

## *Perception and Mind-Dependence – Lecture 3*

### 1 This Week

Goals: (a) To consider, and reject, the Sense-Datum Theorist's attempt to save Common-Sense Realism by making themselves Indirect Realists. (b) To undermine the Phenomenal Principle, and thus the Argument from Illusion .

### 2 Direct and Indirect Perception

We can rejig the Argument so as its conclusion isn't so radical:

#### **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) **(Revised 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 **directly aware** which does have this quality.

Therefore,

- (iii) **(Revised Interim Negative Claim)** In cases of illusion, one is not **directly 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) **(Revised Negative Claim)** One is never **directly aware** of ordinary objects in perceptual experience.

We can work with this understanding of Indirect Awareness:

#### **Indirect Awareness**

$S$  is *indirectly* aware of  $x$  iff  $S$  is aware of  $x$  in virtue of being aware of a distinct thing  $y$ .  
(Here  $y$  serves as a perceptual proxy or mediator.)

### Indirect Realism

There are mind-independent material objects (Realism). And we are sometimes perceptually aware of them. But our awareness of them is only ever *indirect*, that is, we are only ever aware of them in virtue of being aware of distinct sense-data (Indirectness).

A claim about the structure of our perceptual awareness of ordinary objects: that it is mediated. With that in mind consider the following from Russell (1912)

what the senses immediately tell us is not the truth about the object as it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, so far as we can see, depend upon the relations between us and the object. Thus what we directly see and feel is merely 'appearance' which we believe to be a sign of some 'reality' beyond (p. 6).

Russell moves from a point in epistemology to a point in the philosophy of perception: we are focused just on the point about perception.

Indirect Realism is not an innocent position, it faces difficult theoretical questions:

- Why should direct awareness of a sense-datum distinct from an ordinary object give one indirect awareness of the ordinary object? Russell refers to the sense-data as *signs* of the ordinary objects "behind" them. We might say: we are aware of entities which represent ordinary objects, and that is why awareness of such entities gives us awareness of ordinary objects (Representative Realism). Only sketchy beginnings of an account. Why/how do the sense-data represent what they do?
- In order to make Indirect Realism work the Sense-Datum Theorist needs to give us *much more* about what sense-data are. And this requires the Indirect Realist to go beyond the resources of the Argument from Illusion.

Difficult questions aside, Indirect Realism promises us this result:

### Saving Common-Sense Realism

Common-Sense Realism says that we are sometimes perceptually aware of ordinary objects, the revised Argument from Illusion and Indirect Realism is perfectly consistent with this. It just insists that we are only ever *indirectly* aware of such objects.

**But this doesn't work. For Common-Sense Realism should take a direct realist form.** The idea that perceptual awareness of objects is mediated needs philosophical reflection, argument, and theory. A more untutored and common-sense perspective doesn't make use of the idea of such perceptual proxies for typical cases. Such cases strike us as cases simply as cases of being given ordinary objects.

Common-sense descriptions of the character of our experiences are given with reference to the *aspects of the world out there we take ourselves to perceive*, without the need for appeal to mediating proxies; sense-data, ideas, images, impressions, and what have you. Perceptual proxies have no place in a *common-sense* perspective on mundane cases of experience.

In many cases, when we reflect upon our own experiences, they strike us **transparent to the ordinary objects in the world**. If asked to direct our attention to the sensuous character of such experiences, we *see right through* to those ordinary objects and qualities out there themselves.

Suppose a non-philosophical observer gazing idly through a window. To him we address the request, 'Give us a description of your current visual experience', or 'How is it with you, visually, at the moment?' Uncautioned as to exactly what we want, he might reply in some such terms as these: 'I see the red light of the sun setting filtering through the black and thickly clustered branches of the elms; I see the dappled deer grazing in groups on the vivid green grass...' and so on (Strawson (1979, p. 43)).

Thus Common-Sense Realism should be understood as minimally *direct realist*: we are sometimes **directly aware** of ordinary objects. So the Indirect Realist move doesn't save Common-Sense Realism.

### 3 Representationalism

An alternative: the *Representational Theory of Experience* or *Representationalism* (sometimes also 'the intentional theory of experience' or 'intentionalism', see e.g., Crane (2001, 2009, 2013) and Searle (1983)). Let's consider the view with reference to two questions we want any theory of perceptual experience to answer:

**Question 1:** What is the nature of perceptual experience?

**Question 2:** Why do things appear the way they do in experience?

#### 3.1 What is the Nature of Perceptual Experience?

Bob sees the wall as white in colour:

- (1) Bob's experience has a **subject-matter**: it is about or concerns something. His experience concerns *the wall*.
- (2) Bob's experience is a state of mind involving a certain **mode**: it is a *perceptual experience* as opposed to a hope, or a desire (or whatever), and it is a *visual* experience, not an auditory or olfactory experience (or whatever).
- (3) Bob's experience has a certain **representational content**. That is, his experience represents the subject-matter (the wall) in a certain way. Bob's experience represents the wall as white. (Different experiences may have different contents, despite sameness of subject-matter. E.g., you may visually represent the wall as yellow.)

This makes Bob's experience akin to other representational states of mind: consider *belief*:

Bob's belief that Nigel Farage is a bigot:

- (1) Bob's belief has a **subject-matter**: it is about or concerns Nigel Farage.
- (2) Bob's belief is a state of mind in a certain **mode**: it is a *belief* as opposed to a hope, or a perception, or whatever.
- (3) Bob's belief has a **representational content**: it represents Farage as being a *bigot*. (Different beliefs may have different contents, despite sameness of subject-matter e.g., you may believe that Farage is a moron – your belief thus represents Farage in a different way to Bob's).

