

Perspectival facts

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Abstract

It is often objected to B-theories of time that they do not account for a central fact of our experience of time, namely our awareness of the moving now. In the same vein, it could be objected to direct realism about perception that it fails to account for the fact that we perceive things perspectively and are perceptually aware of ourselves as located in space. Analogously, it is often held that theories of self-knowledge must account for this knowledge being irreducibly subjective. In my talk, I argue that these points are mistaken: rather than excluding it, the correct accounts of our experience of time, of space and of ourselves entail that such experiences are atemporal, aperspectival and apersonal. Rather than in the experiences themselves, the locus of subjectivity is in what they are experiences of: perspectival facts are not essentially self-oriented, but real facts in the external world.

The argument from perspective

Perception, according to a popular and plausible view, puts us into direct contact with objects in our surroundings. According to this natural realist view, tentidiously called “naïve”, perception is a two-place relation between a perceiving subject and the object of the perceptual act. ‘Naïve’ realism, however, faces a number of obstacles. What we see, for one thing, depends on where we are: the visible shape of the round cup in front of me, for example, is oval and changes with my position with respect to it. This so-called “argument from perspective” is the strongest argument in favour of sense-data, which are incompatible with direct realism:

- 1 Every intentional object is either existentially independent from its intentional acts, or dependent on it (in which case we call it a “sense-datum”).
 - 2 Oval and round are contrary properties.
 - 3 A same cup can look round from certain point of views, and elliptical from certain other ones.
- ∴ Therefore, at least one of these points of view does not present us with a mind-independent property of the cup, but with a mind-dependent sense-datum.
- 4 There is no reason to privilege one point of view over another.
- ∴ Therefore, we are always presented with sense-data.

The best objection to the argument from perspective is that premise 3 is ambiguous between

- 3’ A same cup can look *round* from certain points of view, and *elliptical* from certain other ones.
- 3” A same cup can look *round from certain points of view* and *elliptical from certain other ones*.

The argument from perspective does not rule out the reading 3”, and 3” does not lead to its conclusion for *round from point of view a* and *elliptical from point of view b* are not incompatible properties if the points of view are different. So the argument is a non-sequitur. Objects of perception are things from certain points of view, i.e. perspectival facts. The points of view accounting for their perspectivity are not the perceptual acts, nor are they modes of presentation of the object (if there is one): they are located on the ‘object side’ as it were. One nice consequence of this account is that once we integrate the point of view into the object of the experience, the reference to ellipses appears unnecessary for capturing the difference between the objects of the two experiences. The best description of the phenomenological fact motivating 3 is, we submit, the following one:

- 3”” A same cup can look *round from certain points of view* and *round from certain other ones*.

What about ellipses then? According to the position we endorse, nothing appears elliptical in the veridical perception of a cup. The cup always appears round from here or there. To appear round from here means that the cup appears to be at a certain *distance* and *orientation* from the given point of view. Orientation is reducible to relative distance of parts: the orientation of the cup changes from a point of view to another iff the ratio of distances between each part and the point of view changes. For instance, from some points of view (right above of the cup), all the parts of the edge are at equal distance from the point of view; while for some other points of view (from the side of the cup), there are parts of the edge that are closer to the point of view than other ones. These ratios, however, should not be confused with the ratios among the parts of the edge themselves: they are all at the same distance of each other, and appear to be so in the perceptual experience.

Ellipses then are just artifacts from painters that project three-dimensional oriented objects on two dimensional vertically oriented screens. When we adopt the attitude of the painter, we create an illusion from a perception: we change the orientation and shape of the perceptual objects. We change the relative distances of the edges of the cup to the point of view, thereby creating the illusion of having an elliptical object in view.

What account for the phenomenological difference between the two experiences is the difference in the points of view, integrated into the two perspectival facts. One might think that this implies the reality of sense-data it was intended to disprove. In claiming that perceptual objects are point-of-view dependent, we seem to imply that they are mind-dependent. Perspectival facts, however, are not sense data, but are ‘out there’, full citizens of the mind-independent external world. They are not parts or aspects of the experiencing subject and they exist independently of experiencing subjects. They are perspectival only in that they contain a perspectivally ‘modulated’ property, ‘modulated’ by its being relational with respect to a point of view.

A point of view is just a point in space (compare Atkin (2006)), where a (point-sized) seeing eye can be located, but that can as well remain unoccupied. Actual points of view do not imply actual views. Points of view are not acts of perception, nor part of the act of perception: they do not depend on perceiving objects. We advocate a return to some robust form of realism about perspectival facts, like the one that was endorsed by neo-realists such as Nunn (1909) or Holt (1912).

Our experience of time and change

The argument from perspective may be applied to ‘temporal denominations’ of the so-called A-type (“past”, “present”, “next week” as opposed to “before 2000”, “on the 1st of July 2009”, “when the first human will be on Mars”), as it is in McTaggart’s argument for the unreality of time:

- 1 Temporal facts are either existentially independent from our present temporal perspective or dependent on it (in which case we call them “A-facts”).
- 2 Being present, past and future are contrary properties.
- 3 The same fact is future, present and past relative to different temporal perspectives.
- ∴ Two of these temporal perspectives do not present us with a mind-independent property of the fact.
- 4 There is no reason to privilege one temporal perspective over another.
- ∴ No temporal perspective presents us with a mind-independent temporal property of facts. Time is unreal.

As before, the right interpretation of 3 yields the harmless:

- 3” The same fact may be *present from certain points of view* and *present from certain other ones*.

