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## Perceptual Experience and Seeing-as

### ***Abstract***

According to Rorty, Davidson and Brandom, to have an experience is to be caused by our senses to hold a perceptual belief. This article argues that the phenomenon of seeing-as cannot be explained by such a conception of perceptual experience. First, the notion of experience defended by the aforementioned authors is reconstructed. Second, the main features of what Wittgenstein called “seeing aspects” are briefly presented. Finally, several arguments are developed in order to support the main thesis of the article: seeing-as cannot be explained by the conception of experience defended by Rorty, Davidson and Brandom.

### ***1. Seeing-as and experience as a causal linkage with the world***

According to some neo-pragmatist philosophers, perceptual experiences only cause certain sort of beliefs – perceptual beliefs – but cannot justify them. The argument is that perceptual experiences lack propositional content, and that only states with propositional content can have logical relations with propositional attitudes such as beliefs. The thesis that perceptual experiences lack propositional content (or even any other kind of intentional content) has been defended by authors such as Davidson (2001a),

Rorty (1979, 1998) and Brandom (1994, 1998, 2002).<sup>1</sup> For brevity, I will call that notion of experience “the conception of experience as a causal linkage”. There are already different arguments against such a conception of experience in circulation (McDowell 1994, Kalpokas 2012, 2014). In this article, however, I want to exploit Wittgenstein’s reflections about the phenomenon of seeing-as in order to develop new objections against it. In particular, I want to show that the notion of experience as a causal linkage cannot explain the paradigmatic cases of seeing-as. The structure of the article is as follows: First, I present the conception of experience I will criticize. Thereafter, I reconstruct the main characteristics of the phenomenon that Wittgenstein calls “seeing-as”. Finally, I show why Wittgensteinian seeing-as cannot be explained by the conception of experience as a causal linkage.

## ***2. Experience as a causal linkage***

According to traditional empiricism, experience is essential for explaining both the origin and the justification of empirical beliefs. As a theory about the origin of empirical knowledge, empiricism claims that all empirical knowledge comes from experience. As a theory of justification, moreover, empiricism affirms that empirical beliefs ultimately rest on experience. The first dimension of empiricism is hard to question. Even critics of empiricism such as Davidson, Brandom, and Rorty acknowledge that, in a causal sense, experience is a crucial element in the origin of empirical beliefs. The second dimension, however, has been criticized in different ways during the second half of the twentieth century. Sellars, for example, has accused traditional empiricists of falling into the Myth of the Given (1997);<sup>2</sup> Rorty has urged us to abandon empiricism

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the inclusion of Davidson in the family of neo-pragmatists could be disputed. Rorty has argued in favor of that inclusion in (1991). See also Murphy (1990). Whatever the case is – whether Davidson can be included as a pragmatist or not-, what is important for my purposes is that Davidson shares a causal conception of perceptual experience with Rorty and Brandom.

<sup>2</sup> Although I mention here the figure of Sellars as a critic of traditional empiricism, I do not want to claim that Sellars himself endorses the conception of experience as a causal linkage that I will criticize. For an interpretation of Sellars as a non-traditional empiricist, see McDowell (2009).

(*qua* theory of justification) because it constitutes just another episode of the exhausted Cartesian epistemological program (1979); and Davidson, finally, has criticized scheme-content dualism as the third – and perhaps last – dogma of empiricism (1984). Thus, all of these philosophers have urged us to abandon traditional empiricism as a theory of justification. According to them, the main reason for rejecting the epistemological relevance of traditional empiricism is, roughly speaking, that perceptual experience does not have any propositional content (or any other kind of content).<sup>3</sup>

As a corollary of their view of perceptual experience, Davidson, Rorty and Brandom have drawn a radical consequence. According to them, experience only has a causal role. More precisely, experiences are causal intermediaries between perceptual beliefs and the world, and do not constitute nor provide any reasons for holding beliefs. As a result of the affections of our sense organs, we can acquire perceptual beliefs, but experiences are not episodes with representational content. Thus, experiences cause beliefs, but do not justify them.<sup>4</sup> They put us in direct contact with the world, not in a cognitive way but in a causal one.<sup>5</sup> Following this strand, Rorty distinguishes between “experience as the cause of the occurrence of a justification, and the empiricist notion of experience as itself justificatory” (1998: 141). Abandoning the latter sense of “experience” means “reinterpreting ‘experience’ as the ability to acquire beliefs non-inferentially as a result of neurologically describable causal transactions with the world” (1998: 141). Davidson, in turn, says:

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Rorty and Davidson, McDowell does not conclude, from the rejection of traditional empiricism, that all sorts of empiricism is in bankruptcy. What he calls “minimal empiricism” can be viewed as a sort of non-traditional empiricism, an intermediate epistemological position between coherentism (defended by Rorty and Davidson) and traditional empiricism (compromised with the Myth of the Given). See McDowell (1994) and (2009).

