

Perception

LECTURE ONE | MICHAELMAS 2017

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Philosophy of Perception

- **Epistemology of perception.** How, if at all, can perception afford us knowledge? What is the relation between perceptual knowledge and inferential/deductive knowledge?
- **Metaphysics of perception.** What is perception? What is the difference between seeing, hearing, and smelling?
- **Phenomenology of perception.** What is it like to perceive? What is the relation between perception and phenomena that are subjectively indistinguishable from perception (dreaming, hallucinating)?

These lectures

- Discuss different philosophical views of the nature of perceptual experience
- Start with 'common sense' (Naive Realism). Then discuss objections by those who are impressed by various 'strange' experiences, such as illusions and hallucinations
- These objections have motivated:
 - Alternative theories of perception: Sense-Datum Theory, Representationalism/Intentionalism
 - Theories that defend naive realism: Disjunctivism

These lectures

- **Lecture 1: Naive Realism**
- **Lecture 2: The Argument from Hallucination**
- **Lecture 3: Representationalism**
- **Lecture 4: Disjunctivism**



Phenomenological question:

What is perceptual
experience like?

Naive Realism

- “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.”

(Alston, ‘Back to the Theory of Appearing’ 1999:182)

Naive Realism

1. The world around is populated by familiar physical objects (e.g., footstools, left hands, scraps of paper, dragon flies...)
2. These familiar objects exist mind-independently
3. We are sometimes directly presented with such familiar objects in perceptual experience

‘Presentation’

- “Perceptual experience, in its character, involves the presentation (as) of ordinary mind-independent objects to a subject, and such objects are experienced as present or there such that the character of experience is immediately responsive to the character of its objects.”

(Crane and French, 'The Problem of Perception' *SEP* 2015)

‘Constituents’

- Some of the objects of perception – the concrete individuals, their properties, the events these partake in – are constituents of the experience. No experience like this, no experience of fundamentally the same kind, could have occurred had no appropriate candidate for awareness existed. In this, sense perception contrasts with imagining and thought.

(Martin, ‘The Limits of Self-Awareness’ 2004:39)

Saving Appearances

- Is Naive Realism a *theory* of perception? Not obviously
- The naive realist seems to presuppose that perceptual experience as such does not require a theory:

People already know what perception is, and they find out simply through everyday experience. Perception is just what it seems to be: a presentation of the objects in our environment

Transparency of experience

Is naive realism really supported by the phenomenology of perception?



Transparency

- “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 setting sun 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, ‘Perception and its objects’ 1979:43)

Transparency

- “that which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us: it seems, if I may use a metaphor, to be transparent—we look through it and see nothing but the blue”
- “the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous.

(Moore, ‘*The Refutation of Idealism*’ 1903)

Transparency

- On the one hand, the phenomenology of perception clearly lends support to Naive Realism: on the face of it, perception indeed seems to be the kind of thing the Naive Realist claims it to be.
- On the other hand, Naive Realism is not the only position compatible with this phenomenology. Some authors highlight that the phenomenology of perception leaves room for doubt about the objects of experience.

Transparency

- When I see a tomato there is much that I can doubt. I can doubt whether there is a tomato that I am seeing, and not a cleverly painted piece of wax. I can doubt whether there is any material thing there at all. Perhaps what I took for a tomato was really a reflection; perhaps I am even the victim of some hallucination. One thing however I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape, standing out from a background of other colour-patches, and having a certain visual depth, and that this whole field of colour is directly present to my consciousness. What the red patch is, whether it is physical or psychical or neither, are questions that we may doubt about. But that something is red and round then and there I cannot doubt. (Price, *Perception* 1932:3)

Transparency

1. The character of experience leaves room for doubt about the nature of what I see
 2. The character of experience does however give me certainty about some of the ‘superficial’ qualities of what I see
- Even if 2 is right (and this is not obvious), Price implies that the phenomenology of experience does not rule out that the objects of experience are not the familiar, physical ones.
 - This allows a subtle criticism of Naive Realism: by claiming that perception is the presentation of ordinary, physical objects, the Naive Realist oversteps the phenomenology of perception.

