

PETER STRAWSON ON THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION IN EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

The issue of perception in epistemology is connected with the possibility of knowing with perceptual clarity. Perception as a unique and fundamental theory of inquiry without doubt raises series of epistemological problems and questions such as what are the correct methods of knowing reality? What is the relationship between the object as it is and as it appears? How do we know or how can we be so sure of what we claim to know? Is the object of perception the same in the real sense of viewing? Is appearance the same as reality? This paper shall through philosophical expository and analysis engage the dilemma of perception in epistemology. Given the task that perception is to study events and the world as they appear to the eyes directly or through optical instruments; this paper examines Strawson's contribution to theory of perception as a causal concept and that there is no clear cut way of describing perceptual experiences without employing physical-object involved.

Key Words: Perception, Sensation, Reality, Appearance, Empirical world.

Introduction

The objective reality of events or its objective state of affair is fundamental to perception as a field of study. The paper aims to establish the various problems associated with the inquiry of perception. Consideration is given in this paper to Peter Strawson as a reference point on the problems of perception in epistemology. Perception is a unique field of inquiry. Perception means intuitively openness to the world. It is the process, act or faculty of perceiving the empirical world. Perception as a concept is from the Latin word *perceptio*, *percipio* which is the organization, identification and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the physical environment. Perception as a fundamental philosophical title holds a central place in any theory of knowledge, and (its place) in any theory of consciousness (Blackburn, 2005: 271). Philosophy in this area is constrained by a number of properties that we believe to hold in the field of perception; (i.) It gives us knowledge of the world around us. (ii.) We are conscious of that world by awareness of 'sensible qualities': such as colours, sounds, tastes, smells, felt warmth, and the shapes and positions of objects in the environment. (iii.) Such consciousness is affected through highly complex information channels, such as the output of the three different types of colour-sensitive cells in the eye, or the channels in the ear for interpreting pulses of air pressure as frequencies of sound (Blackburn, 2005: 271). All perceptions involve signals in the nervous system which in turn result from physical stimulation of the sense organs. That is, the vision involves light striking the retinas of the eyes. In

the case of smelling, it is mediated by odour molecules and hearing involves pressure waves. The word 'perceiving' could be said to come from a transitive verb "to perceive which literally means to become aware of direct object through any of observation or to detect or becomes aware of something in one's mind, by way of apprehension and understanding. Perception is not the passive receipt of these signals, but by the illumination of them.

Furthermore, the purpose of perception as in all other scientific disciplines is to explain objective facts and events. The meaning of this objective is that the events we wish to explain are independent of the observer and that they are observable to all which are not mere illusions (Irvin, 1975: 2). Irving buttresses the independent observer to mean that the events of observation of object take place whether anyone is observing them or not. If there is ever any reason to think about our observation of what is happening in the reasoning faulty, then the need will be to correct the fallacies of perception along the line. For example, when one observes the moon to be moving as cloud passes in front of it, one should know that this is illusion because the moon is not actually moving through the clouds. This is to say that the objective facts with which science deals with are known through perception.

On this note, perception involves some kinds of effects and processing. The first aspect is regarded as the "top-down" effect and the second as the "bottom-up" process of processing sensory input. The "bottom-up" processing is basically low-level information that is used to build up higher-level information (i.e. shapes for object recognition). The "top-down" processing refers to a person's concept and expectation (Knowledge) arising from perception. Perception depends on complex functions of nervous system but subjectively seems mostly effortless because this processing happens outside conscious and awareness level. The rise of experimental psychology in the late 19th century gives psychology a cognitive understanding of perception with variety of techniques. The experimental psychologists employ human participants and animals to study a great many topics including among others, sensation and perception, memory cognition, learning, motivation, and emotion. Perceptual issues in philosophy include the extent to which sensory qualities such as sounds, smells or colours exist in objective reality rather than in the mind of the perceiver. We are conscious of the world by being aware of 'sensible qualities' such as colours, sounds, tastes, smells, felt warmth, and the shapes and positions of objects in the environment (Blackburn, 2005: 271). Although the senses were traditionally viewed as passive receptors, the study of illusions and ambiguous images has demonstrated that the brain's perceptual systems actively and pre-consciously attempt to make sense of their input. There is still active debate about the extent to which perception is an active process of hypothesis testing, analogous to science or whether realistic sensory information is rich enough to make this process unnecessary. The perceptual systems of the brain enable individuals to see the world around them as stable, even though the sensory information may be incomplete and rapidly varying.

