

Problems of perception, sensation, representation

Seminar ‘Das Problem der Wahrnehmung’, Philipp Blum

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Introduction: the problem of perception

Distinguish:

- S sees that p .
- S sees x .

Usual story: the first is intentional, because it is intensional (does not permit the substitution of coreferential terms *salva veritate*).

1. propositional / non-propositional: but (i) that p may be de-se (S sees that he himself* is making the mess); (ii) x may be a fact, or another worldly item of propositional form;
2. conceptual / non-conceptual: but (i) you can regret that p without ‘having’ the concepts needed to understand that p ; (ii) we need concepts to see artefacts, beginnings and endings, social events (the crash of the stockmarket, Maria’s regret);
3. epistemic / non-epistemic: but (i) you can see that p without it being the case that p ; (ii) seeing x may be taken to be itself an epistemic relation (‘acquaintance’);

Question: How are we to combine representation with relationality?

Way out? Take the veridicality of perception to be ‘primitive’. Characterise ‘unsuccessful’ (pseudo-) perception in terms of success-conditions:

- (a) A belief that p is successful (true) iff p .
- (b) A perception that p is successful (veridical) iff p and X .
- (c) An emotion that p is successful (correct / appropriate) iff p and Y .

What are X and Y ? More generally: How do we justify (a) to (c)? It is not enough, e.g., to say that belief *aims* at truth, because both perceptions and emotions do so as well and they need X and Y . Intentionalists believe that mental episodes represent through mediation of some intentional content.

What else is there in perception? Maria and the knowledge argument (call “qualia” the experienced, but non-representational aspects, if any, of our mental states).

- knowing-that vs. knowing-how?
- different modes of presentation?
- different concepts?
- different facts, which stand in some causal / constitutive / determination / grounding relation?
- different facts, which stand in no such relation?

Step back: both what we feel and what we represent have their perspectivalty in common. But the same question can be asked: is the perspectivalty of perception to be accounted for in terms of its content or rather in terms of something else (the acts of perceiving, their modes, ...)?

Back to the problem of error: How can we account for our perceptual relation with the world given that there are perceptual situations where we are not in contact with either the objects nor the properties we locate in the world on the basis of our experiences? Different dimensions to this question:

- metaphysical: is perception a relation? what is its nature / its essence?
- ontological: if perception is a relation, what are its relata? can it be only partly exemplified?
- epistemological: what is the relation between perceptual acts and beliefs ‘based on’ them?

The argument from illusion

When we see, we undergo certain physiological processes and we also have a *visual experience*. Problem: We also have visual experiences when we are hallucinating. (Terminological point: “See” and “perceive” are success verbs / factive in philosophy, that is: When I see or perceive a flying horse, then that flying horse exist.) Macbeth did not see or perceive a dagger before him, but instead he merely seemed to see one; or he had an experience as of one; or he had an experience that represented one. We can have visual experiences when we are not seeing. These are of two types:

- hallucinatory: We do not see anything, we merely seem to see something / have a visual experience as of something: there is nothing to perceive.
- illusionary: We do see something, but we do not see it the way it really is.

Some cases may be hard to qualify one way or other.

Crane (2005: 4) gives the following version of the argument from illusion:

1. “When one is subject to an illusion, it seems to one that something has a quality, F , which the real ordinary object supposedly being perceived does not actually have.
2. When it seems to one that something has a quality, F , then there is something of which one is aware which does have this quality.
3. Since the real object in question is, by hypothesis, not- F , then it follows that in cases of illusion, either one is not aware of the real object after all, or if one is, one is aware of it only “indirectly” and not in the direct, unmediated way in which we normally take ourselves to be aware of objects.
4. There is no non-arbitrary way of distinguishing, from the point of view of the subject of an experience, between the phenomenology of perception and illusion (see e.g., Robinson 1994: 56–7; Smith 2002: 26–27).
5. Therefore there is no reason to suppose that even in the case of genuine perception one is directly or immediately aware of ordinary objects.
6. Therefore our normal view about what perceiving is – sometimes called “naïve realism” or “direct realism” – is false. So perception cannot be what we normally think it is.”

Immediate questions: (i) what are the premisses, what is the conclusion? (ii) what are the rules of inference used? (iii) are terms used both in the premisses and in the conclusion used in the same sense in all occurrences? (iv) how would you formalise the premisses? (v) how plausible are the premisses? (vi) “appears” / “seems”: what’s the logical grammar? are there appearances / seemings? what consequence (if any) does the fact (if it is a fact) have that we describe appearances ‘indirectly’, i.e. in terms of what would be the case if they were ‘true’? Are there ‘true’ (better (?): veridical) appearances? what’s the relation (if any) with belief?

The argument from illusion has often been called upon to distinguish two views:

Common factor theorists : Many people have thought that for every perceptual experience involved in seeing (veridical experience) there is a matching indistinguishable hallucinatory experience. Veridical experiences and hallucinatory experiences are the same in phenomenal character (phenomenal character: what the experience is like to me). So we must give exactly the same account of both experiences. E.g.: Sense datum theories or representationalism.

Disjunctivists : Others think that we should not give the same account of veridical and non-veridical perceptual experiences.

References

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