

The Phenomenological Character of Experience as a Contemporary Problem in the Philosophy of Perception

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Abstract

The philosophical problem of showing the relationship between a subject's experience and its object gives rise to causal problem that was generated by John Locke's representative theory of perception. This paper examined the problem of how mind-independent objects could feature in the phenomenological character of experience and maintained that the appeal to representational character of experience is the answer to the causal problem of perception. Using E.J. Lowe's stick figure sketch of a man as an illustrative example, the paper argued that the indeterminacy in Locke's explanation of perceptual capacities is an appropriate feature of perceptual objects. It further posited that Lowe's adverbialist interpretation of Locke's position is wrongheaded because manner of sensing as subjective reports cannot yield objective standard of knowledge. The method of critical and conceptual analysis was employed while the existing literatures on the subject provided the background to the paper. It concluded the causal antecedents of our experience determine that perceptual object.

Keywords: Perception, phenomenological, causal, representational, indeterminacy.

1. Introduction

Contemporary discussion about the nature of perception focuses on the dispute between the Lockean representative theory of perception and other rival theories. In an attempt to clarify the problem, D. M Armstrong describes perception as a process involving the senses whereby we are enabled to arrive at true beliefs about our environment, so as to satisfy our needs.¹ We are however, sometimes being misled as to the exact nature of our physical surroundings. It is indeed the nature of the intervening processes that make up perceptual experience, which raises contentious issues.

Paul Coates identifies the central difficulty for theories of perception with the inability to distinguish hallucinatory experiences from perceptual experiences.

The statement of the problem is as follows:

Someone who experiences a ringing noise in her ear, which is a common enough auditory hallucination, may think that her front door bell is ringing. So the problem arises: how can a perceptual experience involve the awareness of anything more than the kind of entity that is

involved in hallucination? How can perception take the subject further than awareness of her own mental states, and into an experiential contact with the physical world beyond?²

Coates argues for the position that the other non-causal theories of perception are unable to provide coherent account of the relation between the subject and the object perceived. He concludes that some form of the causal theory as proposed by John Locke must be accepted as correct if the sceptic's challenge is to be resisted i.e. the challenge that knowledge of independently existing physical objects is impossible.³ To this end, Coates rejects Berkeley's purposive explanation of our perceptual experience in which the awareness of sensory qualities in experience is to be construed intentionally.⁴ Coates argues further that the intentional account can only make sense if combined with the causal theory.

Coates give the causal theory of perception schematically as follows:

A subject S perceived X if and only if

1. X is an existing physical object
2. S has a logically distinct sensory experience E
3. X causes E (in the appropriate way).⁵

The causal theory of perception shows that perceptual knowledge is, in an ontological sense, indirect. A subject perceives an object if and only if such a subject is caused in the appropriate way to have a logically distinct experience by that object. For instance, someone who sees a tree will normally or probably have a visual experience of something green, which is caused by the tree. Hence, the causal theorist is right to claim that the subject's experience and the object perceived are logically distinct. The major task, therefore, is to show how they are related in perception. But Coates needs to realize that it is at this point of showing the relationship between subject's experience and its object that an appeal to some unspecified causal connection gives rise to causal problem. The main issue at this point is that granted that Locke's representative theory of perception has generated this causal problem, how can it be solved? Coates concludes that either the causal theory can be vindicated, or we are unable to give a coherent account of perception.⁶ The following section discusses the causal problem with a view to showing the adequacy or inadequacy of the representative theory of perception as defended by Locke.

2. Phenomenological and Causal Components in Perception

Phenomenological theory of perception is concerned with combating the assumption that knowledge is mental representations in our consciousness. It centres on direct, pre-reflective and lived experience. Proponents of this school of thought include J.P.Sartre and M. Merleau-Ponty.⁷

F. Dretske in his work maintains that it is the delivery of information, not the causal connexion that is essential to our perception of things. He presents an account of simple seeing as visual differentiation - a way of describing the subject's visual experience. Thus, seeing objects is a way of getting information about them. What makes it 'seeing' (rather than hearing) is the intrinsic character of those events occurring in us that carry the information. Dretske concludes that causal analysis does not play significant role in giving account of our conscious experience.⁸

Dretske does not subscribe to the belief that perceptual object is determined by the causal antecedents of our visual experience. He, however, notices one important merit of the causal analysis of perception and writes:

Whether a causal account is ultimately satisfactory or not, it does succeed in driving a wedge between perception and conception. It divorces questions about what we see from questions about what, if anything, we know or believe about what we see. It distinguishes questions about the etiology of our experience from questions about the effects of that experience. Insofar as it achieves this separation, it succeeds in capturing the essence of simple seeing.⁹

Despite the attractive features of causal analysis of perception as mentioned above, Dretske affirms that he does not subscribe to such a view. He identifies two main problems with the causal view. The first is the problem of stating just how an object must figure in the generation of a person's experience to qualify as the object of that experience. Let us examine the following perceptual case to illustrate the above view.

