

A DISCOURSE ON THE THEORIES AND PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT: *Perception is arguably one of the most contentious issues in epistemology or the theory of knowledge. It is in fact considered a fulcrum of the discourse as it appears to encapsulate the different thought patterns as to the explanation of how epistemological agents encounter and extract basic bodies of knowledge from the world as it is. Different theories have however been put forward in the explanation of how perception translates to a true, justified belief of the external world, ourselves and extra sensory states. This paper is therefore a review of some of the prominent theories of perception. It also analyses some of the fundamental propositions of the theories in the process of knowing and justifying what is known. It concludes that the theories are rather, more complimentary than divergent since perception can either be sensory or introspective.*

KEYWORDS: discourse, theories, problems, perception

INTRODUCTION

The task of this paper is bifurcated into two broad categories. Firstly, to look into what perception is as it involves the utilization of the senses and introspection as a means of acquiring knowledge and ideas from the outside world. Secondly, to investigate the various theories of perception with a view at analyzing the content of their postulations, that is, how they differ one from another and also to take into cognizance certain arguments against the theories stemming from illusions, hallucinations and subjectivity.

For instance, if we ask the question, how do you know there is a book in front of you? The obvious answer for a realist would be “it is primarily through seeing and touching that we know that physical things exist, we see the chair and then we sit on it”¹. Whereas Idealists would argue that there are no such things as mind-independent objects that do not derive their essence on being perceived by as premised on George Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*. This will however raise the obvious question on the efficacy of our senses. In *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, John Hospers argues that perception or put simply, sense perception is not at all as simple as this, “sometimes we have sense-experiences when there is nothing at all to be perceived, we may be having hallucination such as when we are thirsty and we think we see water and trees in a desert and there are none there”².

Instances of illusions and hallucinations highlighted by John Hospers are just one of so many issues raised in discourses about perception. We must understand that philosophers do not subscribe to a basic standard for the process through which we receive information from outside world from

these divergent views stems various theories of perception which we will examine and discuss in the body of this essay. Questions on the reliability of the sensory states will also be raised in the search for answers.

What is Perception?

Perception is a matter of epistemological dispute which has been in existence from the inception of philosophy. The main thrust of the dispute appears to be on the reconciliation of appearance with reality, that is, how do we come to believe that our senses present us with a perfect representation of the world, put succinctly; can we actually rely on our perceptual experience as a true and indubitable source of knowledge? For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “the perceived world is always the presupposed foundation of all value and all existence”³. Here, Merleau-Ponty argues that for whatever we may claim to know there must be a corresponding fundamental foundation which is empirical by all means. M.G.F Martin explains that perception is the “use any of our five senses, it is through the use of these senses that we explore the world around us and gain knowledge of it”⁵. It can also be defined as “the extraction and use of information about one’s environment”⁶. Sense perception is the use of our senses to acquire information about the world around us and to become acquainted with objects events and their features.

From these definitions an apt conceptualisation of what perception is becomes clear. It is an undeniable fact that it is through our senses that we truly encounter the world. Our ideas or knowledge of the external world as presented by our senses must be of varied kinds or how do we explain situations where people are said to perceive same object but end up with totally contrasting conclusions. I am wont to say that these situations arise either from perceptual errors or misinterpretations of the object of perception as it were. In some cases, it can even be argued that the contradiction is simply a result of the angle from which the object is been perceived; we can even say the effects of the illumination of that particular object accounts for the disparities in their perceptual experience; but we must not fail to ask ourselves this pertinent questions: Aside our perception and interpretation of objects of perception, does it not have a distinct nature in itself as posited by Immanuel Kant which is separate from experience? Can we argue that objects of perception are mind independent and cannot be independent of the mind perceiving them? These questions will lead us into the examination of the theories of perception.

