Perception and Mind-Dependence: Lecture 1
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1 In these lectures...

- We will consider various philosophical views about the nature of perceptual experience.

- We will consider two classic arguments against a naïve realist theory of perceptual experience, and in favour of the view that the objects of perception are mind-dependent.

- We will see how reflection on the nature of perceptual experience can motivate quite radical views regarding both the nature of reality and our knowledge of it.

2 Naive realism

The naïve realist theory aims to capture our pre-theoretical (or ‘naïve’) conception of what perceptual experience is like. So let us ask: how does perceptual experience strike us, intuitively, as being?

The following passage from William Alston is helpful in this context:

The most intuitively attractive way of characterizing [perceptual experience] is to say that it consists of the presentation of physical objects to consciousness. Upon opening one's eyes one is presented with a variegated scene, consisting of objects spread out in space, displaying various characteristics, and engaging in various activities. To deliberately flaunt a controversial term, it seems that these objects are given to one's awareness. It seems for all the world as if I enjoy direct, unmediated awareness of those objects. There is, apparently, nothing at all “between” my mind and the objects I am perceiving. They are simply displayed to my awareness. (Alston: 1999, p.182)

We can extract two basic claims from this passage.

(1) That the objects of perceptual experience are ordinary mind-independent things in the external world (e.g. tables, chairs, rainbows, apples, etc.).

(2) That perceptual experience itself consists in the presentation of such mind-independent things to consciousness (or to one, the subject).
These two claims seem to capture our pre-theoretical conception of what perceptual experience is like. And it is these two claims that constitute a naïve realist theory of perception. (*Caveat:* contemporary forms of naïve realism are often understood as involving a further claim about the so-called 'subjective' or 'phenomenal' character of experience. We won't get into that here, but for helpful discussion, see Fish: 2009 and Martin: 1998-a.)

2.1 The objects of perception: mind-independence

The naïve realist says that we perceive ordinary mind-independent things in the external world. This seems intuitive enough. As P. F. Strawson (1979, p. 99) famously puts it, 'sensory experience (in general) presents itself as an immediate consciousness of things outside us' (my emphasis).

In a similar vein, Hume points out that 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...it. (Hume: 1748/1772, §12.8)

In short: perceptual experience is just a mode of access to what is there anyway, independently of our experiences.

An object is mind-dependent when it depends for its existence and nature on a particular act of awareness.

An object is mind-independent when it does not depend for its existence or its nature on any particular act of awareness.

(So mind-dependent/mind-independent are contraries, not contradictories.)

What is the notion of dependence at issue? The relevant notion is ontological, or metaphysical. It’s fair to say that we all have a rough grasp of the notion. We understand the idea that a smile is ontologically dependent on a person smiling, or that a complex object is ontologically dependent on its parts. So in the same way, we can understand the idea that some particular object is (or is not) dependent on some particular act of awareness. (There is, however, a substantive issue, concerning how this notion is to be analysed, or indeed whether it can be analysed at all. For helpful discussion here re. ontological dependence in general cf. Fine: 1994.)

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2.2 Relational Structure

Perceiving is, in its nature, a way of being aware of things. It is a way of having those things present to the mind. So a natural view, which the naïve realist adopts, is that a perceptual experience just is, or consists in, a subject being aware of an (external, mind-independent) object. The basic idea is that what it is for a perceptual experience to exist is for a person to be aware of, or to be presented with, an (external) object.

Perceptual experiences are events. And in general, we can think of events as being built out of objects exemplifying properties or standing in relations. E.g. it can be said that for the firework display to exist is for the rockets to explode (cf. Kim: 1976). Similarly, we can say that for a perceptual experience to exist is for a subject to be presented (or acquainted) with an object. This is what the naïve realist claims. So on naïve realism, such experiences are relational events: they are events that consist in a perceiver being presented with an external object. Thus such experiences have relational structure (cf. Jacovides: 2010).

(An aside. Notably, Bertrand Russell held a similar view. In particular, he thought that each experience ‘is a complex in which a subject and an object are united by the relation of acquaintance’ (1913, p. 35).)

So, on naïve realism, perceptual experiences ‘literally extend beyond the subject's head to encompass what the experience is of’ (Logue: 2009, p. 25). That is, such experiences literally ‘reach out to, and involve’ the external things that they present (Snowdon: 2005a, p. 137). This is in line with how we ordinarily think of such experience. As Martin (1997, p. 84) puts it, perceptual experience ‘seems to literally include the world’ (cf. Broad: 1952a)

2.3 Summing up

A naïve realist has two basic commitments:

- Perceptual experience acquaints us with the familiar denizens of the external world, and these things are mind-independent, in the sense that they do not depend for their existence or their nature on our awareness of them.