When you hear a doorbell ring, you hear the bell ring, not the button being depressed, even though both events (the bell's ringing and the button's being depressed) are causally involved in the production of your auditory experience. Both are differential conditions.¹⁰

The crucial question, which Dretske raises, is what, then, singles out the bell's ringing (not the button being depressed) as the perceptual object? He concludes that the causal theory of perception has little solution to this question.

The second problem Dretske identifies with the causal theory of perception has to do with the nature of the causal relation itself.

Just what do we mean when we say that A causes B, that A is causally responsible for B or that B is one of A's effects? There is remarkably little agreement among philosophers about the answers to these questions. This intramural squabbling would not be particularly embarrassing to causal analysis of perception if the disputed issues were not themselves germane to the questions we wanted answered about perception. But this is precisely what is not the case. The absorption of photons by the photosensitive pigment on the rods and cones, for example, is a quantum process with all that this implies about the indeterminacy of such events. This indeterminacy can be made to manifest itself under conditions of extremely low illumination; whether the subject will see a faint light is, in principle, unpredictable.¹¹

The crux of Dretske's illustrative example as stated above is that the problem of indeterminacy makes it difficult to ascertain the causal process involved in such perceptual analysis. This is very contentious as one standard view of causality makes the cause part of some nomically sufficient condition for the effect.¹² Dretske contends that (as in physics) since there is no sufficient condition for a photon's absorption, nothing causes it to be absorbed on this analysis of causality. The implication of Dretske's position is that his analysis will constitute a break in the causal chain between subject and object. For instance, it is possible to see things to which we do not stand in the appropriate causal relation. The inherent randomness of quantum phenomena are to be counted as causal in nature.

The philosophical problem with this account of perceptual experience of simple seeing in terms of solely of visual differentiation is that it is too mentalistic. This observation follows from Dretske's claim that to talk about our sensory experience is simply to talk about certain internal brain processes that are essential to one's perception. Dretske's analysis leaves out the explanation of how such internal brain processes code the information about a particular perceptual experience. What about the relation of internal events to external ones? Is it causal or non causal? Dretske fails to provide satisfactory answers to these fundamental questions.

Bertrand Russell rejects the view that we can infer the existence of "things" i.e. bodies and atoms of science from data of science by showing that our sense data have causes other than themselves i.e. the view that something can be known about these causes by inference from their effects.¹³ This is purely a Lockean view of perception, which states that there are physical objects existing independently of the perceiver but that the way these objects appear to us in many ways differs from the way they really are.¹⁴ Russell considers the implication of the above position for science, which shows that no justification of science is possible. Physics for example, will cease to be empirical or a science based on observation and experiment alone. Russell maintains that physical states of affairs can be derived from sense data through a process of "logical construction" rather than "inferred entities."¹⁵ The crux of this line of thought is that Russell does not regard sense data as mental (in the way Dretske and other scholars take it to be) but rather as physical. The various realities that form the sense data of individuals (smell, colour etc.) are sensibilia rather than sense data.

The problem with Russell's position is associated with his assertion that sense-datum is a "particular" of which the subject is aware and that the existence of the sense-datum is not logically dependent on that of the subject.¹⁶ The philosophical question that readily comes to

mind is whether we can talk of a sense datum that is not a sense datum of something? Thus H. A. Prichard presents an argument against Russell's position:

If, as Mr Russell thinks, we are somehow directly aware of what are called appearances, we must also be directly aware of what are called bodies, since the apprehension of the one must be inseparable from that of the other.¹⁷

The argument shows that our awareness of appearances also implies the awareness of their corresponding bodies, which give rise to them. Russell seems to be suggesting that when an appearance really does appear, we may find it difficult to distinguish or separate it from the body without which no appearance will appear in the first place. In this case, it just may be the case that there is no real difference between what appears (an appearance) and what makes it to appear i.e. the body behind it. This, in fact, draws us back to the causal problem of perception i.e. the problem of the relationship between sense data and their objects, appearances and realities behind them.

