

PHILOSOPHY 3340 – EPISTEMOLOGY

Michael Huemer's *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*

Chapter IV: "A Version of Direct Realism"

1. Awareness of Mental Items?

(1) Notice that, if one has, at any point, **beliefs** about one's sensory experiences, it will be true, given Mike's account of awareness, that one is **aware** of those sensory experiences.

(2) Consider the property of redness that a young child ascribes to the surfaces of objects. Any normal perceiver, looking at a ripe tomato under normal conditions has – unless, perhaps, he thinks he is hallucinating – an assertive mental representation to the effect that **that's** an instance of redness. But the property of redness that a young child ascribes to the surfaces of objects is, as a matter of fact, not a property of the surfaces of external objects, but a property of something in the mind. Accordingly, ordinary visual perception involves an assertive mental representation of a property that is, **as a matter of fact**, a property of something in the mind.

(3) The property instance in question certainly exists. But is it true that it "at least roughly satisfies the content of that representation"? Mike might argue that it does not, on the grounds that the representation represents the property instance as being out there in the world, whereas it is not.

(4) I think that would be an *ad hoc* move. If one considers the **total** representation that is involved when one has a visual experience - which may involve a very large number of colors and shapes - there is an enormous correspondence between the representation and the nature of one's visual field, and to treat the fact that those property instances are located in the mind, rather than externally, as outweighing all the other ways in which the representation is accurate, so that the representation is viewed as not even "at least roughly" satisfied, would seem to me to be a move that was not independently plausible, and one that was being made simply to avoid an unwelcome consequence. So I think that the second condition in Mike's definition is also satisfied.

(5) If so, then the third condition is satisfied as well, since it is not an accident that the content of the representation is satisfied.

(6) The upshot will therefore be this:

Normal perceivers are, in perception, aware of properties that are, as a matter of fact, property instances within the mind, not in the external world.

2. Direct and Indirect Awareness

2.1 The Case of the Sophisticated Perceiver

(1) Consider the case of the sophisticated perceiver – as contrasted, for example, with a child. Mike certainly will want to say that such a perceiver has assertive mental representations about external objects, the content of which is at least roughly satisfied, and where this satisfaction is not a matter of accident.

(2) **Those** mental representations, however, presumably do not involve assertive representations that the sensible color properties with which we are directly acquainted are properties of the surfaces of external objects, since then there would be massive error involved. So **presumably** what is being asserted in the representation is that external objects are colored in a different sense – perhaps that they have certain powers.

(3) In Chapter 5 of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Mike discusses the question of the relation between the content of a perceptual experience and that content of a perceptual belief that is directly based upon it, and he says that the former **entails** the latter. Given this view, the assertive mental representation that is present in the case of a sophisticated perceiver has to be that external objects are colored in a different sense than that in which the unsophisticated perceiver takes them to be colored.

(4) But as was argued earlier, one is **aware** of the property instances that, as a young child, though not as a sophisticated perceiver, one attributes to the surfaces of external objects.

(5) Awareness of the latter sort is certainly direct. The question, then, is whether it can be claimed that awareness of the former sort is **also** direct.

(6) If one were not aware of instances of sensible redness, greenness, etc., would one nevertheless have an assertive mental representation that objects were red and green in a different sense of "red" and "green"? Armstrong would say that one would, on the grounds that in the world as it is, one is **not** aware of instances of sensible redness, greenness, etc. – **because there aren't any**. But if one grants that there are sensible, qualitative properties – which one is aware of, and which children attribute to the surfaces of external objects – is it plausible to hold that awareness of those properties is **not causally relevant** to one's having assertive mental representations of external objects? This would seem to me to be a very implausible claim, since it is surely true in a situation where one believes that one is seeing something red, under normal conditions, that one **would not** have the relevant assertive mental representation if one **were not** aware of sensible redness and greenness, and what is the ground of this counterfactual if not a relation of causation between the latter awareness and the former?

(7) Mike's definition of indirect awareness also requires that the causal relation be based upon a belief that the content of the one representation is evidentially relevant to the content of the other. (What is required is not that the content of the one representation is **in fact** evidentially relevant to the content of the other, but that the perceiver, perhaps incorrectly, **takes** it to be so.) So consider, for example, a sophisticated perceiver who interprets the sentence "That tomato is red" as follows:

"That tomato has the power to produce experiences with the sensible quality of redness in normal perceivers under normal conditions."

