

A Direct Realist's Challenge to Skepticism

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Skepticism and the Veil of Perception

Michael Huemer

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At the core of the Objectivist philosophy is the belief that direct realism is true—that is, that we are directly aware of objects in the external world—and that perception forms the basis of our knowledge. In *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Michael Huemer takes up the task of defending those two propositions.

The title of Huemer's book suggests a preoccupation with skepticism (indeed, readers who pick up the book based solely on its title may be surprised to find that Huemer argues strongly against it), and he dedicates the work to Descartes, "for obvious reasons." Out of eight chapters, Huemer devotes the first three chapters, as well as chapter eight, to a discussion and refutation of skepticism. The seventh chapter argues against indirect realism. The core of the book, then, is contained in the fourth chapter, "A Version of Direct Realism," and the fifth chapter, "A Version of Foundationalism," while the sixth chapter defends direct realism against skeptical challenges.

In the preface, Huemer (2001) writes: "I owe an intellectual debt to René Descartes, not only for initiating the modern era of philosophy, but for inspiring my own interest in the theory of knowledge." In the introduction, Huemer writes that he "took the arguments for skepticism more seriously than Descartes himself" did (4). The final section of the third chapter is titled, "Why Study Skepticism?" There, Huemer writes: "I want you to keep your common sense knowledge, since I think it is knowledge, not merely belief, but I also want you to come to a clearer and fuller understanding of the nature of that

knowledge” (45).

Because Huemer takes his intellectual opponents seriously and also maintains a critical view of all philosophical approaches, he has crafted a book that cuts to the heart of skepticism and refutes it thoroughly. Because he builds his work essentially outside of Objectivist sources (Ayn Rand, David Kelley, and Leonard Peikoff are cited in footnotes), yet reaches parallel conclusions, his book should prove especially insightful for Objectivists. Because it is tightly organized and argued, even while its prose is delicate and friendly, the book should prove a joy to read for anyone interested in the subject.

Huemer’s account of direct realism is similar to Kelley’s. Huemer believes we are directly aware of external objects via our senses. We do not have to infer the existence of external objects (57). That is not to say Huemer subscribes to what Kelley calls the “diaphanous model” of perception, which assumes we are aware of external objects by no means. Huemer argues a necessary element of perception is a “causal relation between the experience and the object, that is, the object is causing you to have the experience” (64).

Kelley (e.g., 1986, 45, 111) makes clear that his theory of perception is a direct realist one. Both Huemer and Kelley are concerned with rejecting indirect realist theories—that is, theories that claim we are not directly aware of external objects but rather must infer the existence of external objects from sense-data or internal representations of external objects.

Huemer (2001) writes: “The fundamental mistake that seems to make indirect realism plausible . . . is a confusion between an *object* of awareness and a *vehicle* of awareness” (81). The indirect realist assumes that, because we perceive external objects via perceptual experiences involving the senses, we cannot therefore be directly aware of external objects. But this view is false. By analogy, if someone chops wood with an ax, the person is still chopping the wood, not the ax. We perceive external objects via the senses, but we are aware of the external objects. “The error I am describing seems easy enough to avoid,” writes Huemer, “and yet I think it has been committed by a number of philosophers, with great adverse effects on their philosophical systems” (82). As examples, Huemer explores the ideas of Locke,

Berkeley, and Kant. Indirect realism turns out to be very weak and “vulnerable to skeptical assault” (192).

Kelley (1986) makes essentially the same case, though he places more historical significance on the “diaphanous model” of perception (e.g., 68). Many philosophers have assumed that perception must either be immediate and unaffected by supposedly flawed senses or the result of internal images. This “certain assumption concerning knowledge has traditionally stood in the way of the primacy of existence, by making representationalism and idealism seem the only alternatives to an unacceptably naïve form of realism” (30). Both Kelley and Huemer (2001, 123) describe perception as relational; it arises from the relation of the object and the subject. “Relational,” however, does not imply “subjective”; indeed, the former precludes the latter.

Foundations and Propositions

But perhaps too much can be made of the similarities between the theories of Huemer and Kelley. Consider the following two statements:

1. “[A] perceptual experience has content . . . [and] this content is *propositional*. . . . If experiences did not have propositional content, it would be difficult to understand how a perceptual experience could be the basis for a belief, which does have propositional content, for there would be no logical relations between them” (74).

