

Perception: A Blind Spot in Brandom's Normative Pragmatics

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ABSTRACT

Brandom explains perceptual knowledge as the product of two distinguishable sorts of capacities: (i) the capacity to reliably discriminate behaviorally between different sorts of stimuli; and (ii) the capacity to take up a position in the game of giving and asking for reasons. However, in focusing exclusively on the entitlement of observation reports, rather than on perception itself, Brandom passes over a conception of perceptual experience as a sort of contentful mental state. In this article, I argue that this is a blind spot, which makes Brandom's account of perceptual knowledge unable to properly accommodate the phenomenon of seeing aspects and to explain how we can justify the attributions of reliability to observers that make observation reports.

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Perception: A Blind Spot in Brandom's Normative Pragmatics

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§1. **I**N *MAKING IT EXPLICIT* (hereafter *MIE*) and subsequent works (1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2010), Brandom elaborates his particular conception of perceptual knowledge. Perceptual knowledge is often characterized as a distinctive kind of knowledge, which has its causal source and ultimate epistemological ground in perceptual experience. However, Brandom's account differs from this general and intuitive characterization in that, even though it acknowledges the causal relevance of perceptual experience, it tries to explain perceptual knowledge without attributing an epistemological role to perceptual experience itself. In doing this, Brandom explicitly follows the path of Davidson, Rorty, and, in his view, Sellars.¹ His proposal is, such as he describes it, an inferentialist middle way between Sellars's epistemological internalism and reliabilist externalism. This middle way consists in holding (i) that what makes a subject's observation reports cases of non-inferential knowledge (according to the attributor) is the fact of her reliability (according to the attributor), regardless of the subject's attitudes toward her own reliability; and (ii) that attributions of perceptual knowledge require not just reliability but also, at least, implicit endorsement, on the part of the attributor, of the inference that is the practical acknowledgement of the reporter's reliability (i.e. the inference from the occurrence of a report to the endorsement of it).

However, in focusing exclusively on the entitlement of observation reports, rather than on perception itself, Brandom completely passes over a conception of perceptual experience that, in a suitable reading, can be attributed to two of his heroes: Kant and Wittgenstein. This conception can be found in Kant's first *Critique* and in Wittgenstein's considerations about seeing aspects. Arguably, for these authors, perception is not merely a capacity that elicits observation reports

¹ See, for example, Davidson (2001); Rorty (1998); Brandom (2002b). For Brandom's expressions of explicit endorsement of Davidson's approach, see Brandom (1998, pp. 371–2) and Brandom (2002a, pp. 93–4). For a detailed criticism of Davidson's approach to perceptual experience, see Kalpokas (2012, 2015). For a parallel criticism to Rorty's position about experience, see Kalpokas (2014).

(as Brandom seems to believe), but also, crucially, a certain kind of mental state with intentional content. Thus, the purpose of the present article is to show that Brandom's theory of perceptual knowledge has an important blind spot: although he incorporates many insights from Kant's and Wittgenstein's works, he unfortunately does not take into account the conception of perceptual experience that is present in them. This blind spot prevents Brandom from extending the normative character of intentional and contentful mental states to perceptual experiences themselves. This is not an innocuous consequence. As I will argue, due to this blind spot, Brandom's account of perceptual knowledge is unable to properly accommodate the phenomenon of seeing aspects and to explain how we can justify the attributions of reliability to observers that make observation reports.

The article is structured as follows: first, I will briefly present Brandom's theory of perceptual knowledge [§ 2]. Second, I will argue that this theory cannot properly explain how our attributions of reliability to others, who make observation reports, could be justified [§ 3]. Then, I will argue that Brandom's conception of perceptual knowledge cannot successfully accommodate the phenomenon of seeing aspect famously studied by Wittgenstein [§ 4]. The concluding section only summarizes the main critical results of the previous discussion [§ 5].

§ 2. In his impressive book, *MIE*, Robert Brandom elaborates in detail his normative pragmatics about human language. According to this theoretical approach, the linguistic practices that confer (mainly) propositional content to utterances implicitly contain norms concerning how it is correct to use linguistic expressions, under what circumstances it is appropriate to perform different speech acts, and what the appropriate consequences of such performances are. Thus, from this point of view, interpreting mental states, performances, and expressions as intentionally contentful is attributing to their occurrences an ineliminably normative pragmatic significance.

According to this theoretical framework, Brandom explains observation reports and, in general, perceptual judgments as the product of two distinguishable sorts of capacities: (i) the capacity to reliably discriminate behaviourally between different sorts of stimuli; and (ii) the capacity to take up a position in the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is the account that Brandom calls "the two-ply account of observation", which can originally be found, Brandom believes, in Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*

(hereafter *EPM*).²

The first capacity is a disposition to reliably respond differentially to distinct environing stimuli, that is, to take or treat them as being of one or another kind. This is a capacity that we, human beings, share with artefacts of some kinds (e.g. thermostats and land mines) and mere sentient creatures (e.g. parrots).³ While differential responsiveness is a necessary condition for empirical knowledge, it is not, however, a sufficient one. As Brandom points out, this discriminatory capacity should not yet be understood as a cognitive matter, on pain of losing sight of the fundamental ways in which genuine perceptual knowledge differs from what is exhibited by irritable devices such as the already mentioned above.

