

Perception and Mind-Dependence – Lecture 4

1 Last Week

The Argument from Illusion relies on the Phenomenal Principle. The Phenomenal Principle is motivated by its ability to explain the sensuous character of experience. But I argued that it is *inadequately motivated*. This is because an alternative, the Representational Theory of Experience is available, and is better on various explanatory grounds. So one way to reject the Argument from Illusion is to highlight how the premise which drives it forward – the Phenomenal Principle – lacks adequate support.

2 This Week

Two Goals: (a) to show that the Argument as formulated in contemporary discussions is **invalid**. We need to modify the existing premises or plug in an extra premise to get it to work. But instances of either strategy are contentious. Thus we can respond to the Argument in this new way: initially, it simply doesn't work (it is invalid), but further investigation reveals no obviously secure way to fix it up (French and Walters (2014)).

3 Invalid Base Case

The Argument is invalid in the Base Case Stage, which is, recall:

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 doesn't 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 (directly) aware which does have this quality.

Therefore,

- (iii) **(Interim Negative Claim)** In cases of illusion, one is not (directly) aware of the ordinary object supposedly being perceived.

3.1 How is the Base Case Stage supposed to work?

The idea we find in our contemporary expositors is that once the premises are in place the argument just pivots on an application of Leibniz's Law (e.g., Robinson, p. 32; 57–58; Smith, p. 25). So let's run it through with an example:

Bob's Illusion

(1) Bob has an illusory experience of a white wall as yellow.

So

(2) In the illusory experience, Bob is aware of a yellow sense-datum (by the Phenomenal Principle).

Therefore:

(3) In the illusory experience, Bob is not aware of the wall (by Leibniz's Law).

3.2 But this is invalid

Our contemporary expositors are wrong about what applying Leibniz's Law gets us. What actually follows from (1) and (2) is not (3) but rather:

(3*) In the illusory experience, the yellow sense-datum Bob is aware of is not the wall.

There is obviously a big difference between these two ideas:

- Bob is aware of something which is not the wall.
- Bob is not aware of the wall.

The Argument as we have it muddles these. All it entitles us to conclude is that Bob is aware of something – a yellow sense-datum – which is not identical to the ordinary object – the wall. The non-identity claim follows from Leibniz's Law and the fact that the ordinary object and sense-datum have different properties. For all that, Bob might *also* be aware of the ordinary object. It doesn't follow that Bob is not aware of the ordinary object.

More generally, the issue of invalidity here is that the Interim Negative Claim doesn't follow from the premises of the Argument, what follows, rather, is that: in an illusion, one is aware of an *F*-thing which is not the ordinary object one takes oneself to be aware of. Consistently with this, one might be aware of both the *F* sense-datum, and the ordinary object. The premises of the argument don't rule that out.

(NB: the point is not the familiar one that one might be directly aware of an *F* sense-datum and still be aware, but only *indirectly*, of the ordinary object. The claim is that the argument doesn't even rule out being *directly aware* of both).

4 Strengthening the Phenomenal Principle

One way to fix the Argument to make it valid is to strengthen the Phenomenal Principle. That is, we make it not just a necessary condition of perceptual appearances, but also a *sufficient* condition, so we have:

Strengthened Phenomenal Principle

In perceptual experience it sensibly appears to one that something has a sensible quality, *F*, *if and only if* there is something of which one is (directly) aware which does have this quality.

Applying this to Bob's Illusion will now give us the conclusion we are after:

- (3) In his illusion, Bob is not (directly) aware of the wall.

Here the **sufficient** condition is doing the work. That is:

Sufficient Condition

If one is (directly) aware of an *F* thing, then it sensibly appears to one as if something is *F*.

The wall is *white*. So *if* Bob is aware of the wall, then it must sensibly appear to him as if something is *white*. But it doesn't! The wall appears just *yellow* to him (and nothing else appears white to him). Thus, by the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle, and the facts about the case, we can get the Interim Negative Claim after all.

