

PHILOSOPHY 5340 – EPISTEMOLOGY

Topic 7: Perceptual Knowledge of the External World

Part 1: Perceptual Knowledge and Justified Belief - A Brief Overview

1. Six Main Alternatives

(1) Extreme Skepticism

1. It is not possible to have any justified beliefs about an external world, either a physical, mind-independent, external world or a non-physical, mind-dependent, external world.
2. It is not possible to have any justified beliefs about one's own future experiences, or about patterns in those experiences.

Extreme skepticism involves, then, both external world skepticism and inductive skepticism. This is the view that Hume defended.

(2) Idealism

1. It is possible to have justified beliefs concerning the existence and nature of a non-physical, mind-dependent, external world.
2. Either it is not possible to have any justified beliefs about a physical, mind-independent, external world, or one can have a justified belief that there is no such world.

With regard to the second of those options in point 2, compare Berkeley, who thought that one could know that there was no material world because he thought that one could know that such a world is logically impossible, on the ground that to be is to perceive, or to be perceived.

3. On Berkeley's form of idealism, the non-physical, mind-dependent, external world in whose existence one is justified in believing is an infinite immaterial mind, which Berkeley identifies with God. A question that arises, and which Berkeley failed to address, is whether one is justified in believing that there are other human minds, or non-human animal minds or experiences.

(3) Classical, Reductionist Phenomenalism

1. It is possible to have justified beliefs about physical objects, and at least the vast majority of the beliefs about physical objects that one ordinarily takes to be justified are justified.
2. All justified beliefs about physical objects are inferentially justified on the basis of beliefs about experiences.
3. One can be directly aware only of one's own present mental states, or aspects of those mental states.
4. All facts about physical states of affairs logically supervene upon facts about experiences, either actual or possible.
5. Statements about physical objects can be analyzed in terms of statements about experiences, both actual and possible.

In the middle of the 20th century, phenomenism was one of the views concerning perception that was most widely accepted. But once a method of analyzing theoretical terms in a realist, or non-reductionist way was discovered, the appeal of phenomenism quickly waned, since there was then an alternative view – namely, indirect realism, or the representative theory of perception – which is very similar to phenomenism in many respects, but which avoids virtually all of the objections to which phenomenism is exposed.

(4) Direct Realism

1. It is possible to have justified beliefs about physical objects, and at least the vast majority of the beliefs about physical objects that one ordinarily takes to be justified are justified.
2. Some beliefs about physical objects can be non-inferentially justified in perception.
3. In perception, one is directly aware of physical objects or states of affairs, and nothing else.
4. Some statements about physical objects are analytically basic. (Optional?)

Comment: Direct realists typically accept the fourth thesis, but it seems to me that it is not really essential. I think that direct realists should abandon that thesis.

(5) Indirect Realism, or the Representative Theory of Perception, or Representationalism

1. It is possible to have justified beliefs about physical objects, and at least the vast majority of the beliefs about physical objects that one ordinarily takes to be justified are justified.
2. All justified beliefs about physical objects are inferentially justified on the basis of beliefs about experiences, either past or present.
3. The inference in question is abductive in nature. (The method of hypothesis, hypothetico-deductive method, inference to the best explanation)
4. One can be directly aware only of one's own present mental states, or aspects of those mental states.
5. Statements about physical objects can be analyzed in a theoretical-term way in terms of statements about experiences, plus logical and quasi-logical vocabulary.

(6) Fictionalist Phenomenism, or the "As-If" View, or Radical Empiricism, or Moderate Skepticism

1. This is the view that one can be justified in believing that the theory that there is an external, physical, mind-independent world is **experientially adequate** – that is, that one's experiences are as they would be **if** that theory were true – but that one cannot be justified in believing that the theory is **true**.
2. A person who accepts this view will agree with the indirect realist, and disagree with the direct realist, with regard to the following claims:
 - (1) One is directly aware of instances of qualitative, color properties.
 - (2) One is not directly aware of physical objects or states of affairs.
 - (3) The (Unrestricted) Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is unsound.

(4) The General Principle of Direct Acquaintance is sound.

3. But the person who accepts fictionalist phenomenalism (the "as-if" view, radical empiricism, moderate skepticism) will disagree with the indirect realist, and the classical phenomenalist, in holding that there is no acceptable form of inference that takes one to justified beliefs about physical objects.

