

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 13

Brian Weatherson

2022-10-12

The Trilemma

Two Distinctions

Perceptual Content

Color

Stating the Trilemma

1. Proportionality

Stating the Trilemma

1. Proportionality
2. Pessimism

Stating the Trilemma

1. Proportionality
2. Pessimism
3. Absolute Belief

Proportionality

The strength of one's belief should be proportional to the evidence.

- So if one gets better evidence, one's belief should be stronger.

Pessimism

It is never possible to get certainty.

- So it is always possible to get evidence that puts us in a better position, i.e., closer to certainty.

Absolute Belief

We often have absolute belief, or full belief, in propositions.

- We don't just think that it's very likely October right now, we simply take it as a fixed point in our reasoning that it is.

Absolute Belief

We often have absolute belief, or full belief, in propositions.

- We don't just think that it's very likely October right now, we simply take it as a fixed point in our reasoning that it is.
- Even when we have probabilistic beliefs, these have to be based on something, and things like *It's October* are among those things.

Ways Out

- Create a theory that (somehow!) meets all three.

Ways Out

- Create a theory that (somehow!) meets all three.
- Argue that it's fine to have full belief without maximal certainty (the 20C way).

Ways Out

- Create a theory that (somehow!) meets all three.
- Argue that it's fine to have full belief without maximal certainty (the 20C way).
- Argue that we don't need full certainty (the Bayesian way).

Ways Out

- Create a theory that (somehow!) meets all three.
- Argue that it's fine to have full belief without maximal certainty (the 20C way).
- Argue that we don't need full certainty (the Bayesian way).
- Argue for optimism.

An In Between Way

- Optimism about just enough things to get by.

An In Between Way

- Optimism about just enough things to get by.
- One option, optimism about introspection; that will be for next week.

An In Between Way

- Optimism about just enough things to get by.
- One option, optimism about introspection; that will be for next week.
- Another option, optimism about math and logic; but then how do you get knowledge of contingencies?

An In Between Way

- Optimism about just enough things to get by.
- One option, optimism about introspection; that will be for next week.
- Another option, optimism about math and logic; but then how do you get knowledge of contingencies?
- Another option, optimism about perception; that's for today.

The Trilemma

Two Distinctions

Perceptual Content

Color

Two Distinctions

- Sentences vs Presentation

Two Distinctions

- Sentences vs Presentation
- Content vs Inference

Sentences vs Presentation

Perception, at least intuitively, lets us do two things.

1. It lets us affirm various sentences, such as that there is a red light in front of me.

Sentences vs Presentation

Perception, at least intuitively, lets us do two things.

1. It lets us affirm various sentences, such as that there is a red light in front of me.
2. It shows us how things are, that red (for example) is like *that*.

Priority

Which of these two things, if either, is more fundamental?

- Good question, that people have answered differently over the years.

Priority

Which of these two things, if either, is more fundamental?

- Good question, that people have answered differently over the years.
- Just note for now that we'd like both.

Content vs Inference

A common, but not universal, view is that perceptions have contents.

- When you see the world, you see that it is a certain way.

Content vs Inference

A common, but not universal, view is that perceptions have contents.

- When you see the world, you see that it is a certain way.
- Making sense of this idea will be the central question for this course the rest of the way.

Content vs Inference

A common, but not universal, view is that perceptions have contents.

- When you see the world, you see that it is a certain way.
- Making sense of this idea will be the central question for this course the rest of the way.
- Because it is at once very intuitive, and very mysterious.

Motivation One

Sometimes things are the way they appear, and sometimes they are not.

- What's the difference between these cases?

Motivation One

Sometimes things are the way they appear, and sometimes they are not.

- What's the difference between these cases?
- Possible answer: In the first case, the content of the perception, the way it shows the world to be, is true, and in the second case it is false.

Motivation Two

If we can get down to what's solely given in perception, as opposed to the things that we spontaneously infer from perception, we'll find a realm of infallible truth.

- Theological motivation: And this will validate the claim that it was good of God to give us these senses.

Motivation Two

If we can get down to what's solely given in perception, as opposed to the things that we spontaneously infer from perception, we'll find a realm of infallible truth.