The second element of Sellars's two-ply account of observational knowledge is introduced in order to distinguish possessors of genuine observational knowledge from merely reliable differential responders. This is the element that, according to Brandom, allows us to crucially distinguish between sentient and sapient creatures. The subjects that possess observational knowledge have reliable dispositions to respond differentially to environmental stimuli by applying concepts, that is, they have dispositions to respond with observation reports, perceptual beliefs or judgments. The genuine observer is able to respond to, say, visible red things by coming to believe, claiming, or reporting that there is something red in the immediate environment. So, sapient awareness differs from awareness in the sense of mere differential responsiveness in that the sapient being is able to responsively classify the stimuli as falling under concepts. In turn, the reliable differential response to the visible presence of a state of affairs counts as the application of a concept when it can be considered as a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons. More specifically, in order to count as the application of a concept, the response "must be committing oneself to a content that can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*, that is, that can play the role both of premise and of conclusion in *inferences*" (Brandom 2002b, p. 351). In this sense, the reporter's response (such as saying "That's red" when she is in the presence of something red in her immediate environment) is conceptually contentful, Brandom holds, to the extent that it can occupy a node

² See Brandom (2002b). For an alternative reading of *EPM*, see McDowell (2009, 2010).

³ I believe that Brandom's distinction between sentient and cognitive creatures does not clearly coincide with the distinction between human and non-human animals, as he seems to assume. There is an important amount of empirical evidence that suggests that some non-human species have, in a certain sense, cognitive capacities. For philosophical approaches about animal minds that take into account such evidence, see, for example, Danón (2013), Aguilera (2013), Morales (2009), Glock (2010), Camp (2009), Carruthers (2009) and Kalpokas (2018). However, since this topic is irrelevant for the purposes of this article, I will not discuss it here.

in a web of inferential relations. Likewise, the reporter's grasp of the conceptual content expressed by her utterance "That's red" consists in her knowing what follows from her claim and what it follows from, what would count as evidence for it and what would be incompatible with it. Thus, an observation report can be interpreted as the adoption of a certain kind of stance that can serve as a reason for committing to or entitling to adopt other stances, and it is potentially in need for reasons that might be supplied by still further stances (e.g. claims or beliefs).

In chapter IV of *MIE*, Brandom describes his account of perceptual knowledge as "an inferentialist middle way between justificatory internalism and reliabilist externalism" (Brandom, 1994, pp. 217–221). According to Brandom, reliabilist externalists are right in holding that reliability may entitle a reporter to make an observation report even when the reporter does not endorse (not even implicitly) the inference that is the practical acknowledgement of the authority of such reliability (the inference that Brandom calls the "reliability inference", i.e. the inference that goes from tokens of, say, "That's red" to the acknowledgement of the presence of something red in the immediate environment).⁴ This is a point of discrepancy with Sellars. In effect, in *EPM* § 35, Sellars claims that, in order to be an expression of knowledge, an observation report not only must have authority, but this authority must also be recognized by the person who makes the report. In contrast, Brandom believes that this last step is not necessary. From his point of view, what makes an observation report an expression of perceptual knowledge is the fact that the reporter is considered to be reliable by the person who attributes the possession of perceptual knowledge to her, regardless of the reporter's attitude towards her own reliability (i.e., regardless of whether the reporter also believes in her own reliability or not). The status of the reporter's claim as knowledge is, then, external to her own attitudes.⁵ Notwithstanding this, Sellars is certainly right —Brandom acknowledges— in holding that, in order to count as perceptual knowledge at all, a reliable report must be elicited by someone who is able to participate in the space of reasons. The reporter must be able to understand her own observation report, i.e., according to Brandom's theoretical framework, she must have some grip on its role in reasoning, as a potential premise and conclusion of inferential justifications. Thus, while reliabilism about cognitive entitlement is correct in claiming that perceptual knowledge can be attributed even where the one to

⁴ See Brandom (1997, p. 158).

⁵ The second error that Brandom attributes to Sellars is that of assuming that justification of observation reports must involve explicit invocation of reliability, i.e., that a claim of reliability must be one of the premises of the reliability inference. See Brandom, (1994, pp. 217–8).

whom it is attributed cannot inferentially justify her report, it does not follow from this remark that reliability by itself is enough for the entitlement in question, apart from all consideration of attitudes of taking the reporter as reliable, as reliabilism typically holds. According to Brandom, Sellars is right, thus, to insist that attributions of knowledge require, not just reliability, but also, at least, implicit endorsement of the inference that is the practical acknowledgement of reliability (again, the inference that goes from the occurrence of a report such as “That’s red” to the endorsement of it). Yet, Sellars is wrong, Brandom believes, in thinking that the one who endorses that inference must be the one who undertakes the claim to perceptual knowledge.⁶ It is the attributor of perceptual knowledge who must attribute reliability to the reporter of an observation report, not necessarily the reporter herself. In order for an observation report to count as non-inferential knowledge, then, it is only necessary that the attributor endorses it, at least implicitly, by way of acknowledging the reliability inference.