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to what epistemological externalists hold, Davidson, Rorty, Sellars, and Brandom do not think that a mere reliable causal relation can justify beliefs. In Davidson’s words, “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (Davidson, 2001a: 141).

<sup>5</sup> In the case of Rorty and Davidson, the rejection of the epistemological dimension of empiricism comes accompanied by a coherentist theory of justification. See Davidson (2001a: 141) and Rorty (1979: 178).

To perceive that it is snowing is, under appropriate circumstances, to be caused (in the right way) by one's senses to believe that it is snowing by the actually falling snow. Sensations no doubt play their role, but that role is not that of providing evidence for the belief (2001a: xvi).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Brandom explicitly endorses Davidson's notion of perceptual experience. According to him, some thinkers

... who are careful to avoid the Myth of the Given do so by placing the interface between non-conceptual causal stimuli and conceptual response at the point where environing stimuli cause perceptual *judgments*. That is, they avoid the Myth by seeing nothing non-judgmental that could serve to *justify* perceptual judgments, rather than just to *cause* them. Davidson notoriously takes this line (...) And it is the line I take in my book (2002: 93-4).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, according to these authors, when we perceive something, we are causally stimulated by the presence of the item that is perceived and, as a result, we acquire the belief that, say, something is in front of us.<sup>8</sup> However, in this process, experience in itself does not disclose the world to us; it is not an occurrence, different from belief, that directly reveals the presence of something to us. Experience provides merely a causal linkage between the object and our belief about that object. Since perceptual experiences in themselves have no content at all, they cannot be reasons for holding any belief.<sup>9</sup> Thus, according to this conception, locutions such as "I perceive that it is snowing", "I see that there is an elephant over there", etc. should be understood as only expressing the acquisition of perceptual beliefs, not as expressing mental states

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<sup>6</sup> See also Davidson (2001c: 289-290). Davidson uses "experience", "sensation", and "perception" as interchangeable terms. See Davidson (2001a: 143), (2001b: 45), (1999: 105-6)

<sup>7</sup> See also Brandom (1994) chap. 4, and (1998) where he defends Davidson's conception of experience from McDowell's criticism.

<sup>8</sup> As Davidson expresses this point, "What the senses 'deliver' (i.e., cause) in perception is perceptual beliefs" (1999: 106).

<sup>9</sup> As Davidson claims, "The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? [...] The relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified", (Davidson, 2001a: 143).

different from beliefs – perceptual experiences – with their own propositional content.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Wittgenstein and seeing-as**

In the second part of *Philosophical Investigations*, section XI, Wittgenstein introduces the well-known case of seeing-as. At this point I want to make clear that the aim of my reconstruction of Wittgenstein's ideas about seeing-as is *not* primarily exegetical; rather, I only want to highlight some aspects of the Wittgensteinian reflections on the topic in order to articulate some new objections to the conception of experience as a causal linkage.

Wittgenstein begins section XI of *Investigations* by distinguishing two uses of the word “see”: the first one emerges when, to the question “What do you see there?” one gives the answer “I see *this*” (followed by a description or a drawing). The second one, however, emerges when somebody says, for example, “I see a likeness in these two faces”. Now, let's suppose that I see a certain face and, suddenly, I notice its likeness to another one. I see that the first one has not changed, but now I see it differently. This is the phenomenon that Wittgenstein calls “noticing an aspect” (*PI*, xi, § 113). Something similar occurs with the duck-rabbit figure: I can see the figure as a duck or as 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 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”. As Wittgenstein says, “The expression of a change of aspect is an expression of a *new* perception and, at the same time, an expression of an unchanged perception” (*PI*, xi, § 130).<sup>11</sup> The possibility of grasping the ambiguity of the figure in the duck-rabbit case, or of seeing the likeness between two faces, constitutes an essential feature of what Wittgenstein calls “seeing

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<sup>10</sup> As Davidson claims: “‘I saw it with my own eyes’ is a legitimate reason for believing there was an elephant in the supermarket. But this reports no more than that something I saw caused me to believe there was an elephant in the supermarket” (2005: 135).

<sup>11</sup> An interesting explanation of what is involved in the conflict between the new perception that emerges when we see something as another thing, and what remains unchanged in that act of seeing, can be found in Church (2000).

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). If I can only see the figure as a duck, there is no point in describing what I see by saying “I see the figure as a duck”, because to what different possibility could I be implicitly referring by saying that I see the figure *as* a duck? To what change in my perception could I be referring? Thus, the aspect’s lighting up contrasts with seeing an aspect continuously (*PI*, xi, § 118).<sup>12</sup> When I say “Now I am seeing this as a duck”, I am not just describing my perception, or the object that I see. I am implying that, even though my perception has changed, the figure, notwithstanding, has not changed.

