

**What is the argument from illusion or hallucination, and how might
one criticize it?**

PH1023 - Essay 2

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The argument from illusion or hallucination tells us that our perception of reality is not direct. There are different theories on the effect this has on our knowledge and our understanding of the world. Some more extreme theories only leave the conclusion that we can not truly know anything about the world, leaving only complete skepticism as an option. In this essay, I will show that no matter what further conclusion one draws from the argument from illusion or hallucination, it should not lead us to believe that we cannot have any insight into what reality is about.

The argument from illusion or hallucination goes as follows[3, p.295]:

1. Human perception can be deceived either when under illusion or hallucination. In other words, objects might appear to have properties that they do not.
2. In such cases of illusion or hallucination, one is directly aware of an object with certain properties, which stems from an object that in no way has to resemble the imagined one.
3. If this is the case, one is not directly aware of the actual object
4. Therefore, even when not hallucinating or under an illusion, one is not directly aware of the actual object

From this argument, all sorts of further inquiries about reality are made. No matter what they come up with, they all need to solve our connection to "base" reality and how we can, if ever, know anything about it.

One response to the argument is indirect realism. Postulated is that one should actually accept the indirectness of our perception of reality. All knowledge we can hope to acquire about reality needs to originate in perception. In the base version of this idea, this means that we cannot really know anything about reality[2, p.71ff]. The sensory data we get¹ could be entirely different from how the world is. Variations on the idea try to rectify this inability to know anything about the world. One is disjunctivism, which separates the truth value of a belief from the perception. Sosa criticizes the idea by pointing out that two individuals could have exactly the same sensory experience, one experiencing the real thing, the other hallucinating, while only one of them being right [3, p.299ff]. He thinks this is problematic, as for an individual, relying on sensory input alone (as all humans do), there is no way to know who is right. Sosa himself, therefore, argues for a slightly different view. He gets rid of the idea that concrete objects themselves cause our perception[3, p.301ff]. He argues that the properties of an object are fundamental instead. Differentiating the veridical case from the deceived is that in the latter, there are always some properties missing. As an example, Sosa takes a red post-box. Both in the hallucinatory and real case, the subject experiences the object to have the same quality (or property), e.g. its redness. What makes the real post-box real is that it has some more properties that the hallucinatory one lacks. Sosa does not make clear what those properties are though, they might, for example, be other relations to other objects. Like another person experiencing the same redness of the same post-box. This property could not be present in a simple case of hallucination or deception

Another way to solve the problem is idealism. Rather than explaining how our senses are connected to reality, the idea of reality is abandoned altogether. Perceptions are instead made fundamental. This solves how we can truly know anything by just stating that what we perceive to be real actually is real. On the other hand, it disconnects us from any tangible or coherent reality. Under this view, it is not even guaranteed that things exist if we do not look at them [2, p.73ff].

A modification of the idea which rectifies the issue is Kant's transcendental idealism. In his view, reality is also dependent on perception. Differentiating his form of idealism from the "normal" version is that he thinks there is an objective reality[1]. Kant proposes that this objective reality can be reached through reason. He calls these fundamental things that constitute the objective reality "das Ding an sich" (The thing itself). In the context of perception, this means nothing is beyond our experience as one can always arrive there through reason.

With this in mind it can be examined, why no matter what view one subscribes to, it is impossible for reality to be more than what can be found out through our senses. Let us suppose our reality was not fundamental and what is commonly thought of as the base constituents of our reality², are not the base level of reality. To aid imagination, a perfect matrix style simulation can be taken as an example. In the simulation, the inhabitants would have no way of detecting (even in theory) that their reality is not fundamental. Everything they look at seems to be part of their

¹The theory is sometimes also called sense-datum theory

²e.g. the fundamental particles, or any smaller, yet undiscovered physical stuff

world and not be governed by anything else. This means there is no link, no communication between the layer the simulation runs on and them. To refer to the context of the film, there is no Morpheus appearing, no glitch and no possibility to wake up in a vat with tubes connected to oneself. There is not even a theoretical possibility for any of these things to happen. Such a reality would be similar to what is described by many philosophers that argue we can never truly know about reality because our perception is fundamentally limited.

What does this setup tell us about perception??

It is about the connection between the layers. If there is no way for the simulating layer to impact the simulated one, the former has no relevance for the latter. With such a setup the simulated individuals have nothing to gain from believing in the simulated world, even if it exists. It would add nothing to their understanding of reality knowing about it. Everything they experience can be explained by stuff perceivable by them. Because there are no effects from the simulating layer, no rules, no goings-on in the fundamental reality, affect the perceivable one. As a result, they needn't be included in any theories explaining the simulated one.

This fact alone is not enough to explain why, for the simulated beings, there is no difference if a base-layer exists. One could bring up that there might be phenomena which the people living in the lesser reality could never grasp because they do not know about the actual processes governing them. The key to why this does not disprove the idea is reason. As an illustration, imagine a solid block appearing in a town square of the simulated reality. The actual reason for it to appear is that someone from the simulating layer was pushing a button. Now this phenomenon would not be explainable through the physics of the simulated world. Nowhere in their description of the world, an explanation exists for why the block appears. It seems like in order to explain the phenomena they need insight into a process which they could not possibly perceive.

Why is this not the case then?

The reason is that it would break the perfect separation of the layers. By introducing such a connection, the inhabitants of the simulated world now indeed have a perceptual connection to the simulating one. They can, by common sense, infer that there must be e.g. a being (they might call it god) that makes the block appear. Also, they might be able to mess with the phenomenon and therefore start communicating back to the simulating layer. Maybe they figured out that they could stand in the spot where the block usually appeared and it would not do so. They might reason that the outer being pushing the button had empathy and would not push it for that reason. Through that interaction, they could gather further information about the outer world, further breaking the connection.

Kant himself pointed this out in his book "Critique of pure reason". He states, this fact by telling us that stuff lying outside our perception and reason is illegitimate: "this perspective denies us any insight into the 'inner' nature of things. But if such complaints merely signify that 'we cannot conceive by pure understanding what the things which appear to us may be in themselves, they are entirely illegitimate and unreasonable' since human beings cannot know anything at all 'without the senses'" [1, p.49]

Worth mentioning are two caveats to the notion. For one, we need to accept that human reason, is not in some fundamental way limited. If reasonable beings fail to imagine how reality actually is, then it does not help that everything can be picked up through the senses. An answer to this is fundamentally out of reach, because philosophers themselves are such potentially limited reasonable beings and can thus never hope to know about a way of reasoning that goes beyond their own abilities. The only exception being perceptual evidence of such reasoning, which would lift the phenomenon into the perceptual realm, thereby making it accessible to inquiry again.

A second more serious problem is that of proof. Only because we can imagine, through reason, how the fundamental reality could be, it might not be possible to decide, just through pure reason, which answer is the correct or best one. Therefore, some proof would be required to decide on one version. Even if the base realities phenomena bleed over into observable reality, this does not ensure that the observable effects are enough to prove the fundamental reality being one way or another.

While the argument presented does not tell us, what belief is justified, we can at least be certain, that in theory, a complete understanding of reality is possible. This helps to fend off skepticism and makes supporting some ideas easier. Of the arguments presented on the matter, Kant's transcendental idealism fits best, though some forms of realism are also well suited.

References

- [1] Otfried Höffe. *Studies in German Idealism*. Vol. Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. 10. 2010.

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- [2] Duncan Pritchard. *What is this thing called Knowledge*. Routledge, 2006.
 - [3] David Sosa. “Perceptual Knowledge”. In: *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. Ed. by Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard. 2011.