

Believing in Appearances

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Hedging Russell's Retreat

Let us start with an assertion, by someone at a certain type, pointing to a sheet of paper in front of her, of

(1) This is red.

This assertion expresses a belief with the content that the sheet in question is red and is true iff the sheet is red. Suppose now that the same person, in the same circumstances and with respect to the same sheet, says

(2) This looks red.

I will suppose, for the moment, that the person could have made an assertion relevantly equivalent to (2) with any of the following: "This looks red to me.", "This seems / appears red [to me].", "This has a red look [for me].", "Of this object, one has [I have] a red impression. I will also assume that (2) is true iff the sheet looks red, i.e. iff the sheet has a property, *looking red* (or perhaps: *looking red to someone in such-and-such circumstances*), we may call an "appearance property".

But what is *expressed* by (2)? It is commonly assumed that (2), like (1), expresses a belief, differing from (1) only with respect to its content: while (1) ascribes to the sheet the property *being red*, (2) ascribes to it the different property *looking red*. On most views of such properties, application conditions for their predicates are *easier* to fulfill than the application conditions for the predicates they embed: to be justified in (1), I have to be justified in thinking that the sheet is *really* red, while justification for (2) is easier to come by.

I want to epitomise this view by the label "Russell's retreat". Russell's retreat is the view that in asserting not just (2) but (1) as well, I take a certain type of epistemic risk (perhaps because (2) expresses some defeasible evidence for (1)): when challenged with respect to (1), it may make sense to 'fall back to', or 'retreat' to the *weaker* assertion (2).

In contrast to this picture suggested by Russell's retreat, I want to suggest that (2) is expressive not of belief, but of another state of mind – of conjecturing, taking it to be possible, or even of surmising. As my starting-point and motivation, consider what Sellars says about "looks"-statements in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*:

...to say that a certain experience is a *seeing that* something is the case, is to do more than describe the experience. It is to characterize it as, so to speak, making an assertion of claim, and – which is the point I wish to stress – to *endorse* that claim. [...] ...the statement "X looks green to Jones" differs from "Jones sees that x is green" in that whereas the latter both ascribes a propositional claim to Jones' experience *and endorses it*, the former ascribes the claim but does not endorse it. (Sellars 1997: 39, 40-41)

If (2) does not endorse the claim that the sheet is red, what does it do? Sellars says that it "report[s] the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing [that the sheet is red]" (1997: 39, 40-41). This may well be. But what is *endorsed* by (2)? Certainly not what is reported: asserting (2) I am not endorsing any claim about what would be indistinguishable to what, under such-and-such circumstances and for such-and-such subjects.

What I am endorsing in asserting (2), plainly, is *that this looks red to me*. Does this bring us back to the appearance-properties with respect to which we are supposed to enjoy some epistemological privilege? Not necessarily, I want to argue. There are three questions I would like up in turn:

1. Does the *content* of (2) (or rather: of the mental state expressed by (2)) involve an appearance-property?
2. Do the *correctness conditions* of (2) involve an appearance property?
3. Do the *truth conditions* of (2) involve an appearance property?

Construing "seems" as a (type of) copula, it seems to me, gives us the material for a negative answer to the first question. Motivation for a negative answer to the second question may be found, I want to suggest more tentatively, may be found in Kant's distinction between judgments of perception and judgments of experience. Even more speculatively, grounds for a negative answer to the third question may be found (or at least looked for) in a certain view about the mind of the Pyrrhonian skeptic or, alternatively, in a view about what God has to know to know everything.

“Seems” as a copula

Broad (1923: 237) distinguishes between what he calls the “Multiple Relation Theory of Appearing” and the “Sensum Theory”. According to the former, which he finds suggested (though not worked out) in the writings of Dawes Hicks and G.E. Moore, “*appearing to be so and so* is a unique kind of relation between an object, a mind, and a characteristic”. “Seems” is treated as a “mode of copulation”, “allow[ing] Moore to acknowledge the possibility than an object of awareness might be united with [red] only relative to my current experience” (Martin 2015: 150). According to this ‘theory’, the way in which a region of space has a colour (is “pervaded” by it) is a three-place relation, “involving the pervading colour, the pervaded region, and another region which we might call the “region of projection.”” (1925: 162).

Judgments of perception and judgments of experience

In some works, though not in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant makes a distinction between two types of judgment, i.e. two ways in which a predicate and a subject concept can be mentally combined in an act of endorsement.

In contrast to judgments of experience (JE), judgments of perception do not require a pure concept of the understanding, but only the logical connection of perceptions in a thinking subject (*Prolegomena* §18). The step to the JE is that “beyond the perception is added the understanding’s concept of a cause, which connects *necessarily* the concept of sunshine with that of heat, and the synthetic judgment becomes necessarily universally valid, hence objective, and changes from a perception into experience” (§20, fn.). In the *Mrongovius Metaphysik* (early 1780s), Kant says that for a judgment to have more than subjective validity, the sequence of perceptions [expressed by it, PB] “must be determined according to rules, i.e., be necessary”, and this in turn means it must be necessitated by being grounded in how the world objectively is (AA 29: 815-16).

Not all pairs of concepts can be combined in both types of judgments: “body” and “heavy” can be combined both in a JE, “the body is heavy”, and in a JP, “when I carry the body, I feel it to be heavy [einen Druck der Schwere]”, but “sugar” and “sweet” only get together in a JP, “the sugar is sweet”. It is thus clear that Kant did not have a syntactic difference in mind. Though the details are murky, the crucial difference seems to lie in the claim to validity: judgments claiming objective validity are JE, judgments claiming only ‘subjective’ validity are JP. But what could subjective validity be?

Living by appearances

Pyrrhonian sceptics faced a similar question. Diogenes Laertius IX 103-4 objects to skeptics professing to live without beliefs that they have to “reject what is apparent”. Sextus replies:

...we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance – and these things are precisely what is apparant. When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent – and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. (*PH* I x, 2000: 8)

Adequatio intellectus et rei

In an intriguing article, John Hawthorne (2005) explores ways in which an omniscient being could know what we express using vague predicates. He considers the possibility that God, facing a Sorites series, becomes quite difficult for us to interpret:

I say to God: “Ok, I’m going to take away one hair at a time and at each step tell me if the person in front of me is not bald.” God replies: “Ok I’ll draw a picture of a bald person if and only if the person is bald.” As I remove progressively more hairs, God draws increasingly hair-free depictions. After a while, it will be plausible to say that God has stopped drawing pictures of people who are definitely not bald. And a while after that, it will be plausible to say that God has started drawing pictures of people who are definitely bald. As for drawings made during the intervening period, we will say on each occasion that God has drawn a picture of someone who is neither definitely bald nor definitely not bald. The utterance type which is used to say that the person is bald is the act of drawing a bald person. Obviously there will be cases in which it is indefinite whether the utterance is performed.

References

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