Sense Data



Sense Data

- “But there is no doubt at all that there are sense-data, in the sense in which I am now using that term. I am at present seeing a great number of them, and feeling others. And in order to point out to the reader what sort of things I mean by sense-data, I need only ask him to look at his own right hand. If he does this he will be able to pick out something (and, unless he is seeing double, only one thing) with regard to which he will see that it is, at first sight, a natural view to take that that thing is identical, not, indeed, with his whole right hand, but with that part of its surface which he is actually seeing, but will also (on a little reflection) be able to see that it is doubtful whether it can be identical with the part of the surface of his hand in question....

Sense Data

- ...Things of the sort (in a certain respect) of which this thing is, which he sees in looking at his hand, and with regard to which he can understand how some philosophers should have supposed it to be the part of the surface of his hand which he is seeing, while others have supposed that it can't be, are what I mean by 'sense-data'. I therefore define the term in such a way that it is an open question whether the sense-datum which I now see in looking at my hand and which is a sense-datum of my hand is or is not identical with that part of its surface which I am now actually seeing."

(Moore 'A defence of common sense' 1925:54)

Caution: ‘Sense Data’

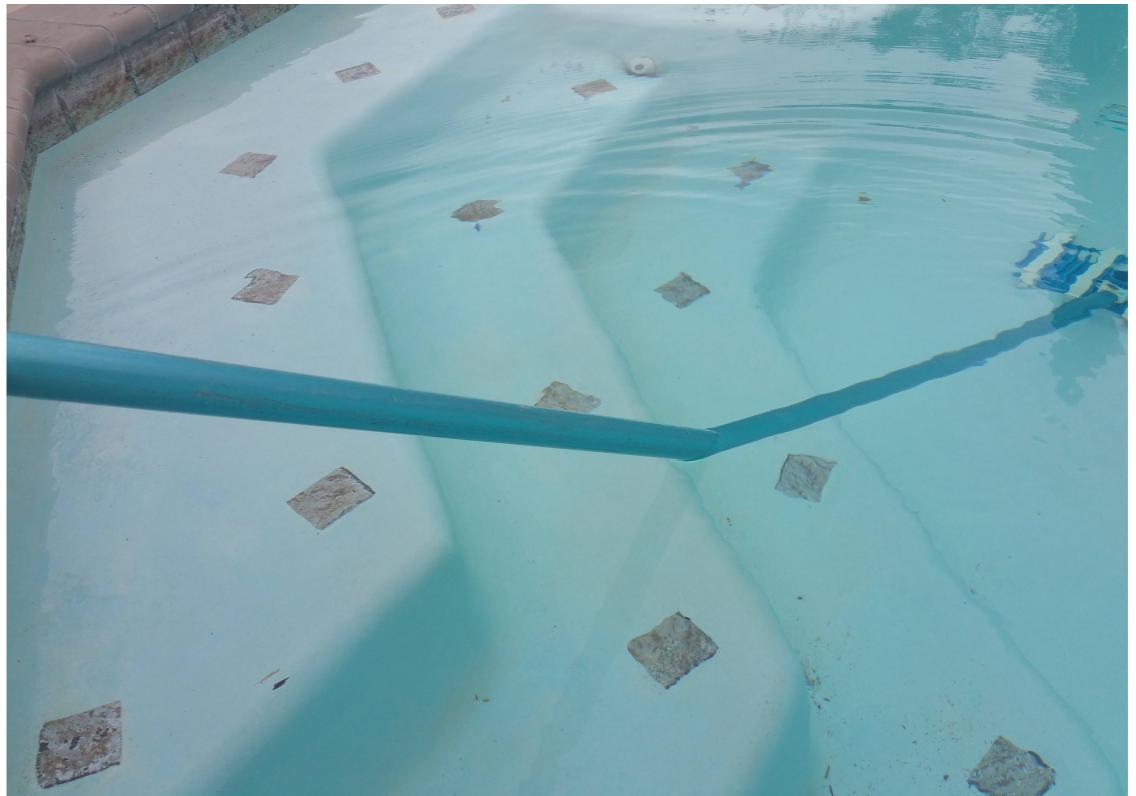
- Typically, when philosophers talk about the Sense-Datum Theory, they see it as a denial of Naive Realism. But this does not obviously fit with Moore’s definition of sense data.
- Moore’s *thin* definition: Sense Data are just the objects given in perception (‘data’ pl. of ‘datum’, from Latin ‘dare’ = *to give*)
- Contrast it with a prevalent *thick* understanding: There is a kind of ‘peculiar’ object that acts as intermediary between us and the world (e.g. the sense datum is a non-physical, mind-dependent entity that is presented in experience)

