

Discussion

Reply to Ari Armstrong's "A Direct Realist's Challenge to Skepticism" (Spring 2004)

How to Be a Perceptual Realist

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In his informative and congenial review of my book, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Huemer 2001), Ari Armstrong (2004) criticizes me and sides with David Kelley on two closely-related matters. The first concerns the content of perceptual experiences. The second concerns the nature of illusion. In the following, I defend my views of these matters, in opposition to Armstrong and Kelley.

The Content of Experience

Before addressing whether perceptual experiences have conceptual content and/or have propositional content, we need to clarify a number of things. First, what does it mean to "have content"? For a mental state to "have content" is for it to represent something, to be *of* or *about* something. For instance, if I see a red sphere in the normal way (no illusions), then my experience is an experience *of* a red sphere; we might also say that it *represents* a red sphere. The "content" is what the mental state represents. Notice that the content is not, itself, a mental state. Two mental states have the *same* content if and only if they represent the same things and represent them as being the same way. Thus, for example, a normal perception of a red sphere might "have the same content" as a hallucination of a red sphere (if the hallucination was exactly as vivid and detailed as the perception).

Second, what is it to "have conceptual content"? Armstrong at times appears to make the mistake of thinking of "conceptual

content” as referring to a *type* of content. Indeed, this assumption is so tempting given the form of words that it would really be better to speak of mental states “having content conceptually,” rather than “having conceptual content.” As I argue in the book, the only real distinction to be made is between two different *ways* a mental state might represent its content: by means of concepts, and not by means of concepts. This is not a distinction pertaining to *what* is represented, so it is not a distinction between kinds of content. Thus, there is no logical reason why there might not be two mental states with the same content, one of which has this content conceptually, and the other of which has it nonconceptually.

Third, what is it to “have propositional content”? For a mental state to have propositional content is for it to represent *that something is the case*. For instance, if I believe there is a red ball here, my belief has propositional content: what it represents to be the case is *that there is a red ball here*. On the other hand, consider my concept, RED. This concept has content (it is *of* the color red), but it lacks *propositional* content (there is nothing the concept, by itself, represents to be the case).

Notice that, based on the above definitions, there is simply no logical connection between “conceptual” and “propositional.” The term “propositional” characterizes *what* is represented; the term “conceptual” refers to *the means by which* it is represented. Once we understand this, it is natural to say that perceptual experiences have *propositional* content, because they represent things to be the case (they represent objects to be certain ways), but they have this content *nonconceptually* (they represent things in a way that does not depend on concepts).

Another way of stating the thesis that perceptual experiences have propositional content is to say that when we have perceptual experiences, something seems *to be the case* by virtue of those experiences. Of course, what seems to be the case need not be something that we have the words, or even the concepts, to express. Thus, an object could seem to have some shade of color that we have no word or concept for.

It is important to understand that the contents of our perceptual

experiences are always propositions *purely about the physical world*. They are never propositions about our minds. For example, when I look up, I see that the sky is blue. I do not see a mental state, nor do I see that the sky is causing a mental state in me, nor do I see that the sky *appears* some way to me. Armstrong suggests at one point that when looking at a plant,

my perception conveys the preconceptual equivalent of, “I see an object that appears similar to other objects I regard as ‘plants.’” (427)

I reject this characterization for four reasons. First, when one looks at a plant, one sees only the plant; one does not see oneself, nor does one see one’s seeing of the plant. Second, one sees the *properties* of the plant, not its *appearance*. These first two points are just what is involved in direct realism. Third, one cannot see that the object is similar to other things that are not now present. One’s *present* experience can only represent the plant to be a certain way; it cannot represent anything that one is not now observing, so it cannot represent a similarity between the plant and a thing one is not now observing. Fourth, one’s experience does not represent a concept, nor does it represent one as having a concept, so it cannot represent the plant as falling under the concept “plant.” Taking account of all these points, we should revise Armstrong’s statement to:

My perception conveys that there is an object with such-and-such properties.

The important point is that in perception, we are aware of *how physical reality is*, not how something *appears* to us. Armstrong appears to agree with this initially, but he slips into representationalist ways of talking.

