

Revisiting the Theory of Appearing

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According to William Alston, the first prominent exposition of the **Theory of Appearing** (TA) is in H. A. Prichard's 1909 work *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*. The latter argues for a specific interpretation of Immanuel Kant's account of perception to place it in line with TA. Prichard uses the theory as a way to save Kant from falling into the same skepticism he so rigorously attempting to disprove. The Theory of Appearing, therefore, is developed in specific opposition to the theories of sense datum which conceptualize perception as a subject's apprehension of sensory 'data' presumably caused by the object it is meant to represent.

Whether TA is successful in avoiding the skepticism which has so long plagued theories of sense datum, however, is still unclear. Critics of TA (and different interpreters of Kant) range from claiming the theory falls just as easily into skepticism as (to use John Searle's term) the 'Way of Ideas' to seeing the theory as a successful avoidance of that pitfall. This paper aims to evaluate the TA, and critiques against it, to determine whether the Theory of Appearing offers a plausible alternative to skepticism.

Although TA has never enjoyed prolonged popularity, its currency peaked among philosophers in the first half of the 20th century. Philosophers such as H. A. Prichard, G. E. Moore, and Wilfred Sellars adopted TA in opposition to the Way of Ideas, which was the most prominent theoretical strand of their contemporaries. As support of TA rose, so did criticism: H. H. Price and Roderick M. Chisholm were among those criticizing the Theory of Appearing. Due to wounds inflicted by critics as well as a dwindling support base, the theory's recognition dwindled. Recently, the theory has once again been taken up as a viable epistemic system. Notable champions of TA in the last few decades include William Alston and Harold Langsam. This paper will investigate the contemporary relevance of the Theory of Appearances by bringing together its proponents and detractors in a critical confrontation.

H. A. Prichard introduced the **Theory of Appearance** in *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, where Prichard promotes an interpretation of Kant where appearances allow knowledge of a mind-independent world. To do this, Prichard uses Kant's explanation of time and space in relation to things and appearances. The commonly accepted conclusion during Kant's career was that, while things appear to be spatial in themselves, they are not in reality spatial. This denial of spatial inherence in objects was exactly what Kant wants to avoid, as Prichard shows with a number of

quotes in which Kant denounces the conception of space as illusion. According to Prichard, Kant likewise argues that appearances are not illusions, but relationships between a perceiver and an object or state of affairs.

An important distinction to note here is that while Kant claims time and space are empirically real, they are not a part of things in themselves. As Prichard puts it: “Time and space are real relations of something, though not of things in themselves.”¹ The common assumption might be that space is an intrinsic property of objects in the world, but without relationships to other objects, this space becomes meaningless. This is seen clearly in measuring with a ruler, with is using one object to gain knowledge about the size of another. References for size, although now possible to discover sizes of things in an image on a computer, are all based on standards set in the world and represented by objects, creating a discernible relationship which allows us to grasp the size of objects.

Similarly, appearance is not an illusion but a relationship between an object or state of affairs. Appearance cannot be a part of the object, as appearances can never fully represent an object. If a coin is viewed from the side, it appears elliptical; if a coin is viewed from above, it appears circular. Both appearances of the coin are real relations between the perceiver and the coin (as I will explain in more detail in the following paragraph), but neither can give a complete compilation of all of the appearances of the coin or give the perceiver direct access to the essence of the coin. The essence of the coin must be inferred from the appearance. Therefore, the coin does not have in itself a bundle of appearances which perceivers access by viewing the coin from a certain angle or holding it in certain conditions. The coin only has in itself its essence. The appearances of a coin (elliptical when viewed from an angle, cold after spending the night in the snow, etc.) are relations between the coin, which in itself is only its essence, and the perceiver. A predicate of this appearance relation is space and time, which affect the appearance of the coin but not the coin itself.

Another qualification Kant, as presented by Prichard, makes about appearance is that it first appears to be illusory, but through experience perceivers come to understand how it relates to the real world. A toddler, for example, may see the moon from the earth and believe it to be the same size as a coin. She may later learn in school that the moon’s diameter is roughly a fourth of the earth’s and be confused. How could something which appears so small be in fact so large? While it may be explained to her that the moon only *appears* to be small, this phenomenon will likely still be a source of interesting mystery for years to come. It is in incidents like these in which she begins to grasp how appearances relate to the real world, how appearances of objects relate to their essences.