How can we explain the phenomenon of seeing as? It is important to notice 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 – at least in itself – 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 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 sees *the same figure* as the person who is not able to see them. In other words, the very same sensory inputs could produce two different perceptual experiences in two different perceivers depending on their capacity for seeing aspects.<sup>13</sup> The difference between the perceivers seems to reside in how one and the other *respond* to what they see, in how they interpret the figure: “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 interpretation presupposes that we think about the figure in a certain way, that we relate it with another object: “And that’s why the lighting up of an aspect seems half visual experience, half thought” (*PI*, xi, § 140). However, it is essential to notice here that it is not the case that seeing aspects consists just in

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<sup>12</sup> Baz insists on this point in (2000).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, when I say “the very same sensory inputs”, I mean “the same distal inputs”.

seeing plus a certain interpretation.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is not a case in which I add an interpretation to a perceptual content whose features as such remain unchanged. Rather, the interpretation is *in* the seeing itself, it arranges the lines and colors which 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 change 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).<sup>15</sup> If we understand 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, thinks of (interprets, in the sense recently mentioned) what she sees. As McGinn (1997) points out, the case of seeing-as evinces the active character of the subject of experience: the nature of visual experience – the determination of what is seen – depends on the way in which the subject responds to the object which is seen.

#### ***4. New objections to the notion of experience as a causal linkage with the world***

In what follows, I will argue that the conception of experience as a mere causal linkage with the world lacks the theoretical resources needed to explain the main features of the phenomenon of seeing an aspect. In other words, the conception in question cannot accommodate the case of seeing-as. However, before presenting my arguments, I would like to make clear where their relevance lies, because it may be thought that seeing-as is so exceptional that it

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<sup>14</sup> See what Wittgenstein says in *PI*, xi, § 245. In xi, § 144 he suggests that seeing-as involves a fusion of both seeing and thinking.

<sup>15</sup> As Strawson 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: 63). The main idea is that a person can interpret a picture in different ways, without actually seeing it in different ways.

cannot provide an adequate basis for criticizing a general philosophical conception of experience.

To begin with, it is debatable whether seeing aspects is such an exceptional phenomenon. In fact, as some interpreters of Wittgenstein's work hold, it can be argued that the phenomenon of seeing aspects is present in perception in general.<sup>16</sup> According to those scholars, what Wittgenstein really wants to teach us is that seeing aspects is a ubiquitous phenomenon: everything we perceive, we perceive in its relevant aspects. Moreover, leaving aside the question of whether or not Wittgenstein actually held that seeing aspects is a general phenomenon, one could plausibly argue in favor of a weaker but related thesis by paying attention to what we actually do in our daily lives. It is common for people to see a cloud in the sky, for instance, as a face, or a mountain as an animal, or a likeness between two faces.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, it is worth noting that children appeal to their ability to see aspects in their games all the time.<sup>18</sup> Thus, although Wittgenstein was particularly impressed by some specific examples of seeing-as, there is no obvious reason to restrict the phenomenon of seeing aspects only to the – sometimes extraordinary – cases considered by him. One may hold that, even if seeing aspects is not a ubiquitous phenomenon, it is something more extended than what one may initially believe. Finally, even if the phenomenon of seeing aspects were atypical, the failure to explain it could constitute an important obstacle for accepting a general theory of perceptual experience in case such failure suggested that an essential feature of experience is overlooked. The incapability to deal with a special phenomenon could indicate that there is a deep flaw in a theory. From my perspective, this is exactly what happens with the theory of experience I purport to criticize. As I hope to show, the notion of experience as a causal linkage passes over important differences between belief and perceptual experience, and it wrongly dismisses the fact that experiences of seeing-as have intentional content. As a

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<sup>16</sup> See Strawson (1974), Mulhall (1990), Schroeder (2010).

<sup>17</sup> See Wittgenstein's example of seeing someone whom I have not seen for years, (*PI*, xi, § 143).

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein acknowledges this point in (*PI*, xi, § 205, 206 and 207).



consequence, I think that the question of whether or not a certain theory of perceptual experience is able to explain the phenomenon of seeing aspects can have profound philosophical implications for the theory of perception.

In order to make clearer the target of my arguments, let us remember, once again, that according to the conception of experience as a causal linkage, experiences are episodes with no content at all.<sup>19</sup> For that reason, although they have an essential role in causing perceptual beliefs, they cannot justify them. From this point of view, perceptual beliefs are those which are caused by experiences, by the stimulation of our senses in the appropriate circumstances; but in contrast to what happens with experiences, perceptual beliefs do have propositional content. Thus, in order to explain seeing-as, Davidson and his followers would need to appeal, not to what they consider mere experiences, but to perceptual beliefs such as they characterize them, because only those mental states, in their framework, have the content required for trying to account for that phenomenon. Now, taking this into account, my strategy will consist in trying to show that the appeal to perceptual beliefs (in combination with the causal role of experiences) cannot provide an adequate account of seeing-as. My arguments purport to make clear that, for a number of different reasons, seeing an aspect cannot merely consist in having a perceptual belief.

