

Epistemology

Lecture 2: Ways of Knowing - Perception

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Chapter I: The Basics

Introduction

- **Potential sources of knowledge:** the senses, memory, testimony, reasoning, introspection, innateness, intuition, etc.
- The senses produce some output that may or may not be informative about the world as it is independent of us.
- Unless otherwise noted, the following terms will be interchangeable:

experience, sense perception, sensation, sensory experience, sensory impression and perception.

The protagonists

- **Perceptions:** Internal states that have a phenomenal character, i.e. a 'what it is like' to have the given experience.
- **Perceptual objects:** Perception is meant to direct its attention towards these objects.
- **Perceptual beliefs:** These have a propositional form.

Example:

I believe *that* the room is painted green.

- **Perceptual content:** The information carried by a perception.

Perception and belief

- Perception is a major source of belief. This is particularly the case in early childhood.
- There's a clear sense in which perceptual beliefs are more robustly justified than most other beliefs.

Examples: Beliefs acquired via mere guessing or wishful thinking.

- Perception is supposed to be something non-inferential; that is, not being arrived at through inferential means.
- Perceptual beliefs, on the other hand, can be used inferentially to justify other beliefs.

Chapter II: Theories about the Nature of Perception

Naive – direct realism

- If I were to summarise this view in a dictum I would say ‘what you see is what’s out there’. We are **directly aware** of the world as it is.
- It is often associated with the common-sense view of perception. Thus, it is sometimes called ‘common-sense’.
- It is a realist view because it holds that perception has access to mind-independent, i.e. real world, objects. In fact, this access is supposed to be unmediated – hence the name ‘direct realism’.
- The **objects of perception** are **external things** like tables and chairs.
- It is also called ‘naive realism’ because it takes a pretty naive stance toward some commonly encountered problems – more below.

Indirect realism

- If I were to summarise this view in a dictum I would say ‘what you see is some kind of copy of what’s out there’.
- It is also known as representative or representational realism – so named because perception is meant to represent reality.

NB: Representation uses one set of objects to denote another.

- It is a realist view because it holds that perception gives us access to mind-independent objects.
- It is indirect because this **access is mediated**. The **objects of perception** are **internal things** like ideas, sense-data or some other intermediaries.
- We use these **inner objects** to *infer* the existence of outer ones.

Sense-data

- **Sense-data** (sing.: sense-datum) are posited to play the role of the much vaunted intermediaries we're directly aware of, i.e. they are perceptual objects.
- They are sometimes thought of as being non-physical, private entities that “actually possess the various sensory qualities that a person experiences” (Bonjour 2007, p. 3).
- They are also meant to be unanalysed forms of experience, untouched by any mental/conceptual ‘corruption’.
- Other posited intermediaries incl. *sensibilia*, viz. un-sensed sense-data.

NB: Both sense-data and sensibilia were put forth by Russell (1912).



The main difference between direct and indirect realism is...

Arguments against Direct Realism

The argument from illusion

- Sometimes the properties we ascribe to an object via perception are different to (or misrepresent) those instantiated by the object.

NB: They can even be contradictory!

- **Example:** The bending of light in media of different refractive indices gives the appearance that an object is bent even though it's not.

NB: We need not even go to science to explain this away as an illusion. We may just use touch to determine that the straw is not bent.



The argument from hallucination

- A similar mismatch arises in this case also. *Perhaps* one difference is that instead of distortion there is replacement!
- The general reaction to such arguments is to insist that we are not directly aware of the world but only through mediation. Various mediating processes are involved in producing a perception. Any of these may lead us astray.



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The argument from perspective

- Perspective can also create a mismatch but of a somewhat different kind. Does the real object change in its fundamental or inherent properties when, in walking around it, we form different perceptions? Surely that would be a highly ego-centric worldview!