4. Such a person will also disagree with the idealist in holding that there is no acceptable form of inference that takes one to justified beliefs about an external, non-physical, mind-dependent world.

5. The resulting view is a skeptical position, but not one that entails that there is no rational basis for one's decisions about how to act in various circumstances, since this moderate form of skepticism holds that one is justified in believing that one's future experiences will be as they would be if there were a physical world.

6. Though the fictionalist phenomenalist holds that one is **not justified** in believing either in the existence of a mind-independent world or in the existence of Berkeley's world, fictionalist phenomenalism is **logically compatible** both with the existence of a mind-independent world and with the existence of Berkeley's world. But, then, given that fictionalist phenomenalism is compatible with Berkeley's worldview, and also holds that belief in a mind-independent physical world is not justified, it would seem that a question that arises for Berkeley's view also arises for fictionalist phenomenalism, namely, whether one is justified in believing that there are other human minds, or non-human animal minds or experiences.

2. Some Important Issues Concerning Perception

The following seven issues are, I think, among the most important ones in the philosophy of perception:

(1) Do experiences involve emergent, qualitative, 'sensuous' properties?

(2) Is talk about physical objects analyzable, or, on the contrary, are at least some sentences about physical objects semantically basic and unanalyzable?

(3) If all sentences about physical objects are analyzable, what is the correct analysis?

(4) Does perception always involve direct awareness of properties that are, as a matter of fact, properties of parts of sense experiences?

(5) Does perception ever involve direct awareness of properties of, or relations between, external, physical, objects?

(6) Does perception always involve the acquisition of beliefs about properties that are, as a matter of fact, properties of parts of sense experiences?

(7) If perception always involves the acquisition of beliefs about properties that are, as a matter of fact, properties of parts of sense experiences, do the beliefs thus acquired, together with memory knowledge, suffice to justify the beliefs about physical objects that one comes to have as a result of perception?

3. Some Relevant Arguments

What are the main arguments that bear upon these seven issues? The answer seems to me to be as follows:

Issue 1: Do experiences involve emergent properties?

Here I think that there are ten arguments that are especially important.

1. Argument for the Existence of Emergent, Qualitative Properties
 - (1) Thomas Nagel's "What It's Like to Be a Bat" Argument;
 - (2) Frank Jackson's "What Mary Doesn't Know" Argument;
 - (3) The Inverted Spectrum Argument;
 - (4) The Zombie World, or Unconsciousness Argument;
 - (5) The Epistemic Asymmetry in our Knowledge of Conscious States: First=Person Versus Third-Person Perspectives.
2. Argument against the Existence of Emergent, Qualitative Properties
 - (6) Armstrong's Competing Hypotheses Objection, and the Complexity Involved in Postulating Emergent, Qualitative Properties;
 - (7) The Problem of the Relation between Mind and Body: Epiphenomenalism, Interactionism, or a Pre-Established Harmony?
 - (8) The Indeterminacy ('Striped tiger', 'Spots against a background') Objection;
 - (9) Armstrong's Intransitivity Objection;
 - (10) Armstrong's Epistemic Objection.

Why is this issue important? The reason is that one of the central issues in the philosophy of perception concerns what types of things one is aware of in perception, and if there are emergent, qualitative properties, then instances of those properties will be a strong candidate, not only for being one of the types of things that one is aware of in perception, but for being something that one is **directly** aware of in perception. One may then have a strong argument against direct realism.

Issue 2: Are sentences about physical objects analyzable?

Here there are, I believe, four important arguments:

- (1) The Possibility of Learning Physical Object Terms, via Hallucination, and so without Ostension;
- (2) The Blind or Color-Blind Person, and the Learnability of Color Terms via Direct Stimulation of the Brain;
- (3) Learning the Meaning of the Term 'Red' in World without Red Objects;
- (4) Ostensive Definition Based upon Erroneous Perception: Red Objects Versus Objects that Look Red.

Issue 3: If sentences about physical objects are analyzable, what is the correct analysis?

The crucial arguments here, it seems to me, consist of three objections to classical, reductionist phenomenalism:

- (1) The Logical Possibility of Mindless Worlds;

- (2) The Problem of Truth-Makers for Counterfactuals about Possible Experiences;
- (3) The Absence of Exceptionless Laws in a Phenomenalist World.