THEORIES OF PERCEPTION

Realism

Realism is the common sense approach to the world. In the real sense ‘the man in the street who has not reflected very much about the problems of perception and the physical world is a realist’⁸. For him the world exists as it is with or without our perception of it. The basic idea of realism is that the kind of things which exists and what they are like are independent of us and the way in which we find out about them. Realists argue that objects are not dependent on our perception of them for their essence to be asserted. They view the world and its components as totally independent of us in the sense and that we are just a part of the whole. In this instance the whole does not rely on us for its being. It is therefore apt to state that all rational agents possess the

tendency to be a realist in the sense that the potentials to accept or argue that whatever we perceive through the senses cannot in any way be different from what it appears to be.

This theory of perception however can be divided into two different classes, direct and indirect realism.

a. Direct Realism

Direct Realism is as an intuitive view in the sense that it tries to describe directly or naively without any prejudice, the world and its objects as they expressly appear. Direct realists argue that the world or objects appear to us exactly as they are and they do not have any hidden quality. For direct realists there are no mind-dependent objects, rather they have their independence outside us as mind independent entities. The existence of the reality does not depend on the perceiver.

According to John Hospers there are 5 basic beliefs or assumptions on which direct realism rests. These beliefs are the arguments, so to speak, which are employed in defending the common sense notion of the world and they seem to follow and agree with the direct realist view of the external world.

The basic beliefs are the following:

- 1) There exists a world of physical objects (trees, buildings, hills etc).
- 2) Statements about these objects can be known to be true through sense experience.
- 3) These objects exist not only when they are being perceived but also when they are not perceived. They are independent of perception.
- 4) By means of our senses, we perceive the physical world pretty much as it is. In the main, our claims to have knowledge of it are justified.
- 5) The sense-impressions we have of physical things are caused by those physical things themselves. For example, my experience of the chair is caused by the chair itself.

In affirmation of the above, G.E. Moore, a major proponent of this position argues that if we try to propose a theory which is contrary, we would be putting forward an absurd and unacceptable argument totally unthinkable, hence fallible. He went further to demonstrate his argument by stating that there are (3) three conditions which must be fulfilled in order to prove the existence of mind independent and external objects. Moore claims that.

I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof... I can prove for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands and saying as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "here is one hand, and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left "and here is another. And if by doing this, I have proved up so facto the existence of external things I can also do it now in numbers of other ways⁹.

This position by Moore appears incontrovertible and valid because we always come in contact with external objects every other day and we have become accustomed to the fact that these objects will always exist without we perceiving them and that they do not cease to exist the moment we are no longer in direct contact with them. In fact, G.E. Moore sees the argument about perception of external objects as incongruent and that it should not arise but since he is "perfectly well aware

that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still be of the fact that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question”¹⁰.

For him we can easily refute anti realist positions by pointing out to them that the mere fact that we can argue about the existence of external objects is enough ground to support their existence since in the course of our arguments we are able, through gestures, using my hands to demonstrate certain points and from these gestures am able to perceive that my hand is existing without any fear of contradiction and Moore support the position thus:

This is a perfectly good proof, provided I know what is asserted in the premises. But I do know that I hold up two hands above the desk not very long ago. As a matter of fact, in this case you all know it too. There is no doubt whatever that I did. Therefore I have given a perfectly conclusive proof that external objects have existed ¹¹.

This view poses a direct attack on the exponents of idealism because of its affirmation of mind-independent entities. He argued that direct realism is vigorously supported by our common-sense. This position is sometimes labeled extreme because of its common-sense view of the world in which we are supposed to accept objects on the basis of their appearances alone. Moore denied the viability of skepticism because objects apparently reveal themselves as what they are and our knowledge of them cannot be doubted in as much as there are no veils of perception which denies us unrestricted access to these objects as they are.

For Thomas Reid, another exponent of Direct Realism often referred to as the founder of the “common-sense philosophy”, the perception of an external object involves some conception or notion of the object and an irresistible conviction of its presence. Reid argues that in perception, we are equipped with a straight-forward access to external objects such that we are aware of things or objects as they truly are. Reid posits that the content of our perceptual experience is reflective or informative of the contents of the state of the external world. How things appear to us in perception is how they are in reality. His book titled *An Inquiry into the Human mind: On the Principles of Common Sense* contained a rebuttal of David Hume’s position on perception which tries to assert that objects cannot be directly known except through impressions and ideas; he argued that the external world is known and explained intuitively without claims of objects dependency on the perceiver.