Will such a perceiver, rightly or wrongly, take his awareness of an instance of sensible redness as evidentially relevant to his belief that the tomato he now takes himself to be perceiving has the power to produce experiences with the sensible quality of redness in normal perceivers under normal conditions?

Or consider, instead, a sophisticated perceiver who interprets the sentence "That tomato is red" as follows:

"That tomato has a surface with the reflectance property R."

Will such a perceiver, rightly or wrongly, take his awareness of an instance of sensible redness as evidentially relevant to his belief that the tomato he now takes himself to be perceiving has reflectance property R?

Would the perceiver in the first case say that he thinks it would **still be reasonable** to believe that the tomato had the power to produce experiences with the sensible quality of redness in normal perceivers under normal conditions **even if he were not now aware of an instance of sensible redness**? Or would the other perceiver in the second case say that he thinks it would still be reasonable to believe that the tomato had a surface with the reflectance property R even if he were not now aware of an instance of sensible redness?

I do not think that either of these things is plausible, and so it seems to me that the correct conclusion to draw is this:

The sophisticated perceiver's awareness of the redness of a tomato (in whatever the relevant sense of 'redness' is) is an indirect awareness that is based upon a direct awareness of instances of sensible, qualitative properties.

(8) In thinking about this, there are two points that are crucial. The first is that knowledge of the physics of the external world does not result in a disappearance of the illusion that objects have colors in the sense of having properties with which children are acquainted, and which they attribute to the surfaces of objects. This illusion is like other sensory illusions, and because of this the awareness that is present in the child is still present in the sophisticated perceiver.

(9) Mike, quite correctly, does not draw the distinction between direct awareness and indirect awareness in terms of a distinction between noninferential knowledge and inferential knowledge, or in terms of a distinction between noninferentially justified belief and inferentially justified belief. So the claim that the sophisticated perceiver's awareness that a tomato is red is **indirect** does **not entail** that the content of that indirect awareness is **inferentially justified** on the basis of the content of the direct awareness of instances of sensible properties. The claim is only that the sophisticated perceiver takes the latter to be evidentially relevant to the former – that is, that he or she thinks that he or she **would not be justified** in believing that the tomato was red were it not for the fact that he or she is aware of a relevant instance of sensible redness.

2.2 Looking Green

(1) Things can look green, either because they are green and conditions are normal, or because, while they are not green, conditions are abnormal, and such as to make it the case that they look green.

(2) Consider a case where a green thing looks green to some human perceiver. Does such a perceiver have a belief that the thing is green, while having no belief at all about whether the thing **looks green**? This seems to me very implausible.

(3) In the situation described, both beliefs will be accurate, and this will not be an accident. So the person will be aware both of an object's looking green and of the object's being green.

(4) If these two sorts of assertive mental representations are found together, what explains that fact? The plausible answer here is surely that the explanation is that the belief that something looks green **causes** the belief that something is green.

(5) If so, the final question is whether the person takes the belief that something looks green as evidentially relevant to whether it is green, and the answer, once again, is surely that he does, since, the person would not think that the belief that the object was green would be justified if the object looked red to him, or if it did not look any way at all to him.

(6) The upshot is that one's awareness of the state of affairs that is the object's being green is based on one's awareness of the state of affairs that is the object's looking green. So we have the following conclusion:

A perceiver's awareness, in normal conditions, of the redness of a tomato (in whatever the relevant sense of 'red' is) is an indirect awareness that is based upon an awareness of the tomato's looking red.

3. Is this Direct Realism?

1. In contrasting his view with indirect realism, Mike reads too much into the label "the representational theory of perception". (79) For an indirect realist, **experience** need not consist of anything beyond **arrangements of qualia**. In particular, there **need not be any representative content** that is part of the experience in any way.

2. To determine whether he is advancing a version of direct realism, Mike suggests the following:

"To see whether I have presented a version of direct realism, we therefore need to ask, in terms of my theory, *What (if anything) are we aware of in perception, and is this awareness direct or indirect?*" (79)

3. Mike needs, accordingly, to defend three theses:

(1) Given his account of perception, we are aware of at least **something** in perception.

(2) Moreover, at least some of the things that we are aware of in perception are **physical objects or physical states of affairs**.

(3) We are **directly** aware of at least some of the physical objects or states of affairs that we are aware of in perception.

