

CONCEPTUALIZING THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION IN THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

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Abstract

Is it possible to discuss perception from the object perspective? The much that has been recounted about perception has actually centred on the subject experience and I fear that such rather one-sided introspection may not offer a satisfactory view in the discourse of perception. So, the perennial problem of perception is not that we perceive differently or that we are trapped in an endless struggle of justifying knowledge claims through perception, but that proponents of the theory of perception are often guilty of silencing the vociferous perspective of the objects of perception. My concern, therefore, is how to echo the perspective of the object of perception in such a way that its relevance in the discourse of perception is not quietened. Again, there is an attempt to discover if the objects of perception speak and if it does why the discordance interpretation of what otherwise is unanimous. Finally, I conclude that there are linguistic aspects to the disconnection between the subject and the object of perception.

Keywords: perception, illusion, hallucination, realism, phenomenalism, idealism.

Introduction

The epistemological enterprise is dotted with knowledge claim and the justification thereof. Put differently, it prioritizes the quest for

how we come to know and the justification of what we claim to know. Little wonder Jürgen Habermas opined that “if we are to be answering a question about modern epistemology, it should be about the possibility of human knowledge. What can we know? How do we know what we claim to know? How are we certain that we know what we claim to know?”¹ Robert Audi typifies that “Like Rene Descartes, we have all asked ourselves at one time or another ‘couldn’t everything I seem to see, hear, etc. be illusory? Might I in fact be dreaming all this? If so what do I really know of the outside world?’”²

Worthy of mention is the fact that one of the thematic discourse in the epistemological enterprise is perception. Scepticism about perception poses a great challenge to the possibility and justification of human knowledge by questioning the trustworthiness of our senses since avalanche of our knowledge claims are premised on the senses. Most of the time, we justify our knowledge of the world on our ability to perceive things via the senses. Sceptics ask, how reliable are the senses in providing us with accurate knowledge of the world? How sure are we that we are not actually experiencing a dream? What if we are just merely a brain in a vat stimulated to have the experiences and apparent memories we now have, what if all knowledge claim is illusionary and mere hallucination?

Consequence upon the above challenges, there are attempts to address them by scholars which has been novel. While some parts of this paper would relay critically some of the contributions to this discourse, the main focus is to explore the possibility of championing an object perspective. Moreover, we submit that the problem of perceptions has a linguistic implication which is novel and worthy of attention.

Perception: Meaning and Theories

The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* defines perception as the “extraction and use of information about one’s own environment (exteroception) and one’s own body (proprioception). The external senses sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste — though overlapping to some extent, are distinguished by the kind of information they

convey (e.g. about light, pressure, sound, and temperature).³ Perception, put simply is the channel through which we acquire information and knowledge about the outside world.

Perception has also been conceived as the process by which we become aware of physical objects, including our own body.⁴ According to Robert Audi, perception is a source of knowledge and justification mainly by virtue of yielding beliefs that constitute knowledge or are justified. Hence, perception is not only regarded as how we acquire knowledge of our environment, but also as a ground or basis on which our knowledge claims are justified.⁵ For Jimoh Anselm, “perception is of things or facts, that is, the use of any of the five senses, seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling, to acquire knowledge of the world around us. Through the senses we explore the world and gain knowledge of it.”⁶

Having examined some of the views of some scholars, it is pertinent to submit that perception is not equivalent to knowledge although it is crucial for the assertion of knowledge. At this juncture, let us examine some of the theories of perception.

Some Theories of Perception

I share with Michael Huemer the sentiment that a theory of perception should answer such questions as: What is it to perceive something? What sorts of things does perception make us aware of? How does perception enable us to gain knowledge of the world around us?⁷ With these in mind, we shall look at a number of the theories of perception.

Representationalism (Indirect Realism)

It is a realist theory of perception which maintains that in perception, we are directly aware of certain internal, mental states or entities — referred to by various philosophers as “ideas” (Locke), “impressions” (Hume), “mental images,” or “sense data” (Russell) — and we are indirectly aware of external things (that is, our awareness of them depends on our awareness of the images).⁸ The mental images we perceive are usually said to be caused by external, physical objects or events and also to represent them.

Representationalism implies a sense experience or collection of sense data that apparently picture some aspects of our physical world like objects. In other words, we can have knowledge about our external world by inferring facts about external objects from the character of our mental images. Again, it claims that physical objects impact upon our sense organs causing us to experience sensations which represent the objects that cause them.⁹ This theory accommodates the opinion that there exists material objects with independent properties, but unlike direct realism, maintains that we do not perceive these objects directly as they are, rather, that we perceive them indirectly through mental representations.