We avoid the conclusion that time is unreal, but have to accept irreducibly tensed temporal qualifications: the full story about temporal reality has to be told from a certain temporal standpoint. The fact that some event is present is itself perspectival, it is internally related to an instant of time. We thus reject the premise Fine (2005: 273) calls “Absolutism”, i.e. the view that the composition of reality is not irreducibly relative, that its relative composition by the facts must be explained in terms of its absolute composition by these facts:

“For the non-standard realist [...], reality at another time is an alternative reality. It is neither a facet of the one true reality nor a hypothetical determination of the one true reality, but another reality on an equal footing with the current reality ...” (Fine 2005: 279)

Temporal standpoints are thus irreducibly involved in the constitution of tensed facts. Recent discussion of temporal consciousness have concentrated on our perception of duration, taking our present perception of present events as a supposedly unproblematic starting-point. The question then becomes: how do we perceive past events *as* past, thereby achieving a perception of duration. Three answers have been proposed:

- auditory and visual perceptions are themselves temporally extended processes, so they are themselves in need of an experiential unification which must be located in the present, be point-like and momentary (cf. Dainton 2000: 133);
- temporalised contents are self-revealing, welded together by nothing other than direct experience (Dainton (2000: 237) and Gallagher (2003: 26));
- we enjoy special representations – retentions – which present us with something in the past as past (Husserl (1966b: 118) and Husserl (1966a: 315));

The first view presupposes a present nexus and leads to a regress. The second wrongly explains the experience as of past and as of future by expanding the present, which leads to a dilemma: either the present is intrinsically structured temporally or it is not; if it is, then it’s not present, but “past flowing into future” (taking the metaphor literally); if it is not, then it doesn’t do its job – both the object’s having been F and it’s going to be $\neg F$ are part of it, which is still contradictory. The third position, however, is ambiguous between locating the pastness in the act and locating it in its content; it cannot be in the acts (that would reduce it to (i)), so it must be in the contents; but then the contents are tensed, but atemporally had – this is the defining feature of the A-theory:

“A perception cannot merely be a perception of what is now; rather any perception of the present phase of an object includes a retention of the just-past phase and a protention of the phase of the object about to occur [...] Inner-time consciousness is not an object occurring in time, but neither is it merely a consciousness of time; rather it is itself a form of temporality...” (Zahavi 2007: 464)

Being a form of temporality precisely is having an intrinsically tensed content. A retention of a as having been F cannot be the same act as a direct apprehension of a as being F – the two acts have different veridicality conditions: the retention is veridical iff a *was* F , while the apprehension is veridical iff a *is* F . That this makes a real difference may be shown as follows.

We do see things moving, not just moving things. That there is change, in particular change of position, is directly given to us in experience. There are broadly speaking two metaphysical theories of velocity. According to the so-called “at-at” theory, championed by Russell, the velocity of a moving body at an instant is grounded in its subsequent locations: the body has the velocity it has *because* it is at these different places at different times. According to an alternative theory, the explanatory relation is reversed: the velocity explains, rather than is explained by, the different locations. This concept of instantaneous velocity is quite mysterious however: what grounds at a specific instance the instantaneous velocity the body has? how are we to understand the possession by the body of a vectorial quantity, having not just a value but also a direction? While instantaneous velocity is metaphysically mysterious, it seems clear that we have perceptual access to it. When I see a thing moving, from a to b through c , I directly apprehend it’s being at b , retending that it was at a and protending that it will be at c . By these three different acts, rather than a succession of direct apprehensions, I see the thing as moving.

Self-biased value-judgments

We have seen that there is an important ambiguity in the description of perspectival facts and contents, with respect to the question whether or not their perspectivity is accounted for by their nature, or by the way they are given to us. The same important ambiguity is present in the third type of perspectival facts, i.e. egocentric, or more generally personal, facts. Egocentric facts differ from locational and temporal facts in important ways: as has been argued by Prior (1968), egocentric facts do not seem to have a full propositional structure: they involve features and contain the subject only as an implicit constituent, if at all. Also, it is not quite clear how this ‘implicitly’ involved subject is to be characterised: is it, as one might think by analogy with the cases of time and space, a mere ‘point’ in some ‘space’ of persons. Or is it a substantial self, bearer of attitudes and subject of self-evaluations? The answer to this question will partly determine the extent of the realm of first-personal facts. Our value-judgments, for example, are self-biased: we often value pleasure more if we are going to have it rather than someone else. Is this always irrational (cf. Hare 2007)? Independently of the answer to that question, we may even question whether we ever manage to make person-independent valuations. The argument from perspective may be applied to ‘personal denominations’ of the A-type:

- 1 Our valuations are either axiologically independent from our own person or dependent on it (in which case we call them *personal valuations*).
- 2 Being better and worse are contrary properties.
- 3 The same action is better and worse relative to different personal perspectives.
- ∴ At least one of these personal perspectives do not present us with a person-independent property of the fact.
- 4 There is no reason to privilege one person over another.
- ∴ No personal perspective presents us with a person-independent valuation.

Given this realism about perspectival facts, it follows that we cannot infer the existence of a self from the existence of perspectives (nor the experience of the self from the experience of perspective). What we get is a very thin notion of a metaphysical subject – atemporal, but the locus of temporality; aspatial, but the locus of spatiality (in experience); apersonal, but the locus of personality (this case is relevantly different, because there is no other reference system). Perspectival facts are self-independent.

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