Thomas Reid’s common-sense conception of perception and the external world criticises any view that denies the independent existence of objects “concerning, belief in the external world”¹². According to Reid the mind is constituted in such a way that sensation automatically causes belief in external objects and such positions as representational realism opined by John Locke, is for him simply a misnomer because “sensations cannot represent physical objects since they do not resemble them in any way. He replies that sensations cannot be taken for objects since their differences from external objects is intuitively obvious to common sense”¹³. Therefore we must accept that whatever we perceive through our sensory organs is externally or independently real and not dependent on a percipient for its reality or existence as the case may be.

Representative/Indirect Realism

This theory holds that “there are physical objects existing independently of perception, but that the way these objects appear to us is in many ways different from the way they really are”¹⁴. This theory advocates the view that external world and physical objects exist independently of our perception or cognition but we cannot come to know these objects or the external world as it thrives outside there, but we know these objects Albeit in ways different from how they actually are. Proponents of indirect realism see perception in a way where appearance does not always tally with reality because we cannot come to really comprehend the reality of objects and external world. Advocates of this theory can be said to argue from an anti-commonsensical point of view because for them when we perceive objects we do not immediately arrive at a total knowledge of such objects.

John Locke, a principal exponent of representative realism argues that “external objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities, which are all those perceptions they produce in us, and the mind furnishes the understanding with the ideas of its own operations. Perception as it is, is the first faculty of the mind, is the first and simplest idea we have from reflection”¹⁵. He stated that if we begin to trace how men begin to have ideas we are actually seeking to know when he began to perceive, because having ideas and perception, for him, are the same thing. Hume affirmed that we cannot know the substance, that is, the object in itself, but through its qualities which we perceive we are able to form the basis of our knowledge. There exists a kind of semblance between the Lockean position and what Immanuel Kant said about *neumenon* and *phenomenon*, such that one is elusive and incomprehensible and the later is that which we can know and comprehend easily.

Indirect Realism theory is often ascribed to John Locke is without doubt a theory beset with problems, some people have interpreted Locke’s theory to mean that we do not directly perceive things in the world but instead we are immediately acquainted with our own ideas or sensations, that these ideas represent things in the world. Another says we perceive ideas in a way that objects in nature affects our senses and present or cause in us ideas representing or resembling the external objects. We must recognize that Locke’s idea of representational realism is a refutation of innate ideas, he attempts to show that we do not have ideas that are inherent in us from birth as claimed by the likes of Rene Descartes, but these ideas get through to us by perceptual experience as in, when we come across external objects. For him the mind of men at birth is “tabular rasar”, he represents this notion with a blank white paper, saying it is through perception alone we get ideas imprinted on this “white paper”.

The crux of this theory of perception is that we are indirectly aware of the physical objects around us in virtue of a direct awareness of internal, non-physical objects, “a sensory smokescreen” from where it causes ideas in us. Criticisms against this theory are contained in the fact that it encourages skepticism in its argument that although the external world exists but we cannot actually come to know it as it is. They argue that it would be more plausible if Locke had argued that our inability to comprehend the mind independent external world is as a result of the inability of our sensory organs, instead of propounding a position that singles out certain qualities which are immediately

given to our sense organs as representing reality. This argument is further analysed by Hospers thus:

Locke, said Berkeley, is committed to skepticism regarding a physical world, he cannot know that it exists even if it does, and he inconsistent because he assumes that it exists and makes claims conceiving it, yet cuts himself off from the possibility of knowing it which invalidates the arguments about physical objects and their qualities that he had given just before.¹⁶

This criticism is debunked by the “time-lag argument” put forward by Mary Margaret Atherton, who said that when we perceive or seem to be perceiving the stars high up in the sky, we are actually not seeing the star as it really is because what appears to us in the perceptual process is not the same size or length of the star, but just a representation of the real object and it is even possible that the star has ceased to exist by the time we are perceiving it, therefore it can only be an indirect object of perception because it is not present to us at the moment of perception and it simply represents the actual object which we can not know directly. In recent time, arguments have been put forward about the disparities that we are faced with during perception, such that, two people looking at same objects are not necessarily seeing the same object.