The proponents of Representationalism are John Locke and David Hume amongst others. Jimoh summarizes the general framework of this theory when he asserted that representative realism hopes to explain away sense deception by using the distinction between sensation and the objects we perceive. According to the representative realists, deceptions occur when our sensations do not match up with the objects of sensation.¹⁰ By implication, whenever the image or representation I have of an object does not correspond to the actual way the object is in the world, I might be subject to an illusion, while, in a condition in which my sensations do not correspond to anything in the world, I am then hallucinating. The pertinent question here therefore is how do we account for the actual condition of the object in the world? More so, how do we bracket the influence of the subject in accounting for the object?

Idealism

Idealism championed by George Berkeley is epitomised by the submission that it is only the mind and its ideas that exist. This was against the backdrop of indirect realism orchestrated by John Locke. For Locke, the only thing we are immediately aware of is ideas. But Berkeley attempted to draw a connection between ideas and the mind which perceive them which is christened in the popular dictum, “esse est percipi”, meaning to be is to be perceived, for physical objects or things only exist when perceived by the mind. He argued that the mind perceives what God implanted in it hence

God is the cause of ideas. For Berkeley, we have no reason for believing in the existence of external objects, and we could not have any coherent conception of what external objects (things that exist outside of the mind) were like. Locke had posited that they resembled our ideas, but for Berkeley, nothing could resemble an idea, except an idea. Berkeley thus refutes the concept of an external object claiming that it is a contradiction.¹¹

The problem with Berkeley's idealism is that it fails to resolve the problem of perception, for it does not satisfactorily explain the distinction between perceptual error and veridical or accurate perception. By implication, everything we perceive could be asserted to be a kind dream, if this is so, then, there is no difference between perceiving something as it really is and being mistaken. Therefore, there is no distinction between hallucination and reality. How then, does idealism make sense of perceptual error, since it has no representation of a real world?

Direct Realism

This theory developed by Thomas Reid was a response to Hume and Berkeley. The crux of this theory is the claim that we do not perceive ideas but we perceive physical objects directly. It maintains that objects continue to observe the laws of physics and maintain their properties irrespective of their being perceived or not. More so, that the senses are windows through which we make contact with the world and through which we know the world as it is. That is, we come to perceive the world in its most direct way through the senses. Reid, furthermore argues that we are justified in believing in the existence of external objects without supplying arguments for their existence. Another name for this theory is naive realism or common sense view of perceptual experience.

Aligning with the claims of Reid, we find it really challenging to make a demarcation between perceptions shredded by illusion or hallucination and actual ones. Russell buttressed the aforementioned when he observed that the apparent shape and colour of a table depend not just upon the properties of the table, but also upon the lighting conditions.

Phenomenalism

Phenomenalism maintains that physical objects are not just collections of actual sense data but also of potential sense data, therefore, they continue to exist even when they are not perceived. In other words, physical objects are permanent possibilities of sensation and that all talk about them can be reduced to talk about actual and potential sense data. Phenomenalists would generally opine that “to be is not just to be perceived, but also to be perceivable.”¹²

There is a variation of phenomenalism, known as linguistic phenomenalism. It is essentially a theory of meaning, which tries to answer the question of what we mean when we talk about physical objects as if they are actual independently existing objects, we actually referring to various patterns of sense data that we experience. For them, talk about physical objects is a short form of sense data or phenomena. The argument that the linguistic phenomenalists seek to raise is that we can technically avoid talk about physical object, since all talk about them can be translated to sense data or phenomena, without any loss of meaning. For example, the word orange does not refer to any independently existing material object, but really means something round, green or orange, sweet and juicy and so on; a collection of potential sense data.

Even when it has been argued that if we translate physical object language into phenomenal language, physical objects will always recur in the translation into phenomenal language. And that it is almost impossible to use phenomenal language without mentioning physical objects, we feel mandated to explore the perhaps narrow possibility of using phenomenal language without mentioning physical objects. Talks about physical objects should stand uncorrupted and battered by subject interference. We proposed that this might offer a viable address to the avalanche problems of perception. At this juncture, it is important to relay some of the known problems of perception in the history of this discourse.

The Problems of Perception

When philosophers ask, what is the nature of perception? They are not asking purely empirical questions, such as: how do our sense-organs actually work? What are the mechanisms of smell and taste? How do vision and touch actually provide us with information about the world around us? On the contrary, they are concerned about how perception provides reason for our beliefs about the empirical world. For instance, suppose I see a jug before me, and come to believe on the basis of this that there is a jug before me. My reason for believing that there is a jug is that I can see it. But the question is what makes seeing the jug a reason for this belief? Is it not possible that one is caught in a web of illusion or hallucinating?

The problem of perception therefore, is the result of attempting to reconcile some apparently obvious truths about perception with the apparent possibility of a certain kind of perceptual error. The problem of perception is created by the phenomena of perceptual illusion and hallucination: if these kinds of error are possible, how can perception be what we ordinarily understand it to be, an openness to and awareness of the world? Put differently, the very fact that it is difficult to identify when an object is perceived correctly and when an error occurs in perception spells out the problem of perception.