Be that as it may, perception is also the process by which an individual selects, organises and interprets stimuli into meaningful and coherent picture of the world. That is, the way we see the world around us. Perceptions vary from person to person. Different people perceive different things about the same situation differently. Based on this fact, it is affirmed that we assign different meanings to what we perceive. That is the reason sensation is relative to individuals and the meanings change for a certain reason.

David Hume divides all perceptions of human mind into two distinct kinds, namely *impressions* and *ideas* (Hume, 2011: 499). The difference between these concepts consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions which enter with most force and violence are called impressions; and they form part of our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas, it means the faint images of impressions in thinking and reasoning (Hume, 2011: 499). There is another division of our perceptions, which is convenient to observe, and which extends itself both to our impressions and ideas. This division is into simple and complex. Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admitting of no distinction or separation. The complex is the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts. Through a particular colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in the object of perception but are distinguished from each other. For instance, the colour of apple is different from that of pineapple viz –a-viz their taste. Perception can be regarded as identification of things or facts. Seeing an object or an event (both count as things for this classification), for instance, a cat on the sofa, a man on the street. One can see a cat on the sofa and mistake it for a rumpled sweater; see a man at a distance and take him for a tree. Other ways of describing what we perceive are variations on these two themes. In seeing where he went, when he left, who went with him, and how he was dressed, we are describing the perception of some fact without revealing exactly what fact it is.

The Problem of Perception

Perception has a massive impact on how humans experience their world. In actual fact, one could say that perception is the main reason for human existence. Perception enables humans to make decisions based on stimuli that are received from the environment (Blackburn, 2005: 271). That is, the experience we gathered from our immediate surroundings. Without perception, these stimuli would never have been received and we would die. The problem of perception is central and obviously aims to reconcile some truth about our experience of the world with the possibility of certain kinds of perceptual error. This problem is not the same as the epistemological problem of how perception can give us knowledge of the external world. The need to make distinction between the real world of objective events on the one hand and a subjective or perceived world of events on the other hand seem legitimates but raises many philosophical problems. One problem that concerns philosophers from inception of history has to do with the real essence of things.

What is real? This poses a fundamental question to metaphysicians on the nature of things and ultimate nature of beings: the material universe or subjective awareness. To the materialist, the world of physical objects and events is what exists and subjective awareness is no more than a special property of the brain, the brain itself being a physical object. The idealist is of the view that all we can be certain about is that we experience the world. Whether it exists or not is pure inference. Therefore, what is real is subjective consciousness about our ideas of the world but not the material world as such. There are other beliefs that there are two realities, or realms, the material and the mental. They acknowledge that the mental world depends upon or is correlated with events in a material object, the nervous system, but they are not willing to accept that mental events are nothing more than neural or brain events. The fall out of this is that not all events in the brain lead to conscious mental states; thereby brain and mental events are not synonymous.

Another related problem is that of epistemology, how can we have knowledge of the material world? How can we be certain that what we think we know is correct or absolute? The problem here is the acknowledgement of the fact that the perceived world is essentially a “construction” of the mind (Irving, 1975: 4). That is to say, what we have directly available are our sense impressions, our perceptions. The naïve realists are of the view that our perceptions give us correct knowledge about the outer world; this however is seen to be unsatisfactory when one considers metaphysically that illusions, hallucinations and mental delusions as not correct or true perceptions of reality. The epistemological problem may be solvable by adopting the Reliabilists theory of perceptual warrant. This is because the problem of perception is a kind of paradox or antimony which arises independently of this epistemological issue. The structure of the problem is simple; perception seems intuitively to be openness to the world, but this fact of openness is threatened by reflection on illusions and hallucinations. The arguments which give rise to this problem can be divided into two: the arguments from illusion and from hallucination.

