

## *Perception and Mind-Dependence – Lecture 2*

### 1 Recap

#### Crane2001

##### **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 ordinary objects exist in the manner we ordinarily think they do: they have a mind-independent existence (i.e., they are not metaphysically awareness dependent).
- (3) We are sometimes perceptually aware of such mind-independent material objects (i.e., either in illusions or veridical perceptions).

Challenged by Argument from Illusion. This argument is consistent with the existence of mind-independent material objects, but targets claim (3) of Common-Sense Realism: it tries to establish that we are never aware of mind-independent material objects. If successful, we might begin to wonder why we should believe in ordinary objects in the first place.

Here is the argument (Snowdon (1992) highlights the two-stage structure, the rest of the reconstruction is based on Robinson (1994), Smith (2002), and Crane (2011)):

##### **The Base Case Stage**

- (i) When one is subject to an illusory experience, there sensibly appears to one to be something which has a sensible quality,  $F$ , which the ordinary 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 ordinary object one is supposedly perceiving.

##### **The Spreading Step**

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

Therefore,

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

## 2 This Week

- We'll see how the argument is supposed to work in detail.
- We'll see what support there is for each stage.
- We'll conclude that it is probably best to attack the Base Case Stage, not Spreading Step.

## 3 The Phenomenal Principle and The Sense-Datum Theory

The argument in Base Case Stage pivots on the Phenomenal Principle. This reflects a particular theory of perceptual experience: a *sense-datum theory*. Here is Mike Martin (2003) describing the core of the theory:

Moore, Russell, Broad, and Price all assume that whenever one has a sensory experience – when one perceives an object or when at least it appears to one as if something is there – then there must actually be something which one stands in the relation of sensing to; indeed they assume there must be something which actually has the qualities which it seems to one the object sensed has. So if it now looks to me as if there is a brown expanse before me as I stare at the table, then an actual brown expanse must exist and be sensed by me. This is so even if we consider a case in which I am misperceiving a white object as brown, or even suffering an hallucination or delusion of the presence of brown tables when none are in the vicinity. (p. 521).

### Sense-Datum Theory

A perceptual experience in which it sensibly appears to  $S$  that something has a sensible quality  $F$  consists in a relation of sensory awareness between  $S$  and something – a sense-datum – which instantiates the quality  $F$ .

The Phenomenal Principle is a consequence of this, and can be reworded to include the terminology of sense-data.

### Phenomenal Principle – Sense-Data

When, in perceptual experience, it sensibly appears to one that something has a sensible quality,  $F$ , then there is something – a *sense-datum* – of which one is aware which does have this quality.

### But the Phenomenal Principle itself doesn't give us any details about the nature of sense-data.

We are in the position that Price (1932, pp. 18-19) was in when he first introduced sense-data into his discussion:

We are not committed to any view about what is called 'the status' of sense-data in the Universe, either as regards the category they fall under, or as regards their relations with other types of existent entities. They may be physical; i.e. they may be parts of, or events in material objects such as chairs and tables or (in another theory) brains. They may be mental, as Berkeley and others have held. They may be neither mental nor physical.

- ‘Sense-datum’ is a **functional term** not substantive term. It picks out something which plays a particular role, not an ontologically unified kind of thing: the sense-datum, in an experience in which it appears to one as if something is *F*, is just *whatever it is* that one is aware of which has that quality.
- Consistently with the Phenomenal Principle, different sorts of things may play the role of sense-data in different cases. (If we simply apply the Phenomenal Principle to a veridical case – e.g., where one sees a white wall as white – what should we say is the sense-datum one is aware of in this case?)
- To get to a more substantive/metaphysically committed conception of sense-data more argument is needed. The Phenomenal Principle doesn’t provide it. All we are entitled to conclude about sense-data, on the basis of the Phenomenal Principle, is just that sense-data are:
  - (1) Things capable of bearing sensible qualities.
  - (2) Things capable of being objects of awareness.