Some reactions to this:

- The response is concessive. It concedes that the argument is invalid, but tries to fix it up.
- Although some sense-datum theorists may well accept the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle, not all of them do. And many of those in the early 20th century tradition who put forward the Argument from Illusion *explicitly* rely *not* on the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle but just the Phenomenal Principle (e.g., Broad and Moore).
- More substantively: This move considerably weakens the argument. Since the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle is *even less plausible than the Phenomenal Principle*. Independently of these contexts we have good reason to reject it. One reason is that it rules out as possible certain perceptual situations which seem perfectly possible:

Bob's Poor Colour Vision

Bob's colour vision is somewhat sketchy, he looks at a scarlet glove, and a crimson glove. Both gloves look *red* to him. He cannot tell by vision that they are different shades of red. Redness characterizes his experience, but no more specific shade of red does. (His colour vision in this respect is of relatively *determinable* colour properties and not more determinate colour properties). Intuitively, then, the scarlet glove he sees looks red to him *but it doesn't look scarlet to him and nothing appears scarlet to him*. But this is impossible by the Strengthened Phenomenal Principle: for if he sees the scarlet glove, *it, or something, must appear **scarlet** to him*. Yet the case seems, pre-theoretically, perfectly possible.

Strengthening the Phenomenal Principle is an option, but it lands the Arguer from Illusion with a much heavier argumentative burden.

5 The Exclusion Assumption

An alternative (also concessive) tactic is to keep the Phenomenal Principle in its original form, but add an extra premise to restore validity. The original argument gets us only to (3*), and the arguer wants to get to (3). So what can we add to get from (3*) to (3)? Something like the following:

(Exclusion Assumption)

Because Bob is aware of a sense-datum non-identical to the wall, he is not also aware of the wall. Awareness of the sense-datum somehow *excludes* awareness of the ordinary object.

(And some generalization of this can be plugged into the Argument to make it valid. No doubt there are different ways to formulate the missing premise here, but this seems like a plausible enough suggestion.)

This is interesting because it reveals another way for an already deeply contentious argument to fail. Though it is popular to do so, one doesn't have to deny the sense-datum theory to reject the argument. Nor the Spreading Step. One could target instead the Exclusion Assumption. The Exclusion Assumption is not obviously true and does seem to be contentious:

- (i) Denying the Exclusion Assumption, and allowing that in illusions we are aware of both the ordinary object and a sense-datum, doesn't seem to be logically incoherent. It would just make illusions cases where we are aware of more than one thing in a single experience. And such cases are anyway familiar.
- (ii) Illusions seem to be cases where (a) we are aware of an ordinary object, but where (b) the object appears to have a quality *F* it doesn't have. If we deny the Exclusion Assumption, and think of illusions as cases of awareness of the ordinary object *and* a *F* sense-datum, we can begin to explain where each element comes from. The ordinary object element comes from awareness of the ordinary object, and the illusory quality element comes from awareness of the *F* sense-datum. We would need to articulate, in addition, how these elements get blended – but perhaps that can be done. If we accept the Exclusion Assumption we simply rule out such an account: but why should we do that? This sort of explanatory strategy doesn't seem *bound* to fail.

So I think the Exclusion Assumption, like the other premises of the Argument, is something in need of argument, not something we can merely take for granted.

If we think about similar exclusion claims, e.g., my being aware of this apple excludes my being aware of this orange, two plausible models for grounding them suggest themselves. *Spatial Exclusion*: I am not aware of the orange in this space because the apple which I am aware of is in this space, excluding the orange. *Occlusion*: I am not aware of the orange because it is occluded by the apple I am aware of. There may be other models.

I take it that we don't want to hold that sense-data *displace* ordinary objects, so of these models the second seems to be the most promising. I will now construct an argument in the mould of the second model for why we should take the Exclusion Assumption to hold in the case of Bob's Illusion. I will then show how we can resist this argument. This doesn't mean that the Exclusion Assumption can't be established in some other way, but it fortifies the point that we are dealing here with something the arguer from illusion has the burden of supporting.

6 The Argument from Opacity

We can pose the following question to the arguer from illusion which will elicit the argument I want to consider:

Consider a case where one sees an object through a transparent medium, and where one also sees the medium itself. For instance, seeing an apple on the table through a beam of light, a shadow, a hologram, a stretch of cling film, or a pane of coloured glass. Take the latter case. We can fix in on just the region where the apple seems to one to be. In that region of space one sees both the apple, and a bit of the glass. And sees the apple through the glass. (Both things are seen equally directly). Both qualities of the apple *and* the medium contribute to the character of one's experience. So the question is...

