

Perception and Mind-Dependence – Lecture 1

1 These Lectures

We'll be considering different philosophical perspectives on the nature of perceptual experience. Our way into this will be through considering **Common-Sense Realism**, and how this comes under attack from reflections on perceptual experience. It has been held that reflecting on illusory experiences ultimately compels us to *deny* Common-Sense Realism. That is the point of the **Argument from Illusion**. This week we'll get clear on what Common-Sense Realism is, and outline the Argument from Illusion.

2 Common-Sense Realism

Common-Sense Realism

- (1) The familiar material objects we ordinarily take the world to be populated by – e.g., tables, stones, pieces of fruit, and so on – actually exist.
- (2) These familiar objects exist in the manner we ordinarily think they do: they have a mind-independent existence.
- (3) We are sometimes perceptually aware of such mind-independent material objects.

It does seem quite obvious that the world includes material objects, which are mind-independent, and which we sometimes perceive.

3 Clarifying Common Sense Realism

3.1 Claim (1) – Material Objects

The first claim of Common-Sense Realism is an ontological claim, it is a claim about what there is: there are such things as the familiar material objects which we ordinarily think exist. So things like apples, chairs, bicycles, and the like, do in fact exist. These are substantial three-dimensional space occupying things; entities which fill space and which can persist through time. – Contrasts with error-theory/nihilism.

The claim is modest. Not a claim about *all there is*. (There are also features, events, etc). Not a claim about *what is fundamental*. (Perhaps material objects are non-basic, build up out of more basic things).

3.2 Claim (2) – Mind-Independence

Common-Sense Realism says that material objects are mind-independent in that they don't depend for their existence and nature on our *perceptual awareness of them*. Some of them may depend (in some sense) on other sorts of psychological state.

Metaphysical Awareness-Dependence

For a thing x to be metaphysically awareness-dependent is for it to be of such a kind – for it to have such a nature – that for it to exist and be as it is, it must be an object of perceptual awareness (it must be perceived). We can think of such things as *constituted* by perceptual awareness: *what it is* for them to exist is for them to be objects of perceptual awareness. Metaphysically awareness-dependent entities are thus mental entities of a certain sort.

This is a cashing out of Berkeley's dictum: *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived. Contrast this with *causal* awareness-dependence, and *counterfactual* awareness-dependence, neither of which are sufficient for metaphysical awareness-dependence.

Causal Dependence

The existence of x is caused by of causally sustained by perceptual awareness of x .

Not sufficient for metaphysical awareness-dependence:

Destructive Mechanisms

Suppose that there are destructive mechanisms in place in this building. They are set to detonate powerful explosives which would destroy the building. But now suppose that the mechanisms are being inhibited by our awareness of the building. Our awareness is causally hooked up to the mechanisms – perhaps through complicated connections from our brains – in a way which triggers an inhibitor, so the explosives don't detonate. So the building is causally sustained by our awareness of it, thanks to the causal link from our awareness to the inhibitors.

The fate of the building is curiously *causally* hooked up to our awareness, even though the building is not a mental entity. The causal dependence of the building on our awareness has nothing to do with *the nature of the building*. But metaphysical awareness-dependence demands that the thing is an object of awareness because of the very nature it has.

Counterfactual Dependence

If we were not aware of x , x would not exist. (That is, in close possible worlds in which we are not aware of x , x doesn't exist).

We can use the example we just used to show why this can't be sufficient for metaphysical awareness-dependence, but here is another example:

Fruit Ninja Destroyers

Take a piece of fruit where if we were not to be aware of it, it wouldn't exist. For suppose there is a team of Fruit Ninjas who have this policy: they slice and destroy all and only fruit we are not aware of. So if we were not to be aware of the fruit the team of Fruit Ninjas would destroy it, and it wouldn't exist. Thus the fruit is counterfactually dependent upon our awareness of it.

But again, the way the fruit depends on awareness is not traceable to the very nature of the fruit. Just because the Fruit Ninjas will destroy fruit that we are not aware of doesn't mean that it is in the nature of such fruit to be objects of awareness.

