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The Logic of Aspect-Perception and Perceived Resemblance

Gary Kemp

By the ‘logic’ of aspect-perception and perceived resemblance respectively I do not mean the question of formalisation per se—the syntax and semantics of certain symbols of a formal system—but the logic of certain relations, as when we say that fatherhood is irreflexive. I claim that the logic of the relation *B sees x as resembling y* differs from that of *B sees x as y*, and thus that we have two relations, not one. It’s easy to think otherwise. One looks at a passing cloud, and suddenly one sees the cloud *as* a camel (of course one is not under the illusion that a camel is in the sky; one thinks ‘A camel!’ without ever forgetting that one is looking at a cloud, not a camel). At the same time, one takes the cloud to *resemble* a camel. Are these not the same thing? Does not the phrase ‘x looks like y’ cover both, for the very good reason that these are each other’s notational variant? No. The relations differ in their respective logical properties—in particular, they differ on whether they are categorical rather than graded, and over transitivity, symmetry and reflexivity.

I do take it that these logical points obtain because the underlying mental states differ, but the purpose of this note is merely to establish the former, not to explore their connections to other departments of philosophy (they are immediately relevant to the philosophy of mind, aesthetics, epistemology and theory of evaluative perception). Some preliminaries.

I will speak only of visual resemblance and visual aspects.

I will speak only of ‘seeing-as’, leaving aside the arguably more complicated ‘seeing-in’. (I shall use the more flexible term ‘aspect-perception’ or ‘aspect-seeing’, which is indifferent between seeing-as and seeing-in.) For brevity I will speak of the two places occupied by x and y as taking only terms denoting objects, not as verbal-phrases or adjectival-phrases, and, more significantly, not as the nominalizations of sentences denoting facts or states of affairs (not that there are no such uses of these constructions; it is connected with ‘seeing-in’, a connection the importance of which was stressed by Wollheim 1980). In for example the construction ‘A sees x as y’, the terms inserted for ‘x’ will always be singular; those inserted for ‘y’ can be singular or general, as in ‘an F’, e.g., ‘an ostrich’. I use ‘x’ and ‘y’ (and ‘F’) merely as schematic letters, not as variables.

Sometimes I will speak of the *primary object*—the immediately perceived object (such as the cloud) in which one sees an aspect or that is seen as resembling some object—as opposed to the *secondary object*—the object that the primary object is seen as, or which the primary object is seen as resembling, e.g. the camel or a camel.

I’m talking about subjective resemblance, experienced or perceived resemblance—not objective resemblance, assuming that there is such a thing. In speaking of perceived resemblance I’m speaking of the subjective counterpart of the objective relation *x resembles y*, just as one may distinguish *A perceives x as blue* from *x is blue*. In the case of resemblance, the direction of explanation—whether from subjective to objective or objective to subjective—is contentious; whereas aspect-perception appears to be without an objective side. In any case I will ignore the objective side save a remark at the end.

With respect to the position occupied by a term for the secondary object, these forms involving 'sees' create an intensional context (actually an hyper-intensional context), and thus differences of scope will obtrude, as in:

Wide scope (de dicto): B sees [x as y]

B sees [x as resembling y]

Narrow scope (de re): y is such that B sees [x as it]; x is such that B sees [it as y]

y is such that B sees [x as resembling it]; x is such that B sees [it as resembling y]

The de dicto forms display the usual differences of substitutivity with respect to the position occupied by 'y', but the position occupied by 'x' seems to be fully referential, open to substitution *salva veritate* by identicals; the second and fourth de re forms are plainly intelligible but the first and third de re forms only dubiously so. I mention these points only to set them aside, as I do not believe that what I say below trades on any differences with respect to their behaviour in hyper-intensional contexts.

1. Relativity. A minor difference is that perceived resemblance is manifestly relativisable (even if not in every case). Without incurring any protest, we speak of shape-resemblance, colour-resemblance, hue-resemblance, build-resemblance, face-resemblance (equally: similarity in various 'respects'), and so on. Indeed almost always, if we say 'x resembles y', we are understood to be committed to some statement of the form 'x F-resembles y'. I'm not going to say that aspects do not ever come relativized to types in these ways, but still they do not as readily admit of such relativisation, and some—such as colour—do not seem to appear at all. If one is looking at clouds and sees a cloud as a polar bear, one naturally says 'A polar bear!', quite unrelativised. One does not say one sees a polar bear in a cloud because of the colour. It very likely comes down to aspect-perception being limited to perceived shape, but I will not pursue the matter further.