In Bob's Illusion, why not think of the yellow sense-datum, D, as like such a transparent entity? Why not think of it as an object of awareness, through which Bob sees the wall, and which makes a difference to the character of Bob's experience, a difference which means the wall looks yellow to Bob?

The response is that *D* is an *opaque* object, and so can't be seen through – it occludes the wall. This can underpin the Exclusion Assumption: **the reason why awareness of the sense-datum excludes awareness of the ordinary object is thus traceable to a feature of the sense-datum: its opacity.**

Why accept that the sense-datum Bob is aware of is *opaque*? The arguer from illusion can highlight more fully how things appear to Bob, and apply the Phenomenal Principle:

The Opacity of the Sense-Datum

In Bob's Illusion, the wall looks yellow to him, but it also looks opaque to him. It is a case where something sensibly appears to be *yellow and opaque*. Thus Bob is aware of something which is yellow and opaque – a yellow and opaque sense-datum, *D*.

The arguer from illusion thus has grounds for holding that the sense-datum Bob is aware of, in his illusory experience, is opaque. That is why awareness of it excludes awareness of the wall. It blocks off other potential objects of awareness from view. Similarly to how awareness of an opaque plank of wood would exclude my awareness of you if it were placed at an appropriate position in my visual field. In his illusion, Bob can't see the wall because he sees a sense-datum *D* which occludes or blocks the wall from view – owing to its opacity.

For *D* to be occluding in this way we have to assume that Bob is aware of it where he *would* be aware of the wall if he were aware of the wall – but this seems like a perfectly legitimate assumption. Since if Bob is aware of the wall at all he is aware of it where something opaque seems to be.

7 Resisting the Argument from Opacity

We can undermine this argument by pointing out that for it to work the arguer from illusion needs to make an extra assumption about the sense-datum, *D*, which they have no obvious grounds to make.

The assumption is that *D* is not only non-identical to the wall, but *wholly distinct from* the wall. That is to say, it is not somehow a *composite sense-datum* part constituted by the opaque wall, and a yellow

elementary sense-datum. If *D* has this composite nature, then it is both yellow and opaque (similarly to how a painting might be both green and black, part green, part black). It is yellow because of its yellow elementary sense-datum component, and it is opaque because of its opaque wall component.

If *D* is such a composite sense-datum then there is no reason at all to suppose that awareness of *D* will exclude awareness of the wall, *despite the opacity of D*. We often see composite opaque things whilst also seeing some of their component parts. Just like seeing a Rubik's Cube can be a case of seeing many of its constituent cubes, seeing *D* could be a case of seeing *both* the wall, *and* the yellow elementary sense-datum, *despite D's being opaque*.

We may well accept the arguer from illusion's insistence that the sense-datum Bob is aware of, *D*, is opaque, but unless they can rule out the idea that *D* is a composite sense-datum, we still have no grounds for thinking that awareness of it excludes awareness of the wall. The arguer might try to fix things up by arguing for one of these claims:

- *D* is not a composite comprised of an ordinary object and an elementary sense-datum.
- There are no such composite sense-data.
- Whenever we are aware of such composites, we are not aware of the ordinary object component of them.

But none of these will follow from the Phenomenal Principle. And it is hard to see what further reflections on experience could justify any of them.

- **A note on the dialectic:** I am not claiming that Bob *is* aware of *D* understood as a composite sense-datum (*putting forward* this claim would have to involve saying more about the nature of *D qua composite* – how and why it combines the elements it combines). Rather, I am highlighting this idea as one thing one might say about Bob's situation merely to *resist* the argument from opacity, and thus to resist one way of supporting the Exclusion Assumption. Unless some such composite sense-datum story can be ruled out, *why* should accept the argument from opacity?

Conclusion: The arguer from illusion has more of an argumentative burden than is usually realized. The Exclusion Assumption may be true, and there may be some way to establish it, but it is not obviously true, and the way to establish it we have considered falls short.

References

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