So: if x is causally or counterfactually dependent upon awareness, that isn't enough for x to be metaphysically dependent on awareness. (Though if x is metaphysically awareness-dependent, then it is counterfactually awareness-dependent).

The second claim of Common-Sense Realism is then this:

- (2*) Material objects are not metaphysically awareness-dependent; it is not in their nature that they are perceived, they are not constituted by perceptual awareness of them.

This is very intuitive. We think that things like apples exist in themselves, independently of our awareness of them. We can *become* aware of them, but becoming aware of them is *not* their coming to be.

Contrast this with **Berkeleyan Idealism** – material objects are in fact mental entities, constituted by perceptions of them. Berkeley holds first that material objects are in fact nothing but bundles of sensible qualities. This apple is a bundle of qualities, a particular colour, form and size, and so on. But second, these *qualities* are nothing but ideas in the mind. Thus Berkeley thinks of objects as collections of ideas:

And as several of these [ideas] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name *apple*. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things...(Berkeley (1734), 1.1)

For Berkeley ideas are *metaphysically awareness-dependent* entities. It is in their nature that they are objects of perception. This is how we can interpret this remark among others:

it seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose) cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them (1.3).

If we put all of this together, the apple itself – and objects more generally – are metaphysically awareness-dependent; nothing but bundles of mental entities of a certain kind, namely, ideas. Thus Berkeley is able to say

The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it... [For such objects] their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them (1.3).

Obvious objection: surely things like apples will continue to exist even if we direct our attention away from them. Or even if we all perished and there was no perception left at all! Reply: Berkeley distinguished between finite spirits or minds – like ours – and the infinite spirit or mind: God. The

qualities – ideas – which comprise the apple are awareness-dependent but they depend upon the all encompassing mind of God who perceives at all times. We may go out of the room and not perceive the apple, but it still remains insofar as it is constituted by the mind of God.

In claiming that material objects are awareness-*independent* the Common-Sense Realist endorses *Realism* about material objects, as opposed to *Idealism*. Here ‘realism’ is a label for the position that material objects are metaphysically awareness-independent.

3.3 Claim (3) – Perceptual Awareness

Consciously seeing an object is one way of being perceptually aware of it, so is feeling an object, hearing an object, and so on. Common-sense is committed to the idea that we are sometimes perceptually aware of mind-independent material objects. As the great Scotch Philosopher David Hume notes, we instinctively

suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other. This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist, independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. Our presence bestows not being on it: our absence does not annihilate it. It preserves its existence uniform and entire, independent of the situation of intelligent beings, who perceive or contemplate it (Hume (1748/1772) 12.8).

Common-Sense Realism makes an even more modest claim: we are *sometimes* perceptually aware of mind-independent material objects. We might also be aware sometimes of awareness-*dependent* entities.

We recognize, to put things very broadly, two categories of perceptual awareness:

- (i) *Veridical experience*: e.g., where one sees an apple and has an experience in which it looks red to one, and it in fact is that way.
- (ii) *Illusory experience*: e.g., where one sees an apple and has an experience in which it looks red to one, when in fact it is some other colour, e.g., green.

Compare such experiences to **hallucinations**: e.g., where one has an experience as of pink rats in the corner, or voices telling one what to do. We don’t think that these are cases of perceptual awareness. They are cases where it *seems to one* as if one has perceptual awareness, but one doesn’t. This is because in such cases the things one seems to be aware of *are not there* (or if they are, there being there is *irrelevant* to the experience which is a result of, e.g., some brain malfunction, or, e.g., a drug, or whatever, not the object).

An experience counts as **perceptual awareness** of an object only if (a) the object is there (to be seen, heard, felt, etc), and (b) the object is relevant in some sense to the experience one has.

Note that it is a matter of debate what it takes for an object to be *relevant* to the experience one has: must it cause it? If so, in what way? Perhaps instead it is part of what constitutes it? But we won’t get into these debates.