Now, as it could be appreciated by the reconstruction made so far, Brandom’s account of perceptual knowledge exclusively focuses on the commitments and entitlements that observation reports involve. However, in this account, perceptual experience itself is credited with no epistemological, or semantic, role at all. As Brandom claims:

“Experience” is not one of my words. I did not find it necessary to use it in the many pages of *Making It Explicit* (...) I do not see that we need —either in epistemology or, more important, in semantics— to appeal to any intermediaries between perceptible facts and reports of them that are non-inferentially elicited by the exercise of reliable differential responsive dispositions. There are, of course, many causal intermediaries, since the non-inferential observation report is a propositionally contentful commitment the acknowledgment of which stands at the end of a whole causal chain of reliably co-varying events (...) But I do not see that any of these has any particular conceptual or (therefore) cognitive or semantic significance (Brandom 2000, footnote 7, pp. 205–6).

However, in taking this path, Brandom passes over what I take to be an important alternative, namely that of conceiving perceptual experience as a kind of

⁶ Certainly, Sellars may reply here that, if the reporter were not able to endorse the reliability inference, she would neither be able to consider herself as possessing perceptual knowledge. But, in such case, it would surely be irrational for herself to reason and act on the basis of her own observation reports. In effect, if it were true that the reporter is unable to make the inference that goes from her own report, e.g., “That’s red”, to the conclusion that something red is nearby, what reason could she have to acquire other related beliefs and to act on the basis of her report?

contentful mental state. This is the thesis of one of Brandom's heroes: Kant. In effect, as is well-known, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant holds, among other things, that perceptual experiences involve both intuitions and concepts. In claiming this, Kant acknowledges that experience has intentional (indeed, conceptual) content.⁷ Kant's idea is not that concepts, or a combination of them, are mere responses to intuitions (in which case concepts would not be presumably needed in order to have perceptual experiences). Rather, the idea is that concepts are necessary for bringing the manifold of intuitions to its unity. Without the work of concepts in experience, we could not be capable of experiencing whole objects at all. To express Kant's point in Brandom's terms: experience is not merely a reliable differential response to the objects presented to us, but, rather, a capacity in virtue of which we conceptually classify what is given to the faculty of sensibility. Since such classification can be correct or incorrect, Kant implies that perceptual experiences, and not merely observation reports elicited by them, have a normative character: they can be evaluated as veridical or non-veridical.

Arguably, a similar conception of perceptual experience can be found in another of Brandom's heroes: Wittgenstein. In effect, Wittgenstein's reflections on seeing aspects can be understood as based on the assumption that perceptual experience has intentional content, a kind of content that can change depending on—it may plausibly be argued—the concept that one brings to experience (I will say more in § 4). As a result, on this interpretation it may be held that, according to Wittgenstein, perceptual experience also has, as for Kant, a normative character.⁸

As I have anticipated in § 1, this is not an innocuous theoretical difference between Kant and Wittgenstein, on the one hand, and Brandom, on the other. Brandom's way of conceiving experience faces, I will argue, some particular difficulties that Kant's and Wittgenstein's conceptions do not. Let us examine these difficulties in the following two sections.

⁷ McDowell (1996), Sellars (1967) and Ginsborg (2008) interpret Kant's first *Critique* as holding that perceptual experience has conceptual content. Recently, Hanna (2005, 2015) and Burge (2010) have proposed a non-conceptualist reading of Kant's account. In any case, however, both in the conceptualist reading as in the non-conceptualist one, Kant is credited with the claim according to which experience does have intentional content.

⁸ Someone might think that, in the particular case of seeing aspects, due to its specific nature, there is not something as being right or being wrong. It is, rather, a matter of seeing aspects or not seeing them. I think, however, that it makes sense to claim, of a person that sees, for example, a yacht in a puzzle painting, that she sees the figure correctly. After all, it is supposed that what is hidden in the puzzle painting is a yacht, not any other thing. The yacht, it could be claimed, is there to be seen.

§ 3. In part VIII of *EPM*, after criticizing a well-known form of the Myth of the Given (i.e. foundationalism), Sellars presents his own conception of epistemic justification. According to Sellars, the epistemic authority of observation reports such as “This is red” rests on the fact that the presence of a red object, appropriately related to the perceiver, can be inferred from the occurrence of such report. Moreover, as we have seen in § 2, Sellars considers that, to be the expression of knowledge, not only must such a report have authority, but also this authority must be recognized by the reporter. In other words, the person who makes the report must be able to infer, from the occurrence of the report “This is red”, the existence of something red in the immediate environment.⁹ Thus, in order to express knowledge, an occurrence of an observation report such as “This is red”, when it takes place in standard conditions, not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a red object, but also the perceiver must know that tokens of “This is red” *are* symptoms of the presence of red objects in conditions that are suitable for visual perception.¹⁰ Hence, Sellars concludes that perceptual knowledge of particular facts presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*. Acknowledging the truth of this point requires, Sellars claims, abandoning the traditional empiricist idea according to which perceptual knowledge stands on its own. So, although there is a logical dimension in which empirical propositions rest on a level of observation reports (which certainly are non-inferentially acquired), “there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former” (Sellars *EPM*, § 38).

