

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 14

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Two Questions about Perception

Object and Content

Why Mediators

Pasnau's Two Questions

1. Simple or Dual?
2. Mediated or Diaphonus?

Simple or Dual

- Simple** The perceptual act alone represents external things, without any need for some further, distinct internal representation.
- Dual** Perception should be analyzed into the act and a distinct internal representation.

Mediated or Diaphonus

- Mediated** We perceive external objects—if we do at all—only in virtue of perceiving something within ourselves.
- Diaphonus** Whatever internal intermediaries there may be [in perception] are not themselves the objects of perception.

Two Contemporary Questions

1. Does perception have content?
2. Do we perceive the world by perceiving internal states?

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The Same Questions

- Not exactly; the weird ‘simple but mediated’ view does not go the same way.
- But close enough for current purposes.

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Content

We talked last time about perceptual content, with questions like.

- Are individuals parts of the contents of perception, or just their properties?
- Are the properties perceived things like colors and sounds, things like shape and size, or something else?

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Object

But that’s a slightly different question from asking what it is we see when we see.

- Hopefully they are related, and Pasnau will eventually argue they are closely related, but they are separate.

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Some Examples

I want to build up to the question by thinking about some cases.

- Assume, for now, that when you look at a person, say Barack Obama, standing directly in front of you, in broad daylight, what you see is that person.

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Assumptions

1. I’ve said you see Obama, not just his qualities. If you prefer, substitute Obama’s shape, size, appearance, etc for the object of perception in whatever I say going forward.
2. I’ve said you see Obama, not your mental representation of him (a la Descartes, Locke, etc). That’s a substantive assumption, and we’ll come back to it.

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Case 1: Window

You look towards Obama, and get a clear sight of him through a (clear, clean) window. What do you see?

- Obama?
- The window?

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Case 1: Window

I assume here the answer is Obama, not the window.

- The window is causally relevant; vision works by detecting light bouncing off a distal object, and that light passes through (and is affected by) the window.
- But that doesn't mean you see the window; you see Obama.

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Case 2: Binoculars

You have a pair of binoculars, and you point them at a distant stage. On that stage is Obama, and you can make him out clearly after adjusting the focus of the binoculars. What do you see?

- Obama?
- The image in the binoculars?

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Case 2: Binoculars

I'm still inclined to say it's Obama here, but it turns out to be a useful case to consider.

- If you say 'binoculars', do people who wear glasses only ever see their glasses?

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Case 2: Binoculars

I'm still inclined to say it's Obama here, but it turns out to be a useful case to consider.

- If you say Obama, what do you say is being seen while the focus is being adjusted? If it is the picture, when do you stop seeing it?
- And we might want to revisit that after some other cases.

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Case 3: Live TV

You're facing a TV that is showing a live speech by Obama, and concentrating on him. What do you see?

- Obama?
- The TV?

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Case 3: Live TV

I don't have anything useful here; it's a really tricky case.

- Note that the test Pasnau gives at the end of chapter 4 says that Obama, not the TV, is the object of perception. I'm not sure it's so clear-cut.

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Case 4: Recorded TV

You're facing a TV that is showing a replay of a debate Obama took part in before the 2008 election. What do you see?

- Obama?
- The TV?

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Case 4: Recorded TV

I guess the TV here, but who knows?

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Case 5: A Photograph

You're facing a photograph of Obama, taken during the 2008 election campaign. What do you see?

- Obama?
- The photo?

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Case 5: A Photograph

Kendall Walton (a prominent philosopher of art now emiritus here at UM) has argued that photographs involve directly seeing the thing photographed.

- This is a very unpopular view!
- But maybe worth thinking about where it differs from the binoculars case.

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Case 6: An Artwork



A prominent poster from the 2008 election.

Do you see Obama or the artwork?

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Case 6: An Artwork

Here, if not before, we have a case where perception is mediated.

- If looking at this picture is a way of seeing Obama, it is only by seeing something else, namely the artwork.

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The Six Cases

1. Window
2. Binoculars
3. Live TV
4. Recorded TV
5. Photo
6. Artwork

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The Six Cases

- All of these are cases of causal mediation; something is part of the causal chain connecting Obama to you.
- And in each case, the causal intermediary could mess something up; windows could be tinted, the picture could be out of focus, etc.

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The Six Cases

- But the standard (pre-C17, post-C18) view is that somewhere on this list, a break occurs.
- Somewhere we go from seeing an external object, to seeing a mediator.
- But where?

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Three Reactions

1. Find a line!
2. Say that the idea of objects of perception is a mistake; perception is a purely causal process.
3. Say that the idea of unmediated perception is a mistake; perception always goes via internal mediators that are themselves the objects of perception.

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Option 2

We're going to mostly talk about option 3, that's the focus of the chapter, but a brief word on option 2.

- The external world can effect thoughts without going via representations.
- If I don't eat, I get hungry, and I think/write more negative lecture notes.

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Option 2

- That's not because there is any intermediating representation between my lack of food and my negative views; it's just a causal force.
- Maybe perception no more involves representation than those kind of external effects on mood.
- That's certainly not how it seems though.

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Four Possible Reasons

1. Introspection.
 2. Illusion.
 3. Fidelity.
 4. Slippery Slope.
- Pasnau rejects the first two as causally explanatory, and doesn't consider the fourth (it's not historically relevant I think), to argue for the third.

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Pasnau's Positive Story

Combines (true?) philosophical claim with (false) empirical claim.

1. Fidelity Constraint: The item that is tracked with greater fidelity is that which is most properly the object of perception.
2. Empirical Claim: Perceptions are a higher fidelity representation of our minds than of the external world.

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Pasnau's Positive Story

He doesn't believe 2; it's not like our minds are splashed with color, or are loud, or smelly.

- But he claims that C17 folks did believe (something like) 1 and 2.
- I couldn't tell how enthusiastic he is about 1, as opposed to saying it's part of what the long ago folks believed.

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Introspection

I found this a bit odd, though probably right on the history.

- Question: Why motivate internal objects of perception by introspection?

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Introspection

Two part answer

1. Introspection is a reliable means of understanding the mind.
 2. It seems like we see internal states.
- On reflection, both parts seem wrong.

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Why Not Introspection

- Pasnau focuses on 1, the general unreliability of introspection. And fair enough too; it's really unreliable.
- But 2 is just as bad; it really doesn't seem like we see internal states.

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An Argument from Illusion

1. Whenever we see, we see something.
 2. Whatever we see, we see accurately.
 3. We don't see external objects accurately (in all cases).
 4. We see the same kinds of things in accurate and inaccurate perception.
- C. Seeing involves seeing internal things.

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An Argument from Illusion

I guess step 3 is very plausible, but everything else seems dubious.

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An Argument from Hallucination

1. Whenever we see, we see something.
 2. Whatever we see, exists.
 3. In hallucinations, the thing we see does not exist externally.
 4. We see the same kinds of things in perception and hallucination.
- C. Seeing involves seeing internal things.

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An Argument from Hallucination

Here it's trickier to say what's wrong, and the disjunctivist position - reject 4 - has some promise.

We'll go on to the importance of keeping a whole argument in mind at a moment.