2. “As the primary form in which we are aware of the physical environment, perception itself is what justifies our conceptual identifications of the objects in that environment. It provides a mode of nonpropositional, noninferential justification” (Kelley 1986, 206–7).

Huemer claims that perceptual experiences have propositional content, that perceptual beliefs must be derived in some sense from that content, and that nevertheless direct realism is true. For Kelley, the notion that perception is somehow tied to propositional content must lead to an indirect realist (“representationalist”) point of view (198). The “propositional theory” leads to the false view that “all cognition is linguistic and that perception is a noncognitive occur-

rence” (201).

Happily, while the rhetoric of the two theorists is in severe conflict, the actual content of their theories is not. Huemer is using the term “proposition” in a peculiar way that lets him escape Kelley’s criticisms. For Kelley (1990, 57), a “proposition” necessarily entails the use of concepts: “[A] concept by itself is not a complete thought. . . . Concepts provide a framework, but the actual units of thought and speech are propositions.” Propositions, then, are necessarily composed of concepts. But Huemer (2001) has something quite different in mind.

I do not say that experiences have *conceptual* content. Their content is propositional but (at least part of it is) nonconceptual. What I mean by this is that experiences have (at least some) content independent of the concepts that the subject of the experiences has. Nonconceptual content is content that does not depend upon one’s having concepts adequate for grasping that content. (74)

Huemer believes that if we look at a tomato sitting on a table, our perceptual experiences are “representing there to be a tomato (or at least something tomato-like).” In other words, Huemer’s use of the term “proposition” can refer to something preconceptual. I think it makes more sense to use the term “proposition” the way Kelley describes and to describe what Huemer is talking about as a “preconceptual analog to a proposition.” Be that as it may, once we understand the differences in terminology, this apparent conflict between the theories of Kelley and Huemer dissolves. Kelley’s “cognitive content of perception” (1986, 256) refers to the same thing as Huemer’s “propositional content.”

We also find a semantic difference between Huemer and Kelley pertaining to foundationalism. “Perceptual beliefs, in my view, are foundational,” writes Huemer (2001, 99). Foundationalism holds that some beliefs “do not depend on any other beliefs for their justification” (98). However, foundational beliefs may be justified by things other than beliefs, and “perceptual beliefs . . . depend on something

else for their justification: namely, perceptual experiences” (99). What Huemer calls the propositional content of perceptual experiences serves as the hook to connect the perceptual experience to the perceptual belief.

Kelley wants to reject foundationalism if that means beliefs, rather than perceptions, are at the root of our knowledge. Kelley (1986, 180–1) links foundationalism to “Cartesian empiricism,” which holds that, while “an independent world is the ultimate object of knowledge and standard of truth, knowledge of it must be based on a foundation of prior knowledge of our own conscious states, which can be known infallibly.” However, Kelley (1998, 14; 1986, 210) makes peace with the type of foundationalism Huemer describes. We must forestall another possible confusion. When Huemer (2001, 72) says that “perceptual experiences are representational,” he means that something is happening within the body of the perceiver, as well as in the external world, in the course of a perception. This meshes with Kelley’s relational view of perception and doesn’t correlate with Kelley’s use of the term “representational” to refer to indirect realism. In Huemer’s terminology, “nonrepresentational” perception would mean “the senses don’t tell us anything at all. . . . If experience is nonrepresentational, then it can be neither accurate nor inaccurate” (72).

Interestingly, at this point Huemer criticizes Peikoff in a footnote (91 n. 43). “Peikoff [1991] 39–41, says something like this, though his point seems to be rather that the senses tell us only that *something* exists causing our experiences, rather than that they tell us nothing at all. I think my arguments following apply equally well to Peikoff’s view.” However, Peikoff is arguing that perception contains some content about external objects but not conceptual content. For, while Peikoff (1991, 40–41) says “[t]he senses . . . do not identify the objects that impinge on them,” he adds that “[t]he function of the senses . . . is to sum up a vast range of facts . . .” Peikoff’s statements make sense only if we assume he’s arguing perception reveals content about the external world but not conceptual information.