Now, Sellars’s conception of epistemic justification clearly faces the following difficulty.¹¹ As we have already seen, the epistemic authority of observation reports lies —according to Sellars— on their reliability: observation reports are symptoms or signs of the presence of the reported entities. And, as Sellars insists, in order to be instances of perceptual knowledge, that reliability must be recognized by the subject who makes the report. However, at this point, the following question naturally arises: how could the subject know that her observation reports are, in general, reliable signs of the presence of the items that they report? In other words, how could a subject know that her observation reports, such as different tokens of “This is red”, are symptoms or signs of the presence, in the immediate environment, of red objects in standard conditions?

⁹ As it was pointed out in § 2, this is a point of discrepancy between Sellars and Brandom.

¹⁰ See Sellars, *EPM*, § 35. This move presupposes a “Level Ascent”, which has been the target of some criticisms. See, e.g. Alston (1983) and Brandom (1997).

¹¹ See De Vries (2000), Williams (2009), Kalpokas (2017).

It seems that, given the theoretical framework of *EPM*, Sellars has no other alternative than to answer that we know about general statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* in virtue of our inductive knowledge about different instances of observation reports such as “This is red”. But this is clearly circular. In effect, on the one hand, Sellars is holding that the recognition of the epistemic authority of an observation report such as “This is red” rests on a general statement of the form “The observation report ‘This is red’ is a reliable symptom of the presence of a red object in standard conditions of perception”. On the other hand, however, it seems that knowledge of such general facts in turn rests inductively on the knowledge that observation reports of such kind (i.e. “This is red”) are reliable (i.e. they can be taken to be true). Thus, observation reports both justify, and are justified by, general statements about their reliability to register the presence of the relevant objects in the immediate environment.

Sellars unsuccessfully struggled with that problem along his career.¹² It is not my purpose here to consider Sellars’s different attempts of giving a plausible solution to it. Rather, I only want to indicate here that, despite the slight differences with Sellars’s theory of epistemic justification, Brandom’s account of perceptual knowledge inherits exactly the same difficulty. In effect, how could a person, who attributes reliability to other reporters, know that their observation reports are, in general, reliable signs of the presence of the items that they report? In other words, how could an attributor of perceptual knowledge know that a reporter’s observation reports (such as different tokens of “This is red”) are reliable? It seems that, given the theoretical framework of *MIE* and his later work, Brandom has no other alternative than to answer that the attributors know about general statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* in virtue of their inductive knowledge about instances of observation reports such as “This is red”. But, just as in the case of Sellars, this is clearly circular: on the one hand, Brandom would be claiming that the attributor’s endorsement of tokens of observation reports such as “This is red” (i.e. her taking them to be true), when these are made by the appropriate reporters, rests on general statements of the form “Observation reports such as ‘This is red’, when they are made by the appropriate reporters, are reliable symptoms of the presence of red objects in standard conditions of perception”. On the other hand, however, it seems that knowledge of such general facts inductively rests on the knowledge that tokens of observation reports, such as “This is red”, when they are made by the appropriate reporters, are reliable (i.e. they can be taken to be true). Thus, again, observation

¹² Indeed, Sellars gives an initial solution, which is unsuccessful to my mind, to that problem in *EPM* § 36 and § 37. I consider that initial solution and further intents of solving the problem in question in Kalpokas (2017).

reports both would justify, and would be justified by, general statements about their reliability to register the presence of the relevant objects in the immediate environment.

Brandom's discrepancy with Sellars does not help him to avoid that epistemic circle. Even when only the attributor is the one who must make, or practically assume, the relevant reliability inference, the question that makes the circle arise appears anyway. In Brandom's account, it is the attributor, not the reporter, who faces the problem of circularity when her attributions of perceptual knowledge are challenged. But, in any case, the same problem arises. Both Sellars's and Brandom's accounts seem to share this flaw.

It is worth noting here that this result is valid even when the endorsement of the reliability inference is implicit. In effect, even in the case in which the attributor's endorsement of the reliability inference is not explicit, it is supposed that she has, or may have, some reasons for her endorsement. These reasons are the ones that the attributor must be able to explicitly give just in case her taking the reporter as reliable is challenged. In such a case, then, the mentioned circularity would inevitably arise again. Thus, the "default and challenge" model of justification, which is involved in the contrast between explicit and implicit endorsement, is of no help here. As a result, it can be claimed that the two-ply account of perceptual knowledge (in both versions, Sellars's and Brandom's) faces the problem of an epistemic circle. This circle, I take it, is a symptom of a flaw in how epistemic justification of observation reports is explained.

Now, I believe that the source of such a flaw lies in Brandom's conception of perceptual experience. In holding that we do not need to postulate any "intermediaries" between perceptible facts and the reports of them; in implying that perceptual experience is only a mere causal intermediary; and, finally, in claiming that experience has no conceptual, cognitive or semantic significance, Brandom renounces to seriously take into consideration a Kantian approach to perception. Indeed, in his discussions with McDowell, Brandom has repeatedly resisted to adopt such approach.¹³ However, this approach could help him to provide an intuitive and common sense justification of observation reports and, thus, a suitable answer to the question of how an attributor could know that a reporter's observation reports are, in general, reliable signs of the presence of the items that they report. The intuitive answer is this: one could justify an observation report such as "This is red" by seeing whether or not the object referred by the demonstrative is, in fact, red. Accordingly, an attributor could know that the observation reports made by a reporter are reliable just by

¹³ See Brandom (1998, 2002a, 2010).

appealing to her own perceptual experience of the states of affairs to which the reports refer. In fact, it is not clear at all how one could know whether observation reports, made by others or even by oneself, are true or not if it is not by appealing to perceptual experience (interpreted as it is suggested here).¹⁴ And without that knowledge, it seems that the reliability of reporters cannot be determined.