The Argument from Illusion

An illusion can be defined as “any perceptual situation in which a physical object is actually perceived, but in which the object perceptually appears other than it really is” (Smith, 2002: 23). That is, when our object of perception appears beyond being real- it is not real. This shows that senses sometimes deceive us and may do so on any occasion. For examples, when one is observing or examining a white handkerchief in yellow light, it appears yellow, or someone with jaundice is perceiving a white paper or white wall, he may think or assume it is yellow based on his or her state of perception. Also, a quiet sound can seem too loud if it is very close to you. In these cases, it is not an overstatement that one is deceiving into believing that things are other than they are. Therefore, illusion in this sense needs not confuse with deception. One can know that he is experiencing an illusion when it is happening. The problem of illusion can be further justified when one is subject

to an illusion; it occurs that something or object perceiving has a quality, F, which the real ordinary object supposedly being perceived does not actually have. For instance, when you submerge a rod or stick into a bucket of water, it will seem bend or wavering. Can we then say that is straight at a point in time and is bending at another time? Illusion, by its hypothesis, is not real as its object. Whether one is aware of the real object or not, or if one is, one is aware of it only “indirectly” and not in the direct, immediate way in which we normally take ourselves to be aware of objects.

To buttress the point further, it is obvious that there is no non-arbitrary way of distinguishing, from the point of view of the subject of an experience, between the phenomenology of perception and illusion. In this sense, there is no reason to claim that even in the case of genuine perception one is directly or immediately aware of ordinary objects. There is a belief that we cannot actually perceive the world around us directly. There are mediating agents that must be put in place. Therefore, our normal view about the subject of perception which is sometimes called “naïve realism” or “direct realism” is false. It follows that perception cannot be what we normally think it is. Since we are always aware of something in perceptual experience, what we are aware of is another kind of object, a “non-ordinary” object which is called a “sense-datum”. (Stumpf, 1994: 269).

Peter Frederick Strawson’s Position on the Problem of Perception

The problem of perception is a central issue in modern epistemology and metaphysics according to Ayer A. J. and other logical positivists. Ayer argues from the position of phenomenalism which he calls “sophisticated realism”. In this sense, Ayer uses psychologistic approach to perception and later gives a defence of realism. Ayer is of the view that perceptual statements are based upon experiential statements just in the sense that it is necessary for any perceptual statements to be true that some experiential statements must be true, but sometimes it is possible for the experiential statement to be true even though the perceptual statement is false. In this connection, A. C. Grayling opines that:

... the experiential statements are primary in the sense that they constitute the logical grounds for, not psychological antecedents of, perceptual statements which point is not in the least invalidated by the fact that their role is brought to light by the process of retreating from more ordinary statements. (Grayling, 1985: 140)

Ayer buttresses this point by stressing that with sufficient ingredient and labour a purely sensory vocabulary could be constructed to describe experience without trading upon the vocabulary of physical objects. This approach by Ayer contradicts the position held by Strawson.

In order to understand Strawson’s position, there is need to consider John Locke’s view of perception. Locke argues that human perception is akin to pictures of objects, received from sense impressions that in some forms exist in the mind as

concepts, or ideas. Locke, Hume and Berkeley are regarded as modern British empiricist. In the view of John Locke for instance, human mind is conceived as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate which passively receives impressions from the external world (Stumpf, 1994: 266). These impressions are stamped upon the mind, as a kind of seal in wax, or picture in the mind. They hold the positions against Platonists that there are no *innate ideas*. In this view, perception is not direct but indirect. Perception is conceived to be mediated by sensuous qualities or experience. To use classical terminology, we perceive of the object. Objects in the world possess primary and secondary qualities, and these qualities are received as impressions through sensation which are the data we pick up from experience. The mind in this sense is viewed as anachronistic, as a black tape in a camcorder which records the impressions. The self or subject then views them as if there are *hemunalus* inside the mind of the subject. For Locke, the mind can never penetrate to the *substratum*, or reach beyond the veil of the senses. The objects of the external world are indeed objects with a real ontological status; that is, they are being. However, the mind of the subject can never penetrate to the world in itself, and this ends up being the major problem for the classical empiricism. This Lockean view is what Strawson analogous to “Scientific realism”; that which ends up presenting us with systematic illusion. Scientific realism is the philosophical view that the universe described by science and sensical view is real regardless of how it is interpreted. The success of science in this context is based on unobservable entities. How do we account for the things the sensual perception cannot see or perceive? The response to this from the scientific realists is that one can make valid assertion about unobservable entities and affirm that they possess the same ontological status as observables.