Here we reach an area of substantive disagreement. Huemer, we have seen, believes that perceptual experiences have propositional

content that may be both conceptual and nonconceptual in nature. Kelley and Peikoff would argue that perceptual experiences cannot possibly contain conceptual information, and they are correct. When I look at Huemer's book in front of me, there is nothing within the experience itself that makes me aware of the concept "book." Instead, as Kelley and Peikoff argue, the nonconceptual contents of perception (which Huemer would nevertheless call "propositional") give rise to conceptual knowledge through a distinct mental process. Huemer's emphasis on "perceptual experiences" is not found in Kelley or Peikoff, who don't draw as important a distinction between perception and perceptual experience. It is because Huemer wants to allow for conceptual content in "perceptual experiences" that he must distinguish them from mere perceptions. This is also the reason why we find such striking differences in the way Huemer on the one hand and Kelley and Peikoff on the other describe some aspects of perception. Take these three statements, for example:

1. "[In the case of] a genuine illusion . . . our experience misrepresents reality" (Huemer 2001, 124).

2a. "[I]llusions . . . are extreme cases of perceptual relativity . . ." (Kelley 1986, 133).

2b. "[Sense] organs have no power of choice, no power to invent, distort, or deceive" (Peikoff 1991, 40).

These three statements correspond with the philosophers' comments about the perception of a stick halfway in water:

1. "When you look at the stick, you are directly aware of something (namely, the stick) that *looks* bent, but it is not in fact bent" (Huemer 2001, 125).

2a. "[T]he illusory 'bent look' is a case, not of nonveridical perception, but of perceiving physical straightness in an unusual form" (Kelley 1986, 88).

2b. "A so-called sensory illusion, such as a stick in water appearing bent, is not a perceptual error. In Ayn Rand's view, it is a testament to the reliability of the senses" (Peikoff 1991, 40).

How does awareness of a "bent stick" incorporate conceptual content and thus move beyond perception *per se*? In the normal course of discussion, the term "bent" usually implies that something

is in fact not straight. It implies that if you pick something up and feel it, you will also detect the “bend” via your sense of touch. When we look at a stick in water, though, we are not seeing a “bend”; instead, we are merely seeing an “angle” in the visual sense. The statement, “The stick appears to be angled,” is not the same statement as, “The stick appears to be bent.” Of course, we must avoid equivocations; the terms “bent” and “angled” are often used interchangeably.

When we realize a “perceptual experience” cannot contain conceptual content, Huemer’s concern that an illusion “misrepresents reality” disappears. As Kelley (1986, 180) discusses, a full theory of knowledge integrates both “foundational” knowledge (as used in Huemer’s sense) and an interrelated conceptual web that is linked to reality through its foundations.

Perception cannot possibly contain or convey causal theories. However, concepts can include causal theories. For example, right now as I look across the room, I see a “plant” hanging in a basket, and I see a “shadow” of the plant cast on the wall. My perceptual experience in itself does not convey all the information necessary for me to conclude I am seeing a “plant” or a “shadow” in the full, practical meanings of those terms. Instead, my perception conveys the preconceptual equivalent of, “I see an object that appears similar to other objects I regard as ‘plants.’” For me to conclude that the object is indeed a “plant” in the full sense of the term (as opposed to merely the visual sense of the term), I have to draw upon inductive knowledge. I remember potting the plant in its basket and watering it regularly. I remember it getting larger over time. If I arise from my chair, I expect my other sensory experiences to mesh with my understanding of what a plant is. (I do not expect to find a synthetic copy of a plant, which could appear visually identical to what I now see.)

The same analysis applies to the “shadow” I perceive. What I actually see is a pattern of dark areas that are flat against the wall. I know this is a shadow because of my understanding of light, because a light is in the appropriate proximity to produce the shadow, and because I remember viewing the wall from other perspectives and having perceptual experiences consistent with seeing a “shadow” right

now.

Kelley rightly recognizes that an “illusion” is not properly categorized as a perceptual phenomenon. Rather, it is a conceptual phenomenon.

For an illusion to occur, one must perceive a given attribute in a form that is not the form in which one normally perceives that attribute, but is the form in which one normally perceives some other attribute for which he has a concept. (Without the latter condition, the percept would be strange but not illusory, for there is nothing one would be led to misclassify the object *as*.)¹ (234)

Kelley’s view is easily confirmed if we imagine what it would be like to view various sticks without the benefit of our other senses or our background inductive knowledge. One would view various sticks, straight and bent, some partially in water and some not. One would notice that sticks placed in water appear angled at the point of the surface of the water. It is only because of our background causal theories that we assume the stick appears angled but is in fact “straight.” Lacking these theories, we could as well conclude that water causes a physical change in the stick to make it appear angled.

