

I am writing a book manuscript, titled *Sensibilia: An Account of Sensory Perception and its Objects*. At its core, the book argues that our metaphysical theories must be responsive to the deliverances of our senses. It is standard to assume that metaphysical inquiry is prior to, and stands above, ordinary everyday experience. To dismantle this assumption, I demonstrate how a familiar class of sensory phenomena undermines a metaphysical framework that traces all the way back to Aristotle – a framework that is widely accepted even today. I then develop a reformed metaphysics that is informed by, and thereby has expansive ramifications for, our account of sensory perception, sensory delusions and the nature of the sensible world.

The book is situated at the intersection of the history of philosophy, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, and is correspondingly divided into three sections. Given the wide-ranging character of the topics covered, the book should appeal to professional philosophers, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates interested in any of those fields. While the argument unfolds over the course of the whole manuscript, the individual sections are sufficiently self-standing to make them useful in a variety of pedagogical contexts. In what follows, I provide a brief sketch of each section.

When carving up reality into its fundamental constituents in the *Categories*, Aristotle draws a sharp distinction between two kinds of being: substances and properties.<sup>1</sup> Substances are entities that enjoy a wholly independent existence and are ‘neither said of a subject nor in a subject’<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, properties exist only by *inhering* in substances. Aristotle’s examples are a particular piece of grammatical knowledge and a particular whiteness. The key idea is that is always appropriate to ask, “Whose knowledge?” or “What thing’s whiteness?”

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<sup>1</sup> More precisely, Aristotle is concerned with the distinction between substances and *instances* of properties (“accidents”). I will use the term “properties” as shorthand.

<sup>2</sup> Ackrill, J. L. (1963). *Aristotle: Categories and De Interpretatione*. Clarendon Press, 2a11-13.

The Aristotelian framework enjoys widespread acceptance up to the present day. The problem, however, is that it fails to account for a class of sensory experiences with which we are all familiar. When a neuroscientist pokes electrodes into a patient's brain, or when someone experiments with a hallucinogenic drug or experiences a simple afterimage, the subject reports having vivid experiences of sensibilia—colors and shapes, smells and sounds—in the absence of any physical objects that could serve as the bearers of these qualities. Nor can the perceiver's mind serve as the requisite bearer. When MacBeth, hallucinating, asks “is this a dagger which I see before me...on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,” surely we are not to conclude that his mind has itself turned sharp and blood-stained.

In order to make sense of the possibility of such experiences, I turn to an insight from the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley. In defense of his idealism, Berkeley famously argues for two claims. First, he argues that sensible qualities like color and shape do not inhere in material substances. Second, he argues that *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived. I interpret this maxim to mean that minds can bring entities into existence just by perceiving them. Perception, for Berkeley, is a relation, distinct from inherence, that mental substances stand in to the qualities that they support.

Where does this leave the traditional metaphysics that we inherited from Aristotle? In the second section of the book, I propose that we clearly distinguish between the notions of *inherence* and *instantiation*. Aristotle is right that substances must always explain the *instantiation* of qualities – they must explain why a particular redness or sharpness exists. But we should not infer that qualities must always *inhere* in substances; that is, we need not assume that, whenever a quality is instantiated, a substance serves as its bearer. In the technical jargon of contemporary metaphysics, the fact that redness is instantiated must be grounded in an asymmetric relation of dependence that redness stands in to a relevant substance, but this asymmetric relation need not always be that of inherence. Perception, I argue, is a distinct asymmetric relation by which the instantiation of redness can be explained.

In the third and final section of the book, I enumerate the payoffs of this metaphysical framework, applying it to a series of problems in the philosophy of perception. First, why can sensory delusions fool subjects into thinking that they are perceiving? I argue that once we see that qualities like color and shape can be instantiated in the absence of any bearers, we can explain why hallucinatory experiences have the character they do: the redness that Macbeth hallucinates genuinely exists in the world, it just depends for its existence on Macbeth's awareness. Second, if the colors and shapes we perceive have their existence secured by our minds, don't we lose all perceptual contact with the external world? Here, I show that, on the framework I develop, our minds can work in tandem with the external world in perception, rather than hiding it behind a veil of ideas. Given that our minds do not serve as the *bearers* of the qualities they support, those qualities can still inhere in ordinary, physical objects. For example, the pain that I feel in my leg exists only so long as I am aware of it, but it can still be located in an ordinary physical limb. Similarly, even if my mind secures the existence of a tomato's redness by perceiving it, that very redness can nonetheless inhere in the physical tomato itself.

As proof of concept, I have published a series of papers in leading peer-reviewed journals that develop the broad contours of this metaphysical framework and its application to some problems of perception. In addition, I was recently awarded an extremely competitive fellowship at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina in support of the book project. The fellowship gives me the opportunity to spend the entirety of this coming academic year at the Center working on the book without any teaching or service responsibilities. My goal is to have a completed draft of the book by August 2023.

Relevant Publications

- Sethi, U. (2022). “Sensible Individuation.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12908>
- Sethi, U. (2021). “The Varieties of Instantiation.” *The Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 7(3): 417-437.
- Sethi, U. (2021). “Mind-Dependence in Berkeley and the Problem of Perception.” *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 99(4): 648-668.
- Sethi, U. (2020). “Sensible Over-Determination.” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 70/280: 588-616.