

How picture perception defies cognitive impenetrability

Alberto Voltolini

University of Turin, Italy

According to the thesis of the cognitive impenetrability of perception to thought – from now onwards, (TCI) – both the phenomenal character and the intentional content of perceptual states are impermeable to states of their subjects' cognitive systems. This means that no change in the content of the latter states alters either feature of the former states. Now, perception of ambiguous figures is held to be a prima facie counterexample to (TCI), for what one takes to be the picture influences what experience she has when facing the picture, hence it induces two different (picture) perceptions. A defender of (TCI) may well reply that in the Gestalt switch involving ambiguous figures there is indeed a phenomenological change, yet this change is only indirectly driven by the states of the cognitive system involved. For, first, those states rather induce a shift in attention, and second, this shift of attention is responsible for the phenomenological switch. Yet let us consider first the fact that in perception of ambiguous figures attention works differently than in the ordinary perceptual cases in which there is no real cognitive penetration; namely, as an active focusing on the very same elements of the figure to be alternatively grasped rather than as a focusing on a different part of the scene one was previously facing. Moreover, let us take into account the fact that picture perception of ambiguous figures is just a borderline case of ordinary picture perception, for picture perceptions both of ambiguous figures and of 'normal' figures are characterized by the lighting up of aspects (different aspects in the former case, just one aspect in the latter case). Then, the above reply may be appropriately circumvented: insofar as in picture perception attention performs a grouping job of the very same elements of the figure one is facing and such an attentive job may suit a conceptual research, concepts mobilized by the states of the cognitive system involved may well help attention to perform such a job by conceptually informing the picture perception a subject entertains.