The same set of arguments plays out with other examples. For example, both Huemer and Kelley discuss the matter of double vision, such as when you put your finger near your face as you focus on a distant object. According to Huemer’s theory: “There is a single, physical object that you are seeing; however, that object seems to be in two places. That is, your visual experience incorrectly represents the finger in two different places. This is a case of a visual illusion” (Huemer 2001, 131).

However, as before, the “illusion” arises only because our causal theories must account for why we have two images of a finger but believe there is only one finger. It’s not quite right to say the visual image is “incorrect.” We’re aware of something that’s duplicated and somewhat blurry that appears similar to other objects we regard as “fingers.” The meaning of “finger” in the strictly visual sense is only

a small part of the full conceptual meaning of the term. Again, we can imagine what it would be like to experience double vision without benefit of our other senses or our causal theories. To make things simple, let's suppose we can see only two objects: a finger in the foreground and a cat in the background. By focusing on the cat, we are also aware of two blurry images of a finger. By focusing on the finger, we are also aware of two blurry images of a cat. Absent our rich background of inductive knowledge, we might surmise that the objects were actually splitting into two.

All of this is compatible with direct realism. I am in fact directly perceiving a single finger, even when I experience awareness of the finger in double vision. But perception does not give me conceptual knowledge of what it is that I am directly perceiving. Illusion does not pertain to our perceptions. I suspect it is this implicit category problem that leads Peikoff (1991, 40) to refer to "so-called sensory illusion[s]." Illusions are such not by virtue of the fact that they pertain to the senses, but because they pertain to concepts.²

Hallucinations and Evil Spirits

Both Huemer and Kelley spend quite a lot of time explaining why traditional skeptical arguments about paradoxes concerning perception do not refute direct realism. Huemer's sixth chapter deals with perspective, double vision, perceptual time gaps, and "secondary" qualities. Kelley tends to spend more time discussing the physics and physiology of perception, contributing to a rich understanding of the phenomenon.

The more difficult challenge is to account for hallucinations. In one sense, this problem is easily dismissed. If we are aware of an external object, then we are experiencing perception. If we are aware of some kind of mental phenomenon not caused by an external object, then we are experiencing a hallucination. And from a third-party (or universal) perspective, this explanation suffices. But from the subject's point of view, the difficulty lies in distinguishing perceptions from hallucinations.

Kelley (1986, 135) first casts doubt on the notion that hallucinations can be experienced as similar to perceptions:

Hallucinations occur in conditions of extreme malfunction, from causes that distort the judgment as well as the sensory processes of the brain. . . . [S]ome vivid imagery occurs [but] we cannot take the report of subjects as evidence about the degree of similarity between hallucinations and perception.

But ultimately the degree of experienced similarity between the two phenomena is irrelevant for Kelley, because they are in fact different. Indeed, Kelley adds, the very notion of a hallucination is dependent upon a perceptual recognition of external objects: “The claim that hallucinated objects are not real is asserted, and could only be understood and justified, by contrast with the assumption that the objects of perception are real” (135). Even if one cannot tell the difference between authentic perceptions and a hallucination, this “does not mean that one is actually in the same state as when he perceives; it only means he cannot tell that he is not” (138).

But Kelley thus leaves unanswered the important question. What matters is not that some external observer can distinguish between a perception and a hallucination, but whether the subject can make such distinctions. What good does it do to believe that direct realism is the correct explanation for perception, when one doesn’t know if one’s experiences are the result of perception or hallucination?

Kelley’s problem becomes the same one that has troubled philosophers since Descartes (1951, 22) contemplated the possibility of an “evil spirit” bent on deceiving us. Huemer (2001, 2) reminds us of movies such as *Total Recall* and *The Matrix*, in which sophisticated machines create entirely virtual worlds for people such that they can’t tell the difference between the virtual world and the “real” world. Similarly, episodes of *Star Trek* have explored possibilities of both holographic technology and computers linked to the brain as ways of creating “artificial” worlds for people. For Huemer, the paradigm case is the “brain in a vat” (16). Discussion of this is so central to Huemer’s analysis that he assigns it the acronym BIV.

