

Research project 2010-2011: Perspectival Facts

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Metaphysical Perspectives on the Philosophy of Mind

The present project aims at reconciling the results and methods of modern metaphysics with the main topics of research in contemporary philosophy of mind. Philosophy of mind - the study of intentional phenomena, conscious and subconscious - studies the main types of our mental activity: thinking, perception, feeling and emotions. But what exactly *are* episodes of thinking, acts of perception, feelings and emotional states? How are they individuated, what is their nature? Much in philosophy of mind hangs on this, even though these questions are only rarely considered in their own right. Research into the mental is often conducted in deplorable isolation from and partial ignorance of crucial metaphysical distinctions: the questions whether or not thinking is always propositional, whether there is some such thing as intrinsic representation, whether or not perception puts us into direct contact with the world, what perspectives are and how they manifest themselves, whether feelings and emotions are states or processes and what dynamical laws they govern them are questions that cannot be adequately treated within the traditional framework of the metaphysics of mind, but instead necessitate a broadening of the theoretical horizon to include metaphysical considerations. To bridge this gap between metaphysics and the philosophy of mind and to bring metaphysical perspectives to bear on questions of the mental is the main innovation of the present research project.

According to a standard conception, objective reality, and the facts that constitute it, are independent from us and our thought and talk and so, to the extent to which we can access them at all, allow for a description whose truth does not depend on our perspectives. Yet we are familiar with the phenomenon that the truth-values of certain thoughts, seemingly apt to represent how things are, essentially vary in accordance with these perspectives. How can this variation in truth-value be reconciled with our conception of facts as being perspective-independent? A natural thought is that this is possible only to the extent that the ways things are represented as being permit capture by statements whose truth-value does not so vary. There are basically two ways to achieve such a reconciliation: the statements are said (i) to variably express different thoughts, each with a stable truth-value (*contextualism*), or (ii) to always express the same thought which is true or false only relative to perspectives, where the latter can in turn be captured by statements with stable truth-value (*anodyne relativism*). Another compatibilist alternative is (iii) to reject the natural thought and to argue that objective reality itself changes *in tandem* with changes in perspective, so that variation in truth-value is mandatory rather than suggestive of dependence on anything non-objective (*perspectival realism*). Revisionary views, by contrast, come in two varieties: either (iv) the statements in question are denied the status of being fact-stating, or (v) reality is no longer conceived of as being wholly independent from us and our relation to it.

The main research goal of this project is to provide a systematic treatment of the third position, aiming to make it compatible with robust realism about the world as independent of us and of what we think about it. The hypothesis to be investigated in particular is that the perspectivity of content is to be accounted for in terms of the perspectivity of facts, a variant of perspectival realism (iii) above. This hypothesis has recently been investigated by Kit Fine for the case of tensed contents in his (2005b), and Dean Zimmerman (2005a) makes some comments on an “ontological” reading of Arthur Prior's egocentric logic (1968b).

The natural place to start for a theory of perspectival facts is the case of perception. Perception, according to a popular and plausible view, puts us into direct contact with objects in our surroundings. According to this natural view, tentatively called “naïve realism”, perception is a two-place relation between perceiving subject and the object of the perceptual act. Naïve realism, however, faces a number of obstacles. What we see, for one thing, depends on where we are: the visible shape of the round cup in front of us, for example, is oval and changes with our position with respect to it. This so-called “argument from perspective” is the strongest argument in favour of sense-data, which are incompatible with direct realism:

1. Every intentional object is either existentially independent from its intentional acts, or dependent on it (in which case we call it a “sense-datum”)
2. Oval and round are contrary properties.
3. A same cup can look round from certain point of views, and elliptical from certain other ones.
4. Therefore, at least one of these points of view does not present us with a mind-independent property of the cup, but with a mind-dependent sense-datum.
5. There is no reason to privilege one point of view over another.
6. Therefore, we are always presented with sense-data.