Reacting to the controversy between the Lockean representational theory of perception and the Berkelian mind-dependent hypothesis, MGF Martin questions whether these exhaust the options. Martin contends that there are reasons to think that one's experience relates one to the mind independent world, and yet does so in a non-representational manner.¹⁸ It is his belief that a simple reflection on the nature of appearances would reveal this fact. Martin explains:

When I stare at the strangling lavender bush at the end of my street, I can attend to the variegated colour and shapes of leaves and branches, and over time I may notice how they alter with the seasons. But I can also reflect on what it is like for me now to be starring at the bush, and in doing so, I can reflect on the particular aspect of the visual situation: for example, that at this distance of fifty metres the bush appears more flattened than the rose bush which forms the boundary of my house with the street. When my attention is directed out at the world, the lavender bush and its features occupy central stage. It is also notable that when my attention is turned inwards instead to my experience, the bush is not replaced by some other entity belonging to the inner realm of the mind.... So, it does not seem to me as if there is any object apart from the bush for me to be attending to or reflecting on while doing this.¹⁹

This is referred to as argument based on the transparency of experience. This suggests that in explaining the phenomenological character of sensory experience, the so-called subjective qualities (sense data) need not be posited as objects of awareness. Martin seems to be defending a direct realist view of perception. We may respond to Martin's example by raising the question; how is he so sure that it is the lavender bush and its features that he perceives when his attention is turned inwards? There is the problem of possibility of illusory experiences to be settled by Martin. A close examination would seem to take us back to the kind of view, which Locke articulated – the qualities of the lavender bush being representational properties of the lavender bush. Martin may not be able to perceive the lavender bush as it really is. We cannot still run away from the causal problem. Furthermore, in emphasising the apparent role of mind-independent objects (the lavender bush and its qualities) as aspects of Martin's experience when his attention is directed inward, the approach indicates the need to account for how mind-independent objects could feature in the phenomenological character of experience, given the argument from illusion. The appeal to representational character of experience is the answer to the causal problem because the objects actually have to be there for one to have the experience.

Defending the inevitability of the causal factor in analysis of perception, Paul Grice presents two different arguments (1) argument from coincidence, and (2) argument from contrivance²⁰. These two arguments are meant to show that the following two conditions are necessary but not sufficient for one to be said to perceive an object.

- (a) The object is in fact there in front of you.
- (b) You have visual experiences of the object.

Let us examine Grice's argument from coincidence.

...it might be that it looked to me as if there were a certain sort of pillar in a certain direction at a certain distance, and there might actually be a pillar in that place; but if, unknown to me, there were a mirror interposed between me and the pillar, it would certainly be incorrect to say that I saw the first pillar, and correct to say that I saw the second.²¹

The point being demonstrated by Grice is that in this case, it is because the pillar does not cause the experience that one does not qualify as genuinely seeing the pillar. Grice states the arguments from contrivance as follows:

You are standing in front of a vase, facing towards it, with your eyes open. But unbeknownst to you, a holographic projector is throwing an image of a very similar, although not the same vase into the space between you and the real vase. You are seeing the holographic image not the first vase. So you satisfy both condition (a) and (b). Yet you do not, it is argued, see the first vase at all. The only thing you can be said to really see is the holographic image (and, possibly, the second vase).²²

In spite of the intuitive appeal made by Grice's arguments of coincidence and contrivances, it is often maintained that they do not show what they are not intended to show because they give the wrong account of why the relevant object is not perceived. John Hyman argues against Grice's causal analysis as follows:

There is no reason why we should regard them as stories about different ways of causing impression, when what they are obviously about is differing ways of causally preventing someone from seeing something- an obstacle, by an apparatus, etc. In the case of the pillars, Grice can see the second pillar and cannot see the first because the second pillar is visible (in the mirror) from where he is standing, whereas the first is hidden from view (by the mirror, as it happens). In it would indeed be incorrect to say that he was the first pillar- because he was prevented from seeing it by an obstacle.²³

The main crux of Hyman's contention is that Grice does not succeed in showing that when I see something, the fact that I see is causally explained by the fact that it is there.