Kelley (1986) discusses the world of “evil spirits” and such in more generic terms under his discussion of the “causal argument” (138). Kelley refers simply to “the device” (139). “It is assumed . . .

that the device would provide exactly the same proximate stimulation as do normal objects . . .” It seems as if Kelley and Huemer are addressing the same issue, but they handle it in very different ways. For Huemer, “the device” is akin to the BIV and it has nothing to do with perception. Kelley, by contrast, concludes: “The subject . . . would be perceiving in the same form in which we perceive, but that form would be his way perceiving a world quite different from ours. . . . [H]e would be perceiving his world—the device” (140).

It would seem, though, that Kelley has brought us again to the brink of skepticism, if the subject cannot tell the difference between what we normally think of as the “real” world and the world of “the device.” And an additional problem presents itself. Why does Kelley assume his device must act on the senses? If Kelley made his device more like a BIV, such that it acted directly on the brain rather than via the senses, then it could create experiences for the subject that seemed like perceptual experiences but were not (even by Kelley’s loose standards). Kelley creates an artificial barrier to skepticism when he assumes his device must act on the senses.

Kelley grants that, hypothetically, even “a hallucination *could* justify a perceptual judgment about an external object” (218). Of course, that judgment would be false. “In abnormal conditions, a person may be perceptually justified in forming a false perceptual judgment” (238). This agrees with Huemer (2001, 114): “You can be justified in believing something that, in reality, is false . . .”

The Link Between Concepts and Perception

Issues surrounding hallucinations and “evil spirits” raise general concerns about the nature of perception. Can we be sure about any of our evaluations of our perceptions? The same difficulties we face generally also show up in specific cases. In his final chapter, “Perceptual Judgments,” Kelley (1986) discusses a number of such cases.³ “I might ‘see’ a camouflaged soldier in the sense that his facing surfaces are parts of my field of view,” Kelley writes, “but I am not in a position to form a judgment about him” (211). However, might we not judge that the camouflaged soldier is instead foliage? Kelley acknowledges that what we believe to be a martini may in fact be a

glass filled with water (212). “I can identify the creature across the room as a cat, even though most of its body is hidden by a chair. . . . I experience the cat as extending beyond the accidental limit to my vision . . .” (214). What if the “cat” is merely a fine synthetic copy? Furthermore, what if the copy is in fact only a partial cat that does not extend beyond the edge of a chair? Is what appears to be a “car” (224) really a car, or is it a movie prop?

“Consider a more extreme case of occlusion,” Kelley asks of us (214). “A hunter is looking across a valley and sees a patch of brown amid the undergrowth on the facing hillside. Could he not judge that it is a deer, even though he sees no part of the deer’s contour and hence does not discriminate the deer as such?” The hunter does not perceive the deer, Kelley concedes, but “his experience as a hunter is leading him through an implicit inference” to conclude that the object is a deer. “In this case, the judgment is not a *perceptual* judgment but the conclusion of an inference . . .” (214–15). What if, however, the brown patch is actually the clothing of another hunter who has cleverly disguised himself as a deer? Or what if it is a synthetic copy of a deer set out by game wardens to capture would-be poachers? And does the hunter “infer” the existence of a deer any more than we inferred the existence of the camouflaged soldier, the martini, the cat, or the car? There is an important difference. The hunter does not perceive the deer, but only a small patch of brown, whereas we really did perceive those other objects as entities. Direct realism accurately describes what is going on for the subject in those earlier cases, but the problem lies in accurately making a judgment about what we are perceiving. Again, it is of little comfort to the subject that an external observer knows whether the “cat” is in fact a cat or a synthetic copy.

As Kelley discusses in detail when describing the perception of the car, one’s knowledge of a car is intimately bound up with conceptual, causal knowledge of cars. As noted earlier, perception cannot convey causal theories, but conception can incorporate such theories. The great problem for the direct realist (and for all epistemologists) is that virtually all of our interesting perceptual judgments contain causal theories. Whether we are talking about cars, plants, shadows, martinis, or cats, our judgments about the world around us are inseparable from

our background causal theories. Kelley recognizes that “all of an adult’s perceptual judgments rest in part on inductive knowledge already acquired.” For example, “in the case of concepts for attributes . . . an adult’s knowledge will include such matters as the causes and effects of an object’s possessing that attribute . . .” (226). At the same time, Kelley claims that “every element in the conceptual knowledge which informs an adult’s perceptual judgments can be traced back to perceptual sources” (210). Thus, “the conceptual identification of perceived objects . . . is merely the articulation of what is perceived . . .” (197).