Scientific Realism

Scientific realism advocates a theory of perception which says that science has shown that physical objects do not retain their properties when they are unperceived and that all those properties we ascribe to them are dependent on our perception for their existence. Scientific realism accepts the existence of physical objects as independent of our perception, but without a mind which perceives them, properties such as colour, taste, sound, smell and heat etc. cannot be said to be inherent in the object. This position gives room for a kind of subjectivity in the sense that it ascribes existence of those properties to the person who perceives them and invariably the nature and interpretation of the object depends solely on the perceiver; since those properties are inherent in the perceptual process.

For the purpose of this paper we would be discussing Idealism and phenomenalism as theories of perception, highlighting their different propositions and their meeting point, especially in their use of sense-data in representing objects of perception and also the tenability of their arguments as put forward by their proponents against realism.

Idealist Theory of Perception

“Idealism arose out of the difficulty of understanding how the human mind can transcend itself and know extra-mental reality”¹⁶ For Idealist, objects of perception cannot exist independently of the mind because those objects are actually ideas in the mind and without the perceiver who perceives them, they cannot exist independently. George Berkeley, a prominent proponent of the argued that if “by physical objects” you mean things existing outside us and causing our sense-experience, I insist that they do not exist, nor could we know that they existed even if they did. But if by “physical object” you mean groups or complexes of sense-experience then they undoubtedly do exist-indeed, we are aware of them every waking moments of our lives, since we

are constantly having sense-experiences that fall into ordered pattern or groups”¹⁷. With this assertion Berkeley proposed a theory of perception which appeared metaphysical in outlook, and absurd especially when compared to others before him.

If we are to accept the position that we do not have objects which exists independently without a mind which harbours them as ideas we must also agree that the existence of ideas or objects is solely hinged on and defined by its being in a mind. This view was made explicit by Berkeley’s dictum “esse est percipi” that is, to be, is to be perceived. George Berkeley’s Idealism creates an obvious difficulty because its argument seems absurd in the sense that we cannot actually be led to believe that the trees, mountains, houses etc that we seem to observe and perceive day in, day out, do not actually exist unless they are being perceived either by a mind or ultimately, by God. To put it in a more succinct way, Idealism affirms that physical objects cannot exist inexperienced and that there cannot be a reality outside experience since whatever is, relies solely on being perceived.

To George Berkeley’s credit, we must necessarily agree that in his attempts at establishing his theory of perception and refuting Locke’s postulation of independent objects as the contents of our perceptual process, he proved first, by arguments largely valid, that our sense-data cannot be supposed to have an existence independent of us, but must be, in part at least in the mind, in the sense that their existence would not continue if there were no seeing or hearing or touching or smelling or tasting. All perceptions according to him, “consists in a partial participation in God’s perception”¹⁸.

Phenomenalism

As a theory of perception “phenomenalism agrees with idealism that our knowledge of physical objects come entirely from our sense-experiences, but it does not follow says the phenomenalist, that when we talk about physical objects we are talking only about sense-experiences at least not about actual sense experiences”¹⁹. It advocates a theory that states perception could either be of actual sense-experiences or possible sense-experiences, it argues that what is to be, is not necessarily to be perceived, rather to be, is to be perceivable. As John Stuart Mill, one of the early phenomenologists puts it; matter is the permanent possibility of sensation. The possibility of sensation exists even when the actual sensation does not”²⁰. Phenomenologists generally agree that to explain our perceptual experience we must accept that there indeed is something continuous, and by this they mean the external world, they profess the view that objects are logical constructions out of perceptual properties.