The importance of this alternative lies, not only on the fact that it provides a simple and intuitive account of how observation reports are, or can be, justified; but also on that it allows us to avoid the epistemic circle that we have detected in Brandom's account. In effect, the circle disappears as soon as we acknowledge that perceptual experiences, in virtue of their content, can have the epistemic role of justifying observation reports, because in such a case it is no longer necessary to appeal to general statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* in order to justify those reports. One (e.g. the attributor of perceptual knowledge) could claim that knowledge of general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* rests on the inductive knowledge of many tokens of the report "This is red", whereas one recognizes that the epistemic justification of those tokens depends, not on one's knowledge of the aforementioned general facts, but rather on one's perception of the relevant facts.

At this point, it may be worth noting that the mere appeal to perceptual experience does not necessarily commit us to the Myth of the Given. In effect, we are not obliged to assume that perceptual experiences are— in Sellars terms— "non-verbal episodes of awareness" (*EPM* § 34), or to hold that such episodes enjoy an intrinsic epistemic authority. One could maintain, for instance, that perceptual experiences involve the actualization of our conceptual capacities, as McDowell has repeatedly insisted (McDowell 1996, 2009), and thereby claim that perceptual content is conceptual in character. This would be a Kantian alternative that would allow us to avoid at once both the epistemic circle and the Myth of the Given.

§ 4. Moreover, and for similar reasons, Brandom's conception of perceptual experience seems to be completely different from the one that is held, or assumed, by another of his heroes, namely, Wittgenstein. In effect, in the second

¹⁴ Of course, in order to know that a certain reporter is reliable, an attributor could compare the reporter's observation reports with her own ones. But, then, the question would be: how could she know, in turn, that her own reports are true? If the answer is that she (the attributor) knows that her observation reports are true because she knows that she is reliable in making such kind of reports, then we have the circle already outlined again: the attributor would be taking her own observation reports as true because she would be taking herself to be reliable, and she would be taking herself to be reliable because she would be taking her own reports as true.

part of *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter *PI*), section XI, Wittgenstein famously considers some well-known cases of seeing-as. Although this section certainly is difficult to interpret and it contains many obscure remarks, it seems to imply, nevertheless, a relatively definite conception of perceptual experience (in particular, visual experience).¹⁵ In what follows, then, I would like to argue that Brandom's conception of experience is not only different from Wittgenstein's, but also that it cannot properly explain the very phenomenon of seeing aspects. This, I will hold, speaks in favour of a conception of perception as a kind of mental state with intentional content.

In section XI of *PI*, Wittgenstein begins by distinguishing two uses of the word "see": the first one appears when, to a question such as "What do you see there?" one answers "I see *this*" (followed by a description or a drawing). The second one, however, appears when somebody says, for example, "I see a likeness in these two faces". So, let us suppose that I see a certain face and, suddenly, I notice its likeness to another one. Certainly, I see that the first one has not changed, but now I see it differently.¹⁶ This is the phenomenon that Wittgenstein calls "noticing an aspect" (*PI*, xi, § 113).

Something similar occurs with the famous duck-rabbit figure: I can see the figure as a head of a duck or as a head of a rabbit; and even when I can see something different in each case, it is true that the figure has not changed at all. If, indeed, I am able to grasp the ambiguity in the figure, I can alternatively say "Now I see the figure as a duck" or "Now I see it as a rabbit".¹⁷ The possibility of grasping the ambiguity of a figure (as it happens in the duck-rabbit case), or of seeing the likeness between two things (as it happens in the case of the two faces), is an essential feature of the phenomenon of seeing aspects. To the person who can only see the duck, say, in the duck-rabbit figure, there is no place for what Wittgenstein calls an "aspect's lighting up" (*PI*, xi, § 118). In effect, as Wittgenstein points out, if a person can only see the figure as a duck, it seems that there is no point in describing what she sees by saying "Now she sees the figure as a duck", because to what different possibility could one be implicitly referring to by saying that *now* she sees the figure *as* a duck? Thus, the aspect's

¹⁵ Although not only of visual experience. For a consideration of other non-visual examples in Wittgenstein's work, see, for instance, Ahmed (2017).

¹⁶ Glock holds that the situation in which something that is seen changes in one respect, whereas remains the same in another, constitutes "the paradoxical appearance of aspect-dawning" (Glock, 1996, p. 37). In reconstructing the way in which Wittgenstein supposedly dissolves this paradox, Ahmed distinguishes between the optic content of sight and the synoptic content of it. See Ahmed (2017, pp. 527 ff.).