## 4 How the Base Case Stage is Supposed to Work

In brief: what the stage aims to establish is:

### Interim Negative Claim

In an illusory experience one is not aware of the ordinary object one takes oneself to be aware of.

And the idea is that if we apply the Phenomenal Principle to illusory experiences we get the conclusion that in an illusion one is aware of a sense-datum **which is non-identical to the ordinary object**. And so one is not aware of the ordinary object in such cases after all – as the Interim Negative Claim says.

**[NOTE THAT THIS IS LOGICALLY INVALID, BUT WE WILL COME BACK TO WHY IN LECTURE 4. FOR NOW LET’S JUST PLAY ALONG AND PRETEND IT IS VALID.]**

In a bit more detail: If we apply the Sense-Datum Theory/Phenomenal Principle to *illusory experiences*, we get this result: *in an illusion* one is aware of a sense-datum distinct from the ordinary object one is supposedly perceiving. For consider what we must say of illusory experiences on the sense-datum theory:

### Sense-Datum Account of Illusions

An illusory experience is a case in which some material object *x* sensibly appears to *S* to have sensible quality *F*, even though *x* doesn’t actually have *F*. These experiences consist in a relation of sensory awareness between *S* and something, *y*, a sense-datum, which *does* instantiate the quality *F*, and so which isn’t the material object supposedly being perceived, *x* (given Leibniz’s Law). **Illusory experiences are thus relations between subjects and sense-data distinct from the material objects they are supposedly perceiving.**

The arguer from illusion thinks this gives us the Interim Negative Claim: in illusions, one is aware of a sense-datum distinct from the ordinary object, so one is not aware of the ordinary object.

## 5 Motivating the Phenomenal Principle

Let's assume this bit of the argument is valid, so if the premises are true, the Interim Negative Claim is established. (We'll return to validity in Lecture 4). The main premise is the Phenomenal Principle. What support is there for this?

Is the Phenomenal Principle just obviously correct? Price seemed to think so:

When I say 'This table appears brown to me' it is quite plain that I am acquainted with an actual instance of brownness (or equally plainly with a pair of instances when I see double). This cannot indeed be proved, but it is absolutely evident and indubitable (p. 63, see also p. 3).

Might question this. But explanatory motivation: why do things look or appear the way they do? Why do things look green to me, when I see the green apple, as opposed to pink? Appeal to the actual presence of sense-data instantiating qualities can play an explanatory role here. (See Broad (1923, p. 240), and Smith (2002, p, 40)).

There is some *prima facie* motivation, but does the Phenomenal Principle provide the *only* explanation of the phenomenological facts? Does it provide the *best* explanation? (We'll explore this more next week).

## 6 The Spreading Step

We haven't *established* the Phenomenal Principle. But there is some support for it. So, assuming the Base Case Stage is valid, we can assume the following is in good order:

### Interim Negative Claim

In an illusory experience one is not aware of the ordinary object one takes oneself to be aware of.

But the arguer from illusion ultimately wants to get us to a more general negative conclusion:

### Negative Claim

We are never aware of the ordinary objects we seem to be aware of in perceptual experience.

To get to this she tries to *spread* the argument beyond the case of illusion to experiences more generally.

- Spreading Step: the account we give of the *veridical* case has to be the same as the account we give of the *illusory* case. What is the upshot of this? Even in veridical cases we are aware only of sense-data distinct from the ordinary objects, not the ordinary objects themselves.
- Needs some justification. For it is not a logical contradiction to say that the nature of illusory experiences is fundamentally different to the nature of veridical experiences.

Continuity motivation: Expressed by C. D. Broad (1952) as follows:

No doubt it would be possible in theory to admit [what we have admitted about illusory experiences], and yet to maintain that in the one case of direct vision through a homogeneous medium one really is (as one appears to oneself to be in *all* cases) prehending a part of the coloured surface of a remote foreign body. But, in view of the continuity between the most normal and the most abnormal cases of seeing, such a doctrine would be utterly implausible and could be defended only by the most desperate special pleading (p. 8).