(Other terminology: subject-matter gets called “intentional object”, and this aspect of states of mind reflects their *intentionality* – the idea of the mind’s directedness on its objects. Mode gets called “attitude”. And representational content gets called “intentional content”.)

Open questions:

- What sort of representational content does experience have? Is it the same sort as what beliefs and/or linguistic representations have? Is it more like what paintings have? Is it something else? Does it require the subject of the experience to possess the concepts which characterize it? (That is, is it conceptual content?)
- What sort of mode of representation is *experiencing*. Can it be assimilated to a sort of *believing* or *knowing*? Or perhaps experiencing is a *sui generis* mode of representing.

### 3.2 Why Do Things Appear The Way They Do?

What gives perceptual experiences their sensuous characters?

#### Explaining Sensuous Character

In seeing the wall as white, *the wall* appears *white* to Bob because of his experience’s representational nature: that is, because Bob’s experience concerns *the wall*, and because it is a representing of the wall *as white* (in the visual mode), the wall appears white to Bob.

The way things look to Bob is accounted for in terms of the way Bob’s experience represents the world as being, and the mode in which his experience represents things. The representationalist holds that if we change the sensuous character of Bob’s experience (e.g., things go from looking white to Bob to looking yellow to Bob), then we must have a change in the underlying representational facts – e.g., changes to any or all of the subject-matter, mode, or representational content. (They might also hold that if we change the representational facts, we thereby change the sensuous character.)

### 3.3 Contrasts with the Sense-Datum Theory

#### Experiences are Representations not Relations

The representationalist thinks that experiences have a subject-matter: they are “of” or “as of” or are “about” or “concern” things. *But experiences are conceived as representations of a subject-matter not relations to it.* Experiences are not constituted by relations of direct awareness, but representations.

#### Representations Lack Existential Import

A representation of *x* doesn’t require the existence of *x*, but a relation to *x* does. (A representation in a picture of a unicorn doesn’t require the existence of a unicorn. But kicking a unicorn – bearing that sort of relation to it – does.)

Put this together and:

### Important Difference

On the representational view, one can have an experience in which there sensibly appears to be something which has a sensible quality *F*, *even in the absence of an F thing*. The subject-matter just needs to be *represented* not *really present*. The Phenomenal Principle demands that such experiences involve the real presence of an *F* thing which one is directly aware of. The representational view denies this.

Illustration:

### Pink Rat Example

One can have an experience in which there seems to be a pink rat in the corner even in the absence of any such *rat* in the corner. Both sides agree on this. But there is divergence:

*Sense-Datum View:*

The Sense-Datum Theorist then says: but one must be directly aware of a pink *thing* nonetheless, a pink *sense-datum* distinct from the rat. Therefore, there must be a pink thing, since awareness is a relation, and relations entail the existence of their relata. The real presence of the pink thing explains how the experience gets its pinkish sensuous character.

*Representational View:*

The Representationalist says that having this experience doesn't require direct awareness of *anything* (rat or otherwise). It is merely a matter of the *representation* of pink rat in the corner. And like representations more generally, this doesn't require the existence of the subject-matter represented, whether a pink rat, or a pink thing. The pinkish sensuous character of the experience comes from the *representation* of that colour quality as opposed to other colour qualities.

Given this, we can see how a Representationalist will account for illusion:

### Representational Account of Illusion

When Bob sees the white wall as yellow, the experience he has is a representational state, in the visual mode, in which Bob represents the wall as yellow. The yellowish sensuous character of his experience comes not from the the real presence of anything yellow, but rather from the representing, in the visual mode, of the wall as yellow. Since the wall is not yellow, the experience is inaccurate.

## 3.4 Conclusions?

The Representational View provides an **alternative explanation** of the *phenomenological facts* which seems just as good as the Sense-Datum Theorist's explanation. But **broader explanatory considerations seem to put Representationalism ahead:**

- (i) Cognitive Science Consideration: Representationalism makes good sense of how cognitive science treats experiences.

- (ii) Parsimony Consideration: Representationalism doesn't posit sense-data distinct from ordinary objects.
- (iii) Representationalism does, whereas the Sense-Datum Theory doesn't, save Common-Sense Realism.

Challenge One: Representationalism does away with the relation of awareness in its analysis of experience. But according to Common-Sense Realism we are sometimes directly aware of ordinary objects in illusory or veridical experiences.

Answer: Experience itself is understood in non-relational terms. But this is consistent with being aware of ordinary objects. Bob has an experience which represents the wall as *F*. That may be illusory or veridical. It is a visual representational state which represents the wall in a certain way. The wall itself is external to the state. The state itself is not constituted by a relation to the wall. But as long as in fact the wall is appropriately hooked up to the experience (e.g., by causing it in the right sort of way), Bob will count as seeing the wall, and thus as being aware of the wall.

Challenge Two: But if Bob is *representing* the wall, then surely he is aware of it *indirectly*.

Answer: No. Representationalism admits no perceptual proxies. There is just the wall which Bob *directly* sees. There is a representational *content*. But this is not an *object* of awareness. (Representationalism is not Representative Realism, but a form of direct realism.)

### **The Conclusion:**

We have not refuted, but *undermined* the Phenomenal Principle: it is *inadequately motivated*. We have an alternative which also explains the phenomenological facts, and seems more plausible than the Phenomenal Principle. We can thus reject the Argument from Illusion, at least until we get a firmer motivation for the Phenomenal Principle which tells us why we should accept it and not Representationalism.

**Next week:** Finally, I'll tell you how I want to resist the Argument. We can do it even if we hold on to the Sense-Datum Theory.

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