Fig 7

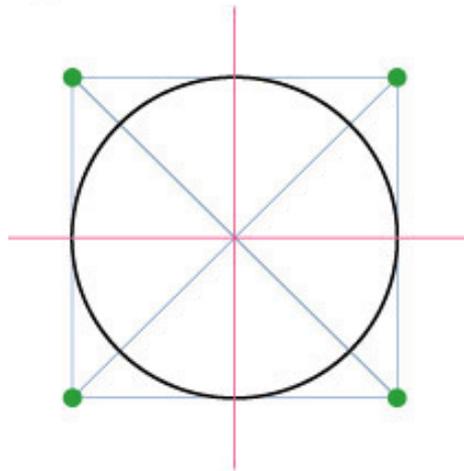


Fig 8

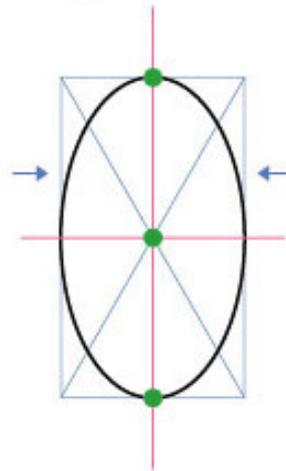
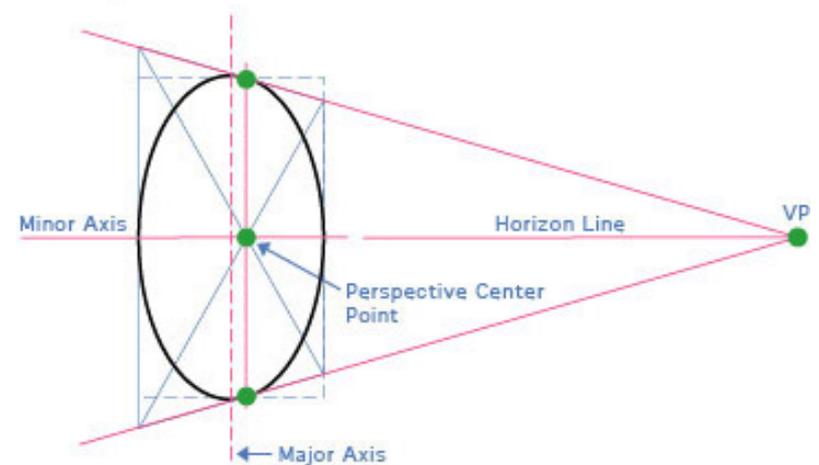


Fig 9



Appearance vs. reality

- The foregoing arguments exploit the wedge between *how things appear to us* and *how things are* independently of that appearance.
- Indirect realists automatically endorse this distinction and posit intermediate objects as imperfect conduits that link the two ‘worlds’.

The argument from indistinguishability

- “(1) A perfectly faithful (visual) hallucination of a field is qualitatively just like, and so intrinsically indistinguishable from, an ordinary experience of seeing that field...

(2) What is *directly* ‘seen,’ the immediate object of one’s visual experience, is the same sort of... thing in a perfect hallucination of a field as in an ordinary experience of seeing a field...

(3) What is directly seen in a hallucination of a field is not a field (or any other physical thing).

∴ (4) What is directly seen in an ordinary experience of seeing a field is not a field.” (Audi 2010, p. 42) [original emphasis].

The argument from (neuro-)science

- “... the character of the resulting experience and of the physical object that it seems to present can be altered in major ways by changes in the conditions of perception or the condition of the relevant sense-organs and the resulting neurophysiological processes, with no change in the external physical object” (Bonjour 2007, p. 5).



In the argument from indistinguishability, which premise is most problematic for direct realists?

1. Hallucination and normal perception are qualitatively indistinguishable.
2. The object of perception is the same in both cases.
3. The object of perception in a hallucination is not a field.

Arguments against Indirect Realism

The 'no object is necessary' problem

- **Objection:** One can question “whether there is any reason to suppose that in cases of these kinds [e.g. hallucination] there must be some object present... Why couldn't it be that the perceiver is simply in a state of seeming to experience such an object without any object actually being present?” (Bonjour 2007, p. 4).

Reply: The possibility is granted but the objector needs to explain in a non-ad hoc way why the two cases (hallucination and normal perception) are different.

The veil of perception problem

- **Objection:** Because indirect realists insist that we are not immediately aware of real world objects but rather mental entities, such a view encourages scepticism about the external world.

Reply: The so-called veil, if it exists at all, need not be obscuring the external world in any significant way. Indeed, indirect realists typically argue that most perceptual beliefs are veridical.

It's just that the information we glean about the world gets transformed from one medium to another – as an analogy think of the various forms a message takes in a telephone conversation.

The myth of the given

- Wilfrid Sellars (1956) has attacked the idea of posits like ‘sense-data’. In his view, these are not only **unscientific** but also **incoherent**.
- Sellars is rebelling against foundationalism, namely that:

some beliefs are basic; their epistemic worth is independent of other beliefs; they get that worth from pure perception; all other beliefs get their epistemic worth inferentially from the basic beliefs.
- His argument is quite intricate but the key point is that **conceptual processes always intervene** in what we perceive. We thus could never have any pure perceptual states like ‘sense-data’.