¹⁷ "The expression of a change of aspect", Wittgenstein claims, "is an expression of a *new* perception and, at the same time, an expression of an unchanged perception" (*PI*, xi, § 130)

lighting up, Wittgenstein claims, contrasts with seeing an aspect continuously (*PI*, xi, § 118).¹⁸

How does Wittgenstein explain the phenomenon of seeing as? As it happens with other topics of Wittgenstein's work, there is no agreement among the scholars on this point. However, for my present purpose, it is not important to decide what exactly Wittgenstein's account is, because my crucial point will be that, whatever "the correct" interpretation of Wittgenstein's texts is, Wittgenstein seems to assume, or take for granted, that perception has intentional content. Admittedly, the contemporary notion of intentional content, such as it is used in current discussions of philosophy of mind, may be alien to Wittgenstein's thought. But even if this were the case, I think that the introduction of that notion (understood, minimally, as the idea according to which, in perception, things appear in a certain way) could be of help to understand the very phenomenon of seeing aspects and Wittgenstein's remarks about it. In fact, it seems to me that the assumption in question is a common ground for most of the interpretations that have been elaborated about this point of Wittgenstein's philosophy.¹⁹

So, to begin with, it is worth noting that the incapability to see a likeness or to detect an ambiguity in a figure —what Wittgenstein calls "aspect-blindness" (*PI*, xi, § 257)— does not imply defective sight. Likewise, the capacity to see aspects is not explained only by good vision, or by a change in the visual impressions (*PI*, xi, § 130), or by a modification of the object that is seen. No thing that is merely given to the sight or that causes our visual impressions explains the change of aspects. The person who is able to see the duck and the rabbit certainly sees *the same figure* as the person who is not able to see them. In other words, the very same sensory inputs can produce two different perceptual experiences in two different perceivers depending on their capacity for seeing aspects.²⁰ Indeed, the difference between the perceivers seems to reside in how they interpret the figure. As Wittgenstein claims: "We can also *see* the illustration now as one thing, now as another. So we interpret it, and *see* it as we *interpret* it" (*PI*, xi, § 116). The

¹⁸ Baz insists on this point in (2000). There is some discussion among the scholars of Wittgenstein's work about whether seeing aspect is a general or a local phenomenon. See, for example, Strawson (1974), Mulhall (1990), Shroeder (2010), Ahmed (2017) and Glock (2016). Although I find the idea that all perception is aspectual (no matter what Wittgenstein believed about this) very plausible, I do not need to enter into that debate here. Whether or not all perception involves aspect-perception, my argument in this section will be, modestly, that Brandom's two-ply account faces decisive difficulties to explain this phenomenon.

¹⁹ See, for example, McGinn (1997, 2015), Glock (2016), Ahmed (2017), Strawson (1974), Mulhall (1990). The exceptions are Travis (2015) and Hutto (2015), who not only hold that perception has no representational content at all, but also that Wittgenstein believed this.

²⁰ Of course, when I say "the very same sensory inputs", I mean "the same distal inputs".

interpretation presupposes that we think about the figure in a certain way, that we relate it with one or another object: “And that’s why the lighting up of an aspect seems half visual experience, half thought” (*PI*, xi, § 140). However, it is crucial to notice here that it is not the case that seeing aspects consists just in seeing plus a certain interpretation.²¹ In other words, seeing aspects is not a case in which we add an interpretation to a perceptual content whose features as such remain unchanged. Rather, as *PI*, xi, § 116 suggests, the interpretation is *in* the seeing itself; it arranges the lines and colours that are seen. As Wittgenstein puts it, when I suddenly see the solution of a puzzle–picture, “I recognize that it has not only shape and colour, but also a quite particular ‘organization’” (*PI*, xi, § 131). The result is a new way of seeing a figure, a gestalt change²² in what one experiences (and not a mere change in how one interprets a figure, as it would be if seeing aspects were just seeing plus a certain interpretation).²³ If we consider, just as it is commonly done, that the phenomenal aspect of the experience consists in the peculiar character with which things are presented in perceptual experience, then we can say that the phenomenal difference between the experiences of the perceiver who is able to see aspects and the one who is not able to do so is due to the particular form in which the former, but not the latter, manages to think of (interprets, in the sense recently mentioned) what she sees.

Now, even when my reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s remarks about seeing aspects has been incomplete and very sketchy, it is sufficient, I think, to realize that Brandom’s account of perception is quite different from the one that can be plausibly attributed to Wittgenstein. In effect, while Brandom restricts his account of perception to the role played by observation reports, which are caused by perceptual experience, Wittgenstein, in turn, focuses his attention on the gestalt change involved in visual perception itself. Seeing something as something else counts, for Wittgenstein, as a contentful mental state because it involves thought, interpretation, and recognition that some particular organisation of the lines and colours of a picture corresponds to the

²¹ See what Wittgenstein says in *PI*, xi, § 245. In xi, § 144 he suggests that seeing–as involves a fusion of both seeing and thinking.

²² To speak in terms of “Gestalt change” does not commit me, by itself, with a Gestaltist explanation of the phenomenon of seeing aspects. For a reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s criticism to the Gestalt tradition in psychology, see Ahmed (2017). See also Glock (2016).