- Theological motivation: And this will validate the claim that it was good of God to give us these senses.
- Secular motivation: And this will be a foundation for our beliefs, a realm where optimism holds.

A Problem

- These motivations are flatly inconsistent!

A Problem

- These motivations are flatly inconsistent!
- The first requires that perceptual contents are sometimes false, the second that they never are.

A Problem?

- Maybe that's not a problem; we could just abandon one motivation.

A Problem?

- Maybe that's not a problem; we could just abandon one motivation.
- But it's a suggestion that perceptual content is an attempt to solve multiple philosophical problems, and maybe we're going to have to choose which one it solves.

The Trilemma

Two Distinctions

Perceptual Content

Color

What Goes In

Pasnau notes briefly that everyone in the period he's looking at, both medievals and moderns, rejected (out of hand) the idea that individuals go into perceptual content.

What Goes In

So the content of my perception can't be *Sumeet is here*.

- At most it's something like *Someone with such-and-such appearance (which I happen to know is Sumeet's appearance) is here*.

But Wait!

Just to place this in context, note that at least some contemporary writers think these *singular* contents, i.e., contents about a particular individual can be perceived.

- Indeed, they think these have a role to play.

An Example

There are two indistinguishable twins, Fred and George.

- Alice sees one of them, let's say Fred, on a train. He is being a jerk.

What's Going On

Alice's thought is about Fred. When she says to herself "He's a jerk", she is criticising Fred, not George.

- But how is this possible?

What's Going On

Alice's thought is about Fred. When she says to herself "He's a jerk", she is criticising Fred, not George.

- But how is this possible?
- One answer: Her original perception did not just have in its content Fred's appearance (which he shares with George), but Fred himself.

What's Going On

Alice's thought is about Fred. When she says to herself "He's a jerk", she is criticising Fred, not George.

- But how is this possible?
- One answer: Her original perception did not just have in its content Fred's appearance (which he shares with George), but Fred himself.
- That allows her to later have thoughts about Fred.

Back to History

Set that aside, at least for now. Because no one thought that way in C14-C18.

- The contents we get are all properties.

Back to History

Set that aside, at least for now. Because no one thought that way in C14-C18.

- The contents we get are all properties.
- Or, maybe, properties as they stand in relation to me.

Which Properties

Two big options.

1. Appearances: colors, smells, sounds, etc.

Which Properties

Two big options.

1. Appearances: colors, smells, sounds, etc.
2. Physical characteristics: shape, size, distance, motion, etc.

Both Have Problems

Appearances would be natural, that's how things appear.

- But what even is an appearance?

Both Have Problems

Appearances would be natural, that's how things appear.

- But what even is an appearance?
- How do we handle the fact, important since Democritus's time, that things appear differently to different people?

Both Have Problems

Appearances would be natural, that's how things appear.

- But what even is an appearance?
- How do we handle the fact, important since Democritus's time, that things appear differently to different people?
- Putting together both these things: are the appearance claims even true.

Color

I'll end by talking a lot about this, but really worth stressing the point here. There are two things we might want a theory of, say, redness to do.

1. Typically, when something appears red, it is in fact red.

Color

I'll end by talking a lot about this, but really worth stressing the point here. There are two things we might want a theory of, say, redness to do.

1. Typically, when something appears red, it is in fact red.
2. Typically, when something appears red, it has the property that redness looks like.

Color

We want a theory that makes our color perceptions both

1. Accurate

Color

We want a theory that makes our color perceptions both

1. Accurate
2. High fidelity

Color

We want a theory that makes our color perceptions both

1. Accurate
 2. High fidelity
- Spoiler: It isn't going to happen.

The Trilemma

Two Distinctions

Perceptual Content

Color



The Dress

- Is that too long ago to be a pop culture example still?
- Anyway, apparently it looks different to different people.

Five Theories

1. Eliminativism

Eliminativism

There are no colors!

- Downsides: Not really consistent with how we talk.

Eliminativism

There are no colors!

- Downsides: Not really consistent with how we talk.
- Upsides: Don't have the problem of fitting colors into a physical world.

Objects aren't Colored

From our perspective, the following view is similar.

- Light is colored, or at least some light is.

Objects aren't Colored

From our perspective, the following view is similar.

- Light is colored, or at least some light is.
- But no objects are.

