

Philosophy 136  
The Philosophy of Perception  
Handout 16  
Tuesday 25 October 2005

1. *Objections to Sense-Data*

Critics of sense-data have generally objected to them on three kinds of grounds:

- a.) Ontological;
- b.) Epistemological;
- c.) Phenomenological;

2. *Epistemological Objections*

Do sense-data act as *intermediaries* or *barriers* between us and objects in the world?  
What does it mean to claim this?

The emphasis in some writings on having *direct* contact with an object or what is known is sometimes held up as a virtue of a kind of knowledge; as if indirect knowledge would be second-rate. Why should that be?

Why don't we say that sense-data afford or facilitate perceptual awareness of objects instead? After all, our normal means to coming to know about objects around us and learn facts about the world is to use our senses. According to the sense-datum theorist what it is to have a sense experience is to be aware of sense-data, so awareness of sense-data provides for knowledge of objects in the world.

*First Suggestion*

According to some *direct acquaintance* with an entity is a necessary condition of thought about it, and hence knowledge of any proposition genuinely concerning it. If our perceptual states do not provide for direct acquaintance with physical objects then we cannot really know things about them. Compare:

*x* d-perceives *y* iff *x* stands, in virtue of *x*'s perceptual experience, in such a relation to *y* that, if *x* could make demonstrative judgements, then it would be possible for *x* to make the *true* demonstrative judgement 'That is *y*'. (P.F. Snowdon, 'How to Interpret "Direct Perception"', p.56 in Tim Crane, ed., *The Contents of Experience* (Cambridge: 1992).)

Why suppose that direct acquaintance (in the form that the sense-datum theory would deny us) is necessary for singling objects out and knowing things about them?  
What of knowledge through watching television or reading the newspapers? Does that meet the constraint of direct acquaintance? Or knowledge of the distant past?

*Second Suggestion*

Perhaps the complaint is that according to the sense-datum theory, sense-data play the role that we thought ordinary objects played. On this construal, the worry of a barrier or a veil would be that objects fail to play the role that we thought that they did in our experience, because sense-data play that role instead.

What role is that and why should we suppose that ordinary objects play any such role?

3. *The Phenomenological Objection to Sense-Data*

The situation is rather... that the employment of our ordinary, full-blooded concepts of physical objects is indispensable to a strict, and strictly veridical, account of our sensible experience. (Strawson, 'Perception and its Objects, p.96 in *Vision & Mind*.)

Some... sense datum theorists assert that the color [Eloise] is aware of is inner and mental and not a property of external objects. But, this sense datum claim is counter to ordinary visual experience. When Eloise sees a tree before her, the colors she experiences are all experienced as features of the tree and its surroundings. None of them are experienced as intrinsic features of her experience. Nor does she experience any features of anything as intrinsic features of her experience. And that is true of you too. There is nothing special about Eloise's visual experience. When you see a tree, you do not experience any features as intrinsic features of your experience. Look at a tree and try to turn your attention to intrinsic features of your visual experience. I predict you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented tree...

The sense datum theorist's view about our immediate experience of color is definitely not the naïve view; it does not represent the viewpoint of ordinary perception. The sense datum theory is not the result of phenomenological study; it is rather result of an argument, namely the argument from illusion. But that argument is either invalid or question-begging... (Harman, 'The Intrinsic Quality of Experience', p.39.)

Distinguish two claims:

- (A) Nothing about introspection of one's visual experience reveals the presence of sense-data, qualia, or 'intrinsic features' of sense experience;
- (B) Introspection of one's visual experience does the reveal the presence of ordinary objects of sense perception – e.g. trees, the Pacific Ocean, tables and chairs.

Pressing objection (A) against sense-datum theories requires assuming that if there are non-physical sense-data we must be aware of them and aware of them as sense-data, i.e. as non-identical with the material objects of sense. Note that Hume in the *Enquiry* claims that we normally do not note any such non-identity.

Pressing objection (B) against sense-datum theories supposes that we are correct to suppose that our sense experience involves the material objects of perception (or ostensible material objects of perception). The complaint is then that this aspect of our sense experience, that it involves the presence to the mind of material objects, or their seeming presence, is not explained by supposing that we are aware solely of non-material sense-data.

In pressing objection (B) we have a reason to challenge the claim that a sense-datum theory gives the best explanation of what sense experience is like. According to the proponent of (B) the sense-datum theory gives *no* explanation of sense experience since it gives no account of the way that sense experience presents the physical world to us.

(B) is an objection, at best, to a *pure* sense-datum theory: i.e. a theory which seeks to explain sense experience solely in terms of awareness of sense-data (cf. Jackson). But what else could one appeal to in an account of sensory experience?

Enter intentional theories of perception.

#### *4. The Intentional Theory of Perception and Belief Analyses of Perception*

David Armstrong once suggested that we should think of perception as an organism's acquisition of belief (or disposition to acquire belief) about its environment or its self. (See *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, Ch. 10 – Armstrong is discussed in the excerpt from John Foster in the Reader.)

Such a theory would not posit sense-data (as Armstrong noted), but it would not seem to explain the nature of sense experience, rather to deny its existence or its relevance to sense perception.

An intentional theory of perception may yet emphasise the close connection between perception and belief but not deny the existence of sense experience. Rather, the character of sense experience is to be explained by reference to the intentional content that a perceptual experience possesses.

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