¹ Prichard, H A., *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, 73.

Prichard critiques Kant for his failure to distinguish between ‘things as appearing’ and ‘appearances.’ In his equivocation of the two, Kant begins an argument with one and ends with the other: starting with distinction between things as they are in themselves and things as they appear to perceivers, he concludes with the distinction between 2 new realities: things-in-themselves (independent of the mind) and phenomena/appearances within it.

Prichard argues that Kant should have stuck with the former (‘things as appearing’). In interpreting Kant using the latter, there is space for an argument to be made that ‘appearances within it’ refers to phenomena appearing in the perceiver’s mind. This interpretation leaves no space for certainty of an outside world and falls into the hole of skepticism which captured the Way of Ideas.

Although the lack of distinction between the two gives room for two different interpretations, Prichard claims that throughout the rest of Kant’s work it is clear he intends to be understood in the former: things as they are in themselves and things as they appear perceivers.

Next, Kant moves to debunk the theory which holds that objects are non-spatial, but the appearances which they produce in perceivers are spatial. A helpful analogy he notes here is the straight stick which appears bent in water scenario. It is nonsense to say that while the stick in water is not bent, the appearance of the stick as bent has a spatial existence in the mind of the perceiver. This is the same as saying while objects are non-spatial, the appearances which they produce in us are spatial. Kant may agree that the stick in the water is not actually bent but sees no reason to assume there must be a spatial existence of a stick which is bent somewhere in the process. On the contrary, Kant claims that appearance is necessarily something mental, and cannot be extending into the realm of the physical. There need not be a physical existence of a bent stick for it to appear bent, a mental existence will suffice.

Prichard then goes on to mention Kant’s note that in describing appearances as *produced by* things, there is an implied “false severance” between appearances and the objects which appear. If object produce appearances, it may seem as if, once produced, there is no longer any relation between appearances and objects. Kant makes clear his view that appearances are continuously related to objects in the process of perception. In making this move, he is intentionally separating himself from the causal theory of perception, which I will mention again later. ‘Produced by’ things implies the object of perception is merely something mental, the object itself is never perceived directly. This results in the solipsism which Kant is trying so hard to avoid. He claims that if there are appearances at all, they must be appearances *of* things rather than appearances *produced by* things. This ‘appearance of’ leaves the relation between appearances and objects intact.

Prichard adds to this subject by acknowledging that the phrase ‘appearances of things’,

whatever its faults, does imply a non-mental reality which is appearing, and that there is a direct relation to it in perception. This distinguishes Kant from the Way of Ideas, in which there is no direct relation to objects or states of affairs. As Kant is able to avoid getting lumped in with the theories he is fighting against, it seems as if the Theory of Appearing, as presented by Prichard, is a successful alternative to the sense data theories of his opponents.

Finally, Prichard anticipates a possible objection to his interpretation of Kant thus far. An objector may rightfully remind that Kant says it is possible to distinguish between the illusory and the real in phenomena, which seems to imply that space is illusory. Prichard responds by saying that while appearance is illusory in some sense, it is still a necessary relationship which allows us to infer the real. As discussed earlier, it is through investigation and experience that we are able to distinguish between the illusion in appearance and the real. This does not necessarily mean that appearances are worthless: after learning how they relate to reality they act as a helpful representation which directs to reality.

Now that the groundwork has been laid by Prichard's interpretation of Kant, the following promoters of the Theory of Appearing fall into line with only slight and largely inconsequential differences. Both G.E. Moore and Wilfred Sellars are writing in wake to Prichard's book which elucidated the theory in 1909, which will allow for manageable comparison and contrast. These philosophers worked to continue Prichard's promotion of TA as well as expand on the theory, responding to criticism as it arose in other minds or their own. As Moore's *Philosophical Studies* (1922) was written just over 4 decades before Sellars' *Science, Perception and Reality* (1963), we will begin with Moore.

Moore begins his discussion of the Theory of Appearing by mentioning a similar distinction made by philosophers of the sense-datum theory which separates an object experienced from a certain angle under certain conditions and the whole object. An object experienced from a certain angle is only part of the surface of the object, while the 'whole object' is a compilation of all of the surfaces of the object. When these two are combined, it can lead to an apparent contradiction (e.g. a circle coin looking elliptical when viewed from an angle). Moore says that all this depends on the assumption that the later presented object is actually perceptually different than the first appearance of the object.