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<sup>19</sup> Someone might think that framing the debate in terms of different conceptions of perceptual experience is inadequate, as speaking of experience suggests such things as awareness, consciousness, and so on. Since all these things seem to imply that there is some kind of content – so the objection might run – the causal account is a non-starter. In claiming this, the objector implies that there is only one notion of experience in epistemology, the one defended by authors like Wittgenstein or McDowell and, as a consequence, talking about experience in describing the conceptions of Rorty, Davidson and Brandom is mistaken. But, in fact, the debate about what perceptual experience is, in epistemology and philosophy of mind, is commonly framed in terms of different conceptions (theories or notions) of experience. For example, see McDowell (1994), Rorty (1998), and Brandom (2002). Fish (2010) presents a useful overview of different contemporary theories of perception. Moreover, the theory that he calls “belief acquisition theory” is extremely close to Davidson’s way of understanding perceptual experience.

Firstly, let us consider the well-known duck-rabbit figure. One can see the head of a duck or the head of a rabbit in a set of lines which are available to simple sight, that is, one can see certain lines as a duck or as a rabbit. How could such an achievement be explained from the point of view of the notion of experience as a causal linkage? As we saw above, according to that notion, to have an experience is to acquire a perceptual belief as a result of the causal affection of our senses. It follows that experience itself does not present the figure to us, because experience has no content at all. From this point of view, to see certain lines as a duck or as a rabbit is to acquire the belief that there is a duck or a rabbit in the figure. These beliefs are the result of our causal interaction, mediated by our senses, with the figure.

However, this account does not adequately capture what the experience of seeing-as consists in, because there is a crucial difference in how the involved mental states – believing and seeing-as – can represent aspects. In fact, when I see the ambiguity of the duck-rabbit figure, I *alternatively* see the duck and the rabbit.<sup>20</sup> I cannot see the same figure, at the same time, as a duck and as a rabbit, but I have to alternate my vision of it as a duck and then as a rabbit. It is an empirical fact that people cannot see the duck and the rabbit simultaneously.<sup>21</sup> This is exactly the reason why Wittgenstein speaks of an “aspect’s lighting up”. Perceptual experiences are occurrences the content of which depends on one’s paying attention, here and now, to the figure as a duck or as a rabbit. In contrast, beliefs are mental states the content of which is not constrained in the same way by attention and, as a consequence, it is possible to have, at the same time, the perceptual belief that the figure in question is a duck *and* a rabbit. Believing

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that not every case of seeing-as involves ambiguity. I just can see a rock as a shoe, for example.

<sup>21</sup> The experiment was originally presented by J. Jastrow (1900). As far as I know, there is no psychological evidence that contradicts the above mentioned fact. A recent experiment seems to show that, providing a specific prompt or cue, when people face *two* instances of the duck-rabbit figure, they get to see both figures, one as a duck and the other as a rabbit at the same time. See Jensen M. S, Mathewson K. E. (2011). However, that experiment does not consider the question of whether people can simultaneously see a *single* figure, both as a duck and a rabbit. This last case is the one considered by Wittgenstein.

that the figure is a duck does not prevent me from believing, at the same time, that the figure is also a rabbit. I can perfectly well believe both things simultaneously. However, I cannot see both, the duck and the rabbit, in the same figure and at the same time. Consequently, the idea that seeing a figure as a duck or as a rabbit means acquiring a perceptual belief about how the figure can be considered, cannot give an account of an essential feature of the phenomenon of seeing-as: the impossibility of seeing different aspects in the same figure, at the same time. Thus, even when, as it normally happens, seeing an aspect gives rise to a perceptual belief (i.e. one could certainly acquire the belief that the figure is a duck as a consequence of seeing the duck in the figure), seeing an aspect is not identical with acquiring a perceptual belief: One could believe, at the same time, that a figure is a duck and a rabbit, but one cannot see the rabbit and the duck simultaneously. The Davidson-Rorty-Brandom's framework cannot accommodate this feature of seeing an aspect.<sup>22</sup>

The case of the duck-rabbit figure sheds light on another problem for the conception of experience as a causal linkage. As we have seen above, those who defend the idea of experience as a causal linkage can only try to explain the phenomenon of seeing-as