Objectivists have seemingly rejected the notion of the propositional content of experience, perhaps because they confuse propositional content with conceptual content:

The task of [man’s] senses is to give him the evidence of

existence, but the task of identifying it belongs to his reason, his senses tell him only that something *is*, but *what* it is must be learned by his mind. (Rand 1957, 942)

The senses . . . do not identify the objects that impinge on them. They merely respond to stimuli, thereby making us aware of the fact that some kinds of objects exist. We do not become aware of what the objects are, but merely *that* they are. . . . It is only in regard to the “what”—only on the conceptual level of consciousness—that the possibility of error arises. (Peikoff 1991, 40)

In arguing that perceptual awareness is direct, I distinguished it from conceptual awareness, and part of what this means is that it is not propositional in form, it involves no predication of a subject. (Kelley 1986, 197)

In these quotations, Rand, Peikoff, and Kelley appear to be taking an absurd position. If it were really true that the senses tell us *only* that something exists, then the task of discovering *what* it is would be insurmountable. To see this, imagine that I call you on the telephone one day, and we have the following dialogue:

- Me: Hey, I’m thinking of something right now. I’ll give you \$100 if you can figure out what it is.
 You: Well, give me a hint.
 Me: Okay, it’s something that exists.
 You: I need more information than that.
 Me: Just use your reason!

Obviously, my final reply is unreasonable. No matter how intelligent and rational you are, there is no way you could figure out what I’m thinking of given no information other than that it exists. Of course, you might try just guessing, but this would not be an appropriate model for knowledge of the external world. Similarly, even with the faculty of reason, there is no way we could figure out the nature of

the objects of perception, given no information other than that they exist.

For this reason, it seems that the Objectivist view leads to skepticism. But more importantly, it is obviously not the case that in perception, we are aware of nothing more than the existence of something. When we see objects, we see them *as being some particular way*—for instance, as having certain colors, shapes, and spatial arrangements.

Perhaps I have misunderstood Rand: perhaps her notion of “what” an object is is narrower than I have assumed. I have assumed that in denying that the senses tell us what an object is, she was denying that the senses give us awareness of *any* of the object’s properties. Perhaps she meant only that the senses do not give us awareness of some important, fundamental properties of the object—for instance, when we see water, we do not see that it is composed of H₂O molecules. Since H₂O is what water is, one might say that vision fails to tell us “what water is.”

But while this charitable interpretation might apply to the quotation from Rand, it cannot be applied to either Peikoff’s or Kelley’s remarks. Peikoff’s assertion that “it is only in regard to the ‘what’ . . . that the possibility of error arises” forces the broadest interpretation of “what”: it forces us to interpret Peikoff as denying that perception represents objects to have *any* properties at all. For as soon as you represent an object to have some property, you are in the business of truth and falsity—the representation is true if the object has that property, and false if it does not. And Kelley’s “no predication of a subject” remark, similarly, must mean that no properties of any kind are ascribed to the objects we perceive.

Perhaps an Objectivist would say that, while of course a *single* perceptual experience of a single object would not enable us to know what it is, we can figure out what things are after a long train of experiences, using induction. But to see the futility of this suggestion, one need only imagine that, after my first phone call, I call you back day after day—a thousand times, if you like—and each time I say, “I’m thinking of something that exists.” I won’t tell you anything about it other than that it exists; I won’t even tell you whether I’m

thinking of the same object as I was thinking of the previous day. Obviously, it does not matter how many such phone calls you receive or how good you are at induction. You will never be able to figure out what any of the objects I am referring to are.

Some might think that I am misunderstanding Kelley. On the same page (197), he states that our beliefs about the objects we perceive result merely from “the transition from a perceptual to a conceptual awareness of *the same fact*” (my emphasis). Similarly, Peikoff (1991, 40–41) writes that “the function of the senses . . . is to sum up a vast range of facts.” I do not see how to reconcile these remarks with the claims that perceptual experiences do not tell us what anything is, that they do not predicate properties of anything, and that they lack propositional contents. Presumably, the facts Kelley and Peikoff have in mind include such things as the fact that a certain object has a certain color. But that fact surely has a subject (the object) and a predicate (the color); it is propositional in form; and it tells us, in part, what that object is. It thus appears that Kelley and Peikoff are inconsistent.