One may reasonably ask at this point whether there is no causal connexion between our environment and our experience. As demonstrated by Locke, the fact remains that the things that we perceived in our environment act causally upon our sense organs, thereby causing all sorts of experiences in our minds. Locke refers to this causal factor as the way in which the insensible particles of objects excite certain sensation in us.²⁴ The fact remains that we cannot give a complete explanation of our perceptions without accounting for the external objects that give rise to them. It is in this sense that the causal factor becomes indispensable in accounting for perceptual experiences. The following section presents contemporary discussions of the nature of reality from the perspectives of substance qualities.

3. Results and Discussion

Locke's representative theory of perception is crucial in his accounting of knowing. Some critics opine that Locke's account of perception is a muddle. According to D. J. O'Connor this, of course, does not mean that all representative theories of knowledge must fail. But they are to be defensible; they need more careful treatment than Locke was able to give his own.²⁵

O'Connor argues:

It will be sufficient here to note that his basic concept of primary quality is confused (a) He fails to distinguish between determinable forms in which these general properties are manifested. A thing cannot have just shape or velocity in general. It must be some specific shape, spherical, cubical, or what not, and some specific velocity. (b) Once this necessary distinction has been made, the two marks which Locke assigns to primary qualities, (i) that they are inseparable from the body in what state so ever it be and (ii) that they truly our ideas of them, are seen to be either false or trivial.²⁶

Arguing further, O'Connor maintains that Locke's attempt to justify the concept of substance, though ingenious, is fallacious, as Locke was arguing against the direction of his own thinking.²⁷ It would be realized that Locke admits that there is no positive conception of

substance, rather what obtains is mere supposition. It is on the basis of this that Locke's postulation of the idea of substance presents a counter-example to his claim that all our concepts have an origin in experience, being derived from sensation and reflection. This actually portrays Locke as an inconsistent empiricist.

Let us consider O'Connor's argument that a given physical object does not have the same determinate shape or velocity in whatever state it may be. This is based on his belief that "changes of state are indeed precisely changes in the primary qualities of an object as it grows larger or smaller, alters its shape, or is accelerated."²⁸ This position rests on a misunderstanding of Locke's thesis on the nature of primary qualities of bodies. Locke writes: Primaries qualities of bodies...are utterly inseparable from the body, in what state so ever it be; and such as in all the alterations and changes it suffers, all the force can be used upon it, it constantly keep and such as sense constantly finds in every particle of matter which has bulk enough to be perceived; and the mind finds inseparable from every particles of matter, though less than to make itself singly be perceived by our senses: e.g. Take a grain of wheat, divide it into two parts, each part has still solidity, extension, figure and mobility: divide again and it retains still the same qualities, and so divide it on, till the part becomes insensible, they must retain still each of them all those qualities.²⁹

This passage from Locke clearly shows that no amount of division or alteration of a body to insensible parts can take away solidity, extension, figure or mobility from any body. We may, therefore, conclude that given the Lockean view of primary qualities of objects, O'Connor's position that changes of state are precisely changes in the primary qualities of bodies appear to be incorrect.

O'Connor presents empirical counter example to refute Locke's defence of substance- the view that it is contradictory to suppose that the qualities of a body or the actions of a mind should exist on there own, unsupported by the mysterious and the quality-less-substratum.³⁰

O'Connor argues:

There are, in fact, causes of observable qualities, which are not the qualities of any substance. Dreams and hallucination provide endless examples. Or to take less bizarre instances, a visual after image, the coloured patch that floats in my field of vision after I had gazed at a bright light, is not inherent in any substance. (It is not, of course, inherent in my eye or in my visual field in the same sense of "inherent")³¹.

. The above argument presented by O'Connor appears to be very weak. The crucial question that O'Connor needs to provide answer to is whether dreams and hallucination do have the same ontological qualities with external physical bodies? Locke makes clear his claim in the essay: This includes "the general survey of the power and limits of the human mind, and also to see what object our understanding were and were not fitted to deal with."³² Appropriately, Locke has demonstrated that through sensations, we become aware of qualities of objects, but that certain primary qualities are not perceptible owing to their nature, for instance qualities such as size, shape, motion, etc. Logically speaking, the idea of qualities suggests that they must be qualities of something. So, it is not out of place for Locke to have argued that qualities cannot exist on their own outside the bodies that produce them. Locke explains:

To discover the nature of our ideas the better, and to discourse of them intelligibly, it will be convenient to distinguish them as they are ideas or perceptions in our mind, and as they are modifications of matter in the bodies that cause such perceptions in us: that so we may not think (as perhaps usually is done) that they are exactly the images and resemblances of something inherent in the subject; most of those of sensation being in the mind no more the likeness of something existing without us, than the names that for them are the likeness of our ideas, which yet upon hearing they are apt to excite in us.³³

O'Connor seems to have confused 'ideas' as concept with 'ideas' as representing qualities of bodies. Hallucination and mental images are sometimes offshoots of remembering and introspection that are not ontologically in the same category with the real qualities of bodies. Hence, O'Connor can be accused of committing a category mistake in his argument against Locke as shown above. The crucial issue that Locke addresses is how we can claim to know anything at all about physical objects, even as they cause our sensations. It is the response to this question that Locke draws a clear distinction between idea and quality:

Whatsoever the mind perceived in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding, that I call idea; and the power to produce any idea in our mind, I call the quality of the subject wherein that power is. Thus a snowball having the power to produce in us the idea of white, cold and round, the power to produce these ideas in us as they are in the snowball I call qualities; and as they are sensations or perception in our understandings, I call them ideas.³⁴

It is from this background that O' Connor has been accused of confusing Locke's concept of ideas with quality.

J. F. Thompson contends that Berkeley's theory of substance generates a false dilemma.³⁵

This is made manifest in Berkeley's recognition of only two possible conceptions of what a material thing is namely, the philosophical and the ordinary conceptions:

...it may perhaps be objected that... if any man shall leave out of his idea of matter the possible ideas of extension, figure, solidity and motion, and say that he means only by that word an inert, senseless substance, that exist without mind or unperceived, which is the occasion of our ideas,... it doth not appear but that matter taken in this sense may possibly exist. In answer to which I say, first that it seems no less absurd to suppose a substance without accidents, than it is to suppose accidents without a substance. But secondly, though we should grant this unknown substance may possibly exist, yet where can it possibly be? That it exists not in the mind is agreed; and that it exists not in place is no less certain - since all place or extension exists only in the mind, as hath been already proved. It remains therefore that it exists nowhere at all.³⁶

Thompson maintains that Berkeley's theory of substance (i.e. his materialism) confuses an empirical fact about perception with a thesis about what it is to ascribe a sensible quality to a material thing.³⁷ Thompson presents the following arguments to support his claim:

Let us grant that a piece of paper has a power to excite ideas of colour in us and that it is when it exercises this power that we are able to say, as a result of observation, what colour it is. Why should we conclude from this that when we say what colour it is - when we ascribe a colour to it - we mean that it has that power? There is no reason why we should conclude this at all. Further, if we do, we are committed to saying that every statement ascribing a sensible quality to a thing is a statement about ideas. And this is what is most deeply objectionable about Locke's account.³⁸

Thompson seems to be making a reasonable point here because it is the identification of all kinds of qualities of objects (both primary and secondary) with ideas that create problem for Locke. Since Locke admits that primary qualities such as size, shape, solidity and motion resemble the real nature of material objects, he needs not generalize all qualities as mere ideas. This is what serves as bedrock for Berkeley's immaterialism that rejects material substance and allows only sensible qualities. The notion of sensible qualities that are not sensible qualities of anything is a strange one. This forms the basis for Thompson's position that "it is definitely wrong to seek to resolve Locke's difficulty by rejecting the idea of a material substrate and identifying what we ordinarily call the material substance with the sum of its sensible qualities."³⁹

Arguing further, Thompson maintains that the claim that Berkeley makes for immaterialism as the only way of looking at the sensible world is quite unfounded. He observes that God plays the same role in immaterialism as matter does in Locke's account.⁴⁰ Let us consider the following argument as put forward by Thompson:

... God is introduced into the argument as a cause of ideas, and the proof of his existence does not enable us to see why he should perceive anything, let alone everything, or indeed what speaking of his perceptions means. The two roles that God plays in immaterialism, that of a cause of sensations and that of ubiquitous observer, are quite unrelated and merely juxtaposed.⁴¹

The main crux of Thompson's argument is that Berkeley needs to have shown that it was impossible for a sensible object not to be perceived by God. This is what is required to provide the missing link in Berkeley's argument for immaterialism. But this is a difficult task that is probably beyond Berkeley's intellectual capacity to grapple with. To this end, the age -

long suspicion that Berkeley appeals to God just to get himself out of a difficulty is then justified.