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<sup>22</sup> It may be objected that my argument does not sufficiently consider the case of finer-grained beliefs such as "I'm seeing the lines as a rabbit now" or "The lines look to me like a rabbit now". Wouldn't the impossibility of simultaneously seeing a duck and a rabbit have to be attributed to these kinds of perceptual beliefs as well? I think that we should give a negative answer to this question. Let us assume that the examples mentioned could count as perceptual beliefs for Davidson and his followers; one may still ask what the expressions "I'm seeing" and "to look" mean in this context. Since these expressions must be interpreted (according to the authors discussed here) in causal terms, as indicating the causal source (vision) of the beliefs in question, "I'm seeing the lines as a rabbit now" and "The lines look to me as a rabbit now" must report that the lines that I'm seeing caused me now to believe that they are a rabbit (see footnote 10 above). But why could not the same lines, at the same time, cause me also to believe "I'm seeing the lines as a duck now" or "The lines look to me as a duck now"? In such a case, the lines I'm seeing (or that look to me) may cause me to believe that they are a rabbit *and* a duck. The appearance of impossibility of believing these two different things at the same time rests, indeed, on a Wittgensteinian interpretation of the verb "to see" (or "to look"). According to this interpretation, to see certain lines as a duck or as a rabbit (or that the lines look to me as a duck or as a rabbit) is to arrange the perceived lines in two different ways. However, this interpretation of the verb "to see" (or "to look") is not available to the authors I'm considering here.

in terms of perceptual beliefs. But, according to them, beliefs are dispositions.<sup>23</sup> However, as I will try to show, experiences seem to be *occurrences or episodes*, not dispositions.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly clear if we consider the phenomenon of an aspect's lighting up. When we pay attention to certain features of the duck-rabbit picture, the head of a duck visually appears to us; however, when we change the focus of our attention, the duck disappears and the head of a rabbit emerges. This exercise can be repeated more or less rapidly. The visual experience of one figure and another can last a very short period of time, depending on the focus of our attention, and it is hard to see how the intermittent character of experience which is characteristic of an aspect's lighting up could be understood in terms of dispositional beliefs. To begin with, it seems odd to say that, in such case, we alternate between two different perceptual beliefs. In such context, exclaiming "Now I see the duck!" and then "Now I don't see it anymore!" makes sense, but it sounds astonishing to claim "Now I believe that there is a duck" and then "Now I don't believe it anymore". These latter expressions sound awkward because we tacitly understand that perceptual beliefs, once acquired, persist beyond the visual presentation of a picture. Now, it seems that those who defend a dispositional account of belief should embrace this intuitive distinction between experiences and beliefs, and they should endorse the claim that, just like other kinds of dispositions, we should be able to retain perceptual beliefs for a longer period of time than the particular moment in which they were acquired. But then, since experience of an aspect's lighting up immediately disappears as soon as the focus of our attention changes, they will have trouble explaining that phenomenon in dispositional terms. Once more it can be seen that

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Davidson (1980) and Brandom (1994).

<sup>24</sup> A blind reviewer of *NWR* has pointed out that there may be some tension between claiming that seeing-as depends, in part, on interpreting what one sees, as I said in § 3, and claiming that seeing-as is inherently episodic. I think the tension in question does not arise if we properly understand the meaning that "interpretation" has in this context. In interpreting a figure, one organizes its lines or spots in a certain way; as a result, a certain form appears to sight (the head of a duck, a human face, etc.). As soon as we stop paying our attention to the lines or spots in the correct way, the form previously seen disappears for us.

Davidson, Rorty and Brandom's conception of perceptual experience does not provide the theoretical resources to properly account for a remarkable feature of seeing an aspect.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the latter, it may be possible for someone who sympathizes with the authors I am criticizing to reply that my objection does not take into account the existence of occurrent beliefs. Even though it is not Davidson's or Rorty's position, she could still argue that there is no obstacle to thinking that not all beliefs are dispositions. There are beliefs, she could argue – perceptual beliefs – whose persistence precisely depends on the presence of their causes. This sort of belief could account for the occurrent character of an aspect's lighting up. Thus, seeing a duck and then seeing a rabbit could be interpreted as the acquisition of the occurrent perceptual beliefs "It's a duck!" and then "It's a rabbit!"

Leaving aside the question of whether there actually are occurrent beliefs or not, it is worth noting that while that possible response could account for the occurrent character of seeing aspects,<sup>26</sup> it could not explain how to see a duck and then a rabbit in front of the same figure is possible. In effect, as I have already remarked in §3, seeing the ambiguity of the duck-rabbit figure implies seeing *the same figure* as a duck at one moment, and as a rabbit at another. According to Wittgenstein, the person who is capable of seeing the duck and the rabbit in the figure is capable of doing so because she can interpret (in the sense explained in §3) the same figure in two different ways. Since the figure is the same, the difference between both experiences of seeing must reside, not merely in the (distal) cause of the experience, but rather in the way the perceiver interprets the figure, that is, in the way she organizes the lines of the figure. Thus, when the perceiver relates the figure to the head of a rabbit, the lines that compose the figure acquire a

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, in a sense, Davidson, Rorty and Brandom could acknowledge that experiences are occurrences; however, we should remember that, for them, in the sense that experiences are occurrences, they have no content at all.