To say there is a table in the next room when there is no one in that room to perceive it is to say that if there were someone in that room, then that person would perceive a table. A.J. Ayer’s conception of phenomenism is in linguistic terms so as to define references to such entities as physical objects in the external world out of existence. For Ayer, sentences which contained terms such as “table” were to be translated into sentences which referred exclusively to either actual or possible sensory experiences. This position held by Ayer was however rejected by R. Chisholm. A common objection to Ayer’s phenomenism is that in the process of eliminating material object

from language and replacing them with hypothetical about observers and experiences, it seems to commit us to the existence of a new class of ontological object altogether. That to say that a physical object exists is to say that someone would have certain sequences of sensations which is triggered by the occurrence of suitable conditions.

The subjunctive conditional as advocated by the phenomenologists is based on the appeal to regularities in our actual past experiences which has been proved or found to concur in relation to other experiences. This point is further buttressed by Jonathan Dancy thus

The subjunctive conditional is grounded in regular conjunctions of experience of being in a certain place and experiences of a wall; you would seem to see a wall in these circumstances because regularly in the past you (and others) have done so. We can in suitable cases infer a subjunctive conditional from a statement of such regularity in experience, and this is just because the regularity goes to make subjunctive conditional true.²⁴

What is meant by the “subjunctive conditional” by the phenomenologist has been adequately described by Dancy, but is this explanation necessarily true? Is its reliance upon regularities in experience a tenable proof for perceptual cognition? For this theory to be tenable it is expedient that phenomenologist put forward another reason which can expressly account for the presence of the external world, because it seems the realist account of an externally independent world seems to be the only sufficient and adequate position.

It is also appropriate to mention that most phenomenologists are sense-datum proponents, their allusion to sense data allows for the existence of illusions in our perceptual experiences. For them, reports of sense data need not correspond with physical objects, the fact that “physical object claims are subject to one kind of error. Physical object can be doubted or even refuted by subsequent sense-experience, but a sense-datum report cannot. The claim that I am seeing a real tomato may prove dubious or even false but even, if it does it still remains true that I had certain sense-experience that led me to believe that a tomato is there”²⁵.

For them, by reporting a sensation, which involves the awareness of certain sense-data, I am making a claim which is extra-ordinary until it becomes veridical through tactile sensation, but if it is not, then my sensation can be said to be merely illusory. Finally, as a theory of perception, phenomenism is often accused of being little more than a denial of the existence of an external world because the phenomenologist shifts knowledge of the world away from any talk of the object itself and replaces it with our experiences of it. This position states that when we talk about a thing such as a tree we are actually talking about our perceptions of it, instead of saying “the leaves on the tree are green” I say I have a perception of a tree with green leaves” by doing so we are not saying anything about the tree, only our perception of it, and by talking only about our perception and experience of things which is totally subjective. We are not led into saying things that cannot be backed by the evidence of our senses.

From the foregoing, it is evident that phenomenism places emphasis on the experiential process as the only credible means through which we can account for what we actually perceive. Since

perception for them, could either be of actual sense-experience or possible sense-experiences and in replying Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, it concludes that to be is not necessarily to be perceived, rather to be, is to be perceivable.

CONCLUSION

It becomes obvious that there are two ways by which we become aware of things. It is either by the senses or by introspection. Whatever we perceive or see depend on the sensory organ. If we agree that perception depends on the organ of perception, then any claim to perception is private but bearing a similitude to reality outside of perception itself. But when I have a knowledge claim based on introspection it is private to me alone. When I feel pain, I can point to place where the pain is being felt but the pain itself can only be perceived by me alone people have private perceptions which are not necessarily perceived by others.

Perceptions of two people when they are close to one another are similar and not identical, we do not know as much as common-sense proposes but we at least know something. All these constitute the problems of perception; where sometimes we have sense-experiences when there is nothing at all to be perceived or even. The fact therefore remains that no theory of perception can single-handedly interpret and explain our perceptual process.

Realists assert that whatever is perceived is externally or independently real and not dependent on a percipient for its existence and qualities while representative realists claim that what is external is never really perceived and they only create in us private sensory ideas but they remain essentially out of our touch, hidden behind a sensory smoke screen while fizzling away gradually. Phenomenalists however combine elements of the traditional theories, that is, idealism and realism by agreeing that only private ideas, impressions or sense data are directly perceived, but denies that external objects are imperceptible realities behind appearances.

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