Argument from Illusion



Argument from Illusion

- “In some/many/most/all cases of perception, we are aware of something that possesses different sensible properties from those possessed by the physical object we take ourself to be perceiving. That of which we are aware is, therefore, something other than the object purportedly perceived.” (Robinson. *Perception* 1994:31)





What's the argument?

Robinson's version of the Argument from Illusion:

1. When viewing a straight stick half-submerged in water, one is directly aware of something bent.
2. None of the familiar objects in your environment is bent in this situation.
3. Therefore, in this situation, one is directly aware of something other than the familiar objects in your environment.

What's the argument?

More accurate (but invalid) version:

1. When viewing a straight stick half-submerged in water, one is directly aware of **something that looks bent**.
2. None of the familiar objects in your environment is bent in this situation.
3. Therefore, in this situation, one is directly aware of something other than the familiar objects in your environment.

What's the argument?

Revised and valid version:

1. When viewing a straight stick half-submerged in water, one is directly aware of **something that looks bent**.
2. If one is aware of something that *looks bent*, then the thing one is aware of *is bent*. ('Phenomenal Principle')
3. None of the familiar objects in your environment is bent in this situation.
4. Therefore, in this situation, one is directly aware of something other than the familiar objects in your environment.

Phenomenal Principle

- “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.” (Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* 1964:29)
- Problem for the revised argument: P2, ‘If one is aware of something that *looks* bent, then the thing one is aware of *is* bent’, seems highly implausible.

Time-Lag Argument

Bonus





Time-lags

- When we ordinarily take ourselves to see a star, our perceptual state is the result of how that star was a long time ago. The star might not even exist now; yet we would still be seeing exactly what we are seeing. So what we are in fact seeing cannot be identical with the star.
- We can add that there is nothing special about the star: all vision works like this, so we never in fact see the familiar objects in our environment.

Time-lag argument

1. When you seem to see a star at 2:40am, that star need not exist at 2:40am. (Assumption)
2. If you see O at t , then O must exist at t . (Assumption)
3. Therefore, when you seem to see the sun at 2:40am, you do not in fact see the sun. (From 1,2)
4. However, when you seem to see the sun there must be something you are seeing. (Assumption)
5. Therefore, when you seem to see a star at 2:40am, there is something you are seeing, and that thing exists at 2:40am, but it is not the sun. (From 3,4)

Time-lag argument

- “[The naive realist] can simply insist that the finite speed of light does not entail that we do not directly see things and states of affairs in the “external world,” but only that we must see them as they were some time ago. We see real physical things, properties, and events, all right, but we see them late, that is all. According to a direct realist, it is a mere prejudice of common sense- and one on which the time-lag argument trades-that the events, and the states of objects, that we see must be simultaneous with our (act of) seeing them.”

(Pitcher, *Theory of Perception* 1971:48

Next week

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- Lecture 2: **The Argument from Hallucination**
- Lecture 3: **Representationalism**
- Lecture 4: **Disjunctivism**