As against Berkeley's position, Hume does not bother himself about substituting a Divine agent for Lockean substrata that are said to present and sustain our perceptual impressions. This is based on Hume's belief that we have no idea of substance as distinct from that of particular qualities, precisely because there is no impression that would give rise to the idea of substance.⁴²

Laurence Bonjour is of the opinion that the representationalist's proposed explanation of the order of our immediate experience has a good deal of plausibility and cogency.⁴³ He alludes to Locke's explicit discussion of two features of our perceptual experiences namely; (i) its involuntary character, the fact that it simply occur without any choice or control on the part of the person having the experience and (ii) the systematic order or coherency of that experience.⁴⁴ The systematic order or coherence consists in the presence in immediate experience of repeatable sequences of experienced qualities. This suggests that we can perceive at any given moment only the limited portion that is close enough to be accessible to our various senses. Bonjour contends that;

Our experience reflects both the qualities of these objects and the different perspectives from which they are perceived as we gradually approach them from different conditions of perception, etc. it is thus the relatively permanent structure of this spatial array of objects that is reflected in the much more temporary and variable, but broadly repeatable features of our immediate experience.⁴⁵

What this particular passage from Bonjour suggests is that there exists an independent realm of objects outside our experience, having its own patterns of order with the partial and fragmentary order of our experiences resulting from our partial and intermittent contact with the larger and more stable realm.

Bonjour, however, identifies a serious difficulty with Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities of objects. Locke's view is that material objects have primary qualities such as shape, size, motion, etc. Bonjour argues that this denial makes the relation between material objects and our immediate experiences much more straightforward than it would otherwise be⁴⁶. Locke's argument, however, is that the colours that we experience depend on the properties of light that strike our eyes and how material objects reflect and absorb light which depend on the structure of their surfaces as constituted by primary properties.⁴⁷ In spite of this envisaged difficulty, Bonjour expresses his acceptance of Locke's argument for his position on visual experience of colour:

I think that this is correct as a matter of science, but the important point for the moment is that if it is correct, then the denial that material objects are really coloured simply followed from the basic logic of the representational position...the only justification for ascribing any property to the material world is that it is required to explain some aspect of our immediate experience, so that the ascription of properties that cannot figure in such explanation is automatically unjustified.⁴⁸

Given Bonjour's position on the representational model of perception, does that mean that other possible explanation as a Berkeley's view that our sensory experience is caused by God or infinite spirit is unjustifiable? The answer is that Berkeley's explanatory hypothesis is capable of explaining the very same features of immediate experiences that the Lockean hypothesis appeals to. Bonjour suggests that all that is needed is for God to have a complete conception of the Lockean model of material world and then to cause experiences in perceivers. Bonjour rates the Lockean representational theory of perception higher than that of Berkeley because the former represents a clear intuitive sense in which the qualities of the objects that explain our immediate experience are reflected in the character of that experience itself. On the other hand, this is not the case in the Berkeleyan hypothesis of immaterialism.⁴⁹

Bonjour seems to be making a point here. The distinction that Locke draws between qualities of objects is quite germane to identifying and separating from each other qualities that exist in the object itself, judgements we make about these qualities and the ideas we have independently of objects. Let us illustrate this point with the idea of flame as presented by Locke.⁵⁰ A flame can have a definite temperature; which is a primary quality of something

that exists. A flame can also have warmth—a secondary quality. Also there can be perception of pain that exist in the mind, independently of the flame, even though associated with it. This is what is lacking in the mind-dependent reality as postulated by Berkeley and which is not to be identified with objects in the world around us.

J. J. Valberg is of the opinion that the objects that manifest in perceptual experience are not, as they seem to be, physical objects, but are rather constructs dependent on brain activity which can persist even if those physical objects vanish.⁵¹ His analysis, however, reflects the causal representative theory of perception.