Objects aren't Colored

From our perspective, the following view is similar.

- Light is colored, or at least some light is.
- But no objects are.
- Maybe we can talk about blue chairs, but chairs are never literally blue.

Still Strange

This has some metaphysical advantages, but it's a mess as a theory of perception.

- It looks like objects are colored.

Still Strange

This has some metaphysical advantages, but it's a mess as a theory of perception.

- It looks like objects are colored.
- If you say they aren't, and that it's just a figure of speech to say they are, you can **maybe** rescue accuracy, but you've given up fidelity.

Subjectivism

Everything is exactly how it seems.

- If it seems different to you and to me, things are different for you and for me.

Subjectivism

Everything is exactly how it seems.

- If it seems different to you and to me, things are different for you and for me.
- The dress might be blue for one person, and white for another.

Fidelity

Is this high fidelity?

- Probably not; it seems like we are seeing things as they are.

Fidelity

Is this high fidelity?

- Probably not; it seems like we are seeing things as they are.
- That's why people thought they were **disagreeing** about the dress.

Disagreement

On the subjectivist view, it's like the disagreement when one person says "I grew up in Michigan" and another says "I didn't."

Potential

To say that something is red is not to say that I see it as red, but that it has the potential to cause red experiences.

- As Pasnau a few times alludes to, this is the natural theory of humor.

Potential

To say that something is red is not to say that I see it as red, but that it has the potential to cause red experiences.

- As Pasnau a few times alludes to, this is the natural theory of humor.
- To say that a joke is funny just is to say that it has the potential to make (typical) people laugh.

What Potential

Anything *could* look red if you shine a strong enough red light on it.

- It has to be that red things are red looking in normal enough conditions.

What Potential

Anything *could* look red if you shine a strong enough red light on it.

- It has to be that red things are red looking in normal enough conditions.
- If normal enough means that some normal people see it that way, I think the dress turns out to be both blue and white.

Too Subjective

Do colors look like things that are less about us?

- I don't know; when you find a joke funny does that seem like less an objective feature of reality than when you find a dress blue?

Causal

Intuitively, something looks red because it is red.

- On this view, something is red because it looks red.

Causal

Intuitively, something looks red because it is red.

- On this view, something is red because it looks red.
- Should we worry about that? Maybe, and that motivates the next view.

Physical

The main point of this whole part of the lecture is to distinguish 3 and 4.

1. Eliminativism

Physical

The main point of this whole part of the lecture is to distinguish 3 and 4.

1. Eliminativism
2. Subjectivism

Physical

The main point of this whole part of the lecture is to distinguish 3 and 4.

1. Eliminativism
2. Subjectivism
3. Potential

Physical

The main point of this whole part of the lecture is to distinguish 3 and 4.

1. Eliminativism
2. Subjectivism
3. Potential
4. **Physical**

Physical

The main point of this whole part of the lecture is to distinguish 3 and 4.

1. Eliminativism
2. Subjectivism
3. Potential
4. **Physical**
5. Strong Realism

Physical

On what I'm calling 'physical' views, colors are identified with the physical things that make them appear to have the color they do.

- The moderns thought that was something about rotation.

Physical

On what I'm calling 'physical' views, colors are identified with the physical things that make them appear to have the color they do.

- In fact it's something about which wavelengths of light get absorbed or reflected. It is microphysical like they thought, but the mechanism is the same.

Good Features

- Colors cause color experiences.

Good Features

- Colors cause color experiences.
- Colors are in the world.

Bad Features

- Still a challenge with describing which physical characteristics. The ones that cause red experiences for *who*, and *in what circumstances*.

Bad Features

- Still a challenge with describing which physical characteristics. The ones that cause red experiences for *who*, and *in what circumstances*.
- Horrible on fidelity; colors don't look like surface reflectance characteristics.

Strong Realism

- So one last theory: colors are real, and they are the way they seem.

Strong Realism

- So one last theory: colors are real, and they are the way they seem.
- Very hard to square this with a broadly materialist world!

Strong Realism

- So one last theory: colors are real, and they are the way they seem.
- Very hard to square this with a broadly materialist world!
- I'm mostly going to set this aside, but if you really want fidelity!

For Next Time

Onto chapter 4, where we talk about introspection as the place for optimism.