4. In order to defend the thesis that we are aware of at least something in perception, Mike needs to argue that perception involves **apprehension**.

5. In order to do this, Mike appeals to the property of **forcefulness** in order to support the **assertiveness** element that is needed if one is to have an **apprehension**.

Comments

(1) A crucial point that needs to be noticed here is that one can be perceiving something **without knowing** that one is perceiving. Similarly, one can be acquainted with **external** objects without knowing that one is thus acquainted.

Thus, for example, assuming that it is logically possible mistakenly to think that one is dreaming, one could think that one is dreaming, while one is really perceiving,

and in such a case, there will not be any assertive mental representation, any more than there is when one is imagining or dreaming. Or, if it is claimed that the idea that one can think that one is dreaming is incoherent, one can use a different sort of case, such as one where one **mistakenly believes that one is hallucinating**.

Alternatively, consider a case where there are experiences that are almost always **drug induced**, and where the experiences have a “fuzzy”, “dream-like” quality, and change rapidly in ways that exhibit few regularities. Imagine, however, that there are very rare properties of physical objects that can give rise to such experiences, and that when this happens, the conditions for perception are satisfied. A person might then very well have had experiences of this **qualitative, phenomenological type** frequently, but never when they functioned perceptually, and in that case it would seem that the experiences might very well **not** be associated with any **assertive** representational content. If so, such a person might have such experiences when it was a case of perception, though once again the experiences would have no **assertive** representational content. So there can be conditions where one is perceiving something, but where one would **not** be doing so **if Mike’s analysis of perception were correct**. So Mike’s account does not cover all cases of perception.

(2) The immediate consequence is that one can have cases of perception in which there is no **awareness in Mike’s sense**, since there is no **assertive** representational content

(3) These considerations also show that not all perception involves **forcefulness**.

(4) This sort of objection to Mike’s analysis establishes **a more general, and important, conclusion**:

Perception of an object cannot be analyzed in terms of perceiving that something is the case.

6. Having attempted to show that “perception is a species of awareness” (80), the next thing that Mike attempts to do is to show that the object of awareness is something physical. Here his argument is as follows:

(1) “The content of a visual experience might be, for instance, that there is an object of a certain shape and color in front of me.” (80)

(2) “Assuming that there is in front of me a physical object of the appropriate shape and color (which there normally is), that fact is what I am aware of, since that fact is what corresponds to the content of my experience.” (80)

(3) “Notice that my perceptual experience does not count as the awareness of any mental state or event, since no mental state or event has any shape or color.” (80)

Comments

1. Whether the claim made at step (2) is true or false depends upon precisely what the content of the perceptual experience is. In particular, it depends upon the color concept involved.

2. If color is conceived of as **unsophisticated human perceivers** do – so that redness is the sensuous, qualitative property that one is directly aware of, and a quality that unsophisticated perceivers mistakenly think is a property of external objects, a property

that, for example, they think they can **touch** – then the claim advanced at step (2) **may** be **false**.

3. Why have I said only that they "**may**" be false? The reason is this. First, the **total** assertive mental representation that is present in unsophisticated perceivers to the effect that there are instances of qualitative properties that are properties of external objects – is certainly false. But, secondly, that false assertive mental representation entails a **more limited** proposition that is true, to the effect that there are **some properties or other** that are possessed by certain external objects to which one is attributing instances of qualitative properties, and that are correlated with those instances. So, thirdly, the question is whether it is either the case that an unsophisticated perceiver has a more limited **assertive mental representation** whose content is that proposition, or the case that the fact that the total mental representation entails this true proposition means that the total representation is "**roughly satisfied**".

4. The argument is incomplete, since step (3) needs to be supplemented by the following claim:

(4) My perceptual experience does not count as the awareness of **any part** of any mental state or event, since no part of any mental state or event has any shape or color.

5. But there is strong reason for holding that (4) is **false**. The property instances of redness that everyone is aware of in perception, and that unsophisticated perceivers take to be properties of surfaces of external objects, do not cease to be cases of color, and those instances of colors do not cease to have shapes, when it is realized that those property instances are properties of things in the mind, rather than properties of surfaces of objects.