Gradedness. Perceived resemblance is a matter of degree. But seeing-as is discrete, like the throwing a switch, either on or off: just as a shade of red can be more or less close to a given shade of red, but a natural number cannot be more or less a perfect square, one can experience resemblance in various degrees, but one either sees the ubiquitous drawing as a duck or one does not (Levinson 1998, p. 228). The experience of *exact* resemblance is the asymptote of the experience of degrees of resemblance or similarity. One's experience when looking at an emu might be that its appearance is roughly similar to that of an ostrich; that of a jackdaw closely similar to that of a rook; and that of a crow exactly similar to that of another crow. In contrast, the discreteness of the experience of aspects is evident especially in the case of experiences of puzzle-pictures, where suddenly the object 'leaps out' of the lines—the aspect 'dawns', as Wittgenstein put it.

In the rest of this section I will confine my remarks to cases where the primary objects and the secondary objects are particular objects.

Transitivity. It would be a mistake to claim that perceived resemblance or perceived exact resemblance exhibits full-blooded transitivity. However it comes close in a way that aspect-perception does not. If one perceives x as *exactly* resembling y (in outline shape say), and if one

perceives y as exactly resembling z (same), then it stands to reason that one can perceive x as *closely* (perhaps exactly) resembling z . If one perceives x as *closely* resembling y , and y as closely or exactly resembling z , then one can perceive x as resembling (perhaps exactly or perhaps closely) z . We're talking about the human mind so one naturally hesitates to bring in numbers, but in general: Let Rxy be the degree of perceived resemblance between x and y (where $0 \leq Rxy \leq 1$). Then—at least plausibly—if for some values μ and ν , $Rxy = \mu$ and $Ryz = \nu$, then $Rxz \geq \mu\nu$. The perceived resemblance of x with z is roughly at least the product of the degree of resemblance of x and y and the degree of resemblance of y and z .

There is, I take it, no temptation to think that seeing-as exhibits such transitivity or near-transitivity, even though one can find or dream up individual cases where x is seen y , y is seen as z , and x is seen as z (for example: a case where one sees a drawing as a certain person, and one can see the person as the person's twin, and also sees the drawing as the person's twin).

Symmetry. If one perceives x as resembling y , then one can perceive y as resembling x . Seeing-as exhibits no such symmetry. If one sees a cloud as a certain dog, say Snoopy, it is quite rare that one can see the dog as the cloud. But in the special case of faces, for example, one may see a face as another (one speaks of seeing a 'likeness'), and the other as the one. Aspect-perception is thus nonsymmetric, not asymmetric.

Reflexivity. Irrespective of the general fact that symmetry and transitivity imply reflexivity, I take it that whereas one's natural reaction to a non-metaphorical utterance of 'I see the duck as itself'—understood as wide scope or *de dicto*—would be incomprehension, one's natural reaction to 'The duck resembles itself', or 'I see the duck as resembling itself', would merely be an eye roll, as if the speaker had advanced a bad-joke tautology. As in 'Yes all right you win there is one thing present that the duck resembles, namely itself'. But the case of the utterance 'I see the duck as the duck' or 'I see the duck as itself', the utterance, if not patent nonsense, stands in need of special explanation.

To sum up: Aspect-perception is nontransitive, nonsymmetric, (presumably) irreflexive and categorical. Perceived or subjective resemblance is weakly or faintly transitive, symmetric, reflexive and graded.

2. Material Difference. The contrast between aspects and resemblance also emerges in the following way. That the experience of resemblance or similarity of two objects does not require one of aspect-perception involving the two is evident from cases like the similarity of various stones one finds in the shallow of a stream; one doesn't see one as another, but of course one may see them as resembling. The other way round does appear to hold: one sees x as y only if one sees x as resembling y . But the experience of aspect-perception does not require that it be backed by or entail an experience of resemblance in any respect in particular; one can see one face in another without being able to specify what it is about the one in virtue of which one sees it in the other.

References

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