Yet these sets of claims seem to conflict. On the one hand, Kelley argues that all of our perceptual judgments are rooted in perception. On the other hand, he seems to recognize that our concepts incorporate causal information. Do we obtain causal information from perception? Kelley seems to believe we do; he refers to “causal knowledge about physical objects that could be acquired only through perception” (241). When discussing the rules of evidence, Kelley (1998, 15) even claims inference and logic are rooted in perception: “The truth of the laws [of identity and noncontradiction] is implicit even in perceptual awareness . . . [A]t any level, the rule [of evidence] is simply an identification of what is given perceptually. Thus the foundationalist insight can be retained: all knowledge does trace back to the evidence of the senses in a noncircular way.”

Rand (1990) follows a similar line of argument. She states: “[C]oncepts have a hierarchical structure . . . the higher, more complex abstractions are derived from the simpler, basic ones (starting with the concepts of perceptually given concretes)” (32). Yet, Rand also seems to recognize that our perceptual judgments rely upon the causal content of concepts. For instance, she recognizes that functionality eventually becomes part of the concept of furniture (22), and consciousness becomes part of the concept of animal (27).

It’s obvious how the contents of concepts not related to causal information arise from perception within Rand’s theory. Concepts are developed by parsing and integrating our perceptual awareness. For example, we visually distinguish tables from other physical objects, and we subsume “tables” under the concept “furniture” and also distin-

guish among various types of tables. We can begin to form concepts even from a static perceptual field; that is, even when objects are at rest.

It's not quite as obvious how causal information is obtained from perception. For instance, we perceive light and shadows, but we do not directly perceive the causal theory that shadows are created when objects block light. Similarly, we perceive plants, but we do not directly perceive the causal theory that plants are living, that they grow, and that they convert sunlight to other forms of energy. (We can say we perceive events that give rise to causal theories.) Likewise, we can't physically point to functionality or consciousness in the same way we can point to a "table." Most of our concepts are expanded with causal information, and some concepts (such as "shadow") seem to consist mostly of causal information.

In some respects concepts arise directly from perceptual awareness, but in other respects concepts develop from causal theories that are only indirectly rooted in perceptual awareness. Surely there is an important difference between the way we find similarities among entities in our visual field, and the way we develop causal theories about those entities. Both types of mental activity may be rooted in perceptual experience, but in quite different ways. Causal theories seem to be only indirectly rooted in perception. Hopefully subsequent discussions will make the distinction more clear.

The problem for Huemer and Kelley (and Rand) is how to get from perceptions to conceptions, while bypassing skepticism, and while accounting for the causal elements of concepts. If Huemer were correct that "perceptual experiences" can contain conceptual information, we could easily move from perception to conception. But Huemer is incorrect on this point. Fortunately, the mistake is totally irrelevant to Huemer's (and indeed Kelley's) theory of justification.

Huemer's Phenomenal Conservatism

We now have two related problems. We have the broad problem of how we know we're not hallucinating or the victim of evil spirits or their technological counterparts. We also have the narrower problem of how we know in any given case whether our judgment about our

perceptions is accurate.

A major point we have reviewed, which both Kelley and Huemer gloss over, is that perceptual judgments, the conceptualization of perception, include causal information. This creates a difficulty when we try to describe how we get from perception to conception, from seeing the objects in the world to figuring out what those objects are in a practical sense. But the problem is not so great as Hume would have us believe. No, our causal theories do not give us apodictic certainty about the future, but they do help us understand and interact with the world in which we live. We needn't approach the small fuzzy object sitting partly behind the chair with infantile wonder; instead we simply pet the "cat" and expect it to purr and so forth.

In one sense, Kelley's account is incomplete when he suggests our conceptualized judgments are directly rooted in perception. Our causal theories (and thus our conceptual web) are laid on top of our perceptual experiences. In another sense, though, our causal theories are rooted in our practical experiences, which are largely a succession of perceptions. Given that we have to fuse causal information into our conceptual awareness, what is the process by which we reject skepticism and embrace a robust set of perceptual judgments?