7. This brings us to the final step in the argument. Having argued that in the case of a perceptual experience, the object of awareness is something physical, what Mike must now attempt to do is to show that that awareness is direct. Here is his argument:

"Finally, is this awareness of facts in the external world direct or indirect? This boils down to the question of whether perceptual experiences are based on some other sort of apprehension. I have not addressed this question before now, but I think it is clear that the answer is no. When one sees a tomato, one's visual experience of a tomato is not caused and logically supported by any other apprehension. I cannot even think of a plausible candidate for a state it might be said to be based on. One might try citing the brain states involved in the visual system's 'information processing' preceding the visual experience of the tomato. But I think this would be a mistake, for those brain states are not apprehensions. There is nothing, nor does there even appear to be anything, that one is aware of in having those brain states, other than the tomato. One is not aware of, not even seemingly aware of, the brain states themselves, nor of the information they are supposed to be processing; the first thing one is actually aware of is the tomato, as a red, roughly spherical thing." (80)

Comments

1. The argument here seems to have the following form:

(1) The only sort of thing that one's awareness of external physical states of affairs might even be thought to be based on is awareness of preceding, 'information processing', brain states.

(2) But one is not aware of such brain states, or of the 'information processing' (supposedly) taking place there.

Therefore:

(3) Awareness of external physical objects and states of affairs is not based on awareness of anything else.

Therefore:

(4) Awareness of external physical objects and states of affairs is direct awareness.

2. The puzzling thing about this argument is that Mike makes no mention at all of the **standard candidate** for the role in question, namely, the property instances – of sensible, qualitative redness, greenness, etc. – that unsophisticated perceivers take to be properties of the surfaces of external objects, but that are in fact **qualia**. (This is especially puzzling because the main philosopher that Mike's version of direct realism is on a collision course with is Frank Jackson.)

3. Just as unsophisticated perceivers are aware of such property instances, the same is true of sophisticated perceivers. The only difference is that unsophisticated perceivers mistakenly take those property instances to be properties of the surfaces of external objects.

4. As I argued earlier, perceivers are not only directed acquainted with such properties instances, they are also aware of them in the sense of awareness defined by Mike. For sophisticated perceivers, no less than unsophisticated ones, believe in the existence of these property instances, and the truth of those beliefs is in no way an accident.

5. Once this candidate is considered, there is a **very strong argument** for the view that awareness of physical states of affairs is **based upon** awareness of these properties.

6. The initial part of that argument, which is concerned with the **causal aspect** of the basing relation, is roughly as follows:

(1) Whenever one sees something, one is in a mental state involving visual qualia.

(2) Consider a case where one is having, say, a purple* qualia, **but doesn't notice it** – perhaps because one is very absorbed in a philosophical conversation. In such a situation one will neither **believe** that there is something purple in front of one, nor will one be **tempted** to believe that there is something purple in front of one, nor will one be **disposed in the relevant way** to believe that there is something purple in front of one, nor will one's situation be such that one would believe that there is something purple in front of one were it not for countervailing evidence that one possesses.

(3) Therefore, in such a situation, though it **may** be true that one is seeing a purple object, it is not true that one is seeing **that** there is a purple object in front of one, and it is **not** true that one is in **an assertive mental state that represents to one that there is something purple in front of one**.

(4) The conclusion, accordingly, is that **if** one is **not** aware of sensible color properties of the sort that unsophisticated perceivers take to be properties of the surfaces of external

objects, **then** one does **not** have a **corresponding perception** that the external world is a certain way.

(5) This conditional obtains **because** there is a **causal** relation between the awareness of the qualitative, sensible property and the awareness of the external object.

7. So much for the causal part of the argument. More work needs to be done, since one needs to show that the causal connection in question obtains because perceivers believe, rightly or wrongly, that awareness of the occurrence of such property instances is evidentially relevant to the corresponding claims about object in the external world.

8. Notice that it cannot be correct to require that perceivers believe that awareness of the occurrence of such property instances is evidentially **sufficient on its own to justify** the corresponding claims about objects in the external world. (Not even indirect realists believe **that!**)

9. So the question is whether, in situations in which perceivers are aware of, say, an instance of sensible greenness, and where they would hold that they are justified in believing that they are seeing a green physical object, they would hold that they would **still** be **justified** in believing that they are seeing a green physical object, **even if** they were **not** aware of the relevant instance of sensible greenness. The answer, surely, is that they would not hold that they would be justified in that case. This shows that **part** of what they take as justifying beliefs about what they see consists of awareness of corresponding sensible properties.