We know (roughly) that light is reflected from physical objects and travels in straight lines, that it impinges on the eye and produces an image on the retina; that this excites the optic nerve, that a ‘message travel from the optic nerve to the visual cortex of the brain; and that finally, as the upshot of this chain of events, visual experience occurs.⁵²

Valberg contends that if there is a causal chain of any sort, then experience is directly sensitive only to the visual cortex of the brain. This is based on the fact that even when the physical object is absent, the activity in the brain continues. If this is the case then Valberg concludes that the object one experiences when one looks at a book cannot be identical with the physical object in front of the eye.⁵³ Physical objects might cease to exist while the perception persists.

It is worth nothing that Valberg considers the above-mentioned line of reasoning as problematic because it is contrary to common sense. If one relies on one’s common sense, the only object one finds is the book itself. One seems to see physical objects out there in front of one’s eyes. The object of experience does not seem to be a mental entity. Hence, and antimony arises. This is due to the fact that experience itself appears to contradict the conclusions derived from any causal theory of perceptual experience. Valberg’s analysis does not solve the causal problem raised by Locke’s representative theory of perception. If Valberg is talking about brain activity through the optic nerve, the crucial question he needs to answer is ‘what gives rise to such an activity in the brain? Physical objects, owing to their qualities, excite such sensation in us. This is the sense in which we can explain our knowledge of physical objects. Though, this would be in a sense indirect.

It is part of Locke’s objective to establish a link between perceptual experience and our intellectual resources. This has led him into the problem of the relationship between precepts and concepts. Locke shows how all the materials of thought and understanding have their origin in perceptual experience, consisting of both sensations and reflections.⁵⁴ There is a position that Locke’s epistemological strategy in achieving his aim is faulty because it is an inappropriate starting point for the philosophy of mind and the theory of knowledge. The point raised here is about the dubious epistemological status or the very existence of sensor ‘‘qualia.’’⁵⁵ as put forward by Locke in his theory of ideas as ‘whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding.’⁵⁶

The status of sensory ‘‘qualia’’ as stated above has been as mistaken by running together two quite distinct kinds of mental phenomena namely, precepts (sensible qualities) and concepts (meaningful components of the thought we entertain).⁵⁷ Furthermore, Locke’s theory of ideas has been criticised because of the mistake in regarding ‘‘concepts’’ as introspectible mental phenomena which are the materials or ingredients of thought. Quite contrary to this, it is argued that concepts are more like abilities, especially linguistic abilities to deploy certain words appropriately in communication.⁵⁸

E. J. Lowe maintains the view that the only sensible way out of these difficulties for Locke is to draw a clear distinction between those properties of ideas themselves and those properties that ideas represent things as having. Let us consider the following illustration of stick-figure sketch of a man by Lowe.

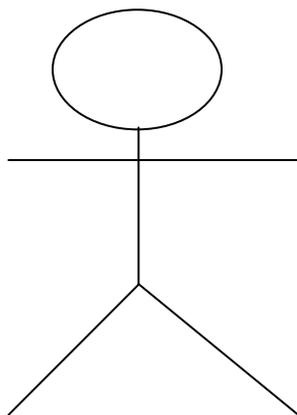


Figure 1: Lowe's Stick Figure Sketch of a Man.

Lowe affirms that it is possible to measure the various lengths and angles of the lines in the above figure. His argument runs thus:

But when we ask whether the picture represents a man facing towards us or facing away from us, we can give no principled answer. We cannot say either that it represents a man who is facing towards us or that it represents a man who is not facing towards us. A man must indeed either be facing towards us, or not facing towards us, of course, but a representation of a man needs not represent him either as doing so or not doing so.⁵⁹

The major point being illustrated in the above passage is the problem of indeterminacy identified with Locke's theory of ideas. In an attempt to defend Locke, Lowe takes perception to be a selective process by which we observe an object and notice some of its properties. At the same time, we may notice that the same object has some other properties or noticed that it does not have them. Lowe, therefore, concludes that the indeterminacy involved in Locke's explanation of perceptual capacities is an appropriate feature of perceptual objects.⁶⁰

Lowe defends a theory of perception along Lockean line though with a different strategy and focus. This is described as follows:

The sort of theory I have in mind will be (a) a causal theory, (b) a representative theory...and (c) a direct realist theory. Many present day philosophers would suppose that such a combination of features is impossible, but properly interpreted they are not incompatible. I also think that a theory with these features could be attributed to Locke, at least on an 'adverbialist' interpretation of his talk about ideas.⁶¹