Illusion

Once we establish that perceptual experience has propositional content, the nature of sensory illusions is easy to understand: a sensory illusion is a case in which perceptual experience represents something to be the case that, in fact, is not the case.

The Objectivist view rejects this characterization:

A so-called sensory illusion, such as a stick in water appearing bent, is not a perceptual error. . . . *All* sense perceptions are necessarily valid. (Peikoff 1991, 40–41; emphasis Peikoff’s)

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

Kelley and Peikoff deny that it is possible for perceptual experience to misrepresent anything. This directly follows from their view about the content of experience: if experience does not ascribe any properties to objects at all, then it cannot get the properties of the objects wrong. This may sound comforting. Perhaps Kelley and Peikoff believe that they are providing the grounds for a response to philosophical skepticism; after all, skeptics regularly appeal to perceptual errors to motivate their all-encompassing doubts. But as we have just seen, the Objectivist view in fact leads directly *to* skepticism. The very thing that supposedly prevents perceptual experience from being *wrong* would also prevent it from being *right*: namely, that it says nothing about the nature of objects. To be sure, if a witness refuses to testify, he cannot perjure himself—but nor can he help us learn the facts of the case.

Armstrong (2004) tries to defend the Objectivist view of the impossibility of perceptual error, but apparently without denying that experiences have content:

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.” (426–27)

The idea seems to be that our experience represents the stick to be *angled* but not *bent*, and that the stick really is angled (though it is not bent), so our experience correctly represents the stick. Unfortunately, I do not know what Armstrong means by “an ‘angle’ in the visual sense.” He seems to intend this expression to be read in some way such that an object’s merely being angled—in contrast to its being bent—would *not* imply that the object is not straight, and also would not imply that if you picked it up and felt it, you would feel the angle. But there is no standard English usage of “angle” such that an

object's having an angle is compatible with its being straight.¹ Indeed, "angle" and "bend" are near-synonyms.

Perhaps "angled" means "*looks* bent." This is suggested by Armstrong's use of the phrase "in the visual sense." In this case, his suggestion would be that the stick appears to us to *look* bent, but does not appear to us to *be* bent. But this would be wrong. As discussed above, experience does not represent objects as appearing some way; it represents objects as being some way. That is to say: objects never appear to *appear* (or look) some way to us. They appear to *be* that way. If the way that they appear to be is different from the way they are, we call that "an illusion."

Armstrong goes on to observe: "It is only because of our background causal theories that we assume the stick . . . is in fact 'straight.' Lacking these theories, we could as well conclude that water causes a physical change in the stick . . ." (428) Armstrong is certainly correct here. But far from undermining my view, the observation *supports* my view of illusions. My view is that the experience one is having at the time represents the object to be bent—thus, if you had no other information, you would naturally (but wrongly) think the object had physically changed its shape. But we correct this false representation by using our background knowledge.

Some might think that, in allowing the possibility of perceptual illusions, I have opened the door to skepticism. As I show in my book, this is not the case. The mere in-principle possibility of an error is not, by itself, evidence of an actual error. This possibility thus is not sufficient to defeat the rational presumption we have that our perceptual experiences are accurate. Of course, my view *does* imply that, in the actual cases of perceptual illusions, such as sticks halfway submerged in water, we should not trust our senses. But that much is obvious: if you see an object half-submerged in water, you should not believe that the object is the way it appears. It does not follow from this that, when I see an object that is *not* in any of the conditions that lead to perceptual illusions, I should not believe my senses. On this point, Kelley, Peikoff, Armstrong, and I are all in agreement.

Ironically, it is the positions *denying* the possibility of perceptual error that lead to skepticism. The reason is that the only ways to *in*

principle exempt perception from error are to either deny that perception tells us anything (as the Objectivists do), or claim that it only tells us about *appearances* (as the indirect realists do). Both approaches fail, since there is then no basis for *moving* from one's perceptual experiences to substantive claims about the external world. My form of realism is the only plausible one: by construing perceptual experiences as already containing information about how the external world is, I allow the possibility of perceptual error but eliminate the problem of how we can "get outside our heads."

Notes

1. Leaving aside the geometer's technical usage, in which one may speak of a "straight angle." If the stick appears to have an angle in it, it is certainly not a straight angle (180°) that it appears to have.

References

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