Enter Huemer's theory of "phenomenal conservatism," which he describes as "a principle of foundational justification" (2001, 98). Huemer offers this surprisingly simplistic rule: "If it seems to *S* as if *P*, then *S* thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that *P*" (99). Notice that there can be both perceptual and "nonperceptual seemings," which means that even though Huemer's "perceptual experiences" cannot contain causal information, his theory easily explains our perceptual judgments, which contain causal information. Huemer means us to understand "seeming" in a strong sense. "[S]eeming . . . is a distinct state from . . . believing" and may "be distinguished from merely arbitrary beliefs" (99). Immediately Huemer explains that our seemings can be undermined by countervailing evidence. Thus, something may be considered justified only if no contrary evidence is known.

Huemer states matter of factly: "I propose to account for perceptual knowledge by the same general principle I apply to all other

kinds of knowledge” (102). Can so grand an undertaking be accomplished in a 209-page book? Apparently so. We will not here recapitulate Huemer’s entire discussion of this principle, but we can see how Huemer’s principle of justification finally defeats skepticism.

Huemer describes a fact or theory that counters a “seeming” as a “defeater,” meaning that the evidence can “defeat” the prima facie justification for something that seems to be the case. In the final section of his book (prior to the conclusion), Huemer explains: “[D]oes the fact that *it is logically possible that I am a brain in a vat* constitute a defeater for my perceptual beliefs? I don’t think so. To allow that would be to defeat the point of the concept of prima facie justification” (183). Thus, Huemer is justified to “claim that my two hands are conclusive evidence that I’m not a BIV” (184), because the existence of the hands precludes being a BIV.

However, Huemer continues, “my ‘proof’ would fail on an indirect realist theory.” If we have to infer the existence of the hands “from the character of my experiences” (184), then we have no prima facie reason to think that our hands are not in fact the product of a BIV. Does this make trouble for my claim that perceptual experiences don’t contain conceptual information? No; direct realism states that we are aware of the external objects that are in fact the “hands” of conceptual awareness. So we may still reject skepticism about the external world.

Still, when Huemer says we are directly aware of our “hands,” he means something quite a bit stronger than, “We are aware of external objects which are visually similar to other objects we regard as ‘hands.’” Does Huemer’s principle of “phenomenal conservatism” serve to justify any of our causal beliefs? I think so. Huemer lists several types of seemings, only one of which is perceptual (99). “There are memory-related seemings: for example, I seem to remember that Saturn is the fifth planet from the sun.” (That this seeming is easily defeated only helps explain the principle. It “seems” to me that the first letters of the planets, arranged by proximity to the Sun, correspond to the first letters of the words in the phrase, “My Very Eager Mother Jumped Suddenly Up (to get the) News Paper.”) Also, “there are intellectual seemings” such as the proposition, “The shortest path

between any two points is a straight line.” “Philosophers commonly call these intellectual seemings ‘intuitions’” (99).

I think we have an “intellectual seeming” that the world operates by causal laws (Rand describes such beliefs as axioms), and that in the specific case of viewing our hands it seems to be the case that the same causal conditions are in place as in previous occasions of viewing our hands. Of course, what seems to hold in specific cases can be overwhelmed by “defeater” information. In the normal course of life, then, we have every justification for believing that the objects we see before us are “hands” in the full conceptual (and causal) sense of that term, and no reason to doubt this. Thus, Huemer’s principle serves as a strong guard against skepticism even if we conclude that Huemer’s perceptual seemings aren’t as robust as he believes.

Huemer’s final discussion of the BIV (181–91) is the most technical and intricate material in the book, as well as the most important in terms of addressing skepticism. I have no desire to attempt to reproduce that intricacy here, but I believe the discussion following in this paragraph is supported by Huemer’s treatment. The skeptical penchant for raising logically possible alternatives to seemingly true beliefs (say, by arguing that our perceptual experiences could as well be produced by a BIV), in effect calls into question *any* possible method of justification we might attempt. As Huemer summarizes: “Any method you might use for trying to know you aren’t a BIV is such that, if you were a BIV, that method would still lead you to the conclusion that you weren’t one” (186). However, this critique also attacks itself and leads to the presumption that “nobody knows anything” (187), or universal skepticism. (As Kelley [1986, 184 n. 4] points out, even Descartes’ famous maxim, I think therefore I am, “still takes a process of thought to grasp . . . and the process could in principle err.”) And universal skepticism is of course subject to a simple *reductio ad absurdum* argument that invalidates it.