Our ordinary perspective on veridical and illusory experiences is that they are forms of perceptual awareness, and so satisfy these conditions. Hallucination is not a form of perceptual awareness because it fails to satisfy either or both of the conditions.

The Common-Sense Realist idea that we are sometimes perceptually aware of mind-independent material objects, then, is correct if we ever have illusory or veridical experiences of material objects.

This common-sense idea is important for at least two reasons: (i) it articulates something that seems to be true about our relationship to reality. It thus forms part of our how we understand *ourselves* as beings in the world. And (ii) it is part of what informs (1) and (2) of Common-Sense Realism. We so readily admit that there are mind-independent material objects because when we reflect upon our relationship to reality we see ourselves as beings who *sometimes perceive such objects*. That's why reflecting upon perception can guide us, as it does, to a conception of the world as a world involving these familiar objects, existing independently of our awareness of them (Strawson (1979)).

Challenges to claim (3) of Common-Sense Realism are thus important: if the claim is false, then (i) we have to re-think our conception of how we relate to reality. And (ii) though it doesn't show that there aren't any mind-independent material objects, it will mean that we face a serious question about why we believe there are.

4 The Argument from Illusion

The Argument from Illusion tries to show that: **we are never perceptually aware of mind-independent material objects**. It occurs in many writings in early 20th century philosophy of perception, e.g., in work by Cantabrigian philosophers C.D. Broad, G.E. Moore, and Bertrand Russell. Also discussed by contemporary philosophers who don't endorse it, but want to get clear on what the argument is – Howard Robinson, A.D. Smith, and Tim Crane. We will draw on the contemporary expositions.

The argument has a two-stage structure (Snowdon (1992)). In the first stage it tries to get to the conclusion that: *in illusions* we are not perceptually aware of material objects. The stage Snowdon calls the Base Case Stage (p. 68), and the claim it aims to establish is what I call the *Interim Negative Claim*. The second stage of argument, what we can call the Spreading Step, aims to generalize the Interim Negative Claim to veridical cases too, and so we end up with what we can call *The Negative Claim*: *we are never perceptually aware of material objects*.

The Base Case Stage

- (i) When one is subject to an illusory experience, there sensibly appears to a subject to be something which has a sensible quality, *F*, which the mind-independent material object supposedly being perceived does not actually have.
- (ii) **(Phenomenal Principle)** When, in perceptual experience, it sensibly appears to one that something has a sensible quality, *F*, then there is something of which one is aware which does have this quality.

Therefore,

- (iii) **(Interim Negative Claim)** In cases of illusion, one is not aware of the mind-independent material object one takes oneself to be aware of. (Since the mind-independent object doesn't have the quality *F*.)

The Spreading Step

- (iv) The same account of experience must apply to both illusory experiences and veridical experiences.

Therefore,

- (v) **(Negative Claim)** One is never aware of mind-independent material objects in perceptual experience.

Let's run this through with an example. Take Bob who looks at a pure white wall in peculiar lighting conditions so as it looks yellow to him:

The Base Case

- (1) It seems to Bob that something has the quality of yellowness, yet the wall is not yellow.
- (2) Bob is perceptually aware of something which is yellow.
- (3) Since the wall is not yellow, Bob is not aware of the wall after all.

The Spreading Step

- (4) The same account of experience must apply to both illusory experiences and veridical experiences.

Therefore,

- (5) Even in a supposed veridical experience of a yellow wall, Bob is not aware of the wall.

Next week we will discuss the argument in more depth and begin scrutinizing it. **Homework:** think for yourself about the argument.

References

- Berkeley, George (1734). *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.
Hume, David (1748/1772). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.
Snowdon, Paul F. (1992). "How to Interpret 'Direct Perception'". In: *The Contents of Experience*. Ed. by Tim Crane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 48–78.
Strawson, P. F. (1979). "Perception and its Objects". In: *Perception and Identity: Essays Presented to A. J. Ayer with His Replies*. Ed. by Graham Macdonald. London: Macmillan.

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