²³ Glock (2016) points out that, in seeing different aspects in a figure, the organization of the material object (the figure itself) remains the same, of course; while the intentional object, in contrast, does not. The intentional object of sight is the object such as it is imaginatively conceived by the subject. It is this object the one that changes with the different ways of organization. In my opinion, we should not conceive the intentional object as completely separated from the material object, as it were a completely different thing. Rather, it is the same material object the one that is seen and conceived in different ways.

configuration of a certain object. In the case at hand, in seeing the figure as, say, a duck, one is sensorily conscious of the duck, one sees the head of a duck in the figure itself. Thus, it may be thought that making the report “This is a duck”, whereas one is seeing the figure as a duck, can be taken, according to Wittgenstein’s point of view, as a way of expressing the content of one’s visual experience, a way of putting into words the aspect of which one is sensorily conscious (and not merely a way of differentially responding to a distal stimulus with the appropriate observation report²⁴). In contrast, according to Brandom’s two-ply account, the report “This is a duck”, even if it could be taken as a reliable report, cannot be considered as the expression of the content of one’s visual experience (the particular aspect under which one sees the duck–rabbit figure), because visual experience, on Brandom’s view, has no content at all.

Now, how could Brandom’s two-ply account accommodate the phenomenon of seeing aspects? Indeed, it is difficult to see how it could achieve this. Remember that Brandom’s account appeals to the combination of two distinguishable sorts of capacities: (i) the capacity to reliably discriminate behaviourally between different sorts of stimuli; and (ii) the capacity to consequently produce an observation report, i.e. the capacity to take up a position in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Now, let us consider the case of the duck–rabbit figure as a paradigmatic example of seeing aspects. How could the two-ply account handle this case? The only distal stimulus at play here is the figure itself. We can initially suppose that, in front of the same stimulus, a subject is able to differentially respond, alternatively, with two distinctive observation reports, i.e. “This is a duck” or “This is a rabbit”. So far, so good. However, if perceptual experience were a mere causal intermediary between the figure and the reports elicited by it, if experience did not have “any particular conceptual or (therefore) cognitive or semantic significance” (Brandom 2000, fn 7, pp. 205–6), as Brandom claims, why would the subject respond with two different reports to the same stimulus? What reason could she have for alternatively claiming “This is a duck” or “This is a rabbit” as a consequence of experiencing the same picture? Of course, we could imagine many occasional reasons in virtue of which a subject may do so; but the relevant reason here has

²⁴ Perhaps it is not completely adequate to speak of “observation reports” in reference to linguistic expressions that are used to describe the aspects under which a person sees a figure. However, if we are cautious in the use of this terminology, and if we have in mind the obvious differences between straight observation reports (e.g. “This’s green”) and reports such as “Now I see this as a duck” or, directly, “This is a duck” (in reference to a seen aspect in the duck–rabbit figure), we can use that terminology without any harm. After all, reports such as the latter ones are, in a certain sense, reports of certain kind of observation.

to do with the different ways in which the same figure visually appears to the subject, i.e. with the different ways of organizing the elements of the picture. This is an essential part of the phenomenon of seeing aspect itself. From Wittgenstein's point of view, a person that is able to see the duck and the rabbit in the duck–rabbit figure can alternatively claim “This is a rabbit” or “This is a duck” *because* she can see the same figure as a rabbit and as a duck. Her reports express different perceptual contents. In contrast, from Brandom's point of view, nothing similar can be said. But, then, what sense would the reports in question have for a person that sees the duck–rabbit figure? What could such reports express? Not, obviously, the aspect according to which a person sees the figure, because, for Brandom, experience has no cognitive, or semantic significance. So, what could the reports express? The key difficulty of Brandom's account lies, I think, in the fact that the capacity of alternatively responding with two different observation reports, in the relevant sense, seems to rest on the “previous” capacity of seeing different aspects in one and the same figure. Unfortunately, however, this latter capacity is not taken into consideration by the two–ply account.

In order to see the problem that the two–ply account faces more clearly, let us consider the following possible situation. We can imagine that a person may have learnt, as a consequence of an adequate training, to respond to a puzzle picture, for example, with the observation report, say, “This is an old woman”, whenever she is confronted to it, even when she is actually unable to notice the relevant aspect. This is, I think, a perfectly conceivable situation. In such a case, the person would certainly be able to produce the relevant observation report in the appropriate circumstances, but, by stipulation, she would not be capable, yet, of seeing the lines that compose the figure as a face of an old woman.²⁵ Thinking about this sort of case can help us realize that the capacity of seeing aspects is clearly different from the capacity of making observation reports. In such possible situation, making the relevant observation report would be perfectly compatible with having what Wittgenstein calls “aspects–blindness”, i.e. the incapability to see aspects. So, the mere appeal to the capacity to reliably make observation

²⁵ I think that Wittgenstein envisages this possibility in *PI*, xi, § 257. There, he claims “The aspect–blind man is supposed not to see the A aspects change. But is he also supposed not to recognize that the double cross contains both a black and a white cross? So if told “Show me figures containing a black cross among these examples?” will he be unable to manage? No. He is supposed to be able to do that, but not to say “Now it is a white cross in a black ground!” “. Strawson conceives a similar situation. He claims, “We could perhaps imagine someone able to *treat* a picture in a certain way, painstakingly to *interpret* it in that way without *seeing* the relevant aspect, without seeing it *as* he was treating it as, at all”, (1974, p. 63). The main idea here is that we can imagine a person that can interpret a picture in different ways, without actually seeing it in different ways. In the text, I try to exploit this kind of possible situations in order to show that Brandom's two–ply account misses the point of seeing aspects.

reports does not explain, by itself, the capacity to see aspects. But the appeal to perceptual experience, conceived in Brandom's lines, even in combination with the capacity to make observation reports, cannot do so either, because experience is understood, by Brandom, as a mere causal intermediary between the figure and the reports elicited by it. Thus, it seems that the two-ply account does not have the theoretical resources to apprehend the phenomenon of seeing aspects itself. Consequently, it cannot properly explain why a person, situated in front of a figure (e.g. a puzzle-picture), could have the relevant reason to claim something of the form "Now I see this as such and such".