10. The conclusions, accordingly, are as follows:

Awareness of external objects in visual perception is always based upon awareness of the sensible properties that unsophisticated perceivers mistakenly take to be properties of external objects, but that are in fact properties in the mind of the perceiver.

Awareness of external objects and their states in visual perception is always indirect.

The same conclusions could be established for the other senses.

Therefore, one of the two central theses of Mike's version of direct realism is false.

4. Summing Up: My Main Criticisms of Chapter IV

Weakness 1: The Failure to Grapple with a Central Claim Advanced by Frank Jackson

1. A claim that lies at the heart of Frank Jackson's defense of indirect realism is this:

(*) In perception, one is aware of states of affairs that are mental, and that involve qualitative properties that are not properties of external, physical objects.

2. More specifically, Jackson argues at length for what might be put retrospectively in terms of the following two theses:

(1) The redness and other color properties that arguments such as the Mary/knowledge argument and the inverted spectrum attempt to establish the existence of are not properties of the external physical world.

(2) In perception, one is aware of instances of those properties.

3. Mike does not mention Jackson's arguments for these central theses, let alone attempt to rebut them, and this is a serious weakness, since Jackson is clearly one of his main opponents.

Weakness 2: The Failure to Establish the "Direct Awareness of Physical Objects" Claim

1. One of the two central theses that Mike is defending is the claim that we are, in perception, directly aware of external, physical states of affairs, and this is the focus of the present chapter.

2. There are basically two ways in which one might attempt to establish that thesis:

(1) One might argue that in perception (a) one is aware of something, (b) one is not aware of any physical state that is internal to one, and (c) one is not aware of anything mental.

(2) Alternatively, one might concede that one is aware, in perception, of something mental, but then argue that one is also aware of some external, physical state of affairs, and that the latter awareness is **not based upon** the former.

3. The problem is that Mike does neither of these things.

4. He does not do the former because he does not grapple with the central thesis of Jackson mentioned in connection with Weakness 1.

5. He does not do the second because, in his discussion of whether awareness of external physical states of affairs is indirect – which occupies a single paragraph on page 80 – he does not even consider the claim that indirect realists such as Jackson would advance concerning what awareness of physical states of affairs is based upon.

Weakness 3: The Failure to Offer an Analysis of the 'Represents' Relation

1. One of the most crucial ideas in Mike's exposition of his approach to the epistemology of perception is the idea of **representational content**.

2. The term 'represents' in the expression 'S represents p' is a **theoretical term**: it does not refer to any observable relation. Consequently, **an analysis** of it is needed.

3. Rather than offering an analysis, Mike attempts to convey what he has in mind by examples.

4. Given that the relation referred to by the term 'represents' is an **intensional** rather than an extensional relation, it is natural to try to analyze it in terms of other intensional relations. In particular, an analysis in terms of **belief** looks promising. But Mike seems reluctant to accept such an analysis, without putting anything in its place.

Weakness 4: The Failure to Offer any Language that is Adequate for the Description of the Qualitative, Non-Representational Part of Experience

1. A crucial issue that arises for any account of the epistemology of perception concerns how the **non-representational part** of experience is to be **described**.

2. One answer to this question is provided by sense-datum theory. Mike neither discusses the sense-datum answer, nor provides any alternative account.
3. Another answer is provided by an appeal to the language of appearing, but Mike is inclined to treat "appears" as reporting apprehensions, and the problem is that one can have visual experiences at least parts of which are not connected with any apprehensions, and so which have no assertive mental representation. So a language of appearing, **thus interpreted**, cannot do the job.
4. A crucial claim that is part of indirect realism is that visual experience involves elements that stand in spatial or 'quasi-spatial' relations – including, most importantly, a relation, R , that has the formal properties of the **betweenness** relation, including:
 - (1) It is not the case that **Raaa**.
 - (2) It is not the case that **Rabb**, and it is not the case that **Rbab**.
 - (3) If **Rabc** then **Rcba**.
 - (4) If **Rabc** then it is not the case that **Rbac** and it is not the case that **Rcab**, and similarly it is not the case that **Racb** or **Rbca**.

Mike does not discuss whether such a relation exists or not. But this is important, since it is a central claim of indirect realism that there is a **mapping relation** between mental states and states of the external world, in virtue of this relation.