While we may agree with Lowe on a - c in the above quotation, his adverbialist interpretation of Locke's theory of ideas is unacceptable. First, let us examine what Lowe means by the adverbialist theory or perception. According to him, in explaining the connexion between objects and qualities, the first thing to note is that it is wrong to regard the qualities as 'things' of a special sort, standing in some genuine relation to the object which has them. This is called the 'act-object' analysis of perception. This is where Locke went wrong.⁶² Lowe describes the adverbial theory as follows:

For ideas or sensations just are, properly speaking, qualities of persons or objects ... it is sensing that are 'adjectival' upon subjects, while particulars 'ideas' or sensations are modes of sensing, and thus have an 'adverbial' status - hence the name 'adverbialism' for this view of the ontological status of sensations ... The lesson, then, is not such qualities as redness and roundness of a rubber ball as "things" somehow related to the ball ... Rather, those qualities are best conceived as "ways the ball is" - literally as modifications or modes of the ball.⁶³

The supposed merit of this adverbialist theory of perception is the solving of the problem of the Lockean unknowable, featureless substratum when the question of what remains after all the sensible qualities of objects have been considered. According to the adverbialist theory, this kind of question does not even arise.

The ball and its qualities are not member of the same ontological category, ---. The qualities of an individual substance, such as the redness and roundness of a particular ball are ontologically independent upon that substance: there could not so much as be the redness and roundness of a given ball but for the existence of that ball, but the ball can perfectly well continue to exist without continuing to be red and round. It is not as though the redness of the ball could continue to exist by itself while the ball disappeared into thin air...⁶⁴

The main point in the above passage is that the source of Locke's error lies in the reification of qualities and independent entities on their own right. The adverbialist theory of perception states that we do not perceive external object by perceiving qualities corresponding to or caused by them. Rather we do perceive real physical objects existing independently of us contrary to Berkeley's claim. Further implication of Lowe's adverbialist theory of perception is the denial of a typical Lockean view that we only perceive physical objects 'indirectly' by virtue of perceiving private, inner mental objects of some sort. This involves a defence of both causal theory and a direct realist theory.⁶⁵

Lowe seems to be confusing issues with his adverbialist interpretation. In the first instance, previous studies have shown that the adverbialist theory does not provide a real understanding of the nature of the perceptual states in question. If we avoid an act - object language as suggested by Lowe's analysis, the implication is that in science, manner of sensing which subjective reports are cannot yield objective standard of knowledge. The meaning of such adverb in relation to the perceptual states they describe is not quite clear. However, Lowe is to be commended for realizing the fact that we cannot avoid causal talk. Consider the following passage of his:

It seems to me that any theory of perception that is to respect the known scientific facts of human physiology and the laws of physics must be a causal theory... By a causal theory of perception I mean one which maintains that for a subject to perceive an object (a physical object, that is) it is at least necessary that subject should enjoy some appropriate sort of perceptual experience which is caused in an appropriate sort of a way by a process originating in the object perceived - as, for example, seeing an object involves enjoying a visual experience caused (typically) by light reflected or emitted by the object entering the eye...⁶⁶

This analysis by Lowe on the adverbialist interpretation of perceptual experience cannot adequately account for the difference between veridical perceptions and non-veridical or hallucinatory perceptions. For instance, if what we need to account for is the manner of sensing or being appeared to, then how can that help to distinguish between cases of genuine perceptions, like when perceivers are actually in contact with 'real' physical object and cases when one is imagining? But both are manners of being 'appeared to' furthermore, one is not even clear about how an adverbialist interpretation of perception can be successfully attributed to Locke. On this ground, we may reasonably maintain that Lowe has probably misinterpreted Locke. Lowe's effort does not succeed in solving the problem created by Locke's representative theory of perception.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the epistemological implications of the central thesis of phenomenology that examines the meaning of phenomena without recourse to causal or scientific explanations. The objective of the Phenomenologist, which is to restore the richness of the world as immediately experienced, carries the consequence that science itself is grounded in the phenomena of direct experience. The problem of illusion undermines the Phenomenologist thesis on direct experience. The various discussions in this paper are consciously in defence of the assumption that knowledge is mental representations in our consciousness as defended by John Locke in his representative theory of perception. Using E.J. Lowe's stick figure sketch of a man as an illustrative example, the paper shows that the indeterminacy in Locke's explanation of perceptual capacities is an appropriate feature of perceptual objects. It concludes the causal antecedents of our experience determine that perceptual object.

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