific way that walkings occur when  $p$  is true, even when  $p$  is not true. Finally, walkings can justify beliefs, because walkings are mostly accurate. Similar explanations can be provided for the corresponding facts about dancings, floatings, meltings, and burnings.

Given that there is an equally good adverbial explanation of the facts about visual experience in (24), and given that it generalizes in a way that the representational explanation does not, I suggest that the representational explanation is *not* the best explanation of the facts in (24), and that we are yet to be given good reason to think that visual experiences have representational content. If visual experiences do not have representational content, then ways of looking are not representational properties, and the adverbial account of visual experience developed in this book is *not* a representational account.

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<sup>7</sup> Again, perhaps there are some walkings for which there is no such  $p$ , but this is equally an issue for the representational explanation of the facts about visual experiences.

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