Howard Robinson (1994) helpfully elaborates on what Broad has in mind here:

The 'continuity' in question is obvious. There is no absolute distinction between a state of tiredness in which things look slightly less clear and a less tired state, or between accurate vision and very slight short-sightedness...It is, therefore, very implausible to say that some of these cases involve direct apprehension of an external object and in the others of a sense-datum [distinct from the external object]. So the argument generalises easily (p. 57).

One can go smoothly from illusory to veridical experiences and vice versa, there can be seamless, continuous transitions between them. These transitions don't at all seem to be from one kind of state to another, with different objects across the states. Thus it seems plausible to demand that the same account be given of illusory and veridical experiences.

Consider also what Smith (2002) says here:

Consider, for example, the common phenomenon of looking at an article of clothing under the artificial lighting of a shop and discovering its "real" colour in daylight. To deny the generalizing step is to suppose that as you walk out of the shop while looking at your purchase, you only become directly aware of that physical item as you emerge into daylight (assuming that this is when an object shows its true colours). Only then does that physical object suddenly leap into your perception *in propria persona*. Before then you were dealing with a train of...sense-data. Or consider the way in which our awareness of colours objects changes as dawn gives way to the full light of morning, or as dusk descends. There is no even anything artificial about dawn or dusk. Anyone who [accepted] the earlier stages of the Argument [from Illusion] and [attempted] to block it only by denying the last, generalizing step...would be forced to conclude that at some point between dawn, and say, noon, we are suddenly vouchsafed a direct glimpse of physical objects themselves, and that as dusk descends there comes a point at which we begin radically to lose touch with reality. And what about moderately short-sighted people who remove their spectacles? And colour-blind people all the time? It is clear that the notion of direct contact with reality that is being defended here is not one that a [Common-Sense Realist] should welcome, since it finds no place in the common-sense view of the world that the [Common-Sense Realist] is trying to defend. Such a manoeuvre in the response to the Argument is committed to an absurdly static view of what constitutes awareness of the world. Genuine, direct awareness of the physical world consists, on such a view, of a number of shots of the world taken from ideal positions (in some sense), with any departure from these ideal poses constituting a perceptual loss of the world itself. The picture of our daily commerce with the world through perception that therefore emerges is one of a usually indirect awareness of physical

objects occasionally interrupted by direct visions of them glimpsed in favoured positions. If one is unhappy with the Argument from Illusion because of its clash with basic everyday convictions about perceptual commerce with the physical world, denying it only at the last step is not the way to respond to it (pp. 27–28).

There is obviously a lot going on in this passage, but what I want to extract is this:

- Start by forgetting about the first stage of the argument and take just the idea that we should give the same account of the illusions and veridical experiences. Now note that *this is exactly the Common-Sense Realist* perspective. For we think that both illusions and veridical experiences are cases where we are *aware of material objects*.
- This is illustrated with an example: When one changes one's point of view to view some clothes in better light, we go from seeing illusorily to seeing veridically, but surely this doesn't constitute a change in *object of experience*, first a non-ordinary sense-datum, then the clothes (some ordinary objects). The common-sense perspective is that one is aware of the same objects across these changes (there is continuity).
- So the Common-Sense Realist starting point should be to *endorse* the Spreading Step.

So here is the problem for the Common-Sense Realist regarding the Spreading Step: if it is *accepted* in conjunction with the earlier part of argument, Common-Sense Realism is false (the Negative Claim follows). If it is *denied*, then this is to relinquish an aspect of our common-sense understanding of our relationship to the world (which can seem like 'special pleading'). And so, Smith urges, the Common-Sense Realist is better off trying to reject the *other* part of the argument, the Base Case Stage.

We'll explore such rejections in lectures 3 and 4.

## References

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