

Philosophy 136
The Philosophy of Perception
Handout 1
Tuesday, 30 August 2005

1. What is Sense Perception?

The Five Senses:

Sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste

The means by which organisms come into cognitive contact with the world around them such that they can think about and aim to act on individual objects in their environments and learn facts about them.

Object perception – S senses o (John sees Mary; Amy hears a crash; Brian feels the softness of the cashmere)

Fact perception – S can sense that p (John can see that Mary is upset; Amy could hear weeping in the next room; Brian can feel the hole in his tooth)

The appearance of objects of perception – how o appears to S , S senses o as F (Mary looks to John to be tall; the crash sounded loud to Amy; Brian feels the cavity as large)

2. The Problem of Appearance and Reality

Things can *appear* to be other than they are to us:

Illusions: one perceives something, but it appears to be a way one does not perceive it to be.

Hallucinations (or delusions): one seems to perceive something, but one does not perceive at all

A Problem of Knowledge

How does one know one is not misperceiving or having an hallucination?

Does one need to know that one is not misperceiving or having an hallucination to come to know anything about the world through the use of one's senses?

A Problem About What Perception Is

What can sensory awareness of objects or facts be if it allows for misperception or mere seeming to perceive?

This will be our main question over the course.

3. The Traditional Approach

Naïve or Direct Realism:

We (sometimes) perceive physical objects *directly* or *immediately*

Indirect Realism:

We never perceive physical objects *directly* or *immediately*

We perceive physical objects through perceiving/being aware of non-physical objects—impressions, images, sense-data, percepts

[Phenomenalism:

We perceive/are aware of non-physical entities—impressions, images, sense-data, percepts—but the physical world is not distinct from these entities]

The choice among these views is (allegedly) forced on one through a response to *the argument from illusion* and one's attitude to the nature of the world.

Austin's verdict:

The general doctrine... [that] we never see otherwise perceive (or "sense"), or anyhow never *directly* perceive or sense, material objects (or material things), but only sense-data (or our own ideas, impressions, *sensa*, sense-perceptions, percepts etc.)... is a typically *scholastic* view, attributable, first, to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are over-simplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described; and second to an obsession with a few (and nearly always the same) half-studied "facts". (J.L. Austin, *Sense & Sensibilia*, pp. 2-3.)

4. *The Significance of the Debate*

The argument from illusion has traditionally been associated with *scepticism with regard to the senses* (see Hume in the reader).

Cartesian scepticism raises the question how we can know that we are not dreaming, or subject to the whims of a clever demon. It questions the status of our knowledge of the world around us as a whole.

Scepticism with regard to the senses worries about the nature of perceptual awareness and whether this can provide for knowledge of the world at all – the so-called veil of perception.

This is as much a problem about our understanding of ourselves as of our knowledge of the world: it seems to us as if we are conscious of the ordinary, every day items in the world around us. But are we really? Can the argument from illusion show that we are *never* aware of desks or chairs, or windows, but are only ever aware of images or impressions or sense-data?

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