<sup>26</sup> The sympathizer of Davidson and his followers should accept that the expressions "Now I believe that it's a duck" and then "Now I don't believe it anymore" make perfect sense.

new configuration for the perceiver. Then, when she relates the figure to the head of a duck, a different configuration emerges. It is worth noting here that this sort of explanation ascribes intentional content to perceptual experience. The visual experience of the figure is not merely the cause of a perceptual belief; rather, it provides different contents (the presence of a duck or a rabbit) depending on the way the perceiver interprets the same figure.

Now, since defenders of experience as a causal linkage claim that perceptual beliefs are caused by the stimulation of our senses, and since, in the case of the duck-rabbit figure, the distal stimulus is the same, it cannot be explained how we are able to see different aspects in a singular figure. In other words, it seems to be mysterious why the same distal stimulus would be able to cause different perceptual beliefs. In effect, if perceptual experience merely provides a causal linkage with the figure (because, as Davidson and his followers hold, it has no content at all) how are we supposed to explain the fact that we are able to see different aspects in the same figure? To express the same question in Davidson's terms, how could the fact that the same distal stimulus is capable of causing us to form different perceptual beliefs be explained? As far as I can see, there is not a clear, or even plausible, answer to this question in Davidson's (or his followers') theoretical framework. The problem seems to lie in the fact that mere causality does not allow us to discriminate between different aspects of the same stimulus. In order to do so, we need to take into account – as Wittgenstein does – the subject's capacity for arranging the same lines in different ways; but this requires quite a different notion of perception than the one that is held by Davidson, Rorty and Brandom. Thus, I think that even if one conceded that perceptual beliefs are occurrent beliefs, it would be hard to accept that seeing different aspects in an ambiguous figure is equivalent to having different occurrent beliefs.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> It may be objected here that even if the distal stimulus is the same, there is no reason to think that the entire causal chain is identical in the cases of seeing the duck and the rabbit. Thus, if there are differences somewhere in the causal chain, it would seem that Davidson and his followers have resources to explain shifts in occurrent perceptual beliefs. However, it must be noticed that the importance that Davidson attributes to distal stimuli

However, even if there were a plausible answer to the question formulated above, the defender of the notion of experience as a causal linkage with the world would have to face two final objections. Firstly, in (*PI*, xi, § 256), Wittgenstein provides us with the elements to develop a further argument for distinguishing between experiences of seeing-as and perceptual beliefs (an argument that, to my mind, applies to whatever notion of perceptual belief one holds, dispositional or occurrent one). He claims: “Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as ‘Imagine *this!*’, and also ‘Now see the figure like *this!*’; but not ‘Now see this leaf green!’”. Here Wittgenstein underlines a clear difference between seeing an aspect and a simple seeing: it makes sense to give the order “Now see the figure as a rabbit!” or “Now see the figure as a duck!”, but it makes no sense at all to order “See this leaf as green!” The grammar of such expressions indicates that seeing something as something else, or seeing a likeness between two things, is, to a certain extent, subject to the will: in responding to the appropriate order, and with an effort of imagination, one could try to see something new in a figure, for example, or in a certain thing. This may be true even in the case that seeing a certain aspect took a great deal of effort.<sup>28</sup> Now, if we remember that, for Davidson and his followers, having an experience is *to be caused* to hold a perceptual belief, that is, that having a perceptual experience is not subject to our will, we can recognize here a new reason for rejecting the reduction of seeing-as to the causal process of acquiring perceptual beliefs.<sup>29</sup> In effect, if perceptual beliefs are caused by our senses, when they are properly

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rests on a profound and important reason, namely, only these stimuli are relevant to determine the content of perceptual beliefs. In effect, it is distal stimulus that determines the content of perceptual beliefs, not what happens in other places of the causal chain. But if experience is only a causal linkage with the distal stimulus (a linkage that may allow us to acquire perceptual beliefs), then there is no way of capturing different aspects in a single figure. In order to see something as something else, one must be able to see the same distal stimuli in different ways (no matter what else happens in the causal chain that runs from the distal stimuli to the content of experience).

<sup>28</sup> Of course, the fact that one is trying to see an aspect does not imply that, as a consequence, one will be successful in doing so. Wittgenstein’s point is, rather, that it makes sense to make an effort to see an aspect.

<sup>29</sup> As Davidson claims, “Perceptual beliefs are formed at first spontaneously. They are simply caused by what goes on that we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell” (2005: 136).

stimulated, it seems that, in the very process of their acquisition, there would be no room for the will's playing the sort of role that Wittgenstein notes in the case of seeing-as. The capacity for seeing-as involves the ability to imagine a certain thing (the cause of our sensory stimulation) in different ways. The spontaneity that is present in the ability to imagine something as another thing, which is characteristic of seeing an aspect, is absent in the causal process of acquiring a perceptual belief, such as Davidson and Rorty understand it. Hence, we have here a good reason to reject the claim that seeing aspects can be understood in terms of perceptual beliefs (dispositional or occurrent), namely, that whereas seeing aspects frequently involves a *voluntary* effort of imagination, the merely causal acquisition of a perceptual belief does not.