In an actual instance of perception an object is seen and seen correctly or as it is. But in the case of illusion, an object is seen but seen incorrectly or as it is not. Instances of illusion can be found in cases in which a round object is seen to be oval, a brown object is seen to be black, or a tall object is seen to be short. In such cases, the subject could be said to be suffering from illusion. Hallucination on the other hand is a case in which it seems to the subject as though something is seen but where in fact nothing is seen. It is the kinds of things that happens in a dream experience. This problem emerged from Descartes's scepticism about experience where he alluded the possibility of one been deceived by a demon. Again, the brain in the vat illustration by the sceptics point to the fact of the possibility of hallucination. The possibility of illusion, hallucination and perspectival variation or conflicting appearances are the underlying factors of the problem of perception.

David Hume, Bertrand Russell and A J Ayer are the major proponents of the argument from illusion. Hume posited this argument in criticizing direct realism when he observed that the character of our sensory experiences often varies even when there is no change in the physical object we are putatively perceiving. For example, as one moves further away from a table, the table looks smaller, but there is no objective change in the physical table. This shows that one is not perceiving the real table. Rather, one is perceiving an image of the table in one's mind.¹³

Bertrand Russell offered another versions of the argument from illusion when he argued that the "apparent shape and colour of a table depend not just upon the properties of the table, but also upon the location of the observer and lighting conditions."¹⁴ Another version of the argument from illusion is expressed by A.J. Ayer. Ayer in his famous optical illusion in which a straight stick, when halfway immersed in water, appears bent. Ayer claims that in this case, what one sees cannot be the real stick. In our ordinary conception of perceptual experience, we always assume that we are sometimes perceptually aware of ordinary mind-independent objects in perceptual experience. However, such awareness can come from veridical experiences, cases in which one perceives an object for what it is. But it can also come from illusory experiences. For we think of an illusion as "any perceptual situation in which a physical object is actually perceived, but in which that object perceptually appears other than it really is."¹⁵

The argument from illusion has been strongly criticized by John Austin, especially when he responded to A.J. Ayer who subscribed to the argument from illusion alongside Bertrand Russell. In actual fact, Austin "argues that the argument from illusion draws plausibility from various misuses of language."¹⁶ He criticized Ayer's optical illusion in which a straight stick looks bent when immersed halfway in water, and as such does not amount to an experience of a real stick. For Austin, for the fact that the stick looks bent, it does not follow that one is seeing something that is bent, nor does it follow that one is not seeing the actual stick. Rather, for Austin, what one is seeing is a straight stick that appears bent. This pre-empts the stance of this paper which is a clarion call for an

evaluation of the relationship between the subject and object of perception.

Exploring the Objective Perspective: A Linguistic Approach

A critical introspection in the discourse of perception showcases that it is possible to assert that the entire arguments on the theories and problems of perception could be effectively summarized into a subject and object perspectives. In other words, positions offered so far could be categorized into two main emphasis; either the subject or the object. However, a sojourn through the history of the discourse of perception suggests that so much emphasis have been laid on the subject almost to the detriment of the object of perception. The over-imposition of the categories of the subject has silence the germane import of the object. This has left us to wonder if it is possible to analyse perception from one perspective without been erroneous. The claims of Austin seems to corroborate the point that so much has to be done to offer a voice to the object of perception.

In a case where a table appears differently to different observers troubles a critical mind. The challenge of asserting whose account represents the actual status of the table becomes herculean. This has been the fate of the philosophers of perception *ab initio*. Worthy of note also is that in all the instances of reports from the subjects, the table's status remains unchanged. We are therefore inspired to propose that philosophers of perception by amplifying the status of the object would go a long way to addressing the pristine and multi-faceted problems of perception.

Conclusion

Having attempted a conceptual analysis of the theories and problems of perception and also demonstrated the positions of various proponents in the discourse, it is pertinent to assert that the position of this paper is that there a linguistic twist to the discourse of perception which offers a viable perspective in addressing the problem of perception. We drew from the claims of Austin which advocates for a language of report that would not compromise the status of both the subject and object of perception.

Furthermore, we may ask; how then can we achieve the linguistic proposal of Austin? For Austin, a linguistic approach which will report the status of the subject as well as the object of perception without a compromise is inevitable in addressing effectively the problem of perception. Again, how do we construe such a language that would guarantee these ambitions? This question is dedicated to the future of philosophers of perception. However, it is worthy of note to identify that there is a linguistic twist to the problem of perception.

ENDNOTES

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⁵ Audi Robert, 1998. *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, The Taylor and Francis Group. p. 16.

⁶ Jimoh Anselrn, 2013. *Certitude and Doubt: A study Guide in Epistemology*, Ibadan: Ebony Books & Kreations. p. 88.

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