Strawson disagrees with Ayer on the basis that Ayer is operating in the classical realism tradition. Ayer believes in a “common sense realism” when approaching the phenomenal world, and holds that we develop such a system as we mature to adulthood. The problem of perception has been central to analytic philosophy as a result of attempting to reconcile some apparently obvious truths about perception with the apparent possibility of a certain kind of perceptual error. Perceptual experience seems to be what we might call an “openness to the world: an immediate awareness of mind-independent objects. However, the fact remains that the character of our experiences themselves is majorly affected by our beliefs concerning the physical world. Strawson replies Ayer’s position that there is need for us to take a step beyond our sensible experience in making our perceptual judgment (Grayling, 1985: 141). This implies that we take a step back (in general) from our perceptual judgments in framing accounts of our sensible experience; for we have (in general) to include a reference to the former framing a veridical description of the latter. Strawson argues this in line of Kantian notion that sensible experience presents itself as an immediate consciousness of the existence of things outside us (Strawson, 1975: 46). It seems unavoidable that we should view experience as permeated by realist presumptions, and that the very character of that experience is determined by these presumptions in a way which makes

them indispensable to a veridical characterisation of our experience itself. That is to say that our experience must involve reference to its objects.

Strawson believes that a more exact analysis of what there “really” is what will be gained by description rather than by speculation. Strawson utilizes the Kantian notion that all perception takes place in a spatio-temporal framework (Strawson, 1966). Given this analysis, what is basic to all perception is that perception is of particular objects. That is, when perceiving, we perceive both the object and its property together. With that many statements can be made about an object, and since Strawson is seeking to find the basis of all perception, he has to qualify exactly what he is trying to establish. The criteria used toward this end are based on the premise that “object must be identifiable in a *spatio-temporal* conceptual scheme”. In other words, qualitative statements are to be understood as the basic object statements. This means that the objects of a statement must be locatable in a spatial and temporal scheme without relying upon anything else for their construal. Further, objects of this scheme must be re-identifiable in the same sense over a lapse of time. This is possible with quantitative statements only, not with qualitative statements. Quantitative statements are made of an object, if that object is locatable in space and time, without depending upon anything else for that identity except the scheme itself. This is not the case with qualitative statements. Qualitative statements are attributive; hence, they presuppose an object already identified before they are applied. For example, to claim that someone is wise presupposes that one is applying the attribute of wisdom to a subject already identified. In other words, quantitative statements do not depend upon anything else, but qualitative statements depend on quantitative identifies or already established. Therefore, Strawson concludes that matter is to be understood as the basic particular upon which all statements about reality are grounded.

In all, Strawson accepts the implications of his metaphysics especially when dealing with the traditional problem of how the mind and body are related. He asserts that the whole problem is a confused one. To him, the concepts “Mind” and “body” are abstract or second order concepts. Both concepts presuppose something even more basic, which he argues in his concept of the “person”. According to him, the term ‘person’ is what is given in perception. The distinction between the mind and body is made after the person has already been identified. In the same vein, a person is re-identifiable by virtue of being a publicly observable behaviour. Strawson’s argument to this effect is that:

The distinction between identifying reference and uniquely existential assertion is something quite undeniable. The sense in which the existence of something answering to a definite description used for the purpose of identifying reference, and its distinguishability by an audience from anything else, is presupposed and not asserted in an utterance containing such an expression, so used, stands absolutely firm, whether or not one opts for the view that radical failure of the presupposition would require the statement of a truth-value. It remains

a decisive objection to the theory of descriptions... that it amounts to a denial of these undeniable distinctions (Strawson, 1964: 85).

Conclusion

In a nut shell, by way of concluding, Strawson, by the foregoing analysis, is of the fact that there are some facts of experience that are uniquely undeniable. That is, there are factual experiences in reality that are not falsifiable with empirical hypothesis. Perception seems intuitively to be openness to the world, a process, an act or faculty of perceiving the immediate environment. It is further based as organization, identification and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment. From the foregoing, it shows that perceptions involve signals in the nervous system, which in term result from physical stimulation of the sense organs. That is, the vision involves light which striking the retinas of the eyes, smell are mediated by odour molecules and hearing involves pressure waves that are difficult if not impossible to deny.

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