A first, in our view unsuccessful, objection to this argument denies premise 3, taking so-called “occluding shapes” to be artefacts invented by philosophers, painters or laboratory psychologists. While not going quite as far as Rock (1983) and Noë (2002), who hold that occlusion-properties are themselves objects of sight, we want to grant premise 3: it is just a fact of the phenomenology of perceptions that cups look oval from some perspectives. Another objection points out that a further premise is needed, viz. that the properties in question (being round, being oval) are (parts of) the intentional object of these perceptions, and holds that the premise is false, because being round and being elliptical are not part of the perceptual object, but rather part of the perceptual content, conceived of as a mode of presentation (MOP) of the object. The cup is presented either in the “oval” MOP, or in the “round” MOP. This objection, very much in the spirit of subproject B, undermines the argument since those modes of presentation are not incompatible. Another option, endorsed by Peacocke (1983) and close to claims explored in subproject C, is to claim that perspectival properties are indeed sensational properties, in the sense of non-representational properties or qualia of the experience. This option differs from the one mentioned in considering qualia to be monadic properties of the act of experience, while the MOP option consider them to be relations between the act and the object of the experience. But it shares its disadvantages. While we grant the need for this additional premise, we think it is true. We cannot account for premise 3 in terms of MOPs. How are the roundness MOP and the roundness property related? It seems redundant to say that roundness is presented in a roundly way. The objector thus faces the following dilemma: either the two shapes are experiences (one 'as a MOP', the other 'as a property') in which case the experience is strangely doubled. Or only the MOP shape is perceived, which avoids the preceding doubling, but renders the shape-property of the object inscrutable.

The good objection to the argument from perspective, by contrast, is that premise 3 is ambiguous between

- 3'. A same cup can look *round* from certain points of view, and *elliptical* from certain other ones.
- 3". A same cup can look *round from certain points of view* and *elliptical from certain other ones*.

The argument from perspective does not exclude 3", but 3" does not lead to its conclusion for *round from certain points of view* and *elliptical from other ones* are not incompatible properties. So the argument is a non-sequitur. The position to be explored in this part of

subproject A is that the objects of perception are *things from a certain point of view*, i.e. perspectival facts. The points of view accounting for their perspectivity are not the perceptual acts, nor are they modes of presentation of the object (if there is one): they are located on the 'object side' as it were. One nice consequence of this account is that once we integrate the point of view into the object of the experience, the reference to ellipses appears unnecessary for capturing the difference between the object of the two experiences. The best description of the phenomenological fact motivating 3 is, we submit, the following one:

3". A same cup can look *round from certain points of view* and *round from certain other ones*.

What account for the phenomenological difference between the two experiences is the difference in the points of view. Does not this strategy imply the reality of sense-data it was intended to disprove (cf. Ayer's phenomenalist move)? In claiming that perceptual objects are point-of-view dependent, we seem to imply that they are mind-dependent. What's bred in the bone comes out in the flesh. As an answer, we want to defend realism about perspectival facts, by claiming, first, that points of view are not parts or aspects of the experiencing subject and second that points of view exist independently of experiencing subjects. A point of view is just a point in space (compare Atkin 2006), where a (point-sized) seeing eye can be located, but that can as well remain unoccupied. Actual points of view do not imply actual views. Points of view are not acts of perception, nor part of the act of perception: they do not depend on perceiving objects. Searle is thus wrong to assert that aspectual shape "cannot be exhaustively or completely characterized solely in terms of third person [...] predicates" (Searle 1992). Rather, we advocate a return to some robust form of realism about perspectival facts, like the one that was endorsed by neo-realists such as Nunn (1909) or Holt (1912). If there are egocentric facts, for example, if me-ness is an objective feature of reality in the same way as is now-ness according to so-called A-theories of time, then my representation of the fact that combines hunger and me-ness may perfectly well consist in a relation to some Russellian proposition. It is the facts themselves that account for the content of our mental states. This account of perspectival thought in terms of perspectival facts has not yet been developed, however. Fine's "Tense and Reality" shortly talks about such facts, and the whole paper, which deals mainly with tensed facts, is relevant to the theory of first-personal facts, *mutatis mutandis*. Prior's "Egocentric Logic" is also relevant, though Prior does not put forward a substantial conception of facts. Much more work is clearly needed, for the very notion of "perspectival fact" is problematic: how can something 'subjective' be out there in the world? Is not reality *defined* as what is objective, independent of us, out there regardless of our subjective takes on it? What is it that makes a fact perspectival, what are the properties of here-ness, now-ness, me-ness that could constitute it? Would it not be possible that perspectival facts, as items in the world, be seen themselves from different perspectives, thereby leading to a regress? Difficult questions which a theory of perspectival facts must answer.