Each of these objections attempts to show that if sentences about physical objects are analyzed in a reductionist fashion in terms of statements about actual and possible experiences, no truthmakers can exist for certain true sentences about physical objects.

Issue 4: Does perception always involve direct awareness of properties that are, as a matter of fact, properties of parts of sense experiences?

Here I think that the crucial argument is that visual perception, for example, always involves awareness of qualitative color properties, and that such properties, rather than being properties of external objects, are, as a matter of fact, properties of parts of sense experiences.

Issue 5: Does perception ever involve direct awareness of properties of, or relations between, external, physical, objects?

The central argument here is that all visual perception of the properties of and relations between physical objects is only possible if there is visual perception of colors. All visual perception of color, however, is either perception (or awareness) of instances of qualitative color properties, or depends upon perception (or awareness) of instances of qualitative color properties. Qualitative color properties, however, are, as a matter of fact, not properties of external physical objects. Therefore all perception (or awareness) of properties of and relations between physical objects depends upon perception (or awareness) of properties that are not properties of physical objects. Accordingly, there cannot be any direct perception or direct awareness of properties of and relations between physical objects.

Issue 6: Does perception that results in perceptual belief always involve the acquisition of beliefs about properties that are, as a matter of fact, properties of parts of sense experiences?

Here I think that there are two important lines of thought:

- (1) The Peculiarity Intuition: Can One See that Something is Green without its Looking Green?
- (2) Awareness of How Something Looks and the Case of Abnormal Conditions of Observation.

Issue 7: Can beliefs about physical objects be inferentially justified?

In the case of this final issue, I think that there are five important arguments:

- (1) The "Retreat to More Modest Beliefs" Argument, or Who's Afraid of Unconscious Inferences?
- (2) Hallucination, and the "Justification and Internal States" Argument;
- (3) The Appeal to Hypothetico-Deductive Inference;
- (4) The "Naturalness of the Theory of Physical Objects" Argument;
- (5) Idealism and the Problem of Competing Explanatory Theories.

4. Flow Charts for Theories of Perceptual Knowledge and Justified Belief

4.1 Flow Chart for the Justification of Beliefs about Physical Objects

(1) Do qualitative, 'sensuous' properties exist, anywhere in reality?

Yes → Question 2.

No → An Armstrong-style Version of Direct Realism

(2) Do physical objects have the qualitative properties they seem to have?

Yes → Naive, or 'Pre-Scientific', Direct Realism

No → Question 3.

(3) Can some beliefs about physical objects be non-inferentially justified?

Yes → Sellars', or Searle's, or Huemer's Version of Direct Realism

No → Question 4.

(4) Can beliefs about physical objects be inferentially justified on the basis of beliefs about sense experiences, past and present?

Yes → Classical, Reductionist Phenomenalism, or Indirect Realism (the Representative Theory of Perception).

→ Question 6.

No → Skepticism, or Idealism, or Fictionalist Phenomenalism.

→ Question 5.

(5) Even if beliefs about physical objects cannot be justified in the sense of being shown to be likely to be true, is one justified in viewing such beliefs as experientially adequate?

Yes → Fictionalist Phenomenalism

No → Skepticism, or Idealism.

→ Question 7.

(6) Can beliefs about physical objects be inferentially justified without using abduction (hypothetico-deductive method, inference to the best explanation)?

Yes → Classical, Reductionist Phenomenalism

No → Either the Representative Theory of Perception, or else Classical, Reductionist Phenomenalism

(7) Can any beliefs about non-physical, external objects be justified?

Yes → Idealism

No → Skepticism

4.2 Flow Chart for the Meaning of Statements about Physical Objects

(1) Are any statements about physical objects basic and unanalyzable?

Yes → Some Form of Direct Realism.

No → Question 2.

(2) Are statements about physical objects analyzable in terms of statements about sense experiences?

Yes → Classical, Reductionist Phenomenalism

No → Question 3.

(3) Are statements about physical objects analyzable in the way that statements about theoretical objects are analyzable?

Yes → The Representative Theory of Perception, or Direct Realism, or Fictionalist Phenomenalism, or Idealism, or Skepticism

No → Question 1.