One important point Moore makes which restates Prichard is that perceiving an appearance does not necessarily result in belief in the appearance. For example, an appearance of a distant tree does not necessarily result in a belief that the tree is actually the size it appears. In this way the appearance of the experience is not granted the same epistemic status as what the perceiver actually perceives the object or state of affairs to be or judges the object or state of affairs to be. A perceiver may see a distant tree, which appears small to them, but still be successful in judging its

approximate size.

Finally, Moore continues the explanation of the difference between perceiving things as they *are* and perceiving things as they *seem*. The example he uses here is the differences in perceiving a blown up balloon and a deflated balloon: *perceiving* a blown up balloon and *perceiving* a deflated balloon is different from perceiving them to *seem* blown up or to *seem* deflated. A better analogy may be that of seeing a white piece of paper under white light. In this case, it *seems* that the paper is red, but it is not *perceived* or *judged* to be so. In this way, using experience as a guide, the perceiver distinguishes between the illusory and the real.

For our final promoter of the Theory of Appearing, we will appeal to a much later work: Wilfred Sellars' *Science, Perception and Reality*. Sellars begins by making similar arguments to Prichard and Moore as to how perceivers understand appearances and their apparently contradictory nature in relation to the real world. His approach to this, however is slightly different.

Sellars begins his exposition of TA by providing a common notation representing perception: 'x looks y to S'. His claim is that 'looks' is essentially a report which does not necessarily endorse what 'looks' to be so. Construed this way, 'x looks y to S' does not imply that S is y, by simply that S appears to x as y. Sellars contrasts this with 'seeing as', which he describes (like Ryle does) as an achievement phrase, meaning 'x sees S as y' implies endorsement that S is actually y. In his own words, "to say that a certain experience is a *seeing that* something is the case, is to do more than describe the experience. It is to characterize it as, so to speak, making an assertion or claim, and--which is the point I wish to stress--to *endorse* that claim."

Now that we have covered the baseline laid by some of the original champions of TA, we will turn our focus to its critics to understand some of the stronger arguments against the theory. As with the section before it, we will proceed chronologically, starting with H. H. Price's *Perception* which was originally published in 1932, and then continuing into Roderick M. Chisholm's *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*, published in 1957.

Price begins his critique of TA by saying that even if we assume 'x appears y to S', it still runs into problems. His claim is that it's in *dissociated* sense-datum, whether of refraction or of reflection, where the theory begins to fail. The example he uses to bring this about is the case of a glove appearing to Jones to be right-handed and over there when it is actually a left-handed glove that is here. Jones' real meaning when he says 'it appears to me a right-handed glove is over there' is 'there appears *to be* a glove over there'. In the case of dissociated sense-datum, the phrase 'x appears y to S' implies endorsement that S judges *x to be* y. He continues by using the case of appearing to be two candles when there is actually only one. It is clear, according to Price, that the perceiver believes there are two actual candles. In both cases, the perceiver has no way to

distinguish between the illusory and the actual.

Next, Price pulls the view further out to analyse the original statement ‘x appears y to S’, which he originally allowed as an assumption. His example here is in the statement ‘the table appears brown to me’. He says that the actual existence of something brown “cannot indeed be proved, but it is absolutely evident and indubitable.”² On the other hand, says Price, we have no way of proving the actual existence of a table (although there may, in fact, be an actual table). Therefore, the statement ‘the table appears brown to me’ contains both knowledge (of brownness) and belief (in the table), or, as Price puts it, a relation of acquaintance and a relation of belief. If sense-datum is represented by ‘x’ in the statement ‘x appears y to S’, then there cannot be any acquaintance in the genuine sense. There is acquaintance with only the sense-datum which represents (rather than presents) brownness; there is never any acquaintance with brownness itself. Once again, we are unable to ascertain the validity of our experiences.

Chisholm begins, like others we have investigated, by arguing against those who believe ‘x appears y to S’ necessarily implies the existence of y. The statement ‘that animal appears centaurian’ does not necessarily imply there is anything centaurian. He takes this a step further to say that ‘looks centaurian’ is simply a specific example of ‘looks.’ This is the same, according to Chisholm as the relationship between ‘green’ and ‘color’: the relationship between ‘looks green’ and ‘looks’ is that it is a specific example of it, just as ‘green’ is a specific example of ‘color’.