As in the case of the problem discussed in § 3, I believe that the root cause of the difficulties that the two-ply account faces in trying to explain the phenomenon of seeing aspects lies in its incapability to properly acknowledge a general feature of perceptual experience, namely, its intentional content and, more specifically speaking here, its phenomenal character.²⁶ The phenomenal character of an experience is frequently characterized, in Nagel's words, as "what it is like to have" that particular experience (Nagel 1974; Chalmers 2006; Shoemaker 1994a, 1994b; Fish 2009). More substantially characterized, the phenomenal character of an experience is also often conceived as an aspect of its representational content, i.e. the way in which the world is presented in the phenomenology of the experience (Chalmers 2006; Shoemaker 1994a).²⁷

Now, regarding the phenomenal character of experience, it could be claimed that, in looking at, say, the duck-rabbit figure, we are not only capable of producing the relevant observation report, but also, and crucially, of seeing the relevant aspects in the figure. As Wittgenstein notes in analysing such cases, we can see the figure as we interpret it. The interpretation is in the seeing itself — Wittgenstein points out— not merely in the response to the figure (i.e., in the observation report). Depending on the interpretation, we can recognize a particular organization in the lines that compose the figure, i.e., in virtue of the concept that we bring to the figure in order to interpret it, we can attribute a

²⁶ Terminological variations include "qualitative character" (Shoemaker, 1994b), "subjective character" (Brewer 2006), and "phenomenal content" (Campbell 2002). Interestingly, Brandom (2010, pp. 322–323) seems to acknowledge that the fact of not regarding the phenomenal character of experience constitutes a weakness of his account.

²⁷ Some philosophers think that the phenomenal character of perceptual experience is not a feature of its representational content. According to them, the phenomenal character of experience is constituted by the very objects and properties of the environment. See, for instance, Campbell (2002) and Brewer (2006, 2011). However, I do not believe that this is an adequate way of characterizing the phenomenology of experience. Although I cannot argue for this point here, I believe that cases of seeing aspects constitute counter-examples of that conception of the phenomenology of perception.

certain meaning to the lines and colours that compose the figure.²⁸ What is thus arranged is not a mental image, but, rather, the very figure itself. So, it could plausibly be claimed that what emerges to sight in turn is, then, a head of a duck and a head of a rabbit, not merely the propositional contents “This is a rabbit” or “This is a duck”. This intuitively explains why a person could be able to alternatively make the observation reports “This is a duck” or “This is a rabbit”: because she is able to alternatively see these aspects in the figure. So, even when a single picture causally affects a person’s senses, when she is equipped with the relevant concepts and an appropriate imagination, she can be able to see different aspects in the figure. Consequently, we can intuitively hold that the observation reports “This is a duck” and “This is a rabbit” are not merely responses to a blind distal stimulus, but, rather, linguistic devices for expressing the intentional content of experience, i.e. the different ways in which a same figure can appear to us.

§ 5. I have argued that Brandom’s account of perceptual knowledge faces two difficulties: It cannot properly explain how attributions of perceptual knowledge could be justified, and, moreover, it cannot accommodate the well-known phenomenon of seeing aspects. The source of both difficulties is, I have claimed, the same one: Brandom’s two-ply account passes over the very capacity of perceiving. In doing so, Brandom departs from two of his heroes, Kant and Wittgenstein, who arguably held, leaving aside obvious differences, that perceptual experience is a kind of contentful mental state. As I have suggested, the adoption of a view that acknowledges the distinctive contentful character of perception may help Brandom deal with the two aforementioned difficulties.

²⁸ Glock (2016) holds that seeing aspects involves a non-conceptual level in the content of perceptual experience. He gives the examples of seeing a face (at a non-conceptual level one sees the same face before and after noticing a likeness with another face), and that of seeing a double-cross (see Wittgenstein, *PI*, xi, § 212). However, I disagree with this appeal to non-conceptualism. Of course, in order to see a face (or a double-cross), no concept is needed; but seeing a face *as* a face, or a double-cross *as* a double-cross, or even seeing *that* it is the same face, or *that* it is the same double-cross, is a quite different matter. In my opinion, what is involved in these latter cases is perceptual knowledge, and this kind of knowledge requires that the relevant concepts articulate what is given to experience. Of course, I cannot defend this thesis here. In any case, the important point is that, even if seeing aspects involved non-conceptual content, it would still be true that experience has intentional content. This is the crucial point that I try to exploit in my discussion of Brandom.

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