

PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action
Lecture 13: How is perception a source of knowledge?

1. We get knowledge in various ways. How do you know that the bottle is white?

- I was told that the bottle is white. (Testimony)
- I remember that the bottle is white. (Memory)
- I deduced that the bottle is white. (Deduction)
- I can see that the bottle is white. (Perception)

One interesting question is: *how* do we get knowledge in these ways? In the next six lectures we are interested in the question:

(EQ) How do we get knowledge via *perception*?

2. To *perceive* is to *see*, or *hear*, or *smell*, or *taste*, or *feel*. We can get knowledge via perception via any of the five sense modalities:

- I know that the bell is ringing because I can hear that it is ringing.
- I know that the liquid is beer because I can smell that it is beer.
- I know that the milk is sour because I can taste that it is sour.
- I know that her bra was silk because I could feel that it was silk.

We shall focus mainly on *visual* perception (seeing).

3. EQ is an *epistemological* question. It is intimately connected with another, a *metaphysical* question:

(MQ) What is the *nature* of perception?

Perhaps an answer to MQ will give us an answer to EQ.

4. So what is the nature of visual perception? What goes on when Rob sees a bottle? One very natural answer is this: when Rob sees a bottle, he is *directly aware* of the bottle, and of its properties (its whiteness, its roundness, etc.). This is *direct realism*.

Why 'direct'? Because it claims that Rob is *directly* aware of the bottle, rather than indirectly, in virtue of being aware of something else. Why 'realism'? Because it allows that the bottle that Rob sees is a *mind-independent* object.

5. Does this help with EQ? Not obviously: Rob might be directly aware of a bottle, and of its whiteness, without being aware that it *is* a bottle, or that it *is* white (and hence without getting this knowledge). Direct awareness is not enough – something else is needed to get knowledge via perception.

Furthermore, suppose that direct awareness were enough to get knowledge. Rob might see that the bottle has been used. Is this because he is directly aware of its usedness? If not, then how does he get *that* knowledge via perception?

6. There are also famous problems for direct realism, to do with the nature of the visual experiences that accompany visual perception:

Perspectival variation. A bottle may look white to Rob in one set of conditions, red in another, without any intrinsic change in the bottle. So the whiteness and redness of which Rob is aware in each case cannot be in the bottle. So Rob is only ever *indirectly* aware, if at all, of any colour in the bottle.

Illusion. A white bottle may look white to Rob in some conditions (the ‘veridical’ case), but red in other conditions (the ‘illusory’ case). In the illusory case, the redness of which Rob is aware is not in the bottle. So in the veridical case as well, the whiteness of which Rob is aware is not in the bottle. The colours of which Rob is directly aware are never in the bottle.

Hallucination. It may look to Rob as if a bottle is in front of him, when in fact there is no bottle there (a case of ‘hallucination’). He is not directly aware of a bottle in this case. So he is not directly aware of a bottle in the non-hallucinatory case either (because his visual experience is just the same).

We will consider five alternatives to direct realism, that largely aim to avoid these problems.

7. **Indirect realism.** When Rob sees a bottle, he is aware of the bottle, and of its properties, but not *directly*. He is *directly* aware of certain *mind-dependent* objects, ‘sense-data’, and thereby *indirectly* aware of the bottle and its properties (because the sense-data are appropriately connected to the bottle and its properties).

Why ‘indirect’?

Why ‘realism’?

Does this avoid the problems in 6?

How does it help with EQ?

8. **Phenomenalism.** When Rob sees a bottle, he is directly aware of mind-dependent sense-data. But he is thereby directly aware of the bottle, because the sense-data *are* the bottle. The bottle is a *mind-dependent* object.

Why ‘phenomenalism’?

Does this avoid the problems in 6?

How does it help with EQ?

9. **Adverbialism.** When Rob sees a bottle, he sees it in a certain way. If it looks white to him, then he sees it *whitely*; if it looks red to him, then he sees it *redly*. These ‘ways of seeing’ are properties of seeing events.

Why ‘adverbialism’?

Does this avoid the problems in 6?

Adverbialism might allow that Rob is directly aware of a bottle, but does it allow that he is directly aware of its properties? It seems, rather, that he is directly aware of *ways of seeing* the bottle (and they are not properties of the bottle).

10. **Disjunctivism.** When Rob veridically sees a bottle, he is directly aware of the bottle and its properties. In every other case he is not. This retains some of the flavour of direct realism.

Why ‘disjunctivism’?

Does this avoid the problems in 6?

How does it help with EQ?

11. **Representationalism.** When Rob sees a bottle, his visual experience *represents* the bottle and its properties (which it may do correctly or incorrectly).

Why ‘representationalism’?

Does this avoid the problems in 6?

How does it help with EQ?