Puzzling entities

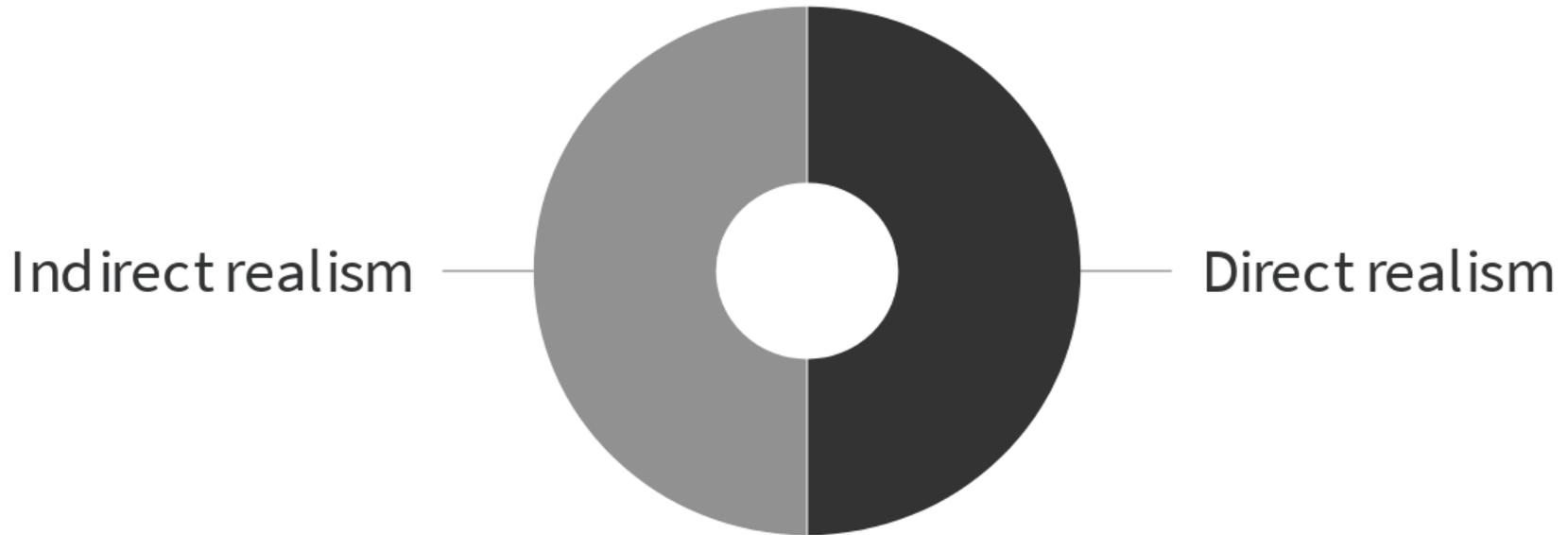
- “[V]arious puzzling questions have been raised about the nature of sense-data: Do they exist through time or are they momentary? Can they exist when not being perceived? Are they public or private? Can they be themselves misperceived? Do they exist in minds or are they extra-mental, even if not physical?” (Bonjour 2007, p. 5).



Is conceptual intervention in the perceptual process incompatible with indirect realism? Why? Why not?

Which view do you associate with the most?

Direct realism A Indirect realism B



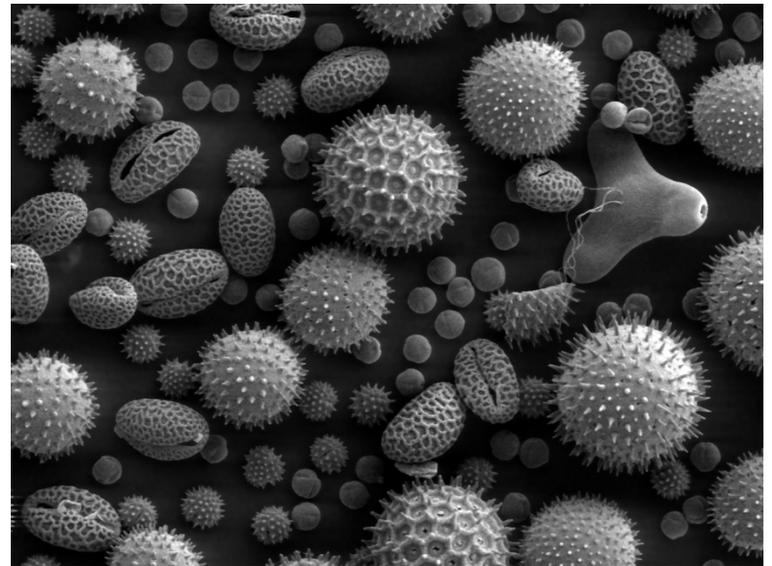
Chapter III (Special Topic): Non-Conceptualism

Non-conceptual content

- It has been claimed that beliefs, theories, bodies and brains, distort what we perceive and experience.
- The idea of non-conceptual content has emerged in part as a reaction to this claim.
- Roughly speaking, such content is not structured by concepts or moulded by top-down processes in cognition.
- Yet it is still capable of representing states of the world or at least carrying raw information about it.
- **Some Proponents:** Cussins, Evans and Peacock.

Non-conceptual content: Example

- There is a sense in which a child and a scientist see the same thing when they're looking at an SEM image of pollen grains even though the child *lacks the concepts* to see all the evidentially relevant details.



Non-Conceptualism and animals

- One view that benefits from non-conceptual content is the view that animals have some mental content capable of representing the world even if though they lack concepts, beliefs, etc.



- “While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would also want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as being at a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and of lower animals. . . . If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual” (Peacock 2001: 613).

The End