Finally, advocates of the conception of experience as a causal linkage would have to respond to an argument roughly envisaged by Strawson.<sup>30</sup> The argument is as follows. We can perfectly conceive a situation in which a person has the perceptual belief (understood in dispositional or occurrent terms) that there is a face in a certain puzzle-picture without being able to see the face in the puzzle.<sup>31</sup> In other words, if perceptual beliefs are conceived, as Davidson and his followers hold, as those ones which are sensorily caused by the immediate environment, then it could be argued that there is no incompatibility between *having* the perceptual belief that there is a face in that puzzle-picture and suffering from aspects-blindness.<sup>32</sup> In order to see this point, let us consider the following

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<sup>30</sup> See footnote 15.

<sup>31</sup> It could be objected that the belief that there is a face in a puzzle is not really a perceptual belief. A blind person could believe that a particular chair is red without having a perceptual belief that the chair is red (the example is from one blind referee of *NWR*). My answer to that objection is that, if perceptual beliefs are those which are caused by the stimulation of our senses, then the blind person's belief is not a perceptual one. However, in the case I am presenting, such as I construct it, the person's belief that there is a face in the puzzle is actually caused by her (well-functioning) senses. Thus, according to the way Davidson and his followers characterize perceptual beliefs, it counts as a perceptual belief.

<sup>32</sup> Wittgenstein seems to make the same point 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 it? No. He is supposed to be able to do that, but not to say "Now it's a black cross on a white ground!"



possible situation. As a consequence of being adequately stimulated, a person could have learnt to respond with the belief that there is a face in a puzzle-picture whenever she is confronted with it, without noticing the relevant aspect; or she could even have seen the face once and thereby have acquired the relevant belief, but then have become incapable of noticing the face any more. In this case, we can imagine that whenever the person sees the picture, her senses could cause her to believe in the proposition “There is a face in that puzzle-picture”, even if she was incapable of seeing the relevant aspect in the picture. In that possible situation, while the person could have acquired the relevant perceptual belief, she would not have seen the face in the puzzle yet. Thus, seeing something as X must be different from having the (dispositional or occurrent) perceptual belief that something is as (or has the aspect of an) X, because the former – but not the latter – is incompatible with aspect-blindness.<sup>33</sup>

I think that the root cause of that problem resides in the incapability of the conception of experience as a causal linkage of properly acknowledging a general feature of perceptual experience, namely, its phenomenal or presentational character.<sup>34</sup> This is the reason why I pointed out at the beginning of this section that the incapability to explain seeing-as could reveal important flaws in the conception of perceptual experience that I am criticizing. In effect, when we ordinarily talk about, say, seeing, we normally imply that the act of seeing is about an object or property with respect to which vision provides us some kind of information. That is, when we talk about visually perceiving something, we not only

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<sup>33</sup> A possible objector may still try to resist that conclusion by arguing that the belief in question is not really perceptual, because even if the puzzle-picture caused the belief, the face in it was not the cause. In order to count as the relevant perceptual belief – the argument could go on – it has to be caused by the face in the puzzle, not merely by the puzzle. However, this argument clearly presupposes that seeing a picture as a face is not a mere perceptual belief, because, in order to be the cause of the relevant perceptual belief, the picture must be seen, not as a mere set of lines, but rather as a face. Of course, it can happen that an experience of seeing-as causes a related perceptual belief, but this does not entail that seeing-as is equivalent to acquiring a perceptual belief.

<sup>34</sup> For the presentational character of perceptual experience see, for instance, Searle (1983), chap. 2. The same idea can be found in disjunctivist theories of perception. See the articles compiled in Byrne and Logue (2009).

understand that perceptual experience causes beliefs, but also that in experience the object is presented in a certain way, that the object or property visually appears to us. According to this point of view, we can be perceptually conscious of objects and properties only in virtue of the way those items appear to us in perceptual experience. What appears to us, when we enjoy an experience, is not something different from the objects themselves.<sup>35</sup> Appearances are not epistemic intermediaries situated between our minds and the world; rather, the idea is that appearances are relational properties which depend on the perspective of the perceiver, her capacity for identifying the relevant items, and the circumstances in which experiences take place. In the case we are focusing on (i.e. that of seeing a face in a puzzle-picture), the conceptual capacities of the perceiver are essential.<sup>36</sup> In effect, without the capacity for introducing the idea of a face into the lines and spots of the puzzle, the perceiver would surely not be able to see a face in it.