- Perceptual experiences are events with relational structure. Each such event consist in the presentation of external things to a perceiving subject. (In older terminology, such events have act-object structure, more on this in lecture 3.)
3 The argument from illusion

We can distinguish three different types of sensory experience: **veridical**, **illusory**, and **hallucinatory**. Only the first two types are genuinely perceptual, i.e. really involve perceiving. Tradition has it that both illusion and hallucination pose problems for naïve realism. Let us first consider illusion.

The ‘argument from illusion’ arguably traces back at least as far as Plato. Versions of the argument appear in Berkeley and Hume, and are developed in detail by various Cantabrigian philosophers, including C. D. Broad, G. E. Moore, and Bertrand Russell. (Another classic treatment of the argument is due to the Oxonian philosopher H. H. Price, who came to work with Moore at Cambridge.) Some contemporary exponents of the argument include: Foster (2000), Robinson (1994), and Smith (2002).

The basic thought underlying the argument is this: **cases of illusion show that in perceptual experience, whether illusory or otherwise, we are only ever aware of mind-dependent objects.** Indeed, Hume seemed to think that this was obvious:

...the slightest philosophy...teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object. The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it; but the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: it was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man [person], who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, this house and that tree, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. (Hume: 1748/1772, §12. 8, cf. Russell: 1912, pp. 2-3)

The argument here is very condensed. But the reasoning seems to be this:

i. The ‘table’ that I see seems to diminish as I move farther from it.

ii. However, the real table does not diminish as I move away from it.

Hence: (IC) The ‘table’ that I see is not (identical to) the real table. [i., ii.]

iii. If the ‘table’ that I see is not the real table, it must be ‘nothing but an image’.

Hence: (C) What I see must be nothing but an image. [(IC), iii.]
The argument assumes that there is only one table, or table-like-thing, that is seen. But why think this? Hume wants to prove that he is aware only of an image, and not of any external object. But at most, he shows that he is aware of both the ‘real’ (external) table and a mind-dependent ‘image’.

This is a quite general point about arguments from illusion. They aim to show that we are aware of mind-dependent things instead of mind-independent things. However, even if they do show that we are aware of mind-dependent things, they do not show that we are not aware of mind-independent things too (see esp. French & Walters: m.s., & Snowdon: 1992).

Aside from this, the argument has two main weaknesses:

1. Premise iii. is not sufficiently well-supported. Even if what I see is not the real table, it does not yet follow that what I see is merely an image (a mind-dependent object). The thing I see might be (a) not the real table but also (b) not a mind-dependent image (cf. Warnock: 1953 p. 154). (Though there is a question as to what else it could be, if not a mind-dependent thing.)

2. (IC) does not follow from i. and ii. Hence, the argument is invalid. There is nothing contradictory about saying that the real table seems to diminish but does not really diminish. Hume seems to assume that the real table could not have both of these properties, viz. seeming to diminish and yet not really diminishing. But why think this? Hume does not provide any reason.

J. L. Austin made this point regarding the ‘bent’ stick in water. What I see looks bent. The real stick is not bent. Does it follow that I do not see the real stick? No. I simply see the real stick, which is not bent, but which looks bent:

What is wrong, what is even faintly surprising, in the idea of a stick's being straight but looking bent sometimes? Does anyone suppose that if something is straight, then it jolly well has to look straight at all times and in all circumstances? Obviously no one seriously supposes this. So what mess are we supposed to get into here, what is the difficulty? (1962, p. 30)

This line of response is problematic, however, if we accept the phenomenal principle (as, arguably, most proponents of the argument from illusion do):

When, in perceptual experience, it seems to one as if something is F, then there is something of which one is aware that is F. (Robinson: 1994)

We want to say, on behalf of the naïve realist, that I simply see the stick, a stick which looks bent, but which is not bent. (Similarly, we want to say that I simply see the table, a table which seems to diminish, but which does not.)
Given the phenomenal principle, however, if the stick looks bent, there must be something that I see which really is bent. So we can’t just say that I see a straight stick which looks bent. We also have to say that there is a bent object which I see. But this object will have to be distinct from the stick—since nothing is both bent and straight!

Why accept the principle? Some philosophers find it obvious. Witness Price:

When I say ‘This table looks brown to me’ it is quite plain that I am acquainted with an actual instance of brownness. This cannot indeed be proved, but it is absolutely evident and indubitable. (1932, p. 63)

It is just obvious, says Price, that if something looks (seems) F, then there really is an F of which one is aware. But is Price correct that this is obvious?