Next, Chisholm argues that Kant’s theory of time ultimately leads to a contradiction. He does this by laying out Kant’s argument in the following manner: (a) nothing whatever exists in time, (b) there are things which *appear* to exist in time, therefore (c) *appearances* of things do exist in time. Kant did not realize that propositions A and C are contradictory “for if appearances really and necessarily are in time, then it is false to say that nothing whatever exists in time.”³ Chisholm says this is the same mistake made by the philosophers who believe that, in the bent stick scenario, the appearance of a bent stick actually contains a bent stick; if the appearance of a bent stick actually contains something bent, then it is false to say that nothing whatever exists in appearance.

At this point Chisholm pauses to note that Moore had suggested, albeit with some hesitation, that objects may *appear* to have attributes which they do not actually have. Sense datum of seeing a penny obliquely as opposed to seeing it from above does not mean we really judge the penny to *be* a different shape than what it was when judged from above; the penny only *seems* different: in one case it *seems* elliptical and in the other it *seems* circular. Chisholm argues that,

² Price, H H., *Perception*, 64.

³ Chisholm, Roderick M., *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*, 118.

while this does avoid the question of whether the *appearance* of an object has surface, it nevertheless fails in some cases to adequately describe what is and what is not part of the appearance. To prove this point, he says if we define ‘the appearance of a piece of coal’ as ‘something which has just those attributes which the coal appears to have’, then we are unsure if the ‘blue’ in ‘the coal appears blue’ is actually an appearance.

In response to these criticisms, we now turn to recent champions of TA William Alston and Harold Langsam. Both argue that TA has been unjustly left in the past as a result of criticisms like those presented by Price and Chisholm. In order to answer their qualms, both go at lengths to further distinguish the theory from the Way of Ideas, letting it live in the idea that perception is a direct, unmediated relation between the perceiver and the objects or states of affairs perceived. After observing their methods of doing this, we will finally be able to question whether their revival is justified.

William Alston’s promotion of TA in his article “Back to the Theory of Appearing”, is centered around his claim that it answers what he calls the three main philosophical questions of perception: (i) What is the nature of perceptual consciousness (experience)?; (ii) What is it to perceive a physical object?; (iii) How, if at all, is perception a source of justification of beliefs about (or a source of knowledge of) the physical environment? His answer to question (i) is quite straightforward: perceptual consciousness *is* a direct, unmediated awareness of physical objects in an environment. For (ii), Alston says that seeing an object is simply for that object to look a certain way to the perceiver. Finally, TA’s answer to (iii) is that we are justified in believing in TA simply by the lack of strong opposing evidence. The amalgamation of these answers moves Alston to claim TA is a worthy theory of perception.

Next, Alston addresses how TA handles hallucination in comparison to sense-datum theories. While sense-datum theories easily account for hallucination, Alston argues “There is no sufficient reason to suppose that introspective indistinguishability entails sameness of ontological structure.”⁴ According to Alston, ‘x appears y to S’ implies ‘x’ exists. This pushes against Price’s argument that there is no way to prove ‘x’ exists as well as Chisholm’s view that the locution only implies the existence of ‘y’. With this said, TA is still able to use mental images to account for hallucinations, as mental images need not be ontologically ultimate in order to be regarded as objects of direct awareness in some cases. Therefore, in hallucination mental images may be what we perceive while in veridical perception we are directly acquainted with the independently existing objects and states of affairs.

Finally, the focus is shifted to address a few more objections to TA. A critic might ask: if

⁴ Alston, William, "Back to the Theory of Appearing," 190.

an object looking a certain way to a subject is an irreducible concept, how can that connect with neural transactions which cause the perception? Alston says that TA does not deny the physical cause of perception. What it *does* deny is that investigating neural transactions can bring about what appearance to a subject in a certain manner is. To which the critic might reply: There is a long causal chain between chain between the object and the subject; how can we have direct perception? The problem with this question is that it conflates causal mediation and cognitive mediation. A chain of causal mediation can be allowed without forfeiting cognitive mediation.

The final piece we will investigate is Harold Langsam's article "The Theory of Appearing Defended", which was published in a book of articles on Disjunctivism in 2009. After making a claim on the nature of perception, Langsam argues TA has a strong explanation for hallucination as well as addresses a few objections often brought against TA in its account of hallucination. Finally, he points a way through the Time-Gap Argument.