Now, the crucial point of my argument (which accounts for the compatibility between having the perceptual belief that something is as X and being incapable of seeing something as an X) is that what emerges to sight in turn, in the case of a puzzle-picture, is a certain face, not merely the propositional content that there is a face in the puzzle. There is an essential difference between being

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<sup>35</sup> This claim, which goes, I think, for perceptual experience in general, is not incompatible with the particular case of seeing an aspect. In seeing an aspect a figure appears in a certain way, its lines appear organized in a determinate manner. This organization depends, in part, on the way the perceiver sees the figure, and, in part, on the way the lines are objectively arranged.

<sup>36</sup> For brevity's sake, I cannot argue here in favor of the thesis according to which conceptual capacities are essential to seeing an aspect. I think that this thesis is very plausible, at least to the extent that one considers Wittgenstein's examples, because merely seeing a figure does not reveal, by itself, an aspect. One needs to think of a figure as something else (a human face, a head of a duck, a glass, etc.). Moreover, philosophers who defend non-conceptualism in theories of perceptual content commonly acknowledge that perceptual experience is conceptual in many cases (for instance, when one sees a tree). See, for example, Peacocke (1992). Thus, there is some room to think that seeing an aspect may count as conceptual even for a non-conceptualist. Finally, even if the content of seeing-as were non-conceptual, my point against Davidson, Rorty and Brandom would still hold, because non-conceptualists do not clearly question the intentional character of perceptual experience, as the mentioned authors do.

perceptually conscious of a face in the puzzle and being conscious of the propositional content that there is a face in it, because whereas one could not be perceptually conscious of a face in the puzzle without a *visual* presentation of it, one can perfectly well be conscious of the propositional content that there is a face in the figure without being visually presented with the face. In other words, in order to be perceptually conscious of a certain face in a puzzle-picture, the face itself must appear to the perceiver, the lines and spots need to appear in a certain way, namely, as a face. Of course, it could be argued that the proposition “It’s a face” is essentially involved in seeing a figure as a face. I do not need to deny this.<sup>37</sup> The point is that, as I understand it, seeing-as involves something else: the visual presentation (as something different from the mere causal stimulation) of a face, the presentation of the particular configuration of the lines of the figure according to the way a face typically looks. This is the important feature of seeing an aspect that Davidson and his followers fail to acknowledge. In effect, in holding that perceptual experience merely causes perceptual beliefs, those authors pass over the presentational character of experience, the fact that in perceptual experience things and properties appear to us in certain ways. As a consequence, they are incapable of properly accommodating the phenomenon of seeing an aspect in their conception of perceptual experience.

## **5. Two different conceptions of perceptual experience**

I have presented several arguments in order to show that the phenomenon of seeing-as cannot be accounted for on the conception of experience as a causal linkage. My general argumentative strategy has been to make clear that, in order to account for the case of seeing aspects, Davidson and his followers have to appeal to either the notion of experience as a mere causal

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<sup>37</sup> I cannot here discuss the problem of whether the content of seeing-as is propositional in character or not. Maybe it is, maybe it is not. My only point is that, even if the content of seeing-as were propositional in character, this would not be incompatible with claiming that perceptual experience (included that of seeing aspects) has a presentational character.

linkage with the world, or perceptual beliefs as the immediate result of the causal interaction of our senses with the world. Invoking the former alternative clearly fails, because perceptual experience, thus conceived, has no content at all; and appealing to the latter is insufficient, because it does not allow explaining distinctive features of seeing-as.

I think, thus, that the notion of experience that is implicit in Wittgenstein's reflections on the phenomenon of seeing-as is radically different from the one defended by Rorty, Davidson and Brandom. Whereas the idea of experience as a mere cause of perceptual beliefs is blind to the fact that experience has content, Wittgenstein's implicit conception presupposes that it has an intentional (and for many scholars, propositional) content.<sup>38</sup> Seeing-as constitutes a particular way of opening the world to us, a way in which thought and imagination are essentially involved. In seeing something as something else we are in cognitive – and not merely causal – touch with the world. Even if a single picture or object always causally affects our senses in the same way, we might be able to see different aspects in it. Of course, on the basis of our experience of seeing aspects, we can also acquire the corresponding beliefs – we can come to believe that there is a face with certain features in a puzzle-picture, for example, because we have managed to see it. However, in this intuitive explanation, experience with a determinate content comes first, and the relevant belief is acquired as a consequence of it. To the extent that experience of seeing an aspect could count as a reason for the relevant belief, it could be claimed that there is ground to retain the epistemic dimension of empiricism that Davidson and his followers dismiss.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> On the intentional and conceptual character of perceptual content in Wittgenstein, see Strawson (1974), Schroeder (2010), McDowell (1998), Hurley (1998), chap. 6, and Sedivy (2004).

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