C. D. Broad (1952b, p. 240) suggests a different source of motivation:

When I look at a penny from the side I am certainly aware of something; and it is certainly plausible to hold that this something is elliptical in the same plain sense in which a suitably bent piece of wire, looked at from straight above, is elliptical. If, in fact, nothing elliptical is before my mind, it is very hard to understand why the penny should seem elliptical. (1952b, p. 240)

We say that it [the stick] looks bent. And we certainly do not mean by this that we mistakenly judge it to be bent; we generally make no such mistake. We are aware of an object which is very much like what we should be aware of if we were looking at a stick with a physical kink in it, immersed wholly in air. The most obvious analysis of the facts is that, when we judge that the straight stick looks bent, we are aware of an object which really is bent. (1952b p. 241)

Broad thinks that acceptance of the phenomenal principle gives the best explanation of what might be called the appearance facts: the facts about how things look, or more generally seem or appear. That is, Broad thinks that acceptance of the principle best explains how things are experientially with one. But why not just say this: things look to one the way they do because of how the stick itself looks? Why not say that things are thus and so for me experientially because I am aware of a stick (table) which looks thus and so?

So the phenomenal principle seems unmotivated.

There may also be counter-examples:

(i) A church is disguised to looks like a barn. I see the church, and it looks like a barn. Does it follow that there is a barn which I see? No! (Austin: 1962)
A snake looks slimy but is not really slimy. Does it follow that there genuinely is a slimy snake-like thing which I see? No! (Pitcher: 1971)

(Cf. Martin: 2000 and Burnyeat: 1979 for sophisticated attempts to explain why philosophers have found the phenomenal principle so plausible.)

A further thing to note: even if we accept Hume’s conclusion, we haven’t yet shown that naïve realism is false across the board. What Hume needs to show is that what is true of illusion is true even of veridical perception. (As Snowdon: 1992 puts it, we need to move from the ‘Base Case Stage’ to the ‘Spreading Step’). But why can’t we say this: illusion presents mind-dependent images, whilst veridical perception presents external things?

According to Price (1932, p. 32), if there were such a radical change in what we see, (as we move from illusion to perception, and vice versa), then we ought to notice. ‘We should expect at least a jerk or a flicker as the one is replaced by the other’. The trouble is that we do not notice. Thus, if Price is right, then the Spreading Step succeeds. But why think that Price is right?

A better argument is the continuity argument. C. D. Broad says:

...in view of the continuity between the most normal and the most abnormal cases of seeing, [i.e. veridical perceptions and illusions] such a doctrine would be utterly implausible and could be defended only by the most special pleading’ (Broad: 1952a, p. 8)

Robinson elaborates the point thus:

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 [mind-dependent image] (Robinson: 1994, p. 57)

Suggestion: We should admit that there is something persuasive about the ‘continuity’ reasoning. But is not clear that this reasoning is totally decisive.

Verdict: there is no obvious reason to accept the Base Case Stage. And even if there were, it would not be at all clear that we must accept the Spreading Step. Naïve realists need not be too troubled by the argument from illusion.
Appendix: A valid version of the argument from illusion

**Base Case Stage**

(1) It looks to me as if there is a bent stick. (Premise)

(2) If it looks to me as if there is a bent stick, then there is something that I see which really is bent. (Application of the phenomenal principle)

Hence: (IC1) There is something that I see which really is bent. [(1), (2)]

(3) The real (mind-independent) stick is not bent. (Premise)

(4) Nothing is both bent and straight. (Premise)

Hence: (IC2) There is a bent thing that I see which is not the real stick [(IC1), (3), (4), (Leibniz’s Law)]

(5) If there is a bent thing that I see which is not the real stick, then that thing must be a mind-dependent object. [Premise]

Hence: (IC3) There is a mind-dependent bent thing that I see. [(IC2), (5)]

(6) It is not the case that I see both a mind-dependent bent thing and the real stick. (Premise)

Hence: (IC4) I do see a mind-dependent bent object, but I do not see the real, (mind-independent) stick. [(IC3), (6)]

**Spreading Step**

(7) If, in the case of illusion, I see only a mind-dependent object, or ‘image’, then, whenever I have any experiences at all, I am only ever aware of mind-dependent objects or ‘images’ (Premise)

Therefore: (C) Whenever I have an experiences at all, I am only ever aware of mind-dependent objects or ‘images’. [(IC3), (7)]

*Question.* There are evidently main contentious points in this argument. But what is the best way to resist it? Which premise, or premises, should we reject?
Bibliography