Objectivists have recently made such complaints as “the field of inference has received relatively little attention” from Objectivist philosophers (Fraedrich 2001, 29). I think Huemer’s “phenomenal conservatism” at least makes some general contributions to such matters. At the same time, Huemer’s work is compatible with the

efforts of Kelley and Peikoff. Peikoff's discussion of arbitrary statements (1991, 163–71) essentially boils down to the claim that logical possibilities are not sufficient “defeaters” for our justified beliefs.⁴ Similarly, Kelley (1986, 239) writes:

If a person is perceiving an object in normal conditions, but has evidence that conditions are abnormal, he could not justifiably disregard the evidence in forming a perceptual judgment. This is merely an application of the general epistemological principle that no matter how strong one's evidence for a conclusion, one is not justified in drawing the conclusion if he is ignoring evidence to the contrary. But neither [will justification] support a requirement that one have positive knowledge that conditions are normal. . . . Reasonable men are alert to signs of misinformation, but they are not paranoid.⁵

Through the course of this essay, we have seen that Huemer's theory of direct realism is basically compatible with Kelley's work, though we must be careful to note how the authors use the terms “proposition,” “representationalism,” and “foundationalism” in different ways. Huemer and Kelley disagree about whether our perceptual experiences can contain conceptual—and thus causal—information. I suggest that Kelley is correct that they cannot. This disagreement explains why Huemer believes illusions such as the “bent” stick in water are a perceptual problem, whereas Kelley believes they are a conceptual problem. Kelley seems to have a little trouble explaining why we know we're not hallucinating at any given moment. A related problem is why we are justified in any of our particular perceptual judgments. This gives rise to an important question that has not yet been adequately addressed: How are causal theories incorporated into our concepts? Fortunately, Huemer's theory of “phenomenal conservatism” indeed allows us to reject skepticism and justify our perceptual judgments. If we look back at the work of Kelley and Peikoff, we find that their commentary on the arbitrary anticipates Huemer's solution and augments it.

A review of Huemer's book raises at least two issues for subsequent study. First, what is the precise relationship between our causal theories and our perceptions? Second, can the principle of "phenomenal conservatism" be usefully applied to fields other than epistemology, such as ethics? The book, however, also answers an impressive list of troublesome questions.

Notes

1. Kelley (1998, 11) also discusses this point: "Even in unusual conditions, where we have experiences that we describe as illusions, the illusory character consists in the likelihood that we will make the wrong *conceptual* identification of what we perceive." Brian Schwartz, who reviewed an early draft of this essay, asked for a more thorough discussion of Kelley's views, though of course he is not responsible for the results.

2. In reviewing a draft of this essay, Robert Campbell asked at this point, "Is a giraffe or a baboon susceptible to illusions? If we concluded that a giraffe was susceptible to illusions, would this imply the giraffe was using concepts?" The answer to the second question is "yes." Of course, giraffes perceive the same way we do when looking at a stick halfway in water. But they are not struck by the oddity of the perception (unless they have some sort of primitive concepts for "straight" and "bent"). The stick in water strikes people as peculiar—as illusory—precisely because it doesn't neatly fit our conceptual schemes. It doesn't strike an infant as illusory. At first, I had trouble integrating the Müller-Lyer illusion (Huemer 2001, 101), in which two lines of equal length appear to be different lengths. Similarly, a square placed in a certain intricate pattern may appear to have curved sides. Then it occurred to me that illusions may be categorized in terms of their distance from our perceptual organs. An illusion pertaining to a stick in water is externally generated at the point of the object. A mirage is generated between an object and the sense organs (Huemer 97 mentions mirages). Double vision occurs because of the placement of the eyes. The Müller-Lyer illusion is closest of all, generated by our internal perceptual processors. The analysis above applies to all types of illusions.

3. Kelley (1984, 22–23) offers another example of identifying a dog that can be similarly addressed.

4. Diana Hsieh referred me to an article by Greg Perkins, 1996, titled, "Truth and the Arbitrary," that discusses Peikoff's views in greater detail. Perkins's article is found at <http://www.ecosmos.com/writings/tatacov.html>. Perkins describes the problems with Peikoff's claim that an arbitrary statement is "neither true nor false," and he references an argument invoked by Huemer regarding this point.

5. Kelley 1998 addresses justification in greater detail.

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