Langsam begins with the claim that "experiences are *relations* between material objects and minds,"⁵ a claim he believes is a commonsense view. He takes his claim to a more specific one: phenomenal features relate objects of perception with the subjects that are perceiving them. The example he gives is 'the apple is appearing red to me'. However, it is important to note that phenomenal features are sometimes present when there is no material object being perceived. This would be cases of minor or more complete hallucination. In this case, phenomenal features cannot be relations between minds and material things as there is no material thing for the mind to relate to. Therefore, Langsam's thesis is that it is only in the case of *perceptual* experience that phenomenal features are instances of this relation, phenomenal features do not play this role in the case of hallucinatory experiences.

With his case for TA's accommodation of hallucination made, Langsam addresses the issue of indistinguishability (AKA Argument from Hallucination), which could be brought against the theory just proposed. The problem is that in Langsam's view of TA, there is no way to differentiate between veridical perception and hallucination. How does Joe know that the apple in his hand is real? Langsam replies with a question of his own: Why does indistinguishability between perceptual experiences and hallucinations result in the demise of phenomenal features of perceptual experience being relations between material objects and minds? The Argument from Hallucination assumes, to use Alston's phrase, "sameness of ontological structure." Langsam sees no reason why hallucinations should be granted the same ontological weight as actual perception. There is no reason that indistinguishability between hallucination and actual perception should be a defeater for TA.

⁵ Langsam, Harold, "The Theory of Appearing Defended," 181.

Finally, Langsam confronts the Time-Gap Argument. In its claim that phenomenal features of perceptual experiences instantiate relations between material objects and minds at some particular time, TA appears to be caught in a trap. Between an event, say a lightning flash, and Jim's perception of the event, there is a "time-gap". Jim's perception of the lightning flash happens at time t , and the lightning strike occurred at time $t-a$, with "a" standing for the amount of time it took for the light to travel from the lightning strike to Jim's eyes. The Time-Gap Argument says TA claims that there is a relation between the lightning at time t and Jim and time t , which cannot be the case as the lightning is gone at time t . TA rejects the idea that if a relation occurs at some time, it must necessarily be relating the two as they are at that particular time. The "appearing to" relation happens at time t , which is the time the light hits Jim's eyes but not necessarily the time of the event.

Now that we have journeyed through the history the Theory of Appearing, we may consider its viability as a theory. In order to do this, we will reflect on whether the criticisms of Price and Chisholm can be fully accounted for by the champions of the theory, new and old. It should be noted that this study uses only select sources, possibly leaving defectors or answers to unanswered questions within the pages of hidden books.

First, we will consider Alston and Langsam's responses to Price's argument through which he claimed that TA could not account for hallucination. To see a right-handed glove over there when there is a left-handed glove over here is different from a white page appearing red. In the former there is no physical basis for the experience the perceiver is having, and in the latter there is. As for being unable to distinguish between the real and the illusory, I think it is clear in both Alston and Langsam's writings that we need not grant the same ontological status to mental images as we do veridical perception. This response can be applied to Price's second critique as well.

Chisholm's critique of Kant's theory of time went unmentioned by champions of TA after Chisholm, but it still does not pose a problem for the theory. We see that Langsam discusses time as a relation, but never goes so far as to make the claim that 'nothing whatsoever exists in time'. The contradiction is made clear by Chisholm, but TA does not seem to be tied to Kant's claim. The simple way out is to admit that things (appearances) do exist in time.

Finally, Chisholm's argument that TA cannot adequately describe what is and what is not part of an appearance. Chisholm's claim is that, by redefining 'the appearance of a piece of coal' as 'something which has just those attributes which the coal appears to have', then we are unsure if the 'blue' in 'the coal appears blue' is actually an appearance. This seems to be correct at first but is actually just misleading. Surely 'blue' is among the 'attributes which the coal appears to have' in the case of a piece of coal which appears blue. It is not part of the typical *concept* of a piece of coal, but this does not mean it cannot be a part of the appearance of coal under the right

circumstances.

The criticisms brought on by Price and Chisholm are now adequately answered, meaning that TA is a sufficient alternative to the Way of Ideas. The language of TA ('appears', 'seems', etc.) may still have its ambiguities, but on the whole, it has been proven to withstand rigorous testing from different types of hallucination and veridical perception. As a result, it seems appropriate to say that, despite its fall and critiques brought against it, TA both was a viable theory